

## Globalization from Below and New Political Identities: The Case of the World Social Forum

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**Abstract.** The World Social Forum is a global public arena of very heterogeneous social movements that despite their very different goals, agendas and languages, come together every year in a way that can be explained with Laclau and Mouffe's notion of articulatory practice. The paper argues that with conflict and contestation, these movements construct an articulatory practice that is organized around the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization. Because if, during the last decades of the twentieth century, neoliberalism, as a set of globalized policies, institutions and conceptualizations of the state, the market and democracy, appeared as an epochal common sense, today, this is no longer the case. World Social Forum contributes to create a global political identity that speaks loud about the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization. While discussing the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas, the paper argues that the construction of regional and global public spheres is at stake in this emerging political identity.

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**Key Words:** The World Social Forum, articulatory practice.

### 1. Introduction

With a somewhat impatient overtone, I now recognize, I asked Octavio, a Porto Alegre independent media journalist, if he knew where I could get an official program. The 2003 World Social Forum (WSF) was beginning in

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only two days and I needed to start deciding which of the 1,710 officially planned or self-organized activities I would attend and be part of. “*Listen Verónica*” Octavio firmly responded, “*if you expect that much efficiency, you should be in Davos, not here in Porto Alegre*”. By “Davos”, Octavio meant the World Economic Forum where heads of big banks and global corporations, executives, and political leaders gather annually in the Swiss resort of Davos –fueling neoliberal ideology and policies, together with big business and technological novelties. “*But...what does it mean to be part of Porto Alegre rather than of Davos?*” I heard my inner voice asking me.

Despite the firmness of his answer, Octavio toured me around the various locations that were going to host the WSF during the coming days. With that combination of pride and joy that one feels only Brazilian spirits possess, he showed me the Catholic University ready for workshops; the Warehouses of the Port ready for panels; the *Gigantinho* stadium that would host public intellectuals’ and massively attended lectures, like that of Noam Chomsky and Arundhati Roy, and the “dialogue and controversy tables” confronting social movement activists with public officials of national and global institutions. We then visited the *Por-do-Sol* Amphitheater waiting for Brazilian President, *Lula*, and a wide range of performances, the camp expecting tens of thousands of youngsters from around the world and many other places like the feminist’s *Femea Planet*, book sales points and exhibits of solidarity economy products. For the third consecutive year, an overcrowded but still truly festive Porto Alegre, provided the physical space for a global arena of social movements that are moving from the protest against neoliberal globalization to envision a proposal about how “Another World is Possible” -like the Forum’s motto reads.

The WSF is not an isolated event. The January gatherings in Porto Alegre, which grew exponentially in terms of attendants<sup>1</sup>, are the most visible events of a complex global political *process* (Sader 2002). The process includes regional (i.e.: European, Amazonian) and thematic (i.e.: about the Argentine or Palestine situation) forums, whose protagonists are always a myriad of social movements organized in regional and global networks. Each forum is an opportunity for organization and mobilization that materializes in preparatory meetings, activities, debates, and incommensurable electronic communication within and among social

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<sup>1</sup> Around fifteen thousand participants attended WSF 2001; fifty one thousand WSF 2002 and over one hundred thousand WSF 2003.

movements. Hence, given its richness and complexity, in this paper, I will only do partial justice to the WSF process. I will begin to explore a question that seems to have been disregarded or downplayed until now. Because many have addressed the origins of the WSF (Cattani 2001), the critical reflections about neoliberalism<sup>2</sup> and some of the popular alternatives that it nurtures (Fisher and Ponniah 2003). Others have analyzed WSF in terms of resistance, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of its political potential (Seoane and Taddei 2001; Hardt 2002, Mertes 2002, Sader 2002). But “the identity question”, that my fellow Octavio unintentionally posed seems to have been unexplored: *What does it mean to be part of Porto Alegre rather than of Davos? What is really new about the Porto Alegre process? Is globalization from below, or more precisely, the WSF, producing a new transnational political identity? If this is the case, How is it being construed? What oppositional discourses and practices are being offered in this emerging global political identity?*

In order to start addressing these questions, I will first discuss why the WSF’s most important events took place in Porto Alegre –or, what were Porto Alegre’s political opportunities for the WSF. I will then argue that the proliferation and coexistence of multiple and heterogeneous social movements that autonomously politicize particular social relations in specific contexts is of course nothing new. The novelty lies, I say, in the *type of relation among* seemingly autonomous struggles, against what authors like Hardt and Negri (2000) have claimed. Following Laclau (1985, and Mouffe1985), I argue that the relation among struggles can be read as an articulatory practice constructed around the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization. Finally, I pay special attention to the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas –an overarching issue at the WSF- to point out that a project of *regional and global* public spheres lies at the core of this emerging political identity.

