The slogan of the World Social Forum – “another world is possible” – speaks against a widespread belief that there is no alternative to neo-liberalism after the fall of the Soviet bloc. As a result, the WSF is constituted in its Charter of Principles as an “open space” for those “opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism” (Principle 1), where the certainty of the possibility of another world becomes “a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it” (Principle 2).

Nevertheless, the Forum is also a space where this process takes place – an “incubator of ideas” (Whitaker 2004a) and a “pedagogical space” (Ponniah 2004, Sen 2004), where imagining after the Third World, and beyond modernity, becomes a viable project (Escobar 2004), as the possibility of the construction of utopia is re-created, but not determined (Santos 2004). This re-enabled and non-deterministic process of the construction of utopia is what enables the suggestion that “another world is possible”. In the same way, the aim of thinking beyond modernity and imagining otherwise is also central to the Forum as a process. However, the realisation of this aim presents very concrete challenges. If we are referring to boundaries that have been imposed on our way of thinking and, therefore, constitute ourselves, how are we to transcend them? Is it really possible to imagine a world other than the one we have inherited? How is it possible to challenge our own boundaries and “Empires within” so that Empires without can be changed in a way that does not resort to repression and fundamentalism?

This article explores these questions in order to contribute to the existing reflections on how the open space of the Forum can be more conducive to a new culture of politics that empowers groups and individuals to think and imagine “otherwise” and enables a process of construction of an alternative “other world” that is more inclusive and equitable. Our line of reasoning is based on our experiences (relations, celebrations and frustrations) and reflections as educators, activists, and academics (from the South and from the North) engaged with the Forum. Therefore, our perspectives are self-reflexively situated in a particular context, which makes them unquestionably partial, but always subject to revision.

Our argument will be divided into three parts. We will start with an analysis of what we

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perceive as limitations of the current ethics of the WSF. We will then examine the principles on which a kind of ethics favourable to the emergence of a new culture of politics could be grounded and propose an alternative interpretation of the slogan of the Forum. Finally, we will suggest the promotion of a specific conceptualisation of the ethics that would be conducive of the ethics and vision described in the second section.

Some reflections on the ethics of the WSF

Ethics is commonly defined as “a system of accepted beliefs which control behaviour, especially such a system based on morals” (Cambridge dictionary). In this article we intend to reclaim this term and redeploy it in the arena of identities and interactions to convey ethics as an ideal of relationship – a way of defining ourselves in relation to others. In this conceptualisation, we also acknowledge that ethics cannot be considered in isolation from the study of knowledge and power and that it relates directly to our understandings of the broader conditions within which human life is situated (Sedgwick 2001). Ethics, then, deals with what type of human relations we envisage as desirable or possible. From this perspective, it is not the same as morality, which describes universalisable principles of normative behaviour. This definition will be explored further in the second section of this paper.

The ethics of the WSF is presented in its charter of principles. It is reflected in its ideal of social relations between organisations and movements and in its organising processes. The Charter of Principles conceives the WSF as “a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context that, in a decentralized fashion, interrelates organizations and movements engaged in concrete action at levels from the local to the international to build another world” (Principle 8). It is further stated that the WSF does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings (Principle 6). Our analysis of the limitations of the ethics within this context is divided into three parts: power in the organisational process, scope, and visions of utopia.

Power in the organisational process

The creation of a context that interrelates organisations and movements for cross-fertilisation of ideas is a momentous initiative. However, to conceive this context as a decentralised space where power relations are non-existent or neutralised is a dangerous mistake, as it turns a blind eye to power struggles that do take place within the Forum. We argue that one of the most important tasks that need to be performed in order to guarantee the continuation of the WSF as an open “incubator of ideas” is precisely to intervene in the power dynamics in its organisational process in order to promote new forms of interactions and relationships.

The struggles for power that take place within the Forum can be traced to the political tradition of commitments to ideologies and identities. These commitments are based on specific non-negotiable certainties (i.e., specific visions of utopia or characteristics essentially shared by members of specific groups) that tend to discourage dissent or open explorations of different worldviews. This can be interpreted as a form of fundamentalism that relies on notions of cultural homogeneity and “pure” identities and generally defines itself in relation to an “other” or “others” defined in opposing terms (“us” and “them”). This kind of fundamentalism usually employs radicalised and antagonistic perceptions of difference (or “the other”) exemplified in the ideas that one is either against or with a specific group or ideology, and that a group’s knowledge or truth is superior to or more legitimate than others. This approach increases the gap between different ways of seeing the world and makes “cross-fertilisation” more difficult as multiple, free and contingent associations are repressed and critical engagement with ideologies is inhibited.

