# Is the World Social Forum a Transnational Public Sphere?

## Nancy Fraser, Critical Theory and the Containment of Radical Possibility

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**Abstract**

In a number of recent articles, Nancy Fraser attempts to understand the World Social Forum within the framework of critical democratic theory. In this article, we examine the descriptive and normative aspects of Fraser's theoretical framework, and explore the effects of projecting it upon the World Social Forum. We argue that while this theory may elucidate some features of the Forum, many of the Forum's most challenging and innovative aspects are obscured and limited by Fraser's framework. Not only, then, does the World Social Forum elude Fraser's conceptualization of it, but we suggest that the praxis of the Forum poses a number of serious challenges to Fraser's critical theory of democracy and social justice.

**Key words**

democracy ■ global civil society ■ global justice ■ globalization ■ pluralism ■ social movements

THE WORLD Social Forum (WSF) is increasingly gaining recognition as an important new phenomenon on the global Left. Originally conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, the WSF regularly convenes thousands of groups and movements of insurgent civil society from around the world for the free exchange of ideas, experiences and strategies oriented to enacting alternatives to neoliberalism. Amid the cacophony of voices now

■ *Theory, Culture & Society* 2009 (SAGE, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore), Vol. 26(5): 61–84
DOI: 10.1177/0263276409106350

commenting on the WSF, there is little agreement on the nature or scope of its significance; nonetheless, there is widespread acknowledgement that discourses of democracy circulate widely within it. As such, engagement between the praxis of the WSF and critical democratic theory would seem to be an obvious and potentially fruitful line of inquiry for rethinking possibilities of democracy, social justice and emancipation under contemporary conditions of globalization.

Such an engagement has recently been initiated by Nancy Fraser, one of the most influential critical theorists of democracy writing today. In a number of recent articles, Fraser makes reference to the WSF as she attempts to grapple with the challenges posed by globalization to Westphalian theories of democracy and social justice (Fraser, 2005a, 2005b, 2007b; Nash and Bell, 2007). Most significantly, Fraser describes the World Social Forum as a newly-fashioned 'transnational public sphere' that is 'prefiguring the possibility of new institutions of post-Westphalian democratic justice' (2005a: 84–5).

Fraser joins a wide variety of commentators who are taking up the WSF in a number of different ways. One way of representing both the counter-hegemonic globalization movements and the WSF is as a response to the failures of actually existing democracy(ies), of both nation-states and of the international system, to address growing popular concerns world-wide about the effects of neoliberal globalization. Violations of basic rights to livelihood are so egregious, powerful global actors and institutions so unaccountable, elite recourse to violence so common, and state complicity so widespread, that there is a global crisis of legitimacy. Many suggest that a common strand among the disparate movements of the WSF is a hunger for fuller, more transparent and accountable forms of democracy undergirded by commitments to global justice. Animating the WSF, then, appears to be a deeply democratic, although widely contested, political imaginary resonant with Fraser's concern to reformulate a critical theory of the public sphere under conditions of neoliberal globalization.

Other commentators besides Fraser have posited similarities between the prevailing conception of 'open space' at the WSF and theories of the public sphere, derived principally from Habermas (Della Porta, 2005; Doerr, 2007; Glasius, 2005; Smith et al., 2008: 31–6; Wright, 2005; Ylä-Anttila, 2005). Noted parallels include a common faith in the power of language and the possibility of communicability across difference, accompanied by a shared downplaying of incommensurability, conflict and power relations. More generally, numerous other observers, drawing on an eclectic range of theory, also identify 'open space' as central to the democratic possibilities represented by the WSF (De Angelis, 2004, 2005; Juris, 2005; Osterweil, 2004; Tormey, 2005). Running through the diverse commentary on the WSF, there is a widespread if often implicit claim that civil society, now transnationalizing, is central to the struggle(s) for democracy and an essential check and counterweight to states and inter-state institutions (and a direct obstacle to undemocratic forms of power, for example, in transnational corporations).

Many others besides Fraser see in the WSF the possible emergence of a global civil society or transnational public sphere.[1] Moreover, they recognize that the ethos of the WSF is informed by contemporary critical theory, even as the WSF's practice stretches and perhaps disrupts the theory.

Against the background of these myriad ways in which the WSF is being represented and taken up in relation to the theoretical literature, the purpose of this article is to explore both the points of contact and rupture between the WSF and (Western) critical democratic theory. We propose to do this specifically through a close engagement with the work of Nancy Fraser, using as a starting point her recent remarks on the WSF. What exactly does Fraser mean when she labels the WSF a 'transnational public sphere'? What are the effects of projecting this conceptualization and its accompanying theoretical apparatus onto the WSF, embedded as they are in a particular normative framework? What does this projection elucidate and/or obscure about the WSF, and more generally about the politics of global justice in the contemporary period?

We proceed in four main sections. First, we provide a thorough account of Fraser's democratic theory of the public sphere, and her recent reworking of this theory in the face of challenges posed by globalization. We also situate this aspect of Fraser's work within her larger normative theory of social justice. Second, we provide some background on the genesis, organizational character and recent history of the WSF. Third, we examine the extent to which the WSF can be theorized as a transnational public sphere in Fraser's sense, and in particular explore the incongruities between Fraser's model and the WSF. Finally, we reverse the theoretical gaze by suggesting a number of ways in which the praxis of the WSF poses deep challenges for critical democratic theory today. In doing so, we enact a practice of 'reciprocal elucidation' between political theory and praxis (Tully, 2002).

We argue that while some aspects of the WSF are elucidated by Fraser's theory, her framework also obscures much of what is most challenging and innovative about the Forum. While the WSF is a transnational, civil society space with great communicative power, we conclude that it cannot be considered a 'transnational public sphere' in Fraser's sense, primarily due to the normative framework that Fraser attaches to this term. We argue that this universalistic, liberal democratic framework confines both the WSF and its constituent movements within the terms and utopian aspirations of Western capitalist modernity, and thereby limits and contains their radical potentialities.