## **2. Porto Alegre’s political opportunities**

The Political Opportunities Structures paradigm of social movements theorizing emphasizes that, if we are to understand collective action, we

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<sup>2</sup> See Journal Vozes 2002: 6 for a collection of articles that criticize neoliberalism within the WSF

should not only consider the internal capacity of the actors but also the incentives and opportunities that politics provide. According to this school of thought, the state can increase (through governmental repression) or lower (through facilitation or toleration) the cost of collective action (Tilly 1978) and function as target (of groups' claims), or fulcrum for social mobilization (when creating enabling infrastructure) (Tarrow 1994, 1995).

It is of course no coincidence that WSF took place in the Brazilian City of Porto Alegre, at least for its first three years<sup>3</sup>. If the Social Forum was to have symbolic power to contest Davos, its location needed to be in the South and resonate with a strong trajectory of social mobilization, Bernard Cassen, A Le Monde Diplomatique journalist and founding member of the WSF, explained (Cassen 2001). Brazil thus appeared as one of the most appropriate places due to extraordinary social and political organizations. The million-strong Movimento Dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement) became known worldwide for its successful direct action of occupying big unproductive estates to create alternative agrarian settlements –and then lobbying the Brazilian government for legal access to property. The Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party), which took former unionist and metal worker Lula to the Presidency on November 2002, also became famous globally for its unprecedented participatory budget, first implemented in Porto Alegre – where each year the new public investment is decided with direct democracy mechanisms. Also, Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (Trade Union Federation) and the feminist movement are often acknowledged as among the most powerful popular organizations in the world. Therefore, Brazil, and Porto Alegre in particular, seemed to offer an inspiring political milieu –that even funded, at least partially, the WSF<sup>4</sup>. Materially and ideologically, the Brazilian state and the Porto Alegre government functioned as fulcrums and enablers of the WSF –something clear in the minds and hearts of activists and participants. “How much safer is to protest here than in Buenos Aires! It seems as if the police would not exist here!” I overheard more than once during the one-hundred-thousand inaugural and closing rallies.

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<sup>3</sup> WSF 2004 will take place in India (International Committee meeting in Porto Alegre, January 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003)

<sup>4</sup> Roughly 85% of WSF is funded by its participants. However, the State of Rio Grande do Sul and the City of Porto Alegre have been the main founders since its inception. This was true even for 2003 after the defeat of the Workers Party in the elections for state governor. The budget was represented during the International Committee meeting in Porto Alegre, January 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

### 3. What is really new about WSF?

To a certain extent, WSF entails nothing new. Already in the late 1970s, New Social Movements scholars pointed out and theorized the emergence of a new set of social actors different to the historical subject of classical Marxism. Unlike actors of the Old and New Lefts, the so-called new social movements spoke of a novel, extended and heightened social conflictuality that politicized hitherto non-politicized arenas like the body, sexual identity, the environment, physical conditions of life and many other lifeworld issues (Cohen 1985). In terms of Touraine (1977, 1981, 1988), if industrial society had extended the public space and democratization possibilities to the arena of labor, postindustrial society had spread the public sphere over almost all fields of human experience.