In addition, this way of seeing requires a seizure of power that promotes competition between different struggles, in which the representation of the (more) “grassroots” or the (more) “oppressed” become central parameters in the battle for power within the Forum. The reliance on notions of cultural homogeneity and pure identities sustains the creation of competing hierarchies of oppression that define who has more legitimacy and who can/cannot speak or be listened to within the space. By focusing on this
kind of relations, the systems that produce domination and subordination are left unchallenged and unchanged, and possibilities for new forms of dialogue and solidarity are closed down. As exemplified above, there are serious undesirable implications, inconsistent with the purpose of the Forum, that arise from the lack of recognition that power relations are always present within any space. Acknowledgement of and reflection on these contradictions are, perhaps, the first steps to create mechanisms to decentralise power and to enable processes that promote a continuous problematisation of identities and representations in the open space of the Forum. These strategies may be necessary in order to sustain the goal of supporting participants in thinking beyond modernity and imagining “otherwise”.

Scope

Another possible contradiction is that there are no procedures to prevent a reading of the WSF as a platform from within which a political campaign is launched to bring about change in the global politico-economic order. This view of the Forum would require a more unified line, based upon collectively agreed principles in order to put pressure on mainstream political systems and actors. It would prioritise organisations and traditional/representational politics to further this aim and turn the Forum itself into a political actor rather than a space. Although the Charter of Principles explicitly rejects this intention, ignoring this possibility might jeopardise the future of the Forum as a space, which, for many, is the Forum’s most innovative and greatest asset, in terms not only of opening different possibilities for thinking, imagining, and engaging with politics, but also of reaching out to new audiences.

As far as new audiences are concerned, the scope of the Forum expressed in the Charter might also be limiting. If the WSF sees itself as only a process for “groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism” (Principle 1), its educational potential is restricted to the so-called “converted”. Besides reinforcing a sense of vanguardism amongst participants, this reduces the Forum’s potential to attract people who are disillusioned with the state of the world. This prevents those who are sceptical of existing party/identity-affiliated ideologies or do not necessarily see themselves represented in organised groups or movements from coming into or remaining within the space. The idea of a space for the collective construction of “utopia” is extremely empowering and could be very appealing for such people, but only if they are given a chance to participate actively as equal partners in this process. However, if many dogmatic groups on the Left are not open to negotiating their assumptions with people who do not define themselves in the categories of activism or party-politics, this process will not take place and modern-Cartesian subjugation of peoples and knowledges will again be reproduced in the name of “liberation”.

Visions of utopia

The interpretation of what the other world is and who should be involved in its process of construction is vital for the definition of what the space is, what can be done within it and who can come in. As an illustration, one possible and common reading is that another world – a socialist world – is necessary, not only possible. This reading prescribes visions of utopia already theorised and tentatively implemented, which are articulated with different perspectives on Marxism. They assert that the proletariat (or oppressed people) should lead a “revolution” towards a more equitable and just society, which implies that the envisioning of the other world would exclude “non-oppressed” peoples. Another interpretation introduces the idea that many other worlds are possible, which, associated with the belief in an unproblematic celebration of diversity, implies different “exploited” groups linked by one common purpose (i.e., opposition to neo-liberalism) coming to the Forum to articulate associations with groups with similar agendas across the world to define what “utopias” meet their interests. The first interpretation can also be seen as a reproduction of what the Forum is trying to fight against. The notion that there is only one “existing” alternative is equivalent to the notion that there is none. Oppression and privilege are also contested grounds, which makes the definition of who should lead the revolution very problematic. However, the strength of this vision lies in its ability to attract to the Forum

groups of people that have critiqued and fought against neo-liberalism for a long time from a specific perspective. The second interpretation focuses on the redistribution of power to different groups within “civil society” on a representational basis in order to form a network of resistance to neo-liberalism. It is innovative insofar as it tries to break the boundaries amongst resistance “single issue” movements, promoting a new methodology of “doing politics” (Whitaker 2004b) that allows for different forms of strategic association. However, in practice, inclusion and “difference” within this framework are still restricted to those institutionalised or organised powers (organisations and movements) within civil society. Groups and individuals who do not fit the previously defined category of “organised civil actors” are excluded from the process.

The two readings also show significant similarities. They both conceptualise oppression as a binary of “oppressors versus oppressed”, perceive resistance and power structures in direct opposition and denote the idea that individual intentionality and progress are the path to liberation. These assumptions are rooted precisely in modern-Cartesian modes of thinking, making these readings complicit with the
process of oppression and domination they critique.

