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The World Social Forum, a Globalisation from Below?

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Keywords

World Social Forum, scholar-activists, globalisation

Introduction

Like many alter-globalisation¹ actors that are influential at the movement's international level, *ATTAC-France*, the *Committee for the Cancellation of the Third World Debt*, the *Mexican Network against Free Trade*, the *Continental Alliance against the Americas Free Trade Area* and the Bangkok-based *Focus on the Global South* have all been founded by committed intellectuals and scholar activists. All these networks and organizations have played a major role in movement internationalisation process and have remained influential members of the World Social Forum International Council (IC).² Indeed, the World Social Forum (WSF) initiative came out as an initiative from committed intellectuals and cosmopolitan³ activists. These international leaders largely dominated the first three WSF and gained an unprecedented influence on the alter-globalisation movement. However, besides empowering these cosmopolitan activists, the WSF also provided

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¹) This term has been chosen to designate the “global justice movement” because it reflects both the aim of the movement (“another globalisation”) and its global character. This terminology is now commonly used in many countries around the world. However, it does not mean to limit the movement to its international actors as many grassroots alter-globalisation activists focus on the local level and daily life.

²) The committee that oversees the World Social Forum (WSF) organisation and determines its location.

³) Friedman 1999.

an open space that favoured interactions between international leaders and activists with a distinct conception of the movement.

This article first outlines the emergence process of an influential and well-connected activist cosmopolitan elite within the alter-globalisation movement. I then focus on consequences of the divide between hyper-mobile, globe-trotting leaders and local and regional grassroots activists: while encouraged to become “active citizens” in society, activists are often kept in a passive position in the WSF and alter-globalisation organisations. However, as the final two sections of this article argue, the WSF has also favoured interactions between cosmopolitan leaders and grassroots activists in two significant ways. Firstly, by promoting a renewed interest of cosmopolitan activists in their home countries’ local and national movements. Secondly, by providing an open space for debate and cross-fertilisation of ideas between international leaders and activists promoting a more horizontal conception of the forum. I conclude by outlining some concrete results of this cross-fertilisation process on the WSF organisation.

This study is based on significant qualitative field research conducted between 1999 and 2007 at the seven World Social Forums as well as international protests and activist meetings in Mexico, France and Belgium. Two specific studies focused on social and cultural activism at the local level were carried out in Liege (Belgium) and Mexico City. This material has been complemented by textual analysis and semi-structured interviews.

From International Scholar-Activist Networks to a Cosmopolitan Activist Elite

Many academics and committed intellectuals have become major “entrepreneurs”⁴ of alter-globalisation mobilisation and of the World Social Forum in its first years. Almost half of the members of the International Council are “committed scholar-activists” and intellectuals.⁵ Indeed, the

⁴ McCarty and Zald 1977.

⁵ Numerous university professors and directors of academic research centres are active in the International Council: E. Taddei, manager of a wide Latin American Network of social scientists takes part in the meetings in the name of the Continental Social Alliance; A. Buzgarin from the University of Moscow is founder of *Alternative Russia*; F. Houtart (World Alternative Forum and emeritus professor of the Catholic University of Louvain),

internationalisation of the movement largely relied on these intellectuals' prestige and fame, on their legitimacy as experts in their research areas and on their international affinity networks. Greatly interested in global issues, scholar activists and committed intellectuals had created international networks many years before bigger alter-globalisation meetings were organized. A European network of activists' experts and intellectuals was set up in Madrid during the 1995 counter-summit against the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund). In one of the network's last meetings before its dissolution in the WSF networking process, over 200 committed intellectuals and experts from all over Europe gathered in Paris on January 5 and 6, 2001. Each of their campaigns was led by a relatively autonomous multi-polar network of committed intellectuals. Similar networks were also set up worldwide. Since its foundation in 1994, the *International Forum on Globalization* has played a leading role in Asia and North America. It defines itself as an alliance of "leading activists, scholars, economists, researchers and writers formed to stimulate new thinking, joint activities and public education in response to economic globalization".⁶ Likewise, the *World Forum for Alternatives* gathers European, African and Latin-American anti-imperialist committed intellectuals around Samir Amin and François Houtart.