## Fraser's Theory of the Transnational Public Sphere

First, what does Fraser mean by the term 'transnational public sphere'? Her analysis of this concept takes place on two levels, 'one empirical and historical, the other ideological-critical and normative' (2007a: 9). At the most basic empirical level, Fraser follows Habermas's notion of a 'public sphere' as 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted

through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction' (1997: 70). This sphere is conceptually distinct from both the state, since the discourses produced and circulated within it can in principle be critical of the state, and the official economy, since its discursive relations are distinct from market relations. Crucially, the public sphere is 'a space for the communicative generation of public opinion' which can then be marshalled as a political force (2007a: 7).

In her earlier work on the public sphere, Fraser criticized Habermas's liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere and argued in favour of a more complex, expanded 'postbourgeois' model. For Fraser, the earlier conception of a single, comprehensive public lacked an adequate account of the multiplicity of publics that comprise the overarching public sphere. Comprehensive publics must coexist with multiple counter-publics, in which members of culturally diverse and subordinated social groups 'invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1997: 81). Furthermore, the older picture of a public sphere that is sharply separated from the state needed to be complicated in order to account for the existence of both 'weak publics', whose 'deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion formation and does not also encompass decision making', and 'strong publics', whose 'discourse encompasses both opinion formation and decision making' (1997: 90).

More recently, Fraser has again expanded this model to account for public spheres that are 'transnational' in character. Fraser uses this term as a simple descriptor of phenomena that transcend national boundaries. As such, Fraser's use of the term '*transnational* public spheres' can be understood to signify discursive arenas and communicative circuits that 'overflow the bounds of both nations and states' (2007a: 7), and in which public opinion and political wills are generated and mobilized. These spheres may be comprehensive publics, counter-publics, weak publics or strong publics; in any case, Fraser uses this most basic *empirical* understanding of the term to account for phenomena such as 'diasporic public spheres', 'Islamic public spheres' and even an emerging 'global public sphere' (2007a: 7).

But Fraser's use of the term 'transnational public sphere' is not simply meant to empirically identify new circuits of communication and political will-formation. Rather, she also uses this term as an 'ideological-critical and normative' concept, which she regards as necessary for any critical/normative theory of democracy today. Fraser argues that no attempt to understand or critique actually existing late-capitalist democracy can do without the concept of the 'public sphere', nor can any attempt to develop alternative models of democracy (1997: 71). Furthermore, the concept of a specifically '*transnational* public sphere' is now necessary for any attempt 'to reconstruct democratic theory in the current "postnational constellation"' (2007a: 8).

In order to understand Fraser's current critico-normative use of this concept, then, it is first necessary to understand the shift in scale from the

national to the transnational that Fraser regards as having taken place in public sphere theory from Habermas's early work to today. Fraser argues that until recently public sphere theory 'has been implicitly informed by a Westphalian political imaginary: it has tacitly assumed the frame of a bounded political community with its own territorial state' (2007a: 8). Today, however, 'thanks to post-Cold-War geopolitical instabilities, on the one hand, and the increased salience of transnational phenomena associated with "globalization" on the other' (2007a: 8), the Westphalian underpinnings of public sphere theory are being problematized, and the theory rethought in a transnational, or post-Westphalian, frame.

But while the Westphalian frame no longer fits contemporary realities, and is no longer sufficient for either criticizing the limits of democracy today or for imagining the emancipatory possibilities of the present, Fraser nonetheless retains the two central principles of public sphere theory, and regards the 'reconstitution' of these two principles as the key challenge facing any critical theory of democracy today:

> My proposal centers on the two features that together constituted the *critical* force of the concept of the public sphere in the Westphalian era: namely, the *normative legitimacy* and *political efficacy* of public opinion. As I see it, these ideas are intrinsic, indispensable elements of *any* conception of publicity that purports to be critical, regardless of the social-historical conditions in which it obtains. The present constellation is no exception. Unless we can envision conditions under which current flows of transnational publicity could conceivably become legitimate and efficacious, the concept loses its critical edge and its political point. Thus, the only way to salvage the critical function of publicity today is to rethink legitimacy and efficacy. The task is to detach those two ideas from the Westphalian premises that previously underpinned them and to reconstruct them for a post-Westphalian world. (2007a: 20, original italics)

So what are these two principles of normative legitimacy and political efficacy, and how, according to Fraser, ought they to be reconstituted? First, the principle of normative legitimacy holds that public opinion is legitimate 'if and only if all who are potentially affected are able to participate as peers in deliberations concerning the organization of their common affairs' (2007a: 20). This principle can be resolved into two conditions: first, the 'inclusiveness condition', which holds that 'discussion must in principle be open to all with a stake in the outcome'; and, second, the 'parity condition', which holds that 'all interlocutors must, in principle, enjoy roughly equal chances to state their views, place issues on the agenda, question the tacit and explicit assumptions of others, switch levels as needed and generally receive a fair hearing' (2007a: 20).

Whereas in earlier forms of public sphere theory, the inclusiveness condition was assumed to apply only to the citizens of one territorial state, today it is no longer tenable to assume that all those who will be affected by the outcomes of political decision-making will share political citizenship.

As such, today the inclusiveness condition must be re-conceptualized to hold that:

> . . . what turns a collection of people into fellow members of a public is not shared citizenship, but their co-imbrication in a common set of structures and/or institutions that affect their lives. For any given problem, accordingly, the relevant public should match the reach of those life-conditioning structures whose effects are at issue. (2007a: 22)

In sum, then, the reconstructed principle of normative legitimacy should now hold that 'public opinion is legitimate if and only if it results from a communicative process in which all potentially affected can participate as peers, *regardless of political citizenship*' (2007a: 22, original italics).

