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The World Social Forum and the Future. From Realistic Utopias to Alternatives

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As I have already suggested, the critical and democratic utopia symbolized by the WSF manifests itself at the outset as an imbalance between negative expectations (what is rejected) and positive expectations (what is proposed as alternative). The success of the first WSF and the increasing counter-hegemonic globalization up until September 11 convinced the movements and NGOs in charge of the organization of the WSF that the movement of movements might be entering a new phase, a politically more consistent one, which would require a higher level of concretization of alternatives. Once the idea of an alternative globalization to hegemonic globalization was consolidated, the political strength of the movement of movements would depend on its capacity to formulate credible proposals for the political agendas of nations and multilateral organizations alike. On the other hand, the consolidation of the WSF rendered more striking the cleavages about strategies and political action that I analyzed in the previous section. Now, the cleavages reverberating on the kinds of proposals submitted were in turn an incentive to further discussion on alternatives and proposals.

By the middle of 2001 the WSF's organizing committee was spreading among movements and organizations, the coordinators of the four major themes (The Production of Wealth and Social Reproduction; Access to Wealth and Sustainability; Civil Society and the Public Realm; Political Power and Ethics in the New Society), as well its guest speakers, the recommendation that interventions and debates were to focus on formulating concrete proposals. The "mot d'ordre" was: "we must advance more proposals." Besides formulating more proposals, some participants also engaged in the formulation of general objectives or principles that identified the need for alternatives and justified them ethically. This is the case of Vandana Shiva, for example, who, following earlier positions, presents the potential for the global justice movement itself-specifically in the form of what she terms, "the living democracy movement"-as an alternative to globalization in and of itself. She argues,

Living democracy is about life, at the vital everyday level, and decisions and freedoms related to everyday living-the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the water we drink. It is not just about elections and casting votes once every 3 or 4 or 5 years. It is a permanently vibrant democracy" (Shiva, p. 4).

In sum, by keeping the commitment to democracy alive, we will both create and sustain an alternative world.

¹ *Uit: Boaventura de Sousa Santos: The World Social Forum - Towards a Counter-hegemonic Globalisation.* <http://www.tni.org/socforum-docs/fm2003boaventura.htm>

Theses were also formulated that had a higher level of concretization, but which lacked the format as well as the substantive and procedural concreteness that might push them on to a political agenda. I myself presented 15 theses for deepening democracy, and François Houtart presented a series of strategic recommendations toward the coherence among the different proposals, as a way to prevent the WSF from becoming a supermarket of alternatives. According to him, "There is need for both a coherence in the proposals and a broad view of the alternatives (Houtart; p. 1). As a guide, he proposes thinking of alternatives on three levels: 1) in terms of "rebuilding the utopias," not in the sense of impossible things but rather as specific goals that serve to mobilize people; 2) defining medium-term alternatives, or those goals that will take time to achieve because they involve lengthy struggles or are up against capitalist resistance; 3) defining short-term alternatives, or those goals that are feasible in the foreseeable future and can serve as mobilizers.

In addition, Houtart emphasizes the importance of strategizing in the "struggle against the globalization of capital" and considers the conceptualization of strategy as key to any conceptualization of alternatives. He lists the main elements of strategy as follows: 1) delegitimization of the "logic" of the capitalist system; 2) building convergence among efforts and networks to work against the system; 3) formulation of alternatives at the three levels mentioned above: utopias, medium-term and short-term; 4) finding formulas for political expression; 5) not to be marginalized as a movement, ie, not to be rendered "folkloric", "violent" or "rare." He also stresses three criteria as important for selecting themes and actions in which the movement should concentrate their efforts: 1) the need to keep in mind the popular contemporary sensitivity of certain themes, 2) the importance of linking up "events of the moment"; 3) the need to address themes on which considerable preparation has already been done by specific groups - which can lead to concrete alternatives.

Hundreds of proposals in this more restricted sense were nonetheless submitted. The great majority of these proposals were presented and discussed in the workshops put together at the initiative of the movements and organizations present. By way of example, I mention some the proposals focusing on economic and institutional changes:

"1. Proposal by the Focus on the Global South for a "Pluralistic System of Global Economic Governance". "This proposal states the aim "not to reform the TNC-driven WTO and Bretton Woods institutions, but, through a combination of passive and active measures, either a) to decommission them; b) neuter them (e.g. converting the IMF into a pure research institution monitoring exchange rates of capital flows); or c) radically reduce their powers and turn them into just another set of actors coexisting with and being checked by other international organizations, agreements, and regional groupings." This strategy would include strengthening institutions like UNCTAD, the ILO and economic blocks (Mercosur, SADCC, ASEAN, etc.); and the formation of new international and regional institutions dedicated to "devolving the greater part of production, trade, and economic decision-making to the national and local level" with multiple checks and balances, and "based on their values, their rhythms, and the strategies of their choice."