Such international networks and the personal affinities they created have been extremely valuable in the first major international meetings of the alter-globalisation movement:⁷ "We started to know each other and to

S. Amin (director of the Third World Forum, president of the World Alternative Forum and former professor of economy); L. Gabriel (founder of the Austrian Social Forum and professor belonging to the *Ludwig-Boltzmann Institute for Contemporary Research on Latin America*); W. Bello (*Focus on the Global South*, professor at the University of Philippines); B. Cassen (ATTAC, professor at the European Study Institute, Paris XIII); F. Mayor Zaragoza (Ubuntu, UNESCO former director and professor at the University of Catalonia) . . . Many other members head a think tank or an NGO that are actually research centres (Espace Marx, CEDETIM, CILAS). Other IC members NGOs are mostly composed of committed intellectuals, like several "centres of alternative information". Moreover, many other organisations also delegate people with high scholar or cultural degrees.

⁶ www.ifg.org. Among its distinguished members figure M. Barlow from the *Council of Canadians*, V. Shiva (India) from the *Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology*, W. Bello from *Focus on the Global South* based in Bangkok and Martin Khor (USA) from the *Third World Network*.

⁷ B. Cassen's book (Cassen 2003) gives a very personal and polemic interpretation of the role of affinity groups in the alter-globalisation and the WSF formation process.

say that we had to do something. We decided to organize the ‘*Other Davos*’⁸ and then the World Social Forums’.⁹ As the movement expanded, international organizational meetings, counter-summits, conferences and social forums multiplied. Travelling from one side of the planet to the other became one of the main activities of some movement’s, NGOs’ and think tanks’ leaders. For example, the two Belgian members of the International Council spent less than ninety days in their home country in 2003 and had over ten intercontinental travels this year. Formal and informal meetings gave these travelling leaders opportunities to learn to know each other very well and to start to take initiatives together. The burgeoning of international meetings thus gave rise to informal but very influential global affinity groups of elite and cosmopolitan¹⁰ activists that would play a decisive role in many of the major initiatives of the international movement and notably in the World Social Forum. At times they have been responsible for highly strategic formal and informal decisions like deciding the Forum’s location, the main conference speakers, and the redaction of the Charter of Principles. Similarly, smaller groups of cosmopolitan leaders took initiatives as important as the “Manifesto of Porto Alegre” and the “Social Movements and Activists’ Assembly”. However, the existence of influential and heavily connected elite has its own negative side. As M. Albert (2004), J. Juris (2004) and especially R. Nunes (2005) have shown it, “hyperconnectivity by a select few [lead] to concentrating power in undeclared ways”¹¹ Many very important strategic and political decisions concerning the WSF and the whole international movement have been taken by a few well-connected leaders with restricted representativity and loose or non-existent relations to mass social movements which they claim to stand for.

⁸ An international counter-summit held in Switzerland in 1999. See Houtart and Polet 1999.

⁹ E. Toussaint, lecture in Louvain-la-Neuve, November 6, 2006. Eric Toussaint is the founder and president of the Belgian-based *Committee for the Cancellation of the Third-World Debt*. With the rise of the alter-globalisation movement, he became a busy globetrotter and has developed his network in Africa, Asia and Latin America. He is an active member of the WSF International Council and of its “*Social movements and activists’ assembly*”.

¹⁰ J. Friedman (1999, p. 396) characterizes the cosmopolitans as the elites who encompass the world’s cultures. “A cosmopolitan is not primarily one who constantly travels the world, but one who identifies with it in opposition to his own locality.” Likewise, in this text, we refer to a globalised activist elite that loses its connections to the lives and considerations of local people. In this sense, we could talk about “un-rooted cosmopolitan” (Tarrow 2005).

¹¹ Nunes 2005.