Second, the principle of political efficacy holds that public opinion is efficacious 'if and only if it is mobilized as a political force to hold public power accountable, ensuring that the latter's exercise reflects the considered will of civil society' (2007a: 22).[2] While Westphalian forms of public sphere theory imagined the will of the citizenry flowing from the national public sphere to the state institutions to be translated into binding laws, and that the state had the administrative capacity to implement those laws, today it no longer appears that the Westphalian state has the administrative capacity to address myriad concerns of a transnational nature, including many related to the economy, the environment, security and so on. As such, Fraser argues that we 'need to construct new addressees for public opinion, in the sense of new, transnational public powers that possess the administrative capacity to solve transnational problems' (2007a: 23). In other words, 'the civil-society track of transnational democratic politics needs to be complemented by a formal-institutional track' such that 'formal institutions . . . can translate transnational public opinion into binding, enforceable decisions' (2005a: 85 n.16). The two challenges arising from the principle of political efficacy, then, are: 'on the one hand, to create new, transnational public powers; on the other, to make them accountable to new, transnational public spheres' (2007a: 23).

In sum, the two principles of normative legitimacy and political efficacy comprise the basic normative framework that Fraser attaches to the concept of the 'transnational public sphere'. But what is the relationship between this normative framework and the empirical understanding of the public sphere discussed earlier? This is where things get murky, for there is significant slippage in Fraser's work between her use of the term 'transnational public sphere' as a critico-normative concept to which the two normative principles apply, and her use of the term to signify one of any number of publics (either weak, strong, comprehensive and/or counter) to which the two principles may or may not apply directly.

In wading through this theoretical terrain, it is first important to recognize that Fraser is not entirely clear whether the two principles are ever meant to apply directly to any particular public sphere. At times, the

'transnational public sphere' (in the singular) appears to denote a comprehensive arena for the generation of public opinion that functions largely as an abstract theoretical concept. At other times, however, the term is used (in the plural) to denote multiple publics/public spheres/counter-publics, which together appear to comprise the abstract, singular, and overarching 'transnational public sphere', and to only some of which are the two normative principles meant to apply. For example, she seems to suggest that only a strong public needs to be inclusive of 'all affected', while a weak subaltern counter-public is not so bound. In fact, the latter might even be essentially defined by its non-inclusive character. Furthermore, while a strong public seems to be regarded as generating a discursively formed general will, to which public powers ought to be directly responsive and responsible, a weak counter-public is regarded as generating a partial will at most, and as only contributing to the overall generation of public opinion which will later be formulated into a general will by a strong public. As such, while Fraser often uses the concept of a 'transnational public sphere' in a strong sense, involving a number of normative conditions that appear only to apply to strong publics, she also uses the term in a weak sense that encompasses both strong and weak publics, which may or may not be bound by the normative legitimacy principle, and may only be indirectly bound by the political efficacy principle. This slippage makes it very difficult to understand what exactly Fraser means when she calls the WSF a 'transnational public sphere', as we will examine below.

The final aspect of Fraser's theory of the public sphere that is important for our discussion here is how this theory relates to her larger, more comprehensive theory of social justice. After all, Fraser's recent focus on the transnational public sphere coincides with, and emerges in relation to, her recent attempts to expand the scope of her theory of social justice beyond the Westphalian frame, into a global theory of social justice.

While it was originally developed as a two-dimensional theory, Fraser has recently expanded her theory of social justice to include three dimensions – redistribution, recognition *and* representation. Each of these dimensions of social justice corresponds to an analytically distinct aspect of the social order, as well as to an analytically distinct form of injustice. First, redistribution seeks to address injustice in the *economic* structure of society, including exploitation, economic marginalization and deprivation, through the remedy of economic restructuring. Second, recognition seeks to address injustice in the *cultural* order of society – that is, in the social patterns of interpretation, evaluation and communication – including cultural domination, non-recognition and disrespect, by pursuing cultural or symbolic change (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 13). More recently, Fraser has expanded her theory to include representation, which seeks to address injustice in the *political* dimension of society. Representation has two levels:

> At one level, which pertains to the boundary-setting aspect of the political, representation is a matter of social belonging. What is at issue here is

> inclusion in, or exclusion from, the community of those entitled to make justice claims on one another. At another level, which pertains to the decision-rule aspect, representation concerns the procedures that structure public processes of contestation. Here, what is at issue are the terms on which those included in the political community air their claims and adjudicate their disputes. (2005a: 75)

Because, in a globalizing world, the Keynesian-Westphalian frame of politics can no longer be taken for granted as the appropriate frame of social justice, questions about representation are now increasingly crucial to a theory of social justice. This political dimension of justice 'furnishes the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out. . . . it tells us not only who can make claims for redistribution and recognition, but also how such claims are to be mooted and adjudicated' (2005a: 75). For our discussion, it is important to recognize that Fraser's theory of the transnational public sphere arises in the context of this global politics of 'representation' or 'frame-setting'.

But while these three dimensions comprise Fraser's *conceptual* framework for understanding social justice/injustice, she also provides *normative* content to her theory of social justice. For Fraser, there is one normative standard of justice that ought to be applied across all three social realms of culture, economy and politics: the principle of 'participatory parity'. She writes:

> In my view, the most general meaning of justice is parity of participation. According to this radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participate as peers in social life. Overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction. (2005a: 73)

For Fraser, then, social justice requires that all three social spheres be submitted to 'the overarching norm of participatory parity', bringing them all 'within the purview of a single integrated normative framework' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 37). Her theory of social justice, then, is '*social-theoretically multidimensional* and *normatively monist*' (2007b: 328, original italics).

## The World Social Forum as an Emergent Transnational Public Space

The World Social Forum was initiated in 2001 by a coalition of Brazilian organizations as a way of convening the widest possible range of groups and movements from around the world who were united in their opposition to neoliberal globalization but who were otherwise exceedingly diverse. At the height of the anti-globalization mobilizations, the vision was to create an 'open space', in which these groups would self-organize and freely agglomerate in modes that were less determined by the logic of protest.

Participants were invited to mount activities for one another, to communicate their struggles in their own terms, to make visible alternatives to neoliberalism already emergent in their practices and ways of life, and to build broad political convergence across difference. The ethos of open space is one of free association, autonomous self-organizing, self-management, co-responsibility and horizontalist modes of relating.[3] The WSF is open to any group anywhere in the world who can mobilize the resources to participate, who professes opposition to neoliberalism, who is not a political party and who is not engaged in armed struggle. The WSF is an autonomous civil society space in that it is non-governmental, non-party and non-confessional.

