

Media discourses on the World Social Forums: Towards comparative analyses¹

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The reflections to be presented in this and a parallel article by Maia and Castro are based on ongoing studies of *Brazilian, Swedish and Russian and Chinese* media materials dealing with the World Social Forums (WSF) in 2001-2004. The overriding question in this paper concerns the ways mainstream media of very different societies have re-constructed the global and local issues addressed by the Forums. Of the four market-oriented economies, Communist China and Post-Socialist Russia stand out as being almost silent about the WSF, favouring economic globalization – seemingly at odds with cultural globalization. In Brazil and Sweden the dominant media harbour contradictory discourses reflecting different political positions visavi the WSF.

World Social Forums – dominant media – cultural globalization

As reflexões aqui presentes, assim como o artigo de Maia e Castro publicado nesta revista, encontram-se baseados em uma investigação em curso sobre o material divulgado pela mídia brasileira, sueca, russa e chinesa sobre as edições do Fórum Social Mundial (FSM) de 2001 a 2004. Este artigo explora, como questão principal, os modos pelos quais a chamada grande mídia de sociedades bastante diferentes reconstruíram os tópicos locais e globais suscitados pelos Fóruns. Das quatro economias orientadas pelo mercado, a China comunista e a Rússia pós-socialista mantêm um silêncio quase completo sobre o FSM, favorecendo a globalização econômica, e, aparentemente, afastando-se da globalização cultural. No Brasil e na Suécia, a mídia dominante encampa discursos contraditórios refletindo posições políticas diferentes sobre o FSM.

Fórum Social Mundial – mídia dominante – globalização cultural

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Les réflexions qui sont présentées ici et dans l'article parallèle de Maia et Castro sont basées sur des études des matériaux issus des médias brésiliens, suédois, russes et chinois concernant les Forums Sociaux Mondiaux (WSF) dans la période de 2001 à 2004. La question du dépassement dans cet article concerne les manières dont les médias de masse traditionnels des différentes sociétés reconstruisent les questions globales et locales abordées dans les forums. Des quatre économies orientées vers le marché, la Chine communiste et la Russie Post-socialiste se tiennent comme les plus silencieuses au sujet du WSF, favorisant la globalisation économique - apparemment en désaccord avec la globalisation culturelle. Au Brésil et en Suède, les médias dominants tiennent des discours contradictoires qui est un reflet des différentes positions sur les WSF.

Forums Sociaux du Mondiaux - médias dominants - globalisation culturelle

Las reflexiones a ser presentadas en este artículo y en otro paralelo de Maia y Castro están basadas en estudios en curso sobre materiales mediáticos de *Brasil, Suecia y Rusia y China* que tienen relación con los Foros Sociales Mundiales (FSM) de 2001-2004. La pregunta dominante en este artículo tiene que ver con los modos en los que los medios principales de sociedades muy diferentes han reconstruido los asuntos globales y locales tratados por los Foros. De las cuatro economías orientadas por el mercado, la China comunista y la Rusia pos-socialista se destacan como permaneciendo en silencio con respecto al FSM, por favorecer la globalización económica. - aparentemente en desacuerdo con la globalización cultural. En Brasil y Suecia los medios dominantes albergan discursos contradictorios que reflejan diferentes posiciones políticas con respecto a FSM.

Foros Sociales Mundiales - *medios dominantes* - *globalización cultural*

Background

The World Social Forum and the media representations of it highlight several phenomena related to transforming power structures in a globalized world, largely driven by media, old and new. It raises questions about the possibilities for world-wide dominance and resistance, the relationship between media and political systems, the changing foundations for political action and participation, media and social movements, re-alignments of power in a so-called deterritorialized world, etc. At the same time it also strongly problematizes nation-founded approaches in media studies and political science alike. All this makes it reasonable to believe that the WSF can serve as a litmus test of media and society relations under widely different national conditions. In this paper we can only give a provisional outline.

When discussing the WSF I take it in the broadest sense, as something including not only the events that have occurred at four times in two different places, Porto Alegre and Mumbai over the years 2001–2004, but all the mobilization, action and counter-action taken during and between these events, and, in the context of this paper, the representation of the WSF phenomenon in different types of media world-wide. The meaning and future of all these movements gathering under the WSF umbrella is of course highly dependent on the ways it is handled by media actors, the latter also being part of the problems addressed by the Forums³. The media may by all probability be an evermore significant arena for conflicts in the “post-political”, “post-national” world – and not only an arena, but forceful actors in them-selves, serving their own commercial and ideological interests and in that also changing the conditions for and forms of global and local conflicts.

It is in the nature of things that social movements, new and old, take a critical stance against contemporary ideological apparatuses. It is equally logical that those media which serve as carriers of dominant ideologies tend to play down this side of social criticism – not accepting being portrayed as political actors or just servants to governments or other establishments.

