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Can the Subaltern Speak at the WSF?

Review of: Janet M. Conway, *Edges of Global Justice: The World Social Forum and Its 'Others'* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

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The World Social Forum (WSF) is known for bringing together participants from across the world to stand against the privileged circles of the world's rich and mighty, represented in the G8, the WTO, and the World Bank, and against the neoliberal system of world governance these institutions champion. The WSF considers itself as an open and horizontal movement, based on the utopian ideal of global justice. Janet Conway's *Edges of Global Justice* challenges this self-perception with a detailed analysis of the tensions and contradictions within the Forum. From the perspective of a participant observer, a political theorist and an activist, Conway presents detailed insights into the movement and the intellectual debates around it, and explores the limits of the liberal, Marxist and poststructuralist political philosophy as theoretical frameworks for the analysis of the WSF. For her, the Forum manifests a completely new modality of the political, which needs to be theorized on its own terms.

The book is compelling in that it points the finger at the most vulnerable aspects of the WSF, where it has not lived up to its own promises. Conway draws attention to the lack of participation of the 'worst off', and to the dominance of professionalized NGOs and the prevalence of the intelligentsia from the middle-classes of the global North. On a philosophical level, Conway's challenge to theories of global justice and Western political thought calls for more rigorous elaboration. Despite its conceptual shortcomings, the book is a highly valuable and innovative assessment of the WSF that offers a wide and detailed account of the heterogeneous debates and the activism within the Global Justice Movement, with a particular postcolonial focus on the agency of marginalized groups.

In her review of the scholarly literature on the WSF, Conway identifies a deeply entrenched Eurocentric and modernist framework and claims that 'coloniality seriously and increasingly distorts knowledge production about the WSF' (p. 20). As a consequence, she draws the reader's attention to the articulations of 'subalternity' within the Forum – the subalterns are defined as 'dwellers, tribal

and indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, *dalits*, and subsistence producers, among other poor people's movements' (p. 10).

The characteristic and new feature of the WSF in Mumbai in 2004 was the mobilization from below, manifested in the presence of *dalits* ('untouchables'), who used performances and music as a means of articulation and visibility. Conway calls this empowering presence of the local poor the 'Mumbai effect' (p. 51) and considers its visibility as an important challenge to the 'white' middle-class Forum of Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2002, where the Forum originated and was dominated by left intellectuals up to that point. The subsequent question then becomes why this 'Mumbai effect' has been muted in the WSF after its appearance in 2004.

According to Conway, the Forum in Nairobi in 2007 transformed into a more institutionalized and NGO-dominated event. Conway explains this shift by pointing to the history of economic and human labor extroversion in Africa. Authoritarian regimes and severe inequalities hampered the emergence of social movements and political activism in Africa and resulted in an unequal insertion of Africa into alter-globalization activism (p. 54). She draws several conclusions from this observation. First, she challenges the WSF radical rhetoric of re-centering grassroots' activism and contests that the Forum actually is an 'open space'. The idea of 'open space' was conceptualized by the Forum's intellectuals Ignacio Ramonet and Chico Whitaker who argued – against the faction of the classical left within the Global Justice Movement led by Immanuel Wallerstein among others – that the WSF should remain a horizontal structure of communicative exchange without a fixed political agenda.[1]

Second, Conway argues that the Forum suppresses matters of 'race' and the diversity of political cultures among its participants (pp. 60-61). She maintains that the articulate 'white left intellectuals', fluent in the colonial languages, keep dominating the nominally open arena, which is only formally devoid of power differentials. Consequently, a form of supportive politics is needed to retain subalternity within the Forum and to decenter Eurocentric masculinist activism.

Subsequently, the book turns to the marginalized standing of the autonomist and the feminist factions within the WSF. While Conway acknowledges the marginalization of the autonomists within the forum, she strongly disapproves of the 'overwhelmingly white' and androcentric (p. 111) manners of their

1 For a debate on 'open space', cf. Ignacio Ramonet, 'La pensée unique', *Le Monde diplomatique* (1995), http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1995/01/RAMONET/1144. Chico Whitaker, 'The WSF as Open Space', in Peter Waterman & Jai Sen (ed.), *World Social Forum. Challenging Empires* (Montréal: Black Rose Books 2009), 111–121. An opposing view is suggested by: Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Dilemmas of Open Space: the Future of the WSF', *International Social Science Journal* 182, UNESCO (2004), 629–637.

spokespersons, who fashion themselves as 'privileged carriers of radicalism' (p. 112). By contrast, her assessment of transnational Feminist activism in the WSF is a lot more affirmative. Feminism, she claims, was able to decenter the 'Porto Alegre Men' and their 'reductive Marxism' (p. 121) by discussing power relations and narrow intellectual frameworks within the Forum. At the same time, Conway highlights the secularist and modernist nature of the transnational feminist movement and its narrow understanding of gender justice. She attests that there is 'little documentary evidence' (p. 115) of subaltern feminist evaluations of the WSF. This omission is a bit astonishing given the wide literature on postcolonial feminism. On a practical level, she then argues for affirmative action in favour of a 'politics of pluralism' (p. 135).