Central to the functioning of the WSF to date has been the understanding that the WSF is not a deliberative process. The WSF is not a unitary entity; no one can therefore 'represent' or 'speak for' the WSF. This is continually contentious within the WSF but to date it has been central to its character and functioning. The International Council of the WSF deliberates over the operationalization of the Forum, and the participating groups and organizations use the occasion to deliberate about their campaigns; the WSF as a whole, however, does not deliberate, make decisions, or embark on common actions.[4]

The Brazilian architects of the WSF vigorously defend the Forum as a non-deliberative space for free association, over and against those who want to turn the Forum into a more unified entity for specific political ends.[5] They argue that the horizontal networking of the WSF is helping to foster a new political culture premised on mutual recognition, learning, co-responsibility and co-operation across difference. According to Francisco Whitaker (2007), the *éminence grise* of the WSF, the Forum is a space to unlearn the practices of the 20th century Left – its hierarchies, violence and authoritarianism – and to learn how to resolve conflicts non-violently, to dialogue with difference, to learn how to live with diversity and to recognize multiple paths for changing the world. Closely related to this commitment is the WSF's embrace of pluralism and diversity and its stated opposition to *pensamientos únicos*, that is, forms of thought which are totalizing and which suppress other possible ways of thinking, of which neoliberalism is the paradigmatic example.

The WSF is thoroughly international but anchored geographically and experientially in the global South. The first WSF, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001, attracted 15,000 participants. Its success led organizers to commit to the WSF as a permanent process. The world event has taken place every January since then, although recently in varying modalities. Over the course of its first five years, it grew exponentially in size. It continues to expand in terms of diversity, complexity and importance, regularly attracting over 100,000 people annually, with many more participating through regional and local social forums.[6]

After three years in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the WSF moved to Mumbai, India in 2004 and to Nairobi, Kenya in 2007. Brazil remains the homeplace

of the WSF but there is a widespread commitment to moving the world event geographically to other sites in the global South. This is a strategy for expanding and deepening the Forum's intercontinental and cross-cultural character. Each WSF event/process is 'placed' but transnational, localized but characterized by an expanding globality. The civil society entities present at the World Social Forum vary considerably depending on the location of the events, but are in every case amazingly diverse in their demographic make-up, organizational forms, cultural expressions, and geographic roots, as well as in their reach, strategies, tactics and discourses.

At the second WSF in Porto Alegre in 2002, organizers called on participants to organize similar processes in their own locales, defined by their own priorities, and at whatever scale made sense to them. Social forums have proliferated, inspired by the world event and organized in accordance with the WSF's Charter of Principles.[7] The world event/process is significantly re-created when it is taken up by organizing groups in different parts of the world, and this changes what follows, locally and globally, although not in any mechanistic or predictable way. Likewise, when the Social Forum is enacted locally and regionally, it assumes specificities that flow from place and scale, the historical-geographical conjuncture in which the event/process occurs, and the discourses, practices, preoccupations and strategies of its constitutive social movements.[8]

There are antecedents to the WSF – in the UN conferences and parallel NGO forums, in the *encuentros* of the Zapatistas, in the mass anti-globalization demonstrations – but the expanding array of forces now regularly convened in one space by the WSF is unprecedented. This is true in terms of the diversity of groups, movements, modes, issues and constituencies represented, the expanding geographic and cross-cultural reach, the sheer numbers of participants, and in the accessibility of the Forum and the programme to any group anywhere that can mobilize the resources to participate. Its newness furthermore lies in the expanding scope of its globality, its multi-scale character in incorporating activisms from the most localized to the transnational, and its highly participatory, horizontalist and autonomist culture of organizing.[9]

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In practice, therefore, the WSF regularly enacts a new kind of transnational public *space*; however it remains unclear whether and in what ways (and to what ends) the WSF should be considered a transnational public *sphere*, in Fraser's sense of the term. Part of the difficulty here has to do with the slippage in Fraser's usage of this term. As we suggested earlier, Fraser vacillates between a strong and a weak sense of 'transnational public sphere'. For our purposes, we will define the strong sense as referring to a kind of strong public to which the two normative principles apply directly, and the weak sense as referring to a weak public to which the normative principles apply only partially or indirectly.

Given Fraser's slippage between these two senses, her categorization of the WSF as a transnational public sphere could be interpreted in at least two ways. On one hand, Fraser could be suggesting that the WSF is a kind of nascent strong public that, in and of itself, has the potential to become a relatively comprehensive and inclusive-of-all-affected arena, theoretically capable of generating legitimate and efficacious public opinion (notwithstanding the non-existence at the moment of a recognized transnational public authority that can translate this general will into binding decisions). On the other hand, Fraser could be suggesting that the WSF is simply one of many weak transnational publics, all of which remain unavoidably partial but should ideally feed into strong transnational publics in order to contribute to the generation, through public deliberation, of a legitimate general will.

In our view, the WSF bears some resemblance to Fraser's basic empirical conception of a transnational public sphere as a non-violent, pluralistic, and dialogical space involving communicative linkages and flows across multiple national borders. Furthermore, the WSF could plausibly be considered a 'transnational subaltern counter-public' in Fraser's sense, understood as a transnational discursive arena that runs parallel to more comprehensive transnational public spheres, and in which subaltern groups can invent and circulate counter-hegemonic discourses and identities (Conway, 2004). However, with respect to the normative framework that is loaded into Fraser's concept of a transnational public sphere – either more or less directly, depending on whether she uses the term in its strong or weak sense – there are significant incongruities with the praxis of the World Social Forum.

*First*, while the WSF *qua* WSF is a communicative space, it is not a deliberative space in any formal sense of having fixed rules of participatory parity and/or an orientation toward arriving at decisions that can be represented as those of the whole. The WSF's non-deliberative character is not an incidental matter but one central to its praxis of open space and to the Brazilian founders' insistence that the Social Forum is not a space of power, but one of consensual association, self-management and horizontal exchange. They defend the open space against those who would turn the WSF into a political instrument, *precisely via processes of representation and deliberation*. The fact that the Forum is not an entity in itself, does not issue statements, take positions, nor embark on actions, protects it and its participants from being consumed by internal struggles for hegemony. Its non-deliberative character frees its participating groups to encounter one another, to listen and to learn, and to be transformed in ways they could not be otherwise. In this view, the Forum's central function is one of cultural transformation of the movements and groups of civil society. As such, while the WSF can be readily and productively analysed as a communicative space which is producing *convergence* across difference, it is intentionally not structured to produce *consensus*.