This elite group of alter-globalisation activists should not be considered as homogeneous: strong controversies and disagreements animate the international global justice sphere. They rely not only on disagreements over strategies or distinct political orientations but also on power struggles and inter-personal conflicts.¹² The main debate opposes a more politically-oriented line that wishes the forum to be able to take political statements and to coordinate actions while others think the forum itself should not adopt political statements but give the possibility of such initiatives to its participants.¹³

To master international connections and to develop extended networks hence became as prevailing in the international alter-global movement as it is in global capitalism.¹⁴ Until mid-2004, the crucial prerequisite to join the international council was not to stand for a large movement or to conduct a significant struggle against global capital but members had to be an “international network”, even though many of these “international networks” had a very restricted social base. The IC was hence focused on globally oriented considerations and has not mixed local, national, and continental actors. The capacity to connect with some affinity group of cosmopolitan activists was hence crucial not only for those who want to take part, even demurely, in the future development of the international movement but also for those who seek the recognition accorded by an IC membership in the national civil society arena. Moreover, as shown above, individual committed intellectuals and scholar-activists are keener on developing such connections than grassroots social movement activists, indigenous activists or unemployed workers.

The IC was initially built around a group of Brazilian activist leaders and some French connections. These two countries as well as Western Europe remained over-represented among the influential movement elite. Some committed intellectuals and a few movements leaders from the Global South have also joined these cosmopolitan networks. Among them, some Indian and Malian activists played a major role in the organisation of the WSF in their home countries. Nevertheless, in most cases, these forum organisers seemed much closer to their European fellows than to their respective country's grassroots activists. For example, Aminata Traore, former Malian Minister of Culture and one of the most cosmopolitan of

¹² See for example Cassen 2003.

¹³ See Sen and Kumar 2007; Whitaker 2004.

¹⁴ Boltanski and Chiapello 1999 ; Castells 2001; Juris 2004.

African activists, was the key actor of the Bamako 2006 Polycentric WSF organization process.

Immersed in this “cosmopolitan activism”, spending much time in international meetings and hobnobbing more with their international counterparts than with local movements, these cosmopolitan activists may lose their connection with grassroots activists in their own home country. In fact, many of these cosmopolitan activists are not directly connected to any mass or grassroots social movement and at times only represent small activist research centres. Like it happens in many other sectors of the global civil society, many alter-globalisation leaders are often not designed by their organisation’s members and not accountable to their members.¹⁵

Active Citizens and Passive Activists

The organizers of the first World Social Forums largely assumed a separation between “normal participants” and cosmopolitan intellectual activists: prominent committed intellectuals were chosen to speak at the main conferences while “normal participants” were relegated to the role of passive audience. The international council held its sessions behind closed doors and security guards. The clearest illustration of this assumed distinction between elite and grassroots participants can be found in the VIP lounges provided in 2001 and 2002.

This division was not specific to the WSF. Although strongly rejected by activists who promote a horizontal organization of the movement, a collective construction of wisdom and change by practices *from below*, such a distinction was clearly assumed by many committed intellectuals and their organizations: “The alter-globalisation movement is like a human body. Committed researchers are the head of the movement and the masses that mobilize for events like Seattle are the legs”.¹⁶ This idea was clearly shared by the former leaders of ATTAC-France:

There is obviously a difference between grassroots activists, who join ATTAC to get a political culture, and the members of the scientific council who are academics and editors of newspapers and magazines, there is obviously a gap. But I think there is a mutual enrichment. People in the executive committee and in the scientific council work to produce

¹⁵) Chandhoke 2002, p. 48.

¹⁶) An activist-researcher from the French “Globalisation Observatory”, interviewed in 2000.

research documents and information. The local sections are useful because they are on the ground and can inform us about what they observe in their region. They see things at this level, in their region, in their town. (ATTAC-France administrator, interview, 2001)

This perspective reduces the role of local activists, making them local informants and recipients of the wisdom and political culture that are produced by the intellectuals who comprise the movement elite. Indeed, in some aspects, ATTAC-France worked like an NGO where a dozen salaried professionals based in Paris had to “manage 28.000 members”, to quote the words of one of these salaried activists in a 2002 interview. This form of organisation has proved to be efficient and to ease the communication with the mass media thanks to the active role of a few leaders. However, such a managerial and top-down structure contrasts with the proclaimed aim of ATTAC to promote a more active citizenship and to deepen democracy.