Therefore, despite the surprise of many observers, the multiplicity of autonomous struggles, embodied in actors as diverse as Tobin Tax activists<sup>5</sup>, environmentalists, feminists, gay, lesbian and transgender activists, unionists, indigenous peoples, pacifists, human right militants, solidarity and cooperative economy proponents, ethnic groups, intellectual-activists and activists-intellectuals, churches, NGOs and activists struggling for Esperanto as *lingua franca*, all organized in regional or global networks, that draw the map of the WSF, should not be seen as an unprecedented phenomenon. Think for a moment about the dissimilarities between a French militant concerned with taxing volatile financial capital and an Argentine activist struggling for the sexual rights of transgender people. Visualize how different a German environmentalist fighting against genetically modified organisms might appear *vis a vis* a Filipino proposing Esperanto as the universal language; or an Ecuadorian indigenous woman claiming legal access to the communal property of land. Even though remarkable, this heterogeneity of social actors that politicize, at first sight, such diverse aspects of human experience, is, in and by itself, nothing new.

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<sup>5</sup> The Tobin Tax, named after its designer, economist James Tobin, proposes to tax global financial transactions in order to curb global markets' volatility and impede drastic fluctuations. It is thus oriented to increase the room of maneuver of nation states to design and implement more autonomous economic policies and to collect revenues for social policies across the world under citizen's control. Key questions about who and how the tax will be collected and decisions concerning the allocation of resources are still unclear (Patomiaki 2000)

The key question to address *what* is new here, is whether or not these seemingly discrete political spaces and autonomous struggles are *related to each other or not*, and if they are, *how*. In the widely read *Empire*, Hardt and Negri state quite solemnly that “the paradox of incommunicability” is “one of the central and most urgent” of our times. They explain that “...in our much celebrated age of communication, *struggles have become all but incommunicable*” (2000: 54, their emphasis). According to these authors, the most powerful struggles of the late twentieth century (that they identify with 1989 Tiananmen Square, the Intifada against Israeli state authority, the May 1992 revolt in Los Angeles, the 1994 uprising in Chiapas, and the 1995 French series of strikes –all struggles that express demands, desires and concerns present in Porto Alegre) are simultaneously economic, political and cultural, but still incommunicable. These struggles simply lack a common enemy and do not have a common language with which to translate to each other. They are therefore disconnected among themselves, and even though they “leap[s] immediately to the global level and attack the imperial constitution in its generality”, they are unable to communicate and create horizontal links among them (Hardt and Negri 2000: 56).

It is well known that *Empire* awoke passionate responses. Among many other charges, critics have confronted the “paradox of incommunicability” with the case of Porto Alegre. Authors with a poststructuralist sensibility have claimed that we should conceptualize Porto Alegre as an ongoing series of alliances and coalitions, whose convergences are contingent but where genuine solidarity can be built up through an overlap of affinities and interests (Mertes 2002). Other critics, holding a historical materialist perspective, have stated that Porto Alegre demonstrates the existence of a common language and a common understanding among struggles against neoliberal globalization and the dictatorship of capital all around the world (Borón 2002).

I believe that these authors are right to single out WSF as *the* case that denies Hardt and Negri’s “paradox of incommunicability”. I also think that “a series of alliances with contingent convergences still able to produce genuine solidarity”, and “a common language and understanding among struggles” exist. Nevertheless, these perspectives fall short of problematizing and explaining the “common language and understanding” that is expressed at the WSF and its specific relation to neoliberal globalization. The struggle “against the dictatorship of capital” simply does not capture the nature of the Porto Alegre process and the complexity of the emerging global political

identity. I do not intend to downplay the key importance of the struggle “against capital”. What I wish to stress, however, is that the novelty of the WSF lies (contra Hardt and Negri) in the effective communicability of struggles. Communicability that, I suggest, is organized around neoliberal globalization in a way that (contra Borón) simultaneously includes and transcends the struggle against capital. Communicability that, I also suggest, we think, following Laclau (1985), in terms of an “articulatory practice”.

Let me first briefly present Laclau’s notion of articulatory practice and then expand on how it relates to the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization for the case of WSF.

#### **4. A practice of articulation and contestation**

From a poststructuralist perspective but still within the theoretical camp of New Social Movements, Laclau (1985) claims that the twentieth century has witnessed a proliferation of antagonisms that tend to create their autonomous space and politicize specific social relations. The political is thus one of the possible forms of existence of the social, rather than a pre-constituted sphere, Laclau says<sup>6</sup>. Accordingly, it is now impossible to identify a group, conceived as referent, with an orderly and coherent system of subject positions. For example, the fact that someone is a worker tells us nothing about her position towards sexism or racism. The social agent occupies a variety of subject positions –a variety of differential loci within a structure<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> As it is well-known Laclau (and Mouffe’s (1985) general project is to theorize radical democracy. Within this project, they claim that there are no privileged points for the unleashing of a socialist (or progressive) political practice, but rather that a “collective will” is laboriously constructed from a number of dissimilar points (87).