As it multiplies and globalizes, the WSF is housing an ever-expanding array of differences. The great diversity within the WSF is not a stage toward

eventual incorporation into a shared whole, but is permanently constitutive and irreducible. The WSF may be more productively considered an agonistic space, which is fostering multiple processes of articulation across different kinds of difference – processes which are constantly emergent and demonstrate varying degrees of flux and im/permanence. This is most assuredly not a space free of conflict, exclusions or struggles for hegemony, despite the repeated assertions of the founders (Alvarez et al., 2004; Conway, 2007b; Vargas, 2005). But while there are debates about the degree to which the WSF lives up to its ideals, there is much convergence about the potential of the Social Forum, as both process and event, to forge new modes of democratic sociality premised on self-management, horizontality and participation (Böhm et al., 2005a; Keraghel and Sen, 2004a; Sen and Kumar, 2003).

The non-deliberative character of the WSF means that it neither seeks to produce, nor is capable of producing, a general will. This absence of a general will and the resistance to the notion that general will formation is desirable, as well as the accompanying opposition to institutionalizing processes within the Forum that might be represented as producing collective decisions or programmes, is a major challenge to the strong interpretation of Fraser's conception of the WSF as a transnational public sphere.

*Second*, while in its autonomy, openness, non-violence and pluralism, the WSF could be considered a classically *civil society* space at the global scale, and thereby perhaps a transnational public sphere in the weak sense, it cannot be a transnational public sphere in the strong sense because it is founded on a non-negotiable exclusionary requirement: that of opposition to neoliberalism. Despite the fact that there is little policing of participation or filtering of political opinion, the WSF is a public space imbued with the ethos of the anti-globalization movements. It is not a *demos* in the inclusive sense of the term, nor on its way to becoming one.

*Third*, the participants within the WSF are not addressing themselves to a single sovereign authority nor are most seeking to create new ones. There are highly variable positions among the groups and movements of the WSF with regard to existing institutionalizations of political life, based on tactical and strategic differences but also on political-philosophical divergence. Nation-states as the putative guarantors of rights/justice have clearly not been abandoned by social movements, but they have been de-centred as the uniquely privileged terrain of social justice struggles, as Fraser (2005a) acknowledges in her search for a theory of post-Westphalian justice. However, the practices of the movements and groups of the WSF point to the simultaneous recognition and contestation of the multiple and overlapping sovereignties characteristic of contemporary world order, not simply or primarily a displacement of the national to the global scale. The social movements of the WSF are targeting the political, economic and cultural institutions that are exerting control over them, locally, nationally and transnationally, and regardless of whether they are public, private, putatively democratic or outright authoritarian. In many (most?) cases, these

struggles do not reflect claims for representation in what are otherwise recognized as legitimate forms of political authority but a pragmatic recognition of myriad modern forms of power and the need to resist them.

Fraser acknowledges this 'disaggregated sovereignty' (2007a: 16), and recognizes that what is needed today is not simply the recreation of the Westphalian imaginary on a larger scale, but rather 'some new, post-Westphalian configuration of multiple public spheres and public powers' (Nash and Bell, 2007: 84). Nonetheless, these remarks stand in tension with her much greater emphasis on the need for new transnational public powers to implement the transnational popular will of new transnational public spheres. Insofar, then, as Fraser's framework requires that transnational public spheres have transnational public powers as their addressees, it is difficult to conceive of the WSF as a transnational public sphere.

*Fourth*, the anti-neoliberal positionality of the WSF imbues it with a clearly politicized character, critical of capitalist social relations and suspicious of modern forms of power, beyond that which can be attributed to conceptions of the public sphere in liberal political theory. In Habermasian theories of the public sphere (of which Fraser's is an example), the *topos* of the public sphere is the containment of private power, specifically in 'the economy' (Fraser, 2007a: 17). The theoretical apparatus of public sphere theory presupposes certain institutional arrangements as given – a 'free' market regulated by a modern state enacting the general will of the citizenry. Many of the movements of the WSF are daily contesting these arrangements as given. The particular civil society character of the WSF does not easily coexist with free markets, liberal and representative democracy, and a Weberian understanding of society as differentiated into semi-autonomous spheres of economy, politics and culture – whether in theory or in practice. This is so despite a wide range of discourses and positionings within the WSF vis-à-vis the quotidian politics of struggle against neoliberal globalization.

In sum, these four characteristics only begin to trouble Fraser's incorporation of the WSF into her theory of the public sphere. The two first characteristics – (1) the rejection of both the possibility and desirability of deliberation, unified will formation and collective decision-making; and (2) the WSF's founding exclusion – stand in deep tension with Fraser's normative criteria of inclusiveness of all affected and parity of participation. The first and third characteristics – (3) the absence of commonly shared or recognized sovereignties and disagreement over the desirability of creating transnational public authorities, as well as a widespread suspicion of all forms of sovereign power – do not easily fit with the efficacy principle in Fraser's theory of the transnational public sphere. Finally, the fourth characteristic begins to reveal the tension between the WSF and the overarching framework within which Fraser is attempting to place it.

## Re-considering Fraser in Light of the WSF

Instead of continuing to think about the WSF in light of the theoretical terms set by Fraser, we now want to contemplate some substantial challenges raised by the praxis of the WSF to Fraser's theoretical project, both in its specific content and its more general underpinnings. In other words, we now propose to read Fraser in light of the WSF. Our intent here is not simply to continue to disagree with Fraser about the character of the WSF; rather, we will argue that the incongruence between Fraser's theory of the transnational public sphere and the WSF as a praxis raises profound challenges to both Fraser's theory of global democracy and social justice, and to critical democratic theory more generally.