The vanguard tendency of some leaders and their sense to constitute an elite distinct from the mass movement have been expressed most clearly in the elaboration of manifestos and programmatic documents. In several cases, small groups of leading movement intellectuals deliberately avoided any participative process with their organisation’s grassroots activists. Indeed, they assume themselves to be more competent to assess global challenges and develop alternative expertise, proposals, and clear programs for the international movement. On January 17, 2003, the 25,000 ATTAC-France activists discovered their organization’s new platform without having been consulted on its content or on its relevance. The text had been written by a few intellectuals in consultation with the organisation’s ruling president. Two years later, the process was repeated at the fifth World Social Forum. Nineteen prestigious intellectuals, including some Nobel Price winners, wrote and signed “The Manifesto of Porto Alegre”. They presented it to the press in a five-star hotel. No possibility was left to the 200,000 WSF participants to discuss and amend the text that was framed as a major document of the forum.¹⁷ Like in other international movements, such a separation from the mass movement may quickly lead to the empowerment of cosmopolitan leaders who “represent themselves as speaking for ‘the people’ without creating either deep grassroots or means for ordinary people to speak through them”.¹⁸

¹⁷ see Sen and Kumar 2007.

¹⁸ Tilly 2004, p. 152.

The leadership of a small affinity group of committed intellectuals at national alter-globalisation events and networks has indeed been strongly contested on this basis. While the Mexican Network against Free Trade wanted to coordinate and to run the WTO counter-summit in Cancun in September 2003, many voices denounced “these NGOs and intellectuals who want to talk in the name of the movements but have no social base”.¹⁹ Indeed, the complete failure of the ReMALC in Cancun and the disappearance of the “People’s Forum” it promoted offered a peculiar illustration of the gap that separated ReMALC intellectual leaders and the Mexican civil society it claimed to represent.

This top-down conception of the organizational process within the movement and the dominant position of cosmopolitan intellectuals have created a contradiction between the message promoted by many alter-globalisation organizations and events and the actual practice: while encouraged to become “active citizens”, activists are often kept in a passive position as consumers of events and ideas conceived by a few leaders.

The third World Social Forum made this particularly visible. It gathered 100,000 peoples²⁰ in Porto Alegre and thus represented a major organizational challenge. Rather than to see the WSF participants as the movement dynamic force, the organizing team perceived them as a problem, wondering how they would be able to “*manage the crowd*”, to quote the expression used by a member of the WSF Brazilian organising committee at an International Council meeting before the forum. The solution they chose was to multiply events for a massive and passive audience. Up to 11,000 people attended the speeches of cosmopolitan intellectuals’ like Arundhati Roy and Noam Chomsky. One workshop session was even cancelled to make sure over 60,000 people came to listen to Lula, the newly elected Brazilian president.

For sure, some committed intellectuals and movement leaders are deeply preoccupied by the movement’s internal democracy and openness.²¹ However, most of them consider internal democracy a secondary problem that the situation and the current struggles and campaigns do not allow to address properly. The emergency of the situation is often evoked as a justification of the lack of democracy, openness and representativeness. When he was asked about the democratic weaknesses of the international

¹⁹ Interview with a Mexican farmer union activist, 2003.

²⁰ The 2001 and 2002 WSF respectively gathered 15,000 and 50,000 activists.