"2. Proposal by the ATTAC (Association For The Taxation Of Financial Transactions For The Aid Of Citizens) for the Control of Financial Capital". It includes aims to restore and promote controls over capital flows to nation-states, through national-level policy measures and international fiscal measures; levy tax on international financial transactions (Tobin Tax), which would have a low average rate and its annualized cost inversely proportional to the duration of the transactions to discourage speculation; levy a variable tax on FDI (foreign direct investment); levy tax on the profits of transnational corporations; reinforce specific controls on all financial markets; elimination of tax havens, by the lifting of banking confidentiality, intervening in states that harbour tax havens, publishing data on tax havens, respecting anti-money laundering laws, etc; reinforcement of controls on banks; prudential rules for international investors; make private actors who are responsible for the crises pay; and reform the international financial institutions (IMF and World Bank).

"3. Proposal by the CorpWatch's for the Conference on Transnational Corporations (facilitated by Joshua Karliner)." It states that: "The current corporate-globalization paradigm, which prioritizes corporate profit maximization over human rights, labor rights and environmental rights, should be turned on its head to prioritize these universal life values." It then proceeds with detailed proposals to realize this objective, including the separation of corporations and the state which "should also extend from local and national governance, to global governance institutions such as the WTO, World Bank, IMF, UN, etc."; campaigns against specific corporations and their activities; campaigns to seek to ally with alternative, smaller scale, local, more accountable businesses that are providing similar goods or services; campaigns for, and indices to, measure corporate responsibility; binding rules on transnational corporate behavior to be established through a Framework Convention on Corporate Accountability; and strengthening collaboration between social movements in the South and the in North, fighting for corporate accountability and democratic control over corporations.."

"4. Proposal by the Committee for Cancellation of the Third World Debt as an alternative to Neo-liberal Type Adjustment Programs in Southern Countries." This alternative to the present development strategy would entail three phases: 1) ending of structural adjustment policies; 2) adoption of partly self-based development models; such models would entail constructing sufficiently solid internal economic foundations to allow the country to open up to international trading. This type of development involves creating politically and economically integrated zones, bringing to bear endogenous development models, strengthening internal markets, creating local savings funds for local financing, developing education and health, setting up progressive taxation and other mechanisms to ensure the redistribution of wealth, diversifying exports, introducing agrarian reform to guarantee universal access to land for small farmers and urban reform to guarantee universal access to housing, etc; 3) acting upon trading practices. This would entail six elements: a) mechanisms guaranteeing a better price for the basket of products exported on the world market by developing countries would be introduced. These might include stabilizing the prices of raw materials, building up regulatory stocks - which means doing away with zero stocks, etc.; b) developing countries would be encouraged to establish cartels of producer countries; c) the right of each country (or group of countries) to nutritional autonomy and self-sufficiency in staples would be guaranteed - implying protection measures for imports, in total opposition to the minimal agricultural export quota of 5% imposed by the WTO

on member countries; d) rules of global trading to become subordinate to strict environmental, social and cultural criteria would be enforced.; e) public services in the general interest would be excluded from the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS); f) the trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) agreement would be abolished.

"5. Proposal by IRAM (Institute for Research and Application of Methods of Development) for agrarian reform and land policy (presented by Michel Merlet)." It presents a synthesis of proposals for agrarian reform and land policies as being developed (for the purpose of producing a practice-oriented workbook) in several stages on the basis of discussions with researchers, development specialists and representatives of small farmers organizations in various world regions.

Merlet proposes that first the discussion of land rights be reframed from one of those who "own" the land to one of those who "use" the land, or rather the differentiation between a legal recognition and a social definition of land rights. From that base he proposes several measures for addressing land rights as a public policy priority in countries with highly unequal land distribution. First, he calls for a system of agrarian reform accompanied by a systematic method for improving agrarian reform policies and putting them into action. This agrarian reform should include a revision of the relationship between collective and individual property and the development of social land management mechanisms as well as greater security of the rights of individual producers. In addition, it should concentrate on developing local capacity for land management whereby peasant/small farmers organizations learn to increasingly coordinate with models of regulation and markets as well as with groups of producers operating on non-reformed land. Finally this process should include the coordination of agrarian reform with agricultural policy, tariff protection on key products, mechanization and modernization policies to promote product quality but compensate for regions disadvantaged in terms of natural resources, etc.