<sup>7</sup> Thus, for Laclau, a structure is an ensemble of different positions or discourses that have no a priori or necessary links between them. The subject’s positions are autonomous from one another and it is thus impossible to speak of an agent as a unified or homogenous entity. Laclau claims that, following psychoanalysis, social sciences have broken with the category of the subject as a transparent and rational unity that conveys a homogenous meaning to her conduct and is the source of her actions. Therefore, the proliferation of new points of struggle and political mobilization that new social movements have opened up can only be understood with a de-centered and de-totalized notion of subject.

However, the fact that subject positions are autonomous and there is no necessary a priori link between them, does not deny an opposite trend – the movement towards articulatory practices. Thus, there is a double movement of opposite signs. On the one hand, there is a tendency towards autonomy of each subject position and towards a specific politicization of a particular social relation. On the other hand, there is the opposite attempt to fix these subject positions by articulatory practices, as moments of a unified discursive structure (Laclau 1985). Therefore, an articulatory practice establishes “a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 105).

In other words, what Laclau (and Mouffe) are making available is the idea that even though social movements might well be autonomous from each other because they politicize specific and very dissimilar social relations, they can nevertheless “laboriously” construct an articulatory practice that connects them in a way that transforms the identities of all. It is fundamental to make clear, however, that this transformation of identities *does not mean that each movement becomes exactly each other* (what would take us back to the unity of “the historical subject”, still so dear to orthodox Marxists). Rather, what I believe is at stake here is what Butler calls “a practice of contestation that demands that movements *articulate their goals under the pressure of each other*” (Butler 1998: 37, my emphasis).

I believe that in the WSF case, the articulatory practice, the practice of contestation is organized around the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization. I am now turning to discuss this crisis.

## 5. Neoliberal globalization and its legitimacy crisis

“The twenty-first century does not belong to Bretton Woods”  
José Durceu, Brazilian *Ministro da Casa Civil* of Lula’s administration

We know since Weber that any type of domination requires legitimacy. For domination to reproduce itself, last in time, exercise authority and maintain obedience, an administrative staff with executive functions and bounded to “its superior” “by custom, affectual ties, material or ideal interests” is a necessary but not sufficient condition, Weber says. Whether on rational, traditional or charismatic grounds, domination requires a claim to validity – the fact that the administrative staff *believes* in the legitimacy of the domination (Weber 1978: 212-215). Weber’s notion of legitimacy is thus circumscribed to the relation between the ruler and her/his administrative

staff. A more widespread and “folk” notion of legitimacy within analysts, activists and media circles, however, often refers to the relation between rulers and ruled –to the belief or not in the validity of the domination hold by the ruled. Both, the Weberian and the “folk notion”, are appropriate here. Let me explain.

During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bretton Woods institutions<sup>8</sup> and the so-called Washington Consensus encouraged, if not enforced, a deep process of structural transformations in most of Latin American and other Third World countries. Whether one considers the early case of Argentina in 1976<sup>9</sup>, or the Mexican debt crisis in 1982<sup>10</sup> as starting points for the Latin American region, the so-called neoliberalism, or neoliberal globalization, implied that a set of economic and social policies rooted in neoclassical economic theory and in a neoliberal political culture, were predominantly seen through Margaret Thatcher’s infamous “TINA”: “There is no Alternative”. Under a governance structure that Robert Cox (1997) captured with the metaphor of the “*nébuleuse*” (due to its elusiveness and lack of democratic accountability), Bretton Woods institutions and other “expert bodies” (like Inter American Development Bank) evolved a common ideology that was later injected as a consensual outcome into national processes of decision making.