²¹ See for example Albert 2004.

council, B. Cassen, one of the main founders and champions of the IC, defended himself this way: “The International Council was thought in a hurry. It is useless to seek some criteria and principles that have guided its construction. There were no criteria behind the choice of its participants. The newcomers have been accepted after a long time, without any consideration for any convenient criterion”.²²

Problems concerning internal democracy have arisen in movement organizations founded by scholar-activists and intellectuals of every country where this field research has been conducted. Grassroots activists are often treated as consumers of their discourses, and tools of their strategies. Moreover, many collaborators and employees of alter-globalisation groups and committed intellectuals denounce to the strict control their leader imposes on every document and initiative that comes out the organisation. Some have openly described their boss as “a real dictator in intern”.²³ Many alter-globalisation small think tanks and NGOs are built by and around a committed intellectual that rules as a lifelong president. Even bigger organizations led by intellectual leaders do not always take the internal democracy weaknesses into consideration. In 2006, the leading team of ATTAC was even convicted of fraud in the 2006 internal elections.²⁴

In many alter-globalisation forums and initiatives, a gap separates grassroots activists and cosmopolitan leaders. The controls the latter exert over key political and organizational decisions represent an inherent inconsistency of the WSF and of many global social justice movement events and organizations. It questions the credit of the global social justice movement as a “globalisation from below” that many activists and scholars²⁵ refer to. While the alter-globalisation movement contests the dominant and elite-driven globalisation, it is partly ruled by elite cosmopolitan activists that share a top-down conception of social change and of social movement organisations. While promoting active citizenship, they often enclose grassroots activists in a very passive posture. They often neglect locally rooted dynamics or consider them a mere tool towards reaching the main challenge that is situated at a global level. Conversely, some local activists have

²²) During a meeting of the French national alter-globalisation coordination network, 27/04/2004.

²³) Interview with an Asian network employee, 2003.

²⁴) See Passet 2006 and Lussion 2007. Four years before, the founding president managed to impose his follower without internal elections.

²⁵) i.e. Bandy and Smith 2005; Brecher et al. 2002.

become suspicious toward these global-oriented leaders and question the utility of international forums. To reduce the gap between these two categories of activists and between the local actors of the movement and its globe-trotting scholar-activists is hence a crucial challenge for the movement.

Bridging the Gap: A Renewed Interest for the Local

The multiplication of meeting and events at an international level has strengthened the constitution process of an alter-globalisation cosmopolitan elite and widened the gap between these globe-trotting leaders and their fellow grassroots activists. However, the World Social Forum process also resulted in new opportunities of encounter and interactions between these two categories of activists in two significant ways. Firstly, the WSF process has not only propelled local activists to an international level; it has also generated a renewed interest for local and national activism and civil society amongst cosmopolitan activists. Secondly, the WSF has never remained under the complete control of a few organizers. Its initiators have provided an open space that has given local activists opportunities to be heard by a wider audience, including some influential cosmopolitan activists. The encounter and debate between distinct visions of the WSF have resulted in significant change in the event's organisation, especially in its 2005 edition.

The WSF offers local activists from many parts of the world opportunities to meet, to share their experience and to network. Since 2003, the *No Vox* network has gathered French illegal migrants supporters, Indian dalits, Brazilian landless farmers and homeless movements and Argentinean jobless piqueteros. It has enabled them to frame their local struggles in a wider perspective and to connect them to a larger movement. As an Argentinean piquetero summarized, "We are here to make our revolt part of the global movement, to contribute to the movement and to learn from it" (WSF 2003). For many activists, the WSF also represents a unique experience for global consciousness: "For the first time in my life, I perceive myself as taking part in something truly global" (an Indian activist, WSF 2005). Indeed, the WSF has allowed many local activists to access the global level in their claims, experience and networks. Such international meetings have provided an alternative to the myopic tendencies that can emerge from local struggles. Indeed, the WSF also gives an international platform to

local movements that help them to make their claims and messages heard in the international as well as in their own national space. For example, the 2007 WSF in Nairobi allowed Kenyan and African homosexual rights activists to make their cause visible in their local and national public sphere at an unprecedented level.