In countries where the question of access to land is not as severe, he calls for the development of a management policy for agrarian structures "which facilitates the modernization of the units of production and guarantees their social function"; and for the implementation of social "structural" policies directed towards the organization of agrarian structures (including policies that regulate the land market) that fulfill the needs of society as a whole. In addition he emphasizes the need to construct land management bodies which take into account the "multiple rights of different actors" with regard to land and natural resources, as well as the decentralization of a large part of management and administrative systems and the concurrent coordination of national systems with local ones. Finally, he calls 1) for creating networks between peasant organizations, researchers and experts; 2) promoting educational and training programs for all producers and those who deal in the strategic importance of land; 3) carrying out of a lobbying campaign to influence international organizations and bilateral coordination on land issues; 4) developing linkages between rural and urban interests; and 5) promoting the inclusion of the theme of land use and distribution in broader discussion agendas of world poverty and global justice.

Proposals to Fight Against the Commodification and Privatization of Water and For the Right to Water.

Using as an example the Thematic Area II, "Access to Wealth and Sustainability", many proposals were presented concerning water, food sovereignty, knowledges and patents, and health. I mention here the proposal on water.

Globalize the struggle against the economic system which promotes the destruction and degradation of water and inequality in its distribution, forming a broad civil society coalition including local communities, indigenous people, national and international organizations in the fight for water, in order to:

Oppose neo-liberal policies of the international financial institutions, the WTO, and regional free trade agreements such as the Free Trade Zone of the Americas, and the commodification and privatization of water.

Oppose unsustainable development projects, such as large dams, industrial waterways, large-scale mining, large-scale agribusiness and others, which destroy and degrade water sources.

Propose and promote sustainable water management alternatives:

Establish a world water parliament, which will implement a global water contract;

Establish an International Convention at the United Nations, on water as a fundamental human right

Organize protests throughout the world during the week 14 March, 2002 (international day of struggle vs. dams) to 22 March (world water day), promoting the fight for water, in opposition to privatization of water, and for the universal right to water, with the slogan "water for life, not for death".

Establish an international treaty on water as a common good, between nation states and indigenous peoples

Form an alliance of social movements on water, to submit to the Sustainable Development Summit in Johannesburg a proposal for a global water agreement.

Ensure adequate supplies of clean water for all individual, community and national water needs (domestic, food production, energy, recreation, maintaining environmental quality).

Support and promote global solidarity with those peoples who suffer the consequences of desertification and drought.

Support the struggle of local communities and national movements for the control of their water sources and distribution systems (ex: Coordinadora de Cochabamba) in resistance to the privatization process and for the re-establishment of sustainable community-management water management systems.

Denounce the systematic persecution of leaders of the Coordinadora del Agua de Cochabamba, including Oscar Olivera, by the Bolivian government.

"Sustainable Water Management:"

Managing water from its sources, through sustainable management of territories and through the effective participation of civil society, in particular indigenous communities, in decision-making processes.

Requiring companies that destroy water sources to repair the social and environmental damages they have caused and to restore the quality of these water sources.

Prohibiting the use of chemical products that destroy water quality

Promoting campaigns against the conversion of rivers into industrial waterways.

Using experiences gained during climatic disasters, such as el Niño, to promote campaigns for sustainable water management and in resistance to the economic system.

Implementing alternative biological systems for sewage management

Promoting rainwater harvesting methods for domestic and agricultural use.

"The Fight Against Dams"

To establish a moratorium on new dams until all the economic, social, cultural and environmental impacts they have caused are resolved.

To pressure national governments, export credit agencies, and international financial institutions to adopt the recommendations of the World Commission on Dams.

To promote a new energy model, based upon efficiency, conservation, and use of alternative energy sources such as wind, solar, and biomass.

To support and express solidarity with the populations fighting Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada river in India by signing a petition aimed at the Indian Prime Minister, who will be making a final decision on the project.

Besides proposals of global scope, others of regional scope have been also presented. One of the more consensual ones among Latin American social movements is to submit ALCA (Free Trade Zone of the Americas) to a referendum in each one of the Latin American countries. The great majority of the proposals have their origin in the articulations among movements concerned with the same thematic area.

Contrary to what the corporate media reports, the WSF has been "a machine of proposals." The design, complexity, and technical detail of many of them is of higher quality than many of those presented by the institutions of neoliberal globalization. The challenge ahead is to press these proposals on to the political agendas of the different states and the international community. It is a long-range challenge because, for these proposals to become part of the political agendas, the national and transnational political institutions must be changed. And, as I mentioned in the previous section, many such institutional changes will occur only on the basis of non-institutional struggles. They will require rebellion, nonviolent but often illegal direct action.