Therefore, in order to propose strategies of dealing with these challenges in terms of ethics and pedagogy, in order to enable processes of thinking beyond these boundaries, we feel it is important to spell out some basic assumptions that make us believe that the cultivation of a new culture of politics – and not only a new methodology – is necessary for the WSF process.

Another possible ethic

We start from the premises that ethics is related to a choice in relation to how we think and act in the world and how we see and relate to others; and that everyone’s knowledge is constructed socially, but that human beings can act upon this construction. From this perspective, knowledge of ourselves and an awareness of the process of construction of our knowledge can be interpreted as an ethical responsibility. In this sense, as defined by Paulo Freire, being aware of the mechanisms that shape our understanding of the world, and of its partiality or non-determinism, is a precondition to a process of self-liberation (Freire 2002), of going beyond prescribed understandings of the nature of reality and being. It is also an acknowledgement of human “unfinishedness” and of the possibility to conceive the world in a way other than the one we have inherited.

Within the space of the Forum, if we regard the present as undesirable and producing negative consequences for the future, it is necessary to analyse what made this present possible in the first place. This analysis should take into account the way social processes have shaped our subjectivities – aspirations, relationships and modes of thought – and how we, the people who seem to be fighting for justice and liberation, are implicated and complicit in these processes. If our ways of seeing and being in the world (perspectives and identities) were constructed by these processes, then it might be the case that the construction of the possibility of another world and the other world itself should start within ourselves with the questioning and deconstruction/reconstruction of who we are. In the same way, in order to open ourselves up to new possibilities, to learn other ways of seeing and being in the world, we might need to unlearn some of the old certainties and ways that we have been taught in the past, which might represent closures that prevent the emergence of the new.

In the context of the Forum, unlearning, defined as the ability to question how truths are produced, might be a precondition to the decolonisation of our imaginations. This decolonisation, as an attempt to break with the conditioning effects of processes of domination, can be associated with Freire’s concept of “critical resistance” to conditioning ideologies.

On the one hand, the necessity for this critical resistance creates in me an attitude of permanent openness toward others, toward the world; on the other hand, it generates in me a methodical mistrust that prevents me from becoming absolutely certain of being right. To safeguard myself against the pitfalls of ideology, I cannot and must not close myself off from others or shut myself into a blind alley where only my own truth is valid. On the contrary, the best way to keep awake and alert my capacity for right thinking, to sharpen my perception, and to hear with respect (and therefore in a disciplined manner) is to allow myself to be open to differences and to refuse the entrenched dogmatism that makes me incapable of learning anything new. In essence, the correct posture of one who does not consider him- or herself to be the sole possessor of the truth or the passive object of ideology or gossip is the attitude of permanent openness. Openness to approaching and being approached, to questioning and being questioned, to agreeing and disagreeing … knowing that I am learning to be who I am by relating to what is my opposite. And the more I give myself to the experience of living with what is different without fear and without prejudice, the more I come to know the self I am shaping and that is being shaped as I travel the road of life. (Freire 2002: 118)

The notion of unfinishedness, as the belief in the partiality of one’s knowledge and in the possibility that one might be wrong, associated with processes of self-reflexivity and unlearning, might give rise to positions that are more uncertain and humble and, therefore, more open to engagement with and contamination by difference. Difference, in this view, is something essential to transform and broaden perceptions in a process where cross-fertilisation or “contamination” may affect participants at ontological and epistemological levels: transforming the ways one sees the nature of reality, being, and knowledge. Thus ethics, as stated by Gayatri Spivak (quoted in Landry and MacLean 1995: 7), is a call for relationship: an embrace of difference as an act of love.
An alternative reading of the possibility of another world

This kind of ethics, in which everyone is responsible for self-decolonisation and the process of construction of another world, is only consistent if we consider an alternative interpretation of the slogan of the WSF. We propose a reading that points to the notion that only one undivided world, that is not homogeneous, nor monolithic, but that transcends current divisions, is desirable. However, its vision or utopia should not be imposed by any particular group of people, be they neo-liberals or Forum participants. Its process of construction should be everlastingly unfinished in order to keep dialogue, minds and the possibility of alternative futures always open. Thus, for this process to take place, there are two preconditions. One, power should be radically and deliberately decentralised; and two, all individuals should be empowered to participate and be included in the process of negotiating and envisioning this utopia in order to take responsibility in the deconstruction and reconstruction of themselves (their worlds) and the “one world” envisaged. Empowerment in this context is the ability to negotiate one’s own subjectivity and to go beyond imposed boundaries. It is not something that we do to other people, but an awareness developed by each individual related to the construction of his/her own subjectivity and the choices open to him/her. This interpretation prioritises interdependence over autonomy and aims for a globalism of solidarity that defines differences in a way that does not depend on myths of cultural purity or authenticity, but rather flourishes on relationships of cooperation and not cooptation – relationships that contaminate without homogenising (Brydon 1990).

