CHAPTER 8

Is the World Social Forum a Democratic Global Civil Society?

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We live in a multi-centered world in which world politics is formed by states together with transnational corporations, intergovernmental organizations as well as various non-governmental actors. Within it a major player has arisen, one which some call the “second superpower”, the “movement of movements” or the “global justice movement” – and its main convergence centre: the World Social Forum (WSF 2001–).\textsuperscript{1,2} So far 500,000 persons have participated in the WSF which yearly gathers several thousands of civic organizations in about thousand workshops, discussing the present world order and what to do about it. Since the end of the 1990s we are witnessing what is most probably the broadest transnational mobilization of social movements ever in history of mankind. The “Battle of Seattle” 1999 against WTO and the seventh World Social Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, 2007, are just the tip of an iceberg in this ongoing networking and cooperation of various movements around the world.\textsuperscript{3} This “movement of movements” is mobilizing several millions of people in very different contexts and around very different topics, people that converge in their criticism of the present militarized neoliberal world-order which is dominated by the world’s only super-power; the USA.\textsuperscript{4} The World Social Forum is possible to understand as a \textit{global counter-hegemonic project} in which the

\textsuperscript{1} della Porta 2007.
\textsuperscript{2} The movements gather at several other occasions but then in minor numbers, e.g. the Peoples Global Action meetings and at convergence centres during protests against top-summits of multilateral regimes (e.g. G8 or WTO).
\textsuperscript{3} Polet 2004.
\textsuperscript{4} Appelbaum and Robinson 2005.
contemporary corporate globalization, neoliberal hegemony and US military dominance is contested.5 The movements that converge at WSF articulate so different strategies, demands, ideologies, groups and technologies that if understood as one movement, as della Porta (2007) argues, it is a movement united around heterogeneity, a quite unusual identity of a movement.6 For the purpose of my argument it is irrelevant if the movement is one or several. We know for a fact that several movements are converging at the WSF. Still, as an arena for world politics, in which contending social groups form the politics of the world, WSF is simply not enough, since it only unites one part in the struggle, excluding its opponents.7,8 But WSF is one part in the constitution of an infrastructure of world politics, as a potential candidate of what until recently was mainly a theoretical concept: a “global civil society”. Against a united neoliberal globalization and US imperialism a global civil society will matter. Scattered societies and groups need to find their own empowering and mutual cooperation in order to stand a chance of self-defense and transformative struggle making other possible worlds a reality.

This article focuses on the specifics of the main institutional platform of the movement(s) – WSF – regarding its democratic and global quality and scope. Firstly, to what extent is WSF the forum of the social world, i.e. globally engaging the social groups of the world? Secondly, in what sense is WSF a participatory forum for the people that do participate? Thirdly, to what degree is the forum really the social world’s own forum, i.e. is the decision-making of WSF democratic? And, as a conclusion then, is WSF possible to understand as a “democratic global civil society”? I will shortly consider other candidates of global civil society and discuss the contested and usually liberal and Western understanding of “civil society”, just enough to make my argument clear. But I will not try to determine the conceptual limits of a “global civil society”, its history or wider relations to the political economy and its global regimes, or its relation to the global justice movement(s). This is not the place to discuss globalization, the

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5 Santos 2006.
7 Abrahamsson 2003.
8 Global arenas of world politics exist today, built by the combined effect of a global confrontation chain between the main actors of globalization (the summit protests from Seattle 1999 to Rostock 2007), the contending networks of WSF and WEF, and the communicative network of networks (Internet), see Vinthagen unpublished.