While alter-globalisation propelled local and national activists into the global civil society, it also generated a renewed interest amongst cosmopolitan activists in their respective home countries' national and local movements, which they had previously neglected. This has especially been the case among the "Third-World solidarity" sector whose actors and networks found renewed interest in the political and social contexts of their homelands with the national and local social movement process. Some of them have become key actors in both local and national alter-globalisation convergences. In Austria, the national Social Forum has been founded by the director of a research centre on Latin America, a long-time globetrotter involved in the international movement dynamic. Likewise, the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development (CCFD) has become one of the leading actors of the French alter-globalisation convergence.²⁶ As an activist research centre built around a travelling scholar-activist, the *Tricontinental Centre* used to be exclusively dedicated to the Global South and to anti-imperialist struggles. The centre has committed itself massively in the international alter-globalisation movement since its early beginning and its leader, F. Houtart, has been an important actor of the movement internationalisation process and an active member of the international council. In Belgium the development of national and local social forums by trade-unionists, NGO activists, citizens' networks, local movements and cultural actors in 2002 in turn generated an unprecedented involvement at the national and local levels among scholar activists. The main Belgian Development NGO network has followed a similar path. It played a major role in the launch of the Belgian Social Forum in 2002 and 2003 and hired some of the most productive young intellectuals of the alter-globalisation national scene. Besides its development campaigns in the South, which remain the main goal of the organisation, several new projects and campaigns have been set up in Belgium.

²⁶ See Dreano 2004 and Agrikoliansky 2003.

A similar evolution has been observed at the local level. The case of Liege, a Belgian French-speaking town, is particularly interesting in this perspective. Local grassroots activists created the local chapters of ATTAC in 1999 and the local alter-globalisation networks two years later. They were soon joined by some committed intellectuals and NGOs active at an international level that manifested an unprecedented interest in local life and activism. Eric Toussaint, founder of the “Committee for the Cancellation of the Third-World Debt” (CCTWD) and an active member of the WSF International Council, has been strongly committed to the development of ATTAC-Liege, helping activists to understand the international economy and to take part in the organisation executive committee. The CCTWD hired one of the founders of ATTAC-Liege, assigning him to pursue the nascent organisation’s development. Similarly, once Oxfam national and international network got massively involved in the World Social Forum, its local chapter in Liege decided to join the city’s alter-globalisation convergence. It has developed new contacts with other local civil society actors that it used to ignore before: “Before, we had very little contact with activist sectors in Liege. Now, with the convergence, we know what everyone is doing and we try to see when and how to support their initiatives” (an employee of Oxfam-Liege, 2003). Without leaving its international solidarity commitment, Oxfam-Liege now also join local initiatives and events and became an actor embedded in the dynamic local civil society.

While an easier and broader access to an international dimension has been offered to locally oriented actors, the social forum dynamic has also generated a renewed interest in local and national struggles and movements amongst many cosmopolitan activists. Both of these dynamics have been crucial in limiting the distance between movements active at the local level and activists’ travelling elites.

Cross-Fertilization

The second factor favouring a reduction of the gap between the leading cosmopolitan elite and other activists lies in the *cross-fertilisation* process²⁷

²⁷⁾ Della Porta 2005.

through which they have inspired each other by their values and practices. The social forums have worked as open spaces that set cosmopolitan leaders in contact with grassroots activists' more horizontal and participatory values and visions of the forum. The rising questioning and criticism towards the forum organisation as well as some concrete alternative practices brought the international council to adopt deep changes in the WSF, especially in its 2005 edition.

The WSF initiative surged in cosmopolitan committed intellectuals' networks and so its first editions gave major roles to these elite activists. In many aspects, the 2001 WSF looked like an academic congress, with major intellectuals and academics monopolising the big conference panels and even appeared as speakers in smaller workshops. However, organizers and cosmopolitan activists were overflowed by the crowd and its enthusiasm. While they waited for 2,000 participants one month before, over 15,000 attended the event. Among them, many quietly stayed as passive audiences in the conferences. However, some others soon contested the WSF organisation and used the open space it provided to build alternative and more participatory workshops and meetings.