*First*, the praxis of the WSF throws into question a number of aspects of the traditional framework of democratic theory within which Fraser is operating. This framework imagines public opinion as formed by processes of inclusive deliberation and eventually reduced to a legitimate general will, in order to then be translated by central institutions into binding, enforceable laws to which all are subject. The praxis of the WSF challenges what are two sides of the same coin in this framework: the notion of a single, legitimate public will and the need for a centralized sovereign authority. The WSF's praxis of 'open space' suggests that the imperative to arrive at universally binding outcomes, demanded by the existence of centralized forms of authority charged with legislating for all, may in fact *impede* social solidarity and *hinder* collective action by raising the stakes of deliberations in a way that necessarily suppresses diversity, emphasizes divisions among interlocutors, and turns participants into competitors fighting to define the 'general' will and to determine the final outcomes that will be binding on all. Second, and conversely, the experience of the WSF suggests that communication, convergence, solidarity and cooperation may be promoted more effectively through spaces of encounter that are non-deliberative (in the formal sense) and decentralized, in which collectively binding decisions are not required and the autonomy of participating groups or individuals is maintained. As Hilary Wainwright argues in reflecting on the WSF:

> . . . the principle of autonomy together with opportunities to talk together through networks and common spaces . . . allows diversity and common purpose to be compatible, while it also overcomes the fear of debate and argument, since if organizations feel their autonomy and integrity are secure, then debate is interpreted as an arena of co-operation rather than competition. (2004: xx)

The WSF, then, through its praxis of letting plurality stand, allowing convergence and cooperation to emerge in an unforced way, and rejecting the need for consensus or central decision-making, presents a deep challenge to Fraser's claims that (a) the principles of 'normative legitimacy' and 'political efficacy' are indispensable to any critical democratic theory, and (b) what global justice requires today is the formation of new, global articulations of

a general will and the creation and legitimation of new global political institutions. It does so by posing anew the question of whether we can imagine and make space for other practices of the political, the just and the democratic that are based on mutual recognition, dialogue, autonomous decision-making, self-organization and cooperation, but in which a general will and a sovereign centre are no longer considered necessary. In short, the WSF challenges us to ask what kinds of democratic politics might be based upon a primary recognition of the impossibility, and even undesirability, of a general will.

The *second* set of challenges to Fraser's theoretical project arises from the WSF's foundational commitment to diversity and pluralism, and its foundational opposition to *pensamientos únicos*, or ways of thinking that are structured in such a way as to deny the possibility of other ways of thinking. The praxis of the WSF testifies to the irreducibility of human diversity. It affirms the multiplicity of ways of thinking and living otherwise, and plural paths to emancipation. The WSF refuses the claim of those on the Right that there is no alternative to neoliberal globalization. It simultaneously rejects ideological authoritarianism on the Left, particularly of Marxisms that have demanded absolute allegiance and suppressed both internal dissent and alternative ways of thinking external to themselves.

Its opposition to *pensamientos únicos* means that through its praxis, the WSF seeks to open space for plural alternative visions and ways of life to take root and flourish. While some actors in the WSF likely share Fraser's vision of global justice, most would resist the notion that the only alternative to neoliberalism is a resurgence of (new and improved) Western-style, Keynesian-era social democracy, with its redistributive welfare state and its expanding politics of recognition, and which now, in this new era of globalization, simply needs to be realized at the global scale.

The WSF resists such 'conservative utopias' which, by definition, 'identify themselves with present-day reality and discover their utopian dimension in the radicalization or complete fulfillment of the present' (Santos, 2004a: 236). According to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, these 'closed horizons', which either implicitly or explicitly affirm an 'end of history' narrative, can be contrasted with the 'critical utopias' that nourish the WSF: 'the WSF signifies the re-emergence of critical utopia, that is, of a radical critique of present-day reality and the aspiration to a better society' (2004a: 236). It is this utopian dimension of the WSF that is captured by its central motto 'Another World is Possible!'

Fraser regularly situates her theory within the historical tradition and continuing unfolding of *modern liberalism* (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 222–33). As a realist, her work, albeit reluctantly and critically, takes capitalist social relations as a global given. It is within this general framework, both normative and realist, that she wants to understand the critical possibilities of the WSF. She proposes the WSF's model of solidarity-building as a hopeful model for building global solidarity robust enough to support the global redistributive welfare programmes that are a central feature of her

theory of global social justice (Nash and Bell, 2007: 81). While Fraser wants to understand the WSF as a phenomenon internal to the long march of liberal democracy, our analysis suggests that such a limiting of the critical possibilities of the WSF misses the deep challenges that its praxis poses to the liberal democratic imagination and mode of theorizing. Underpinning Fraser's work, and indeed the project of liberal political theory, is the unexamined conviction that liberal democracy is the apex and end of utopian hope. This is not so for the WSF. Projecting the terms of public sphere theory onto the WSF erases possibilities emergent in the WSF which lie beyond the traditional liberal horizons of this theory.

The WSF's resistance to *pensamientos únicos* affirms the plurality of possible alternative worlds to the neoliberal present and represents an alternative utopian imaginary (or imaginaries) to that of global social democracy. But it also presents a deeply ontological challenge to Fraser's theoretical project, having to do with the question of normative pluralism. While Fraser recognizes in many of her writings that the challenge of deep diversity is that no single ethical conception can be deemed universally authoritative, she nonetheless argues that her principle of social justice – namely, the principle of participatory parity – actually transcends this predicament, and can in fact be established as authoritative because of its non-sectarian and impartial character. As she puts it: 'I also contend that *beneath all the cultural complexity* lies a single moral imperative: the principle of participatory parity' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 219, emphasis added).

