

My Answers to Prager Fruehling Questions on WSF [The World Social Forum]

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About two decades ago you raised the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Could you please explain to our readers what brought you to this very special and central question and what the answer looked like?

I was brought to this question because a teenage armed struggle activist had tried to speak with her body by waiting until she menstruated before she killed herself so that people would know that it was not an illicit pregnancy but a refusal to kill from within an armed struggle movement; she also actually left a more conventional written letter to her sister. This happened in 1926 during the armed struggle against British imperialism. By the 80s, highly educated women in her own family had forgotten this and dismissed her as an illicit pregnancy suicide. Defining the subaltern as groups that cannot find a social recognition for their resistance, I asked an enraged rhetorical question and answered it in the negative. The positive answer is to create infrastructure so that subaltern resistance is recognized. More important, it is to become actively involved in changing education for the subaltern, so that it is not a question of solving problems and recognizing, but of producing problem solvers.

2. Within your scientific works- and especially in analysing feminism- you developed the idea of the so-called "subversive listening". What exactly do you mean by this and who will be empowered to do what?

I no longer remember where I defined "subversive listening." My entire 50 year trajectory (from the date of first publication) has been to learn from my mistakes. This is because I publish too quickly, but do not think the old good idea of waiting until fully prepared is a good idea for everyone. On the other hand, I think the phenomenon of instant judgment brought forth by electronic media is not politically responsible. "Empowering" is not a useful idea for me.

3. Over the last eight years, you participated in several World Social Forums (WSF) and European Social Forums. What kind of hopes and expectations did you have with regard to them? Have they been fulfilled?

I can see that these questions were prepared for other people. I have never participated in a World Social Forum. I accepted an invitation to speak at the European Social Forum and prepared what I thought was the best intervention I could. However, upon arrival I found that another event had been scheduled at the same time and place. I did not speak. This mystery was never solved.

4. You defined deconstruction as "a constant critique of what you cannot not want". Does the WSF perhaps meet a certain function or is it sooner a more or less constant communication about what is NOT wanted?

Since I have never attended the World Social Forum, I cannot answer this question. Let me however say that what you have quoted is one of the many descriptions of deconstruction that I have written during my active life. At any rate the word was, in English, "persistent," and not "constant." Since this answer,

if it gets published, will also get translated, all I can do is rely on the goodwill of the translator to recognize that there is a serious and activist difference between the two words.

4a. Does the WSF possibly need a stronger agreement about concrete common demands?

Not qualified to conserve this question.

4b. Could it be that the WSF needs more coherence in terms of content and respectively be more recognizable - especially with regard to interests of the subaltern?

I think an institution as large as the World Social Forum will have difficulty in being responsible to the interests of the so-called subaltern, because I do not agree that a possibility of making a multitude out of the world's subalterns is in place. I believe that the project itself is ignorant.

5. The external perception of previous WSF often was strongly concentrated on a few left Presidents or famous scientists, having achieved a proper pop star status. When over the last few years media focused on Lula, the new uncrowned king of the reports about the WSF is now Chavez. Could this be a problem for future WSF?

The star system is always a problem, but can also be used to change public opinion. Vanguardism is not avoidable for large scale results. It should be recognized as a problematic weapon, and other kinds of engagements should persistently (not "constantly") supplement it.

6. The Charta of Porto Alegre contains principles of the World Social Movement. One of these principles says that there is no speaker/representative of the WSF. In practice, there is of course a group of people who prepares the forum, who determines the time and the place of the different speeches and who communicates with the media. However, this preparing group (indirectly seen as representatives) never had been legitimated by a democratic process and its members are often people who can easier effort their regular participation. Thus, critics argue the WSF would be affected rather by an informal hegemony than democratically legitimated representatives. How do judge the situation? Do such processes of informal hegemony really sustain the positions of the subaltern?

I don't think the subaltern has anything to do with the supposedly participatory nature of the World Social Forum. I think reasonable structural mechanisms should be used, remembering that reason is a fragile instrument and must be protected.

7. Would you agree that the real practice of the WSF provides a space in which subaltern can communicate and be listened? Or is it rather a forum that more or less is dominated by western intellectuals as you criticized earlier?

I do not have a critique of Western intellectuals. I am myself a Western intellectual of Indian origin. However, I do not think the subaltern can communicate and be listened to under the leadership of the World Social Forum. This has nothing to do with West and East, North and South. That work is elsewhere.

7a. How should a WSF look like and be prepared to give subaltern a possibility to communicate?

This question can only be answered in the field. Not with words, but with the immense difficulty of real action. Not with the rallying cries against actually existing problems, but through the effort to understand the problem with other assumptions of “normality.”

7b. How should a WSF look like and be organized in order to turn subversive listening into reality?

Small collective cells working all over the world and coming together from time to time? I don't really know. My work is focused supplementation.

8. What exactly do you wish and hope to be realized during the next WSF? Since I am not and never have been a participant, I can only wish that the Forum is enjoyable and meaningful for those who participate in it, that it leads to real change, that money is not wantonly spent, and that internecine quarrels do not take the main initiative. □□□