From this perspective, a new culture of politics is conceptualised as a new way of producing meaning, of seeing the world, of knowing and of relating to others. The idea is that the “other world” should be constructed and manifested in different modes of interaction amongst human beings, and with the natural environment, so that the shortcomings perceived with neo-liberalism on a macro-level can be overcome through a transformation of modes of thought and relationships on a micro-level. Within this framework, forms of construction of ideology and identity are questioned and collectively and continuously reconstructed. The notion of inclusion is also extended to the level of the individual as the emphasis on a commitment to ideologies, identities or groups is replaced by a commitment to a process of “becoming” that is continuous and encourages free and contingent associations.

This perspective points to a willingness for transformation that acknowledges the role of existing mechanisms of power and politics in the production of the status quo and the identities of groups and individuals, recognising that “we”, the people who want to change the system, are also part of it. This acknowledgement of complicity reminds us that “going beyond modernity” does not mean stepping outside the system, as this is an impossible move, but recognising its boundaries at different levels, such as within ourselves, in relationships or in institutions, and attempting to transform them from within. Two immediate implications for Forum participants, which develop out of this recognition, are: (a) the problematisation of how we establish our identities as activists, in relation to non-activists and (b) how this identity and our activist strategies reproduce the system they attempt to oppose. By believing that we occupy a superior position in relation to the “non-converted” because of our “activist” actions and self-declared activist status, we may close possibilities of dialogue and intervention and even subordinate other identities or actions that may have similar objectives, but are defined in different terms. However, we are not advocating the dissolution of this category, but rather claiming that we should question it from time to time in order to identify contradictions in what we are doing. This attitude demands humility; it requires processes of deconstruction and reinvention to become central in the recreation of the world, in a movement that goes beyond being a new “methodology of doing politics” and becomes a new “culture of politics” – a new form of seeing, knowing, and being in the world.

In proposing this interpretation, we recognise our ambivalent and conflicting location at the borders of education, academia and activism, and our privileged position to participate in the processes of the Forum and critically
reflect and write about it. We also profess our subscription to the goal of creating more equitable and peaceful societies and consequently our own complicity with the humanistic project – a project that is also rooted in “modern” assumptions and that is “unfinishable” and forever internally in contradiction with itself (Hoofd 2004). In writing this paper, we are aware that we are in fact also reproducing the system we are critiquing by using its modes of textual and material production and that our approach to writing does not entirely perform what we are advocating, which exemplifies one of the points we intend to make: that we are always complicit in reproducing the system, that we cannot escape and therefore that the struggle is not about “us” and “them”, but about “us all”, always. Nevertheless, we are trying to employ the tools that are available to us self-reflexively and responsibly in an attempt to challenge and transform the violence the system produces.

Therefore, rather than an attempt to regularise, normalise, and discipline individuals, by describing a set of parameters within which participants should perceive themselves and relate to others within the Forum, we are proposing something that can be articulated as a “reflective” (as opposed to prescriptive) ethic. This reflective ethic, as suggested by Foucault in one of his last interviews, seeks not to “suggest what people ought to be, what they ought to do, what they ought to think and believe” (quoted in Spivak 1995: 156), but to enable the construction of an awareness about how social mechanisms have, up to now, been able to work and how, therefore, these systems have conditioned the way we think, evaluate, act and relate to others. And then, starting from there, leave to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence. (ibid)

The Forum as a pedagogical space

The characterisation of the Forum as a pedagogical space can contribute to the nurturing of this kind of ethic. Rather than pedagogy defined as content transmission, this ideal pedagogy should be re-conceptualised as a willingness to learn and to teach, to challenge and be challenged, and to emerge different from this encounter, moving away from coercion and persuasion. This pedagogy should also cultivate an emphasis on critical engagement with and within the Forum making it a dialogical space where participants can reclaim their right to question knowledges and realities and share the ownership of the process and outcomes of the production of new contingent knowledge. Self-reflexive critical engagement can push the boundaries of the Forum and transform it at different levels. Besides being central to a pedagogy for decolonisation of minds and imaginations, it can also function as a safeguard against essentialisms and fundamentalisms, preventing processes of closure, promoting openness and supporting decentralisations of power in various dimensions, such as within organisational processes and the events themselves.