In the later chapters of the book Conway discusses the theoretical and normative implications of her sociological account, based mainly on participatory observations. Conway refuses to represent the WSF using the classical vocabulary of Western liberal political theory or Marxist terminologies. She claims that neither the Habermasian idea of discursive democracy nor Gramsci's social theory is an appropriate tool with which to analyze the WSF process. Concerning the former, she convincingly argues that the WSF does not seek to create any unified will formation, nor does it have the capacity to produce a legitimate transnational consensus. On the contrary, the process aims at the formation of many 'counter-publics'. Although Conway succeeds in giving evidence for the inadequacy of these premises of deliberative democracy, she does not refute Wright's claim about the 'Habermasian character of the open space of the WSF'.[2] One could say that contrary to its 'post-liberal' rhetoric, the Forum aims at the free exchange of communicative rationality beyond hierarchical power relations as a regulative idea.

Conway also points out that the Forum, particularly its Anarchist factions, questions the basis of economic modes of production and refuses to accept the state as a prime agent of change. Along these lines, Conway rejects Gramsci's social theory as too state-centered and modernist and therefore unable to imagine change beyond statism.

Rejecting deliberative as well as hegemonic theory, Conway approves of radical democratic theory as put forward by Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, as the most adequate to explain the WSF process.[3] She assumes that this stream of thought allows for difference within an anti-neoliberal justice-based agenda,

2 Collin Wright, 'Opening Spaces: power, participation and plural democracy at the World Social Forum', *Ephemera: theory and politics in organization* 5/2 (2005), 409-422, p. 73.

3 Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London/New York: Verso, 1985).

and that it best grasps 'transversal' politics. The term 'transversality' has been coined by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in reference to the WSF and describes the equal status of diverse emancipatory struggles, which are incommensurable and therefore cannot be reduced to a single ideology of liberation. [4] Critics may object that this term glosses over the inherent tensions between the highly heterogeneous normative and political positions within the WSF. The vagueness of the term may also be responsible for weakening Conway's discussion of the WSF's relevance for discourses on global justice in the final section of the book.

By way of conclusion, Conway calls for more awareness of the differences within the WSF. Stressing the importance of epistemology, she considers the Forum a space for recovering silenced knowledges and subjectivities that offers new grounds for experimental social practices and different ways of doing politics. In this regard, she argues in line with Santos' account of the Forum[5], which worked with a similar methodology of historical, sociological and theoretical assessments. They converge in the epistemological claim for pluralism and respect, which has been already named by Santos a subject matter of 'cognitive justice'.[6] However, Conway tries to make a further argument concerning the debate on 'global justice': By using the metaphor of the 'edges' of global justice, she introduces a signifier that alludes to non-discoursified social practices and world views that are not taken into account in the academic discourses of moral philosophy (p. 138). According to Conway, these 'edges' unsettle the global justice movement and its theoretical justifications as a middle class phenomenon by the International Left (p. 156). Although the WSF pretends to expand towards its margins, it does not decenter its inherent power structures. And although the Forum claims that the subaltern is at its centre, the 'urban, and the literate, organized primarily through NGOs, and increasingly globally networked through their access to the Internet, international travel, and fluency in colonial languages' (pp. 156-157) remain the privileged carriers of the event. Conway sensitively presents this discrepancy between discourse and practice while she acknowledges the Forum's audacious and on-going efforts to deal with these antinomies.

However, she remains vague on the normative conclusions that follow from this critical observation. On the one hand, Conway demands more global justice and explicitly bases her critique on the premises of anti-racism and anti-colonialism. In line with this, she applies a normatively thick vocabulary using the language of 'oppression', 'marginalization', 'emancipation' and 'gender

4 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006), p. 39.

5 Ibid.

6 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, 'Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges', *Review* XXX/1 (2007), 45–89, p. 53.

justice'. On the other hand, Conway asserts a theoretical standpoint beyond modernity, which she labels 'post-liberal' (p. 134) and 'transmodern' (p. 141). For an innovative contribution to postcolonial and feminist theory Conway would need to say more about the process of rearticulating these entrenched normative terms and elaborate on their specifically 'transmodern' theoretical foundations and character. Likewise, her appeal for diversity remains in tension with her vision of radical emancipatory struggle. For example, while Conway urges her readers to confront religious and cosmological difference, she does not shed light on how a political activist may identify emancipatory scripts as opposed to repressive elements within the involved religious or indigenous discourses (such as the case of a faction of Hindu nationalists that defended hierarchies based on caste in the broader context of the WSF in India in 2004). One can object against Conway that the normative question of how to solve these urgent questions by means of social theory and moral philosophy are bypassed through appeal to inspecific and open terms such as transmodernity, transversality and post-liberalism.

In her defense one could say that the field of moral philosophy, particularly theories of global justice, are yet to fully confront the challenges posed by postcolonialism and transcultural philosophy. The literature that Conway could lean on in order to solve these theoretical puzzles is therefore not extensive. However, she could have made reference to theories of recognition and recent critical theory, as both have engaged with the complexities of a politics of difference and multiculturalism since the early 1990s. Finally, one might read these shortcomings in Conway's book as a pledge to theorize justice with greater sensitivity to epistemological (and 'cosmological') difference, culture/religion and power differentials. Taking the book primarily as a phenomenology of the World Social Forum and its 'other', we may appreciate its insightful and daring analysis of the history of the Forum, the panorama of the intellectual currents and struggles it provides and the new ways of doing politics it points towards.

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