

EXTENDED REPORT

FROM A POSTCOLONIAL TO A TRANSMODERN WORLD SOCIAL FORUM DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT The 2013 edition of the World Social Forum took place in Tunis, March 26th-30th. While Mediterranean Education actors rarely refer to Frantz Fanon when challenging the neo-liberal educational agenda, among the Latin American, Asia and African popular education actors there is a noticeable trend to “read” local practice in relation to regional specificities and to endorse the epistemic de-linking and disobedience from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality as advocated by transmodern scholars Quijano and Mignolo.

RIASSUNTO L'edizione 2013 del Forum Sociale Mondiale ha avuto luogo a Tunisi dal 26 al 30 marzo. Mentre i principali attori in ambito educativo del Mediterraneo raramente fanno riferimento alle prospettive proposte da Frantz Fanon nel mettere in discussione l'agenda neoliberista, chi proviene dalle esperienze di educazione popolare dell'America Latina, dell'Asia e dell'Africa mostra una tendenza sempre più marcata a “leggere” le pratiche locali in rapporto alle specificità regionali e a sottoscrivere le forme di disobbedienza e sganciamento epistemico dal sodalizio razionalità/modernità con la colonialità così come proposta da ricercatori della tradizione transmoderna come Quijano e Mignolo.

al-Karama

Written in six different languages on its banners, *al-Karama* (dignity) was the key theme of the Tunis 2013 edition of the World Social Forum, twelve years after it was organized for the first time in January 2001 in Porto Alegre as a counterpoint to the Davos Economic Forum. Born in

Brazil, the WSF had been organized in Africa three times in the past: in Bamako (2006), Nairobi (2007), and in Dakar (2011). The Tunis edition staged over 1000 events, organised by 4.000 organisations, involving 20-70.000 participants (according to different estimates). This was the first time that the worldwide edition of the forum was of direct concern to the Maghreb (and Arab speaking) region. How does “dignity” translate in the everyday World Social Forum dynamics? To begin with, the logistical support to the organisations and the participants involved in the WSF was provided by the Nomad08 cooperative. The cooperative is from Redeyef, the first Tunisian town to say an explicit “no” to the previous president, Ben Ali. In 2008 the local population supported the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT) that was opposing the government’s plan to close local mines.

This resulted in two intense weeks of street demonstrations that attracted to Redeyef and the neighbor villages a significant concentration of the Tunisian police forces in order to stop any form of protest. The struggle was particularly intense during six months with the police killing three young demonstrators and jailing hundreds of political prisoners. The Redeyef resistance movement is therefore at the heart of the process that triggered the 2010 massive demonstration and eventually the multi-party elections. Nonetheless, two years later, over 45% of young people in the region are still unemployed. To respond to this situation a group of young people founded NOMAD08, a self-managed cooperative producing interpretation equipment.

According to Wassim, one of the founding members, this was a way to create employment conditions by promoting a social and solidarity economic approach. Trained by the Tunisian engineer Mohamed Jribi they have been working with FM transmitters and portable radios, cellphones and basic electronic devices. The WSF was their first opportunity to find an external sponsor: the WSF secretariat invested 5000 euro in order to purchase the basic equipment and to

rent a workshop and in the three months previous to the WSF event they were able to produce 160 FM transmitters, 80 spiders in order to equalize the sound output and 50 translation cabins. In this way, the El Manar University Campus that hosted most of the WSF events was able to offer participants 40 halls equipped with interpretation facilities.

Their approach appeared to be very much in tune with the Social Solidarity Economy initiatives that have a well established tradition at the WSF. What are the priorities of the economy in a country such as Ivory Coast? “To begin with” said Madi Solo from the Resau Ivorienne de l’*économie social et solidaire* (RIESS) at the opening event “economic initiatives should be supporting social inclusion: it is a matter of values and it is a matter of making economic activities sustainable”. Social and solidarity economy organisations were sharing their practices and strategies at the WSF through a series of 10 events involving local groups and international networks such as RIPESS (Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of Social Solidarity Economy), RAESS (Africa Social solidarity Economy Network), Urgenci, Via Campesina.

Along with other representatives of SSE organisations such as ENDA, Madi Solo participated in the Social Solidarity Economy at the WSF event “The reality of SSE in Africa”, jointly organized by RAESS and Attac France. His introduction to Ivory Coast efforts to rebuild social bonds along with economic initiatives sparked numerous interventions concerning the need for African local and regional organisations to deconstruct both Western economic models and dominant perceptions of African history and its role within world relations. As it happened for most of the forum’s thematic areas, the results of the Tunis WSF are scheduled to be presented and discussed in future thematic networking events: for instance the World Forum on Fair Trade (April 2013, Brazil), the World Social Forum on SSE

(July 2013, Brazil) and then RIPPSS' 5th Global Forum of SSE in Manila, October 15-18.