Thus, neoliberal globalization was not only about globalizing policies like stabilization and structural adjustment programs, the privatization of public companies and public services, the drastic liberalization of trade (for Third but not for First World countries), and the de-regulation of most markets. What was also globalized, was a whole set of understandings regarding the state, its relation to the market and to civil

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<sup>8</sup> I am referring to the set of institutions that were created in 1944 in the context of the Bretton Woods Conference: International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) –then International Bank for Reconstruction and Development- and the recent World Trade Organization (WTO) –before General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

<sup>9</sup> Argentina can be considered an early case of neoliberal globalization due to the neoliberal economic program of the military coup in 1976. Many have insisted on how Menem’s administration in the 1990s was the final stroke of a process inaugurated by the military regime.

<sup>10</sup> Mexico’s default of its foreign debt in 1982 and the IMF fiscal austerity programs imposed after it can also be read as inaugurating moments of neoliberal globalization in Latin America (Verltmeyer and Petras 2000).

society, together with new conceptualizations of democracy and citizenship. While “the social state” was dismantled, “the penal state”, experienced a correlative “hypergrowth” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001: 158). While the state shrunk in terms of social responsibilities for its citizens, it became incredibly strong in terms of criminalizing protest and social conflict, and in many cases, it functioned as a powerful fulcrum for big corporations<sup>11</sup> (Borón 2002). In addition, symbolically speaking, the neoliberal state was also highly active in shaping a minimalist conception of democracy (Alvarez et al 1998), and a notion of citizenship “based on individual subjects as bearers of rights who must entrepreneurially fashion their overall personal development through wider relations to the marketplace” (Schild 1998: 96). Paradoxically<sup>12</sup>, but with his usual striking clarity, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, expressed the 1990s epochal common sense when he said: “outside globalization there’s no salvation; inside globalization, there’s no alternative” (Borón 1999). A whole set of understandings, knowledges, practices, policies, and power relations appeared under the façade of inevitability.

*But today, the belief in the unavoidable and common sensical nature of neoliberalism, and neoliberal globalization, has come to an end.* The crisis that neoliberalism is facing today can be seen through the Weberian and the folk notions of legitimacy that I mentioned above. On the one hand, for the case of Latin America, for example, within academic and policy circles, there is an overall consensus that the worsening of poverty and income distribution since the 1980s has turned the region into the most inequitable region in the world<sup>13</sup> and has led to unprecedented levels of open violence. The alarm with the “high social costs of the structural adjustment

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<sup>11</sup> According to Borón (2002: 99), even though corporations might be “global” in scope and access to markets, they always have some type of “support” from their national governments. This “support” is expressed in policies like direct subsidies; massive financial rescue operations, funded in many cases by workers and consumers; devaluation of national currencies in order to favor some sectors of capital at the expense of others, and “labor reforms” among others.

<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, because while back in the late 1960s, Cardoso had sought to update Lenin’s theory of imperialism for Latin American settings in Dependency Theory, in the 1990s, his presidential administration implemented neoliberal policies.

<sup>13</sup> There is of course debate regarding the timing and pace of the increase in poverty and inequality, together with the magnitude of growth that has characterized some years and countries in the 1990s. But there is consensus regarding the overall trends (Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000).

programs” has been part of the mainstream discourse for some years by now (Korzeniewicz and Smith 2000), even before Argentina’s tragic crisis in 2001. In addition, the fact that the Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz slammed the door of the World Bank to publicly accuse the IMF and the World Bank of being wholly antidemocratic, pervaded by “malpractice” and US/G-7 exceptionalism speak to the lack of credibility and validity that Bretton Woods institutions’ administrative staff holds towards neoliberalism<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, in terms of the “folk” notion that refers to the relation between the ruler and the ruled, a genealogy of oppositional movements of the last years in different parts of the world, speaks loud about the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization (Seoane and Taddei 2001)<sup>15</sup>.

## **6. Articulation around the legitimacy crisis of neoliberal globalization**

*WSF emerges within this socioeconomic and political constellation as a global public arena of a myriad of very heterogeneous social movements that seek to de-privatize neoliberal globalization, disenclave it from the nebuleuse of Bretton Woods institutions and place it under the light of critical and grassroots debate. The struggle against neoliberal globalization becomes an articulatory practice that connects social actors who, with contestation and without becoming exactly each other, still negotiate their goals and projects within a common horizon and under each other’s pressure.*

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<sup>14</sup> Stiglitz (2002) argues that due to “market fundamentalism” IMF and World Bank make “bad economics”.

