



October 2019

## Renewing WSF's Utopian Laboratory Contribution to GTI Forum Farewell to the World Social Forum?

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The philosopher G. W. F. Hegel once noted that the political process that embodies a new universal impulse often perishes while its principle persists. What is the principle that the World Social Forum brought forward? My 2003 book *Another World is Possible*, co-edited with William F. Fisher, was the first book in English on the World Social Forum, the first to contend that the common theme that threaded through all the alternatives proposed at the WSF was a call for a participatory, radical democracy, and the first to argue that the Forum represented the initial steps for building a new left and a new global civilization.

Over the years, there have been a number of insightful interpretations of the WSF process: it embodies resistance to globalization; it epitomizes the latest struggle against imperialism; it manifests the power of identity; it is an insurgency against all forms of hierarchical discrimination, including patriarchy; it exemplifies the “movement of the multitude” or articulates the emergence of the epistemologies of the South. The interpretation that I offered did not and does not exclude any of the others but encompasses them within a common overlapping framework: the “alternative globalization,” or “global justice,” movements that emerged from the WSF at minimum call for a radically participatory democratic process to be integrated into all major economic, political, cultural, or ecological decisions. Social movements around the planet are too diverse to fully develop—at this time—a common substantive notion of the good, but they can bring forward a shared principle of the process of emancipation, that is, the call for a global radical democracy that extends across all social domains.

## The Utopian Laboratory

The World Social Forum has been a utopian laboratory, a space for reimagining progressive politics, practice, and theory in the wake of what the late, great Immanuel Wallerstein once noted as the diminution of the welfare state in the “First World,” the fall of the Soviet Union in the “Second World,” and the exhaustion of various Southern national liberation projects in the “Third World.” We can add that many of the alternatives presented in this laboratory also expressed the critique of modernity from various postmodern, or alternative modern, perspectives. The diminution, the fall, the exhaustion, the critique—all severely weakened the legitimacy of the three dominant left-wing, statist projects of the second half of the twentieth century. The various proposals presented at the WSF initially incarnated an attempt by an emergent global left to reimagine emancipation in the wake of the apparent decline of the progressive possibilities of the state.

The World Social Forum was founded by three long-time activists (Oded Grajew, Francisco “Chico” Whitaker, and Bernard Cassen) and their organizations as an event where various progressive social movements, theorists, and teachers—but not political parties—could regularly come together to mutually construct alternatives to the social degeneracy, cultural illusions, and asocial sensibility produced by neoliberal globalization. The Forum was imagined as an “open space” in which all progressives, that is, all those opposed to the current dystopian form of globalism, could voluntarily participate as equals in debate and solidarity. The process aspired to creating a situation in which dialogue among various members and movements in the public sphere was not distorted by the systemic pressures posed by state bureaucracies, the commodity form, or imperial intervention. These discussions inevitably led to a shared culture and a mutual recognition of and commitment to our common humanity. The Forum has been the subject that refuses to treat itself or others as objects.

The principle of creating a universally available public space in which all can voluntarily come together in camaraderie to discuss freedom has been admirable but inevitably riven with the contradictions of the system that movements wish to transform. The representation of women, of Africans, of minorities, of the indigenous, and of the poor has never lived up to the aspirations of the “open space” ideal. But, with that said, one cannot discount one of the Forum’s greatest

successes: its attendance numbers have been stunning. In the 2000s, it regularly had over 100,000 participants at its events, indicating the range of the Forum's appeal, the talent of its organizers, and the extent of the public's desire for alternative forms of globalization.

While the future of the Forum is unclear, its influence is not. The impact of the Forum's call for participatory democracy has been evident in the Occupy movement, the *indignados* in Spain, the Arab Spring, and some of the leftist governments in Latin America. While the WSF never officially allowed political parties to be the principal organizers of its events, the Forum's influence has been obvious in countries like Bolivia and Uruguay. The discourse of participation has been regularly heard in La Paz and Montevideo, and while one can question the extent to which it has been genuinely democratic, one cannot ignore the prevalence of its use. The discourse is not only utilized by governments but also, significantly, by local social movements and the general population. The call for a new, genuinely egalitarian democracy has—in its various guises—been the common foundation for leftist struggles in the twenty-first century. It will continue to be so as the mainstream discourse of globalization evolves into a call for a world civilization that can accommodate humanity's diverse material, cultural, political, and ecological aspirations.

## Politics

How does the Forum address the contemporary problem perfectly articulated by Roberto Savio: “The WSF has lost an opportunity to influence how the public understands the crises the world faces, a vacuum that has been filled by the resurgent right wing”? It is time for the World Social Forum to engage political parties and processes. The Forum emerged in a context in which the statist left had been delegitimized or at least severely weakened, and thus it made sense in 2001 to not substantially integrate statist representatives into the Forum space. Today—certainly since the 2008 financial crisis—the state has returned. The electoral option—symbolized in North America by people like Senator Bernie Sanders and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—once again appears to be a viable way forward for some substantial, progressive change. The state is of course not the only way forward (we need strong international social movement

networks to pressure political parties to maintain their promises), but the state remains the most powerful potential vehicle and ally for social transformation.

The standard of a global, radical democracy will persevere as the key element of the international left, but if the WSF does not want to suffer the fate of past processes—those that pushed forward a universal impulse but perished while their principle persisted—then the Forum must reinvent itself. It must exceed the historical conditions from which it emerged. It must find a way—with all the contradictions, frustrations, and negotiations that this implies—to effectively involve political parties and actors into the open space.

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## About the Author



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Cite as Thomas Ponnah, "Renewing WSF's Utopian Laboratory," contribution to GTI Forum "Farewell to the World Social Forum?," *Great Transition Initiative* (October 2019), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/wsf-ponniah>.

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