This short note on the WSF begins on purpose with examples of the forum proposals. In 2006 the collective book "100 propositions du Forum social mondial" published by the Editions Charles Léopold Mayer highlighted the wide range of WSF contributions concerning socio-economic and political models that do not surrender to the neo-liberal paradigm. Too often the little media attention generated by the WSF is confined within the realm of the "no global" protest slogan. This dominant media attitude has been summarized by Michelle Beyeler and Hanspeter Kriesi¹:

While direct support for the global social-justice movement primarily comes from industrialized countries, newspapers published in these countries tend to give priority to critical evaluations. Only in France do we find supportive governments and publics as well as a very supportive stance of the newspaper we analyzed. Newspapers published in the South were more supportive of the movement, while their elite frequently evaluated it negatively. In part, this contrast can be explained by the fact that particularly the Western newspapers were keen on reporting critical claims by developing country elites because these claims were part of the newspapers arguments about the street protesters' ignorance of the trade policy debates.

This general attitude has veiled or dismissed proposals such as the Tobin Tax or the Basic Income that today are discussed by mainstream actors and successfully adopted as with the debt audit, as in the case of Ecuador which held an official debt audit enabling the Correa government to declare its debt illegitimate and to secure a multi-billion dollar write-off. The issue is particularly relevant to EU (especially

¹ Beyeler M., Kriesi H. (2005) *Transnational Protest and the Public Sphere*, Mobilization: An International Journal 10(1): 95-109, p.106

Mediterranean) Member States as well as the WSF-host country, Tunisia - as an International Monetary Fund package is believed to be almost underway and a debt audit would be a way to head towards a different direction and a way to put into practice the national assembly's decision to audit the debts run up under the Ben Ali period.

Of veils and identities

While it seems relatively easier to find a WSF convergence around concrete socio-economic proposals, identity issues remain controversial. The final Declaration of the Social Movements Assembly² at the World Social Forum on 29th March 2013 states that

Through the WSF process, the Social Movements Assembly is the place where we come together through our diversity, in order to forge common struggles and a collective agenda to fight against capitalism, patriarchy, racism and all forms of discrimination and oppression. We have built a common history of work which led to some progress, particularly in Latin America, where we have been able to intervene in neoliberal alliances and to create several alternatives for just development that truly honors nature.

But when it comes to the Maghreb-Mashreq region the shared WSF analysis does not go very far yet. It simply states:

We are at a crossroads where retrograde and conservative forces want to stop the processes initiated two years ago with the uprisings in the Maghreb-Mashreq region that helped to bring down dictatorships and to challenge the neoliberal system imposed on the peoples. These uprisings have spread to all continents

² <http://www.cdhic.org.br/?p=888>

of the world inspiring indignation and occupation of public places.

Indeed the Tunis WSF was an opportunity to welcome for the first time a majority of participants from the Maghreb and the neighbor regions. As I stepped into the Nomad08 premises at the El Manar University Campus, on March 25, the posters hanging on the walls of the University building were saying “Niqab³ is my choice. It has not been imposed on me”. WSF participants learned that a dozen female students are bringing to court professors and higher education heads for discriminating against students wearing niqab. In the blog,⁴ where I am contributing along with Mediterranean participants reports and comments about the WSF, my colleague Nomen Beji writes

My former professor is now being brought to court as he is being accused to have discriminated against a student wearing niqab. Today, instead of talking about the future, the Tunisian university talks about veil.

Tunisian forum participants who are working or studying at the university report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend “academic freedom” as they fear that frequent allegations against professors and courses that they are not behaving according to Islamic principles is preventing proper academic debate. At the same time, the WSF provided an opportunity to witness the vitality of the various Tunisian women’s organisations and of their participation in key independent media and organisations such as Dostourna (Our Constitution). The University Campus and the central Habib Bourguiba avenue, where evening concerts took place, were places where one could feel

³ a cloth which covers the face as a part of sartorial hijab (veil), not a Tunisian custom

⁴ <http://voicesfromtunis.org/>

the pleasure that many Tunisian participants and citizens took in singing and dancing revolutionary songs, as a way to celebrate the “revolution”, freedom of expression, and to defy Salafites’ pressure to inhibit singing and dancing. According to Omar Ghedamsi, painter and chair of the artists’ union “Salafites threatened the artists but we did not respond to their provocations as we wanted to avoid any violence at the forum”.

Conflicts were noticeable in relation to most Mediterranean and Middle East participating countries: Algerian participants were prevented from entering the country, Moroccan participants regularly voiced their disapproval of the Saharawi struggle and Polisario activists got into argument with them, Palestinian activists asked the Iranian delegation to change the wording of a banner presenting Palestinian victims as “the real Holocaust”, within the Iraqi and Syrian groups, a clear split was noticeable. From a post-colonial perspective it is interesting to notice that usually both parties are accusing each other of being imperialist and of being supported by the capitalist powers.