<sup>15</sup> To name only some key events: In 1996, the Zapatistas in Chiapas organized the “First Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism”. In 1997, North American and European organizations launched a campaign against the work-in-progress and secret “Multilateral Investment Agreement” –which was finally suspended in 1998. In that same year, Tobin Tax organization (ATTAC) was created, and several marches took place in the context of the “First Day of Global Action”. 1999 witnessed the massive protest against World Trade Organization in Seattle, and 2000 the World March of Women that denounced throughout the year and in different continents, women’s oppression in the context of globalization. See Seoane and Taddei (2001) for a detailed and insightful reconstruction of the this genealogy.

Conflict and contestation were expressed, for example, in the International Committee meeting held in January 2003. This Committee, formed by delegates endowed with a voice but not with a vote for making binding decisions, and observers, of more than one hundred global networks of social movements is, together with the Brazilian Committee, responsible for the overall coordination of the WSF. It thus has a powerful say in terms of the procedures that frame the WSF as a global public sphere, and is highly responsible for its horizontal and democratic functioning –“a challenge that today is pressing not only for states but also for social movements”, a feminist militant I interviewed, insisted. While “rethinking the architecture of the WSF”, and when the US war on Iraq was still only a possibility, deep differences emerged. Behind the debate of seemingly “just strategic” issues, dissimilarities regarding the nature of globalization, its emancipatory alternatives and the role of WSF came to the fore.

Within that context, the discussion about the location of WSF 2004 - Porto Alegre or India- became significant. Some delegates argued that, under the threat of an imperial war that would further strengthen US hegemonic might in the world, WSF ought to be taken to India. Because globalization was about US imperialism, and no social progress would ever be achieved without undermining it, the struggle of global civil society should be further internationalized. WSF ought to pronounce itself regarding the big issues of world politics (not only the US war on Iraq, but also the Palestine cause, future FTAA, among others) and constitute itself as a key organizer of anti-systemic struggles, these delegates said. Others agreed upon moving to India but “those were the wrong reasons”. The key problem, they stated, was that the WSF was not diverse enough. As a global deliberative process inspired on the principles of direct democracy, a wider range of national, cultural, ethnic, religious and gender identities ought to be present -and the WSF should never speak in other’s name. Finally, other delegates claimed that in the context of a likely war, and given that globalization was such a multifaceted process beyond imperialism, what was needed was the construction of new political cultures of peace, and the strengthening of the new emerging alliances to prevent the war. In that regard, Porto Alegre had not only become an icon of alternative political cultures, but it had also accumulated invaluable know-how for the setting of WSF –thus, the Forum should not move to India. In other words, the discussions about the location of WSF 2004 (and also about an International Committee declaration against the war on Iraq –which was finally rejected) revealed differences in delegates’ understandings of globalization per se (how much of globalization

ought to be read as US imperialism) and, accordingly, of WSF's political nature and role in the struggle against globalization.<sup>16</sup>

However, these differences and contestation do not seem to be an obstacle for the constitution of a global political identity articulated around neoliberal globalization. The "Call of Social Movements", or the "Bill of Principles", as some activists use to name it, the only WSF "official and consensual" document, is clear about how the struggle against neoliberalism not only "tolerates" but asks for a diverse and heterogeneous political identity. The Bill of Principles states that because neoliberal globalization is seen as a system, and a process that reveals so "many faces" -"the war against terrorism... to cement the domination of US government and its allies"; "the further repression of the Palestinian people...and their struggle for self-determination"; "Argentina[']s financial crisis caused by the failure of IMF structural adjustment and mounting debt ..."; "the casino economy [exemplified in the] collapse of the multinational Enron..."; "US unilateralism [that] undermines attempts to find multilateral solutions to global problems..."; "policies [that] create misery and insecurity [that] have dramatically increased the trafficking and sexual exploitation of women and children"; "the external debt of the countries of the South [that] functions as an instrument of domination"; "the adoption of the 'development agenda' [that] only defends corporate interests"; "the [WTO] that is moving closer to its goal of converting everything into a commodity...[and whose] agenda is perpetuated at the continental level by regional free trade and investments agreements"; - that is to say, because neoliberal globalization is so multifaceted, then, the struggles and resistance that "flourished" to "uphold the dignity of life", are also multifaceted<sup>17</sup>:

"We, social movements from all around the world, have come together in tens of thousands... to continue our struggles against neoliberalism and war.... We are diverse -women and men, adults and youth, indigenous peoples, rural and urban, workers and unemployed, homeless, the elderly, students, migrants, professionals, peoples of every creed, color and sexual orientation.