The challenge presented by the WSF to this theoretical monism is that it is a form of *pensamiento único* which leaves little room for *normative pluralism*, or the notion that there will be, and in fact ought to be, difference and diversity among normative principles and ways of thinking about of social justice. The WSF's opposition to *pensamientos únicos* suggests that no single conceptual and/or normative framework will suffice for critical theory or for building forms of radical global politics, and that even the desire for such a monistic politics reflects an imperial impulse that seeks to suppress and ultimately overcome the irreducible diversity of social life. Forms of abstract, universal theorizing that project global blueprints or master plans from a single perspective onto all others cannot, by their very mode, offer full participation to others in the formation of norms of social justice; instead, the most they can offer is a form of imposed participation, or the chance of 'being participated' (Mignolo, 2000: 744). Furthermore, pretensions to impartiality or neutrality, which often underpin the ostensible universality of such theories, are dangerous in their claims to rise above all others, in their de-politicized character, and in their denial of irreducible difference. As Kompridis contends in his critique of Fraser, 'strong notions of impartiality may be part of the problem, not part of the solution to the challenges of value pluralism and deep diversity' (2007: 279).

The praxis of the WSF suggests that the pluralism of normative horizons and ways of thinking about social justice should itself be

recognized as a principle of critical theory and of radical politics. As we have argued, part of the great innovation of the WSF lies precisely in this aspect of it. As such, the WSF can be regarded as challenging Fraser's claim that 'Critical Theory needs a nonsectarian theory of justice' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 223). Rather, the experience of the WSF suggests that, far from needing yet another general theory of justice, critical theory may in fact be better served by moving away from such monistic, general forms of theorizing. To this end, Santos argues that, in fact:

> . . . the extraordinary energy of attraction and aggregation revealed by the WSF resides precisely in refusing the idea of a general theory. The diversity that finds a haven in it is free from the fear of being cannibalized by false universalisms or false single strategies propounded by any general theory. (2004b: 341)

When confronted with the immense diversity within the WSF, then, Fraser's desire to offer a general theory that is 'comprehensive, integrative, normative, programmatic' (1997: 4) not only seems increasingly implausible, but also problematic.

The *third* set of challenges presented by the praxis of the WSF to Fraser's own theory and to democratic theory more generally are those arising out of the historical relations of domination that have enabled Western forms of theory and knowledge to become hegemonic and have rendered invisible or disposable forms of theory and knowledge rooted in the Global South. The WSF is largely a phenomenon of the Global South, constituted by a foundational critique of the inequalities and exploitations of the modern world order: their 500-year-old origins in histories of European imperialism and colonialism; more recent relations of dependency advanced through the post-war projects of development and modernization; and their current entrenchment through neoliberal globalization and free trade. This groundedness in memories of colonial violence and exploitation, of slavery and genocide, of dispossession and immiseration that continue into the present and have always served as the underside of modernity, provides the WSF with an orientation aimed more toward the privileging of 'colonial' or 'subaltern' difference – that is, toward all the ways of being and knowing that have been subalternized through the modern/colonial forms of power (Escobar, 2004; Mignolo, 2000) – than toward the establishment of new global political institutions that simply replicate dominant Western political imaginaries and hegemonic power relations. Indeed, the movements of the Global South which populate the WSF have little reason to believe that any such institutions created today would function other than to serve the imperial interests of the Global North. As such, the praxis of the WSF points beyond such modern/colonial imaginaries for sources of renewed political mobilization in the present. In the words of Walter Mignolo, rather than seeking inclusion into 'the abstract universal cosmopolitan ideals (Christian, liberal, socialist, neoliberal) that had

helped (and continue to help) to hold together the modern/colonial world system and to preserve the managerial role of the North Atlantic', this counter-hegemonic praxis works toward the emergence of 'new forms of projecting and imagining, ethically and politically, from subaltern perspectives' (Mignolo, 2000: 743–4).

As both Shalini Randeria (2007) and Kimberly Hutchings (2007) argue, Fraser's understanding of the public sphere, and of the smooth transition from Westphalia to post-Westphalia, reflects the very particular experience of a small number of Western societies, and fails to grapple with the imperial underside of either phase. Fraser's work reflects 'a specific political imaginary that is closely tied up with the experience of Western modernity in general, and the fate of liberal-capitalist welfare states in the latter part of the 20th century in particular' (Hutchings, 2007: 62); it fails to take account of the fact that, for example, the Westphalian state could only have ever been understood as even nominally 'efficacious' – in Fraser's two senses of having 'translation' and 'capacity' – within the Global North, since the postcolonial state has always been beholden to powers and interests well beyond the will(s) of its people(s). In other words, both the Westphalian and post-Westphalian institutions of our world have, for many, served as little other than the instruments of their own exploitation and domination. As such, Hutchings poses the right question to Fraser when she asks: 'what can the creation of new mechanisms of translation and capacity mean to those who do not have the model of the old ones on which to base their aspirations?' (2007: 62). The experiences of many of the participating movements of the WSF suggest that the creation of new global mechanisms and political institutions of the sort imagined by Fraser would likely signal the expansion of modes of domination, subalternization, exploitation and impoverishment of the world's majority.

## Conclusion

Nancy Fraser has consistently argued for a mode of critical theory that aims at 'disclosing, and fostering, possible links between existing social struggles and historically emergent possibilities for emancipation' (Nash and Bell, 2007: 75). In aligning her critical theory of the public sphere, as well as her critical theory of social justice, with emancipatory social movements, Fraser wants her work to assist in the formulation and clarification of the arguments and goals of these movements in a way that furthers their praxis. We share with Fraser a commitment to politically engaged critical theorizing of this kind.

But there is a danger involved with this mode of theorizing, namely that in attempting to refine and (re)formulate the terms and goals of the movements, the theorist may actually end up limiting and containing the radical possibilities emergent within them. The radical possibilities of new social movements are often manifest within their innovative practices, and cannot easily be grasped using older, established theoretical concepts and frameworks. Attempts to do so often miss what is most novel and

challenging about these struggles, and may serve to contain these potentialities by confining them within inadequate languages of interpretation and evaluation. These languages render the innovations unimportant, or perhaps even invisible, and as such may contribute to their eventual disappearance from the movements in question. Critical theory can therefore function to inhibit the emergent emancipatory possibilities of social struggles as much as to encourage them.

In this article we have suggested that in her recent discussions of the World Social Forum, Nancy Fraser attempts to understand the WSF within an established framework of liberal democratic theory, and in doing so fails to notice and take seriously many of its most exciting and innovative aspects. We have argued on the one hand that many aspects of the WSF do not easily fit into Fraser's notion of a transnational public sphere, in either its strong or its weak version, and on the other that the praxis of the WSF can be regarded as presenting some substantial challenges to the liberal democratic theory of social justice that Fraser is applying to it.