Solidarity with Palestine has been the forum’s common ground, with over 15.000 people marching on Saturday 30th March from 14 January Square along Habib Bourguiba avenue and Palestine avenue to Pasteur square where the Palestinian embassy is located. This march marked Palestinian Land Day, the annual day of commemoration of the events of 30th March 1976. And an enormous Palestinian flag was welcoming participants at the WSF main site.

Educational agendas

Compared to other thematic areas, educational activists and scholars came to the WSF with more open questions.

Some of them can be summarized by those who sparked the debate at the workshop on education and activism jointly organized by SOAS and local student movements:

The workshop introduction reminded participants that education is essential to making a better world and that at the same time there are many barriers to education: economic, social as well as cultural barriers.

“How can those barriers be broken down? – asked the workshop organisers – “How can we ensure everyone can access education i.e. upholding it is a human right? What do the processes of marketization mean to education? How can that be opposed and replaced by an alternative vision of a democratic form of education? How can those who have access to education (including academia) help in the process of change for a better world? How can activism transform education and academia? Furthermore, there is a close link between power and knowledge. What is the main purpose of knowledge? Might it not be one of the tasks of knowledge itself to oppose dominant power structures? How can we challenge knowledge when it fails to critique power?”

The workshop provided more questions than answers, and yet provided a wonderful opportunity to share case studies and to provide links and possibilities for networking amongst like-minded education-activists. Other educational workshops contributed to the sharing of local and regional struggles. On the morning of March 29th, at the workshop “For a new world of solidarity, dignity and social justice”, Laura Verduci introduced participants to the “No MUOS” struggle implemented by Sicilian organisations and particularly by the Niscemi community to prevent the American Army from installing MUOS technology at a USA military base in Niscemi. The MUOS (Mobile User Objective System) is an Ultra High Frequency (UHF) (300 MHz to

3 GHz frequency range) SATCOM system, primarily serving the DoD, the United States Department of Defense.

The MUOS constellation will consist of four operational satellites and one on-orbit spare. MUOS will provide military point-to-point and netted communication users with precedence-based and pre-emptive access to voice, data, video, or a mixture of voice and data services that span the globe. It involves four military sites: in California, Hawaii (already in place) and sites for planes in Australia and Sicily (under construction). The struggle is centred around road blocks trying to prevent the implementation of the work that is necessary to introduce MUOS technology at the base. The conference was an opportunity to announce the March 30th the first National “No MUOS” demonstration in Niscemi and to drum up participants’ support for it. This resulted, the next day, in the Sicilian Governor’s ban on installing MUOS components. This is yet another example of how local political decisions are taking the lead in designing an alternative agenda to neo-liberal and military strategies.

This awareness has been a distinctive feature of the work of most educational actors at the WSF (and, since 2001, also at the World Education Forum within and alongside the WSF) addressing issues such as the right to education, world educational goals beyond 2015, education and sustainability, education and civil society, literacy as awareness raising. The self-organised workshops at the WSF provided a wide range of debates, tools and claims to place educational issues at the heart of the social movements’ agendas.

Organisations such as the Instituto Paulo Freire have been part of the WSF process right from the start and their familiarity with the WSF workshop format is noticeable in their ability to involve local partners through free software, distance learning technologies as well as to organise debate and reflections around concrete tools such as adult literacy

and planetary citizenship publications as well as scholarly works.

Since October 2001 they are promoting, within and in collaboration with the WSF, the World Education Forum, a network of educational movements and organisations as well as unions and public authorities who presented, at the WSF, the publication “The Education We Need for the World We Want“, a joint effort by The Working Group on Education which includes The International Council for Adult Education (ICAE), the World Education Forum (FME), the Latin American Campaign for the Right to Education (CLADE), the Latin American Council of Adult Education (CEAAL), the Journey on Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility, the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO, Brazil), the International Bureau of Education, the Popular Education Network of Women from Latin America and the Caribbean (REPEM).

The WEF debate provided an opportunity to discuss issues of co-production of and access to knowledge with both analytical studies supporting the open data option, as well as inspiring local practices such as the French network Les Petits Débrouillard, promoting inclusive workshops based on experiential and active learning methodologies. On March 29 three partners, the Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches en Sciences Sociales (CERSS), and Dignité, Forum Civil Democratique Marocain (FCDM) organized the workshop “For a new world of solidarity, dignity and social justice” focusing on the role of civil society in formal, nonformal and informal education. It was an opportunity for the International Council for Adult Education to present the virtual exchange that will take place between 4 and 12 June among all ICAE members, in order to start a global discussion in relation to the achievements, challenges and the future of Education for All, with the approaching EFA and MDG target

date of 2015 in mind. This raises questions regarding how to shape the post-2015 international education agenda.

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⁵ Mignolo W. (2011), Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto, *Transmodernity*, Fall 2011: 44-66