A Vision of the Forum as an Alternative Experimentation

Besides committed intellectuals and citizens that get mobilized on economic global issues – like the Third World Debt, international financial institutions and free trade agreement – many alter-globalisation activists emphasize the importance of the struggle at a local level and in the daily life. They seek to set up concrete alternatives and to get emancipated from global markets domination. These activists have developed another vision of the movement and of the WSF. While “globally-oriented” activists take advantage of international forums to converge in large networks and confluences, “locally-oriented” activists regard such meetings as opportunities to exchange their experience as local activists: “WSF is not to decide on some action campaign or to make as many people speak as possible. Action is taken every day locally. WSF is a platform, where such actions are reported and discussed which have succeeded in ways out of capitalism: from cooperatives of subsistence farming, via groups of solidarity sharing their land and their abilities, to indigenous people who realise the Declaration of Rights, lately passed by the UN assembly” (e-mail posted on the

“WSF-Discuss” mailing-list on September 19th 2007). Moreover, many of these activists mistrust the top-down structure often associated with a movement expansion and internationalisation. They rather promote the creation of similar but autonomous spaces, networks, social centres and initiatives in other communities, neighbourhoods and cities: “We don’t seek to build a big organization but many, many small organisations that all keep their specificities” (a local social forum activist in Belgium).

“Locally-oriented” activists conceive social transformations as an ongoing collective process and repeatedly emphasized the importance of directly democratic processes. The forums and mobilizations are hence considered as places to implement their democratic and participatory ideals.²⁸ As a document issued by a Parisian young activist network explains, “We do not separate our practices and aims. We choose a horizontal, anti-sexist, self- and eco-managed way of operating.”²⁹ This perspective strongly contrasts with the top-down organization of the first WSF as well as with actual practices of many movements, unions, intellectual networks and NGOs. On these bases, they strongly contested the WSF top-down organization of the first Forum. They questioned the dominant position of cosmopolitan elite activists and subsequently set up alternative and participatory practices within the WSF and in autonomous spaces.

²⁸ Mc Donald 2004; Juris 2004; Osterweil 2004; Pleyers 2005.

²⁹ The protest of more horizontal activists had a significant influence on the WSF development. However, locally-oriented activists and networks have also their limits. When disconnected from a broader perspective, some activists consider the neighbourhood or the community as the only significant level. It often leads to develop suspicion or even mistrust toward all processes and actors that are not directly “grassroots”. The suspicion may also concern nationally or internationally movement organisations, including alter-globalisation convergences. For example, some activists of Barricade considered the Belgian Social Forum events as worthless: “*It is like a big mass where everyone feels he has to come and show himself. (...) Nothing really happens here. It is in our cities that we can really make things change.*” Sometimes, it may even result in a withdrawal to the near local level, as with these libertarian Parisian young activists who decided to retire in a countryside house “to escape the capital and market domination”. Other activists reject all kind of structured organisation, maintaining it would denature the movement and impose its top-down logic. However, fluid networks also have their limits. Heavier organisational structures and professional activists may really be indispensable to massive events like the WSF. In many ways, grassroots and locally oriented activists have also benefited from the WSF cross-fertilisation process and of the efficiency of leading networks of cosmopolitan activists that set up the forum that hosted and sometimes supported their alternative autonomous spaces.

Towards an Open WSF? The 2005 Experience

In 2002 and 2003, young activists organized the *Intergaláctica Laboratory of Disobedience*, a participatory forum for sharing experiences among resistance movements from around the world. Radically opposed to the hierarchical character of the WSF, some of these activists engaged in a festive demonstration and a direct action against the WSF VIP room.³⁰ This symbolic action resulted not only in the renunciation of the forum organiser to set up such a room in the following social forums but also questioned the movement leaders about the WSF hierarchy and elitism. After the strong criticisms during the 2003 WSF, globally oriented IC members progressively became more open to ideas and suggestions to make the forum organisation more coherent with the values it defended: waste recycling, solidarity economy, more active participation, etc. The 2004 Mumbai WSF, the International Youth Camp³¹ and the international activist interpreter network “Babel” constituted spaces for the experimentation of such alternatives and repeatedly asked the IC to adopt such practices for the whole forum.³²

Some critics were progressively assuaged even by the globally oriented members of the International Council. In January 2004, the message was largely accepted and even relayed by some cosmopolitan IC members: “*the sons and daughters of Porto Alegre are not here. (...) We have to change the Forums’ methodology. We have to discuss with the European experience and with the Indian one. We need a democratic dialogue with Continental social Forums, especially between the World Social Forum and the Asiatic Social Forum and the European Social Forum*”.³³ The modalities of a more participative forum became the main debate of the 2005 preparation process.