In practical terms, this conceptualisation signals a move from a feeling of vanguardism and from a “talking heads” format to more participatory, dialogical, and inclusive structures in order to create an environment in which individuals can learn from one another and allow each other to feel acknowledged, validated and relatively safe from oppressive or silencing institutional powers. This would require the organising committee to use more participatory and inclusive approaches in an attempt to set the example in WSF-organised events, an effort that is already starting to take shape in preparation for the WSF 2005 and that will hopefully be embraced and celebrated by participants and other Forum initiatives.

Promoted and addressed in this way, the Forum has the potential to attract individuals (particularly young people) who are sceptical of the forms of politics that present absolute certainties or fixed utopias. It can also increase the Forum’s potential as a catalyst for the creation of similar pedagogical spaces that can inspire and support “non-politicised” people in the wider society to start asking certain questions and to become aware of their political existence, expanding the role of the WSF as a catalyst for change beyond its boundaries. We can cite two initiatives that, using the Forum as an icon for resistance, have worked in this direction:

– The twelve-session Open Space Seminar Series on the theme “Are other worlds
possible? Cultures of politics and the World Social Forum” that was organised by Jai Sen, Mukul Mangalik and Madhuresh Kumar at Delhi University in India during August–December 2003, under the auspices of the History Society, Ramjas College. One of the outcomes of this project was the publication of the book Are Other Worlds Possible? The Open Space Reader compiled by Jai Sen and Madhuresh Kumar; another was the formation of two autonomous discussion groups among students from different universities in the city; and a third is a forthcoming set of books based on the transcripts of the seminars.

The educational project “Other Worlds”, an initiative inspired by the seminar series in New Delhi that involved educators, activists and academics in Brazil, India and the UK in the development of a set of introductory learning materials as an entry point to the Forum and to the issues discussed within it in order to prompt and support the creation of pedagogical “open spaces” in educational and community settings. In the second phase of this project, an international comparative research exercise has started, in which groups are going to pilot the materials in different contexts in five countries.

**Final thoughts**

In our reflections in this paper, we have attempted to identify some of the limitations of the current ethics of the Forum conceptualised as a space for groups and movements in civil society, and to explore the kind of ethics and conceptualisation that would enable and support the goal of transforming the boundaries of modernity and thinking “otherwise”. The alternative conceptualisation proposed in this paper conceives the Forum as a pedagogical space in order to foster the conditions for the emergence of a new culture of politics, a culture of openness that would support processes in which new forms of relationships and agency can develop and be nurtured. For this purpose, we suggested that the encouragement of self-reflexivity within the Forum, as well as the inclusion of individuals who do not see themselves as activists, are important steps towards this objective.

The Forum promoted as a learning or pedagogical space would expand the current focus on national and international links among movements and organisations in society and on connections and dialogue focusing on similarities. In outreach strategies to activist groups this view has the potential to help demystify the divide between theory (thinking) and practice (doing) and support the emergence of a culture of dialogue across differences. It could also justify the creation of outreach approaches for non-activists – as an invitation to a process of collective reflection and construction of an alternative world, increasing and expanding the Forum’s political impact. We also claim that fostering the culture of self-reflexivity that is already emerging within the Forum could generate systematic considerations of the Forum’s own contradictions, which could encourage Forum participants to re-negotiate their subject positions, bring in new actors and create new possibilities for the future of the space, reinforcing its potential as a catalyst of change in society.

**Notes**

* We are grateful to the editorial advisers for this issue of the ISSJ, Chloé Keraghel and Jai Sen, and to Colin Wright, Ingrid Maria Hoofd, Barbara Hill, Tracy Slawson, Martin Ham and Laiz Capra, for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this text.

1. Unlearning is defined by Gayatri Spivak as the ability to question how truths are produced, descending to the level of the cultural and political formations that produce them (Landry and MacLean 1995: 4).

2. The educational project Other Worlds is hosted by Mundi and can be found at www.mundi.
It proposes an approach to transnational (global/political) literacy based on “reflective ethics”, in which participants are encouraged to engage critically with issues related to global and local contexts and think about how their way of seeing the world and acting in it are connected to justice and injustice. This approach is based on ideas related to critical and postcolonial pedagogies, as well as a constructivist understanding of the learning process. The notion of “critical engagement” (as opposed to uncritical engagement and critical disengagement) is central to its methodology in conjunction with the concepts of justice and responsibility/accountable agency and ethics as a call for relationship – an embrace of difference. The project promotes the concept of transnational and transcultural solidarity and the critical exploration of “other worlds” (perspectives of people who are resisting injustice and oppression) that are not readily available in the media or in formal education, through a participatory, non-indoctrinating methodology of questioning and building connections.

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