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<sup>16</sup> Even though I was neither a delegate nor an observer, I could attend the International Committee Meeting and make these observations.

<sup>17</sup> See "Call of Social Movements", <http://www.portoalegre2002.org>

The expression of this diversity is our strength and the basis of our unity.”<sup>18</sup>

*Now, what is the nature of this heterogeneous global “we” that emerges in this multifaceted struggle against neoliberal globalization? What regulatory principles are at stake in this global identity?* Of course, once again, I can only do very partial justice to these questions given the richness and complexity of the WSF process. I will only point out a principle that, I think, lies at the heart of this new global political identity. This principle - that I discuss with the case of the struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA)- challenges the national limits of democracy, or, better say, the national limits of the public sphere. WSF aims at connecting processes of deliberation and opinion formation, with processes of decision-making *at a regional or global level*. It thus aspires to the ideal of global public deliberation and social integration on the grounds of communication rather than of domination (Calhoun 1992).

### 7. Connecting weak and strong publics at the global level

Advancing an interesting line of democratic theory, many scholars have criticized Habermas’s liberal notion of public sphere<sup>19</sup>. I wish to point out here Fraser’s (1992) critique because she has sought to update Habermas’s model for today’s actually existing democracies in a way that illuminates the struggles and articulatory practice of the WSF. Fraser rejects, from a normative standpoint, the *desirability* of *one single public*<sup>20</sup>. She calls

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<sup>18</sup> “Call of Social Movements”, point 2.

<sup>19</sup> See Calhoun (1992) and Mehaan (1995) for collections of essays that have criticized and furthered the line of research pioneered by Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

<sup>20</sup> The critique of one single public has also been done from other perspectives. From historiography for example, Eley (1992) argues that eighteenth century Europe witnessed a variety of combative subaltern publics –the radical intelligentsia of Jacobinism, sectors of the peasantry and the working class, among others- that used the same emancipatory language of reason that Habermas attributed solely to the bourgeois public. The liberal bourgeois public sphere was thus shaped in contestation and conflict with a variety of competing popular publics, Eley says.

instead for the need of multiplicity and coins the distinction between “weak” and “strong” publics. While the formers are exclusively devoted to opinion formation practices, the latter encompass public opinion formation *and* decision-making capacities. Fraser thus opens up a new line of normative and empirical questions related to the institutional arrangements that would better connect both types of publics for the sake of democratic accountability.

*The WSF takes up these questions for regional and global levels as a key part of its articulatory practice.* This is clear in the struggles and debates surrounding the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) –a George Bush initiative for continental commercial integration to expand the already existing North America Free Trade Area. Because this “work-in-progress” project condenses the most basic understandings of neoliberalism, it became an overriding issue at the WSF -not only convoking the massively attended closing march but also inspiring innumerable workshops, conversations and documents. Because struggling against FTAA is throwing the dart to the core of the neoliberal project, such struggle is able to articulate coalitions like the *Continental Social Alliance*<sup>21</sup>.

In a nutshell, the FTAA seeks to equate foreign and national capital in terms of their access to national markets –that is, both types of capital should be treated under exactly the same conditions. It would therefore grant free mobility of capital and commodities for the Americas –excepting Cuba. Unsurprisingly, the same is not true for labor mobility –that would still be subject to innumerable restrictions. Unlike the European Union, the FTAA project does not include *political* integration. It does not anticipate any democratic supranational institution. Rather, it plans to disappear the minute the WTO is able to put in place a global multilateral agreement of the same nature (Arceo 2001) –postponed in 1998, after the pressure of an international coalition campaign (Seoane and Taddei 2001).