The WSF is sometimes described as an anti-globalization coalition, sometimes as a movement for "globalization from below", then compared to the Davos meeting, representing "globalization from above". This is not too farfetched since it all started out as an anti-Davos meeting. Wallerstein describes it as "a loose coalition of transnational, national, and local movements, with multiple

priorities, who are united primarily in their opposition to the neo-liberal world order" (Wallerstein, 2002). This is bound to evoke very different responses in different parts of the world and in different types of media. One dimension in this is the sheer amount of coverage. Another is the relative focus on the WSF and the World Economic Forum (WEF) respectively. When it comes to the content of reporting we are interested, *inter alia*, in concepts of democracy, techniques of Othering, the use of metaphors and visual elements and the ways all this add up to a limited number of dominant themes.

The choice of Brazil, Sweden, Russia and China follows 'the largest differences' approach within comparative studies, most likely to yield significant differences in terms of ideological and cultural responses - but because of *what* differences? There are huge differences, of course, between these countries as exponents of different political and economic systems, but the journalistic representations of the WSF annual events may also differ because of the different positions in the global system and their coming on very different roads into late modernity.

One path of political democratization has been followed by a number of Latin American countries, starting in colonial and dictatorial or authoritarian pasts, variously reflected in today's media. Brazil is our chosen case. As with Russia this is back-grounded in the earlier study mentioned above.

Sweden differs from the other three, not only in size, but also because of the relative social and political stability of this country. It is a country without an authoritarian past in the modern era, but with declining participation in the Swedish and European parliamentary elections and

corporativistic tendencies, often mentioned in international comparisons, also in the media structure.

Russia of the last decade and a half has been termed "transitional", which implies some kind of in-between position – and also a direction. Our preferred term, "transformational", signifies less confidence about that direction. When it comes to democratic developments we get contradictory signals, not least when it comes to the media system.

China, the Communist one-party state, which recently became a member of the WTO, has a media system which, still, is largely controlled by the CCP. Cultural globalization is not yet on the official agenda, in strong contrast to economic globalization. It is Communism the Chinese way, also in the field of the media.

To put etiquettes on these countries, such as post-authoritarian, post-communist or post-socialist, corporativistic capitalism and market-oriented communism seems to be a futile exercise. As we shall see, these labels are not very good predictors of media output, at least not as seen from the limited perspective of this provisional comparative study. Because of this a few words are in place on national comparisons in a globalized world, defying most ready-made classifications of both countries and media systems.

On national comparisons

The nation-state may not be withering away in general as some 'globalists' will have it, but it is no longer the same container of political processes as it may once have been.⁴ It has taken on new functions and it is certainly a different thing in different parts of the world. Small nations and super-powers have very little in common, for one thing, often being positioned in centres and peripheries and thus in a dependency relationship. Forgetting such relationships often implicates a "methodological nationalism", in the words of Ulrich Beck. It tends to see the nation as a container of

globalization effects.⁵ We are left with a "balance" model, or zero-sum idea, of the relative strength of the nation state vs. the global system – instead of a framework not taking the "nation vs. the global" dichotomy as a given, but, rather, as a highly relevant theoretical problem. Sklair, for instance, has strongly criticized "the limitation of state-centrist approaches" which often amounts to "analyses that begin and end with nation-states". The problem is that "(t)hese [nation-based] classifications give us a wealth of empirical data, but the result is conceptual confusion and general inconclusiveness when we try to explain anything in terms of such state-centered categories" (Sklair 1995:45). Further, when it comes to nations as huge – and with as large regional, class and ethnic differences – as, for instance, the federations of Brazil and Russia, the nation category turns into a problematic abstraction, to say the least.⁶ The issue is rather the ways economic, social and cultural differences and fractioning are structured "locally" in response also to the global context – local differentiation being part of a larger complexity.⁷ For instance, national elites may profit immensely from economic globalization while other strata may be even less well off – this might explain much of the resistance against "globalization", particularly in Latin America, but throughout non-core areas in the world economy, peripheries and semi-peripheries.

Another circumstance that should alert media scholars is that the press and newer media since the early 19th century have been central mechanisms for nation-building, or, in the ideological construction of nation-ness (the well-known Benedict Anderson formula). For comparative media studies the results of this historical construction work is a particularly relevant empirical problem, not a methodological baseline. To what extent have what characteristics of nations been determined by specific media interventions in the national culture – by the yellow press in the Anglo-American world, or by politicized media in Italy?