Finding a new way to organize the 2005 WSF thus became a major challenge. To allow its 150,000 participants to take a more active role in the meetings and debates was not an easy task. Massive conferences with a 10,000 audience disappeared from the program. Indeed, no single conference was set up by the WSF organisers in order to give more importance to the thousands of workshops set up by the participant organisations. Consequently, rather than massive crowds listening to famed intellectuals,

³⁰ cf. Juris 2008.

³¹ Osterweil 2004; Nunes 2005; Juris and Pleyers 2007.

³² Moreover, the European Social Forum was considered a more transparent counter-model.

³³ During the IC meeting in Mumbai, January 2004.

hundreds of tents were set up to host smaller and more participatory events. After introductory speeches, the assembly was split into smaller groups, giving everyone a chance to express their own opinion. Such proceedings were implemented for a wide range of issues and debates: the WSF organization and its limits, “How to change the world without taking power?” or “A new international institution order”.

While the rising institutionalisation of the WSF could have paralyzed its 2005 edition, the cooperation and dialogue between more institutionalized and network-based activists opened the forum to other actors. The bottom-up dynamics gave the event a new and refreshing momentum. Horizontal activists critics and interactions with the globally oriented leading activists opened the way for a more inclusive and participative forum. Nevertheless, many misunderstandings and suspicions remains between globally and locally oriented activists. The 2005 WSF reality was not always the “total self-organisation” and “100% horizontal process” claimed by J. Miola, the “WSF *executive manager*” (*Libération*, 01/02/2005). Indeed, cosmopolitan elite affinity groups played a major role in both polycentric WSF events in Bamako and Caracas. With the Appeal of Bamako or the celebration of Chavez’ revolution, the political-oriented committed intellectuals – especially their Marxists and anti-imperialists components – have been more influential than ever before in the alter-globalisation movement. Nevertheless, recent forums differ significantly from the former ones that were massively dominated by globally oriented actors’ top-down logic.

Conclusion

As a unique open space, the WSF has facilitated the encounter and dialogue between these two distinct conceptions of the movement. Their interactions resulted in some *cross-fertilization* that transformed both tendencies: some of the main ideas of locally oriented activists have been adopted by their globally-oriented counterparts and vice-versa. Cosmopolitan leaders are now more aware of the importance of internal openness and democracy while networked locally oriented activists are more open to collaboration with the WSF organisers. Their exchanges and interactions have proved crucial in preventing movement towards either closed localism or disconnected expert cosmopolitanism but also helped maintain openness within the Forum. Even though the dialogue between these two trends has not always been easy, but it has shown that it can result in pro-

ductive and creative interactions, leading to more participatory – and still efficient – meetings and a better balance between local and global claims, strategies and events. The diffusion of the participatory and network values and practices within the WSF among the cosmopolitan elite activists shows that the core of the alter-globalisation movement and of its innovative potential lies in these conflictive but productive debates and interactions between activists that defend distinct conceptions of the movement process and of the strategies that lead to social transformation. Hence, the alter-globalisation movement should not be considered as a homogenous actor but as a cross-fertilization process of various activists' trends.

By empowering the cosmopolitan elite activists, the alter-globalisation movement internationalisation has given credit to Michels' iron law of oligarchy within social movement. However, it has also propelled grassroots activists to the global level and facilitated diffusion of their horizontal values and practices in the movement's global public sphere. The WSF should hence be seen as a double-sided process. It has not only strengthened the importance of the internationalisation of the movement but also promoted a renewed interest for the local by the cosmopolitan activists. Though it has widened the gap with the globe-trotting cosmopolitan intellectual activists but has also opened spaces for activists to contest the vertical way they run the forum and the movement. It has increased international leaders influence on the movement but has also come out of their control, allowing radical criticisms to be expressed and a new dynamism to come from grassroots activists' vision of the forum.

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