

Twenty-Two Theses on the Problems of Democracy in the World Social Forum

Teivo Teivainen

In the meeting of the Strategy Commission of the World Social Forum's International Council, held in Paris in November 2003, some tasks were distributed among the participants. I was asked to prepare notes on the strategic challenges of the World Social Forum process.

In the following notes, I will focus on one particular issue that I feel we have not discussed sufficiently. There are also other important issues we should discuss about the future of the WSF process, and I do not pretend to cover all of them in this note.

My main argument is that the WSF in general and its International Council in particular, have such depoliticizing features that may hinder our possibilities to apply democratic principles. In order to make your comments and refutations easier, I will present this argument below in the form of twenty-two theses. In some parts, I have formulated my arguments in a somewhat simplistic way to make them provocative so that we may have a debate. I send these theses now in a very preliminary form to get comments from you.

Before formulating the theses, let me say a couple of words about my general understanding of democracy, which takes into account the institutional features that enable the processes through which people can take control over their lives. In most theories of democracy, the relevant

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are associated with states. While I believe that states are important, my definition of democracy does not depend on them. I find it more important to analyze to what extent particular social processes are democratic than to rely on nation-state-centric categories of democracy. In this case, I find it important to reflect on the extent to which the WSF process is democratic. More particularly, I will focus on the politicizing dimension of democratization.

About Politicization

- Politicization is a key aspect of democratic struggles. It means showing the political nature of such relations of power that are presented as neutral. It has been a central feature of most socialist (politicize the capitalist economy), feminist (politicize the patriarchy) and other radically democratic movements.
- The growing power of the seemingly nonpolitical global economic institutions during the last decades of the 20th Century generated conditions for the politicizing reaction that was symbolized by the massive protests during the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in 1999. It was no longer possible to reproduce the claim that global economic institutions were nonpolitical and neutral.
- Politicization is important both for the movements that aim at transformations within the limits placed by the capitalist system places and for the movements that fight for a post-capitalist world.

About Democracy in the WSF

- It is strategically and morally desirable that movements wanting to radically democratize the world apply democratic principles to themselves and the articulations they build with other movements. Democratic principles should be applied to the way the World Social Forum (WSF) is organized.

- The WSF rules and practices include depoliticizing elements that block the possibilities for more democratic and transparent procedures. Some depoliticizing elements are more problematic than others.
- Pretending that there are no relations of power to be made visible within the WSF process is the most harmful of these depoliticizing elements. Even if it is often presented as "not a locus of power", "not an organization", and "only a neutral space", the WSF does have relations of power.
- The fact that these relations of power are not sufficiently transparent does not necessarily mean that there would exist a conspiracy or conscious attempt to silently rule the International Council and other WSF organs. It does, however, mean that we have a problem that we should face.



- Claiming that the WSF is "not an organization", and that therefore questions of power and organizational democracy are not relevant, resembles the claim that the International Monetary Fund is a purely technical institution. Both claims are ideological mystifications. Both claims should be rejected by those who believe in radical forms of democracy.
- The rules and procedures of the International Council should be made more explicit and transparent. Without more formalized rules, it will be particularly difficult for movements and organizations with

few material resources to take part in the decision-making of the
WSF process.

About Representation

- Traditional conceptions of territorial representation cannot and should not be applied to the WSF process. Nevertheless, if we want to create a more democratic International Council, considerations related to representation should not be rejected in an absolutist way. A binary opposition between (good) participatory democracy and (bad) representative democracy leaves unaccountable power relations with too many places to hide.
- If we accept that Africa and Asia do not have enough presence in the International Council, that they are in this sense under-represented, we should also accept that some principles of representation do have a role in our attitudes toward the WSF.
- When the WSF process was less well known, it was relatively easy to organize the International Council without too many concerns about who its members are and what they may represent. The problems the International Council has had in trying to establish a procedure for incorporating new members are an indication of the difficulties of trying to operate without formal structures and procedures.
- As there exists an increasing number of "national" social forums, there will be increasing demands to articulate them with the International Council and other official organs of the WSF. This will increase the pressures to talk about issues related to balanced representation in the International Council. This does not necessarily mean that we should create numerical formulas to ensure fair representation of the unjustly under-represented groups or areas.

- In the construction of the WSF in India, issues of representation have been more explicitly debated than in the construction of the global WSF process. We should learn from the Indians.



- The depoliticizing elements of the WSF rules and practices can help to avoid conflicts within the WSF, but at the same time they make the WSF governance bodies an easy target for accusations of reproducing non-democratic practices.

About Strategic Goals

- Apart from the depoliticization that hinders democratic practices within the WSF, there also exists another kind of depoliticization. It consists of the idea that the WSF is not a movement or a political actor but simply a space, an arena.
- This second kind of depoliticization is reflected in the practice that the International Council has not made public declarations about political issues, for example about the imperialist war in Iraq. This unwillingness to take a public stand has been used by many opponents of the WSF process to claim that the WSF serves no good purpose in anti-imperialist struggles.
- We have to move beyond rigid movement/space dichotomies if we want to understand the role of the WSF. The WSF can play and has played a role in facilitating radical social action. One example is

the fact that the massive anti-war protests of 15 February 2003 were to a significant extent initiated and organized from within the WSF process. We should use this example more consciously to counter the claims that the WSF is politically useless. We should also use it as a learning experience, to build more effective channels for concrete action without building a traditional movement (of movements).

- The slogan "another world is possible" has been useful in partially breaking the hegemony of the there-is-no-alternative discourse. Since learning implies growing, the WSF must move to a new stage in its learning process. At some point, it is no longer enough to repeat that another world is possible. It is increasingly important to envision what the other (post-capitalist) world may look like.
- The WSF should not be turned into a political party or a new international. It should, however, have better mechanisms for exchanging, disseminating and debating strategies of radical transformation. More explicit mechanisms and procedures mean more possibilities for getting things done.

About the Charter of Principles

- The Charter of Principles, as the key document that defines the political orientation of the WSF, should not be amended or replaced too easily. It could, however, be useful to define procedures for revising it if needed in the future.
- The article 6 of the Charter of Principles, in a phrase that is strangely missing from the Spanish version of the Charter, states that the WSF "does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings". It is a useful reminder of the fact that the WSF is not a party-like organization. If, however, the phrase is interpreted to mean that there are no relations of power within the WSF, or within its International Council, it becomes an element of ideological mystification.