Far from being limited to this case of the WSF, however, we want to suggest that Fraser's mode of critical theory is actually quite prone to containing, rather than enabling, emancipatory possibilities in this way. This is because of the singular, general and universal character of her mode of theorizing. Although Fraser regards her critical theory as a form of *situated* criticism, relying on norms that are 'historically emergent' within 'the present constellation', what is striking is that her notion of both 'history' and 'the present constellation' appear to be markedly singular. In her writings, '*the* present constellation' appears as an ostensibly global condition marked by the vague terms of 'post-Fordism, postcommunism and globalization' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 90). Her critical theory is situated only within something called 'contemporary society', characterized as it is by 'capitalism' and 'modernity' and all of the historical processes that accompany these, including: the differentiation of social spheres; the fluidity, pluralism and contestation of cultural forms; and an overarching commitment to the principle of liberal equality (Fraser and Honneth, 2003: 48–69). The 'history' in which Fraser situates her critical theory, then, reads as a singular, universal history of capitalism, modernization and the gradual fulfilment of liberalism. Because the 'history' and 'present constellation' in which her theory is situated are themselves universal, her critical theory itself becomes a universal theory of democracy and social justice.

The problem with this picture is that it occludes everything that is learned by asking the questions: Whose history? Whose present? Whose justice? (Hutchings, 2007). The WSF is filled with participants whose experiences of capitalism, modernity and liberalism differ greatly, not only from Fraser's account of these, but also from one another's. Despite this multiplicity, however, many of these participants share in common a direct experience with the dark underside of Western modernity, namely coloniality (Escobar, 2004; Mignolo, 2000), and do not see emancipation lying within its potential. This particular blend of multiplicity and commonality,

then, deeply informs the WSF, and makes it a phenomenon not easily comprehensible within the confines of general theories of liberal democracy.

But is there an alternative to general theories of Fraser's kind, toward which critical theorists can re-orient their work? Perhaps, once again, some light can be shed here by the praxis of the WSF. For as Santos suggests, the alternative to general theorizing that is emerging in the open space of the WSF is the practice of *translation*: 'To my mind, the alternative to a general theory is the work of translation. Translation is the procedure that allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible' (2004b: 341). Translation is crucial, he argues, because it enlarges 'reciprocal intelligibility without destroying the identity of what is translated', thereby maintaining a 'contact zone' for mutual solidarity and permeability. Through practices of translation, 'diversity is celebrated not as a factor of fragmentation and isolationism but rather as a factor of sharing and solidarity' (2004b: 342).

Far from giving up on democracy and social justice, then, the work of translation simply acknowledges and affirms the multiplicity of injustices, as well as the multiplicity of principles and practices of democracy and social justice. In doing so, it abandons the search for a universal, general theory of democracy and social justice on which to base solidarity and action coordination across difference. Instead, the experience of the WSF suggests that mutual understanding, solidarity, cooperation, and indeed justice itself may be better built through practices of translation that are simultaneously political, dialogical, creative, experimental and open-ended.

*Notes*

We would like to thank James Tully, Alex Livingston, Robert Lee Nichols, Mike Palamarek, Lee Cormie and the journal's reviewers for their helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

1. See, for example, contributors to the special issue of *Development Dialogue* (Löfgren and Thörn, 2007) entitled *Global Civil Society: More or Less Democracy?*

2. Fraser also resolves the efficacy principle into two distinct conditions, although this distinction is less pertinent to our discussion. First, the 'translation condition' holds that 'the communicative power generated in civil society must be translated first into binding laws and then into administrative power'; and second, the 'capacity condition' holds that 'the public power must be able to implement the discursively formed will to which it is responsible' (2007a: 22).

3. See contributions in *Ephemera* 5(2) (Böhm et al., 2005b) for critical discussion of this concept with reference to the WSF.

4. It is critical to maintain a distinction between the WSF and its governing and organizing bodies, the key ones being its International Council (IC) and International Secretariat. While IC deliberations are an important pole in shaping the world-scale WSF process, the proliferation, dynamism, geographic dispersion and multiculturalism of WSF processes continually overwhelm the IC and any occasional attempts to control and/or represent the WSF.

5. For two sides of this space vs. movement debate, see Whitaker (2004) and Teivainen (2004).

6. The 2006 WSF was poly-centric, meaning that the 'world' event was comprised of three loosely connected events, one each in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In 2008, the 'world' event was a Global Day of Action dispersed over hundreds of events all occurring on the same day. These varying modalities are responses to the high financial and organizational costs of mounting a single, annual world event.

7. See: http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2

8. For the attendant difficulties in representing and analyzing the WSF, see Conway (2007a).

9. There is a growing literature, both activist and academic, on the WSF. A wide range of commentaries appear on the WSF website (www.forumsocialmundial.org.br). The first compilation of documents focused on the alternatives to neoliberal globalization discussed at the 2002 WSF (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003). The most important and internationalized collection to date is Sen et al. (2004; see also Sen and Waterman, 2008). Other collections surrounding the 2004 WSF in Mumbai reflected the South Asian context and process, and focused on questions related to the WSF's methodology of 'open space' (Keraghel and Sen, 2004a; Sen and Kumar, 2003; Sen and Saini, 2005). Sole authored books by key Brazilian organizers include Leite (2005) and Whitaker (2007). Feminists, focused largely on the role of women and feminism, have been most attentive to the internal power dynamics of the WSF and the contradictions of the 'open space' (Alvarez et al., 2004; Chejter and Laudano, 2003; Conway, 2007b; Eschle, 2005; León, 2002, 2005; Vargas, 2003, 2005). Scholar-activist collections have appeared in the journals *Ephemera* 5(2) (Böhm et al., 2005b), *International Social Science Journal* 56(182) (Keraghel and Sen, 2004b) and *Development* 48(2) (Harcourt, 2005). The most wide-reaching intellectual work to date on the WSF has been done by Portuguese legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006).

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