Needless to say that, as it is today, the FTAA would over empower global corporations not only *vis a vis* labor but also *vis a vis* national and

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<sup>21</sup> Continental Social Alliance (Alianza Social Continental) is a network of network organizations (unions, indigenous, feminists, environmentalists, trade experts, churches, human rights, among others) working for alternative and social just integration policies in the Americas (<http://www.asc.has.org>)

local governments. It foresees an almost unrestricted scope for the possible activities of corporations (to, for example, primary education or senior citizen's care). And it plans to provide corporations with new legal mechanisms to sue governments, "whenever their activities or profits are restricted", in private tribunals that, in principle, would make secret and unappealable decisions (Abin 2000a).

Now, rather than the rejection to the project of continental trade integration *tout court*, what was paramount for different voices of the oppositional movement at the WSF was the hermetic secrecy with which the negotiation process takes place. Denounces revolved around the lack of publicity, pointing to facts like the absence of national parliament members and associational organizations in the ongoing negotiations<sup>22</sup>; or the absence of references, in the only released document, of who is saying what<sup>23</sup> (Abin 2002b). Counterproposals to FTAA are focussed not only in mobilization and protest but also in demanding official national plebiscites as follow ups of the unofficial (church and civil society driven) Brazilian plebiscite that took place on September 2002. Calls for popular organizations to be informed and get involved in the ongoing negotiations abound (Grito dos Excluidos 2002: 3). Indigenous and feminist organizations are making claims for regional integration on the grounds of principles other than those enacted by FTAA negotiations –principles of reciprocity, complementary and solidarity (Burch 2002).

As these struggles begin to ripe, at least in part (FTAA drafts were made public for the first time immediately after an official meeting on April 2003 in Puebla, Mexico<sup>24</sup>) it is clear that a key element lying at their core is a search to connect transnational decision-making bodies with social movements' claims and desires. What seems to be at stake here is the project of disenclaving the manufacturing of transnational policies from the institutional *nébuleuse* that had hitherto enclaved them –a typical, obviously non-democratic, ruling practice of Bretton Woods institutions, and so dear to neoliberal globalization. WSF thus functioned as an arena that linked and sinergized diverse social actors that are working to air policy making and

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<sup>22</sup> A Committee of Economic Vice-Ministers carries out the negotiations.

<sup>23</sup> According to Abin (2002b) the first released draft seemed a 'festival of brackets' - brackets showed ideas where consensus had not been achieved. The problem was that there were no references to explain what government held what position in the debate.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.asc-has.org/presentacion-html>

create “sensors” between “weak publics” of opinion formation and “strong publics” endowed with decision-making capacities *at regional and global levels*.

## 8. Conclusion

Aware of the partial justice that I can do to the richness and complexity of the Porto Alegre process (and maybe to any on-going political process), in this paper, I have argued that a new global political identity seems to be emerging at the WSF. The proliferation of social antagonisms that politicize specific social relations, embodied in actors as diverse as feminists, unionists, Tobin Tax activists, indigenous peoples, human rights militants, and pacifists, among others, is of course nothing new to the landscape of late twentieth century social conflict. What seems to be the novelty, however, is that despite very heterogeneous goals, agendas, languages, needs, norms, and strategies, these actors still develop a practice of articulation, without becoming exactly each other. This articulatory practice necessarily entails conflict and contestation –that according to both activists and scholars needs to be treasured and elaborated, for the sake of an internally democratic “we” (Butler 1998). I have argued that this articulatory practice is organized around the crisis of legitimacy of neoliberal globalization, and it thus challenges it in a capillary and multiple fashion. If during the last two decades of the twentieth-century, neoliberalism, as a cluster of policies, institutions, ruling practices, knowledges, understandings of state-market relations, and definitions of democracy and citizenship, appeared as an epochal common sense, today, this is no longer the case. WSF speaks loud about this crisis.

While discussing the struggle against the FTAA, I have claimed that social movements at WSF aspire to the ideal of creating regional and global public spheres. Moreover, social movements struggle for connections between “weak publics” of deliberation and opinion formation and “strong publics” of decision-making *at regional and global levels*. Thus, among other oppositional discourses and practices, the project of airing the manufacturing of transnational policies that neoliberal globalization enclaved within the *nébuleuse* of Bretton Woods institutions, is at stake in this emerging political identity.

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