To start with a classification based on dubious, if at all made manifest, assumptions about differences taken as independent variables, "standard ways of classifying countries in comparative sociology"⁸, is to put the cart before the horse. E.g. the first, second and third (and fourth) worlds,

invented in 1955 by representatives of regions refusing to choose between the two cold war alternatives, state communism and capitalism. A more recent classification of media systems is Curran & Park's four-field scheme based on two dichotomies: democratic vs. authoritarian and neo-liberal vs. regulated. To this is added an extra category: "transitional and mixed" societies (Curran and Park, 2000:13). We will return to this classification below, but it is obvious that three of our countries belong to the fifth category. This also actualizes the problem with static categories: the process of change can itself be seen as a category left out by definition. Types of change, driving forces, direction, speed, etc. make up some of the dimensions characterizing a world in transformation.

There are thus several problems with a comparative strategy based on a more or less intuitive, more or less aprioristic sorting of the objects of investigation. Early and late modernities as well as different positions in the present world system are bound to produce fundamentally different understandings and conceptualizations of media and society relationships.

In a more or less globalized world, country comparisons may be more or less meaningful, depending on what it is that is compared, and how. Globalization tends to confound the logic of (country-based) comparative research because exogenous factors are, more or less by definition, taking over the endogenous ones. Nation-based comparisons tend to isolate their objects from each other, at the cost of the analysis of the tensions created between nation states and the external world, as has been pointed out recently by Appadurai: "the kinds of comparison of social units that relied on their empirical separability cannot be secure" (Appadurai, 2001:5).

This being said I will still argue for nation-based comparative approaches as a tool for the investigation of transnational processes. Not that the nation state is mechanically taken as the basic unit, for all sorts of comparisons. Rather, the nation is an important level in between the global and the local and the reason is the stronghold of historically instituted national political cultures. Diverging media representations of world events reflect these cultures, but these representations also depend on contemporary transnational communications. The end result derives from

the interaction between these diachronic and synchronic sets of conditions. This interaction develops across time, which implies, for instance, that national media may recontextualize or reinterpret events to make them more understandable – or politically useful – in the national context (the well-known domestication phenomenon). The political or ideological impact of global media may thus be transient when it comes to particular issues. With increasing “turnover” in world news this effect becomes stronger, leaving little time for national political institutions and interpretative machineries to sort things out for their national audiences.⁹

We are thus aiming at a theoretical perspective that takes us beyond one-sided priorities of the global or the national as all-encompassing explanatory frameworks. Instead we would argue that

- national political cultures still make a lot of difference for the media, especially the press; however, especially television may momentarily conform to trans-national media events and “global” interpretations of them;

- major national (“mainstream”) media tend to support, through their selective coverage and in their opinion materials, national policies, in particular foreign policies, serving what is often referred to as the national interest;

- national media is a place where clashes between global and national cultures are sometimes articulated, in one way or other;

- mainstream media tend to interpret political phenomena in traditional and nationalistic terms, which means that new political activities not involving elected representatives, or preferred political procedures, always run the risk of being dismissed as undemocratic, irrational and suspect; or, as the case may be, they are not covered at all;

- on both global and national levels the mainstream media may be opposed by alternative (radical, oppositional, alternative, etc) media; the relationship between these two media forms is multi-faceted, sometimes mutually exploitative;

- in the era of economic globalization the above conditions work differently in core, semi-peripheral and peripheral economies - in a super-power state there may be less conflict between globalization and the national interest compared to peripheral countries, because the latter may feel a need to protect themselves against the former, be it in economic, cultural or other areas.

In the following we will focus on our four countries and how the WSF has been reported, given the very different media and political conditions. In most parts of the world the media coverage of the WSF gatherings have slowly increased over the years with increasing numbers of participants. WSF materials have also become increasingly available on the web. Still, there are certain countries where the coverage is minimal, at least in the dominant media. Let us now take a quick look at the coverage, or non-coverage, of the WSF events.

The four countries: coverage and non-coverage

Brazil

It is no wonder that the World Social Forums held in Porto Alegre were widely covered by *Brazilian* media. Especially the one in 2002, visited by the newly elected Workers' Party president Lula. This coverage was very mixed - along the whole scale from sympathetic to antipathetic voices, reflecting the open social and economic cleavages of Brazilian society. Regional and national television coverage was intense and several studies of this coverage are underway. In the article by Maia and Castro (in this issue) three dominant discourses in the major dailies were identified. First, the Forum was described as a "carnival" (or "spectacle"), focusing on the festive side. This was also very much in focus in the visual materials. Second, the Forum was described as Utopia, read "unrealistic", or filled with "useless verbosity". Third, the Forum was perceived of a manifestation of segments of the Left.

Sweden

The often noted corporativistic structure of the Swedish media system and a balance of power shifting towards economic and managerial interests (Dahlgren, 2000) would also make us expect a coverage favouring the WEF and ridiculing the WSF. On the whole this is also what happened in the major media, particularly in the economy and international pages, as could also be expected. But other voices sometimes found their way into the cultural pages, like Naomi Klein writing in the largest tabloid, the *Aftonbladet* (Feb. 13, 2002). Also one of the founders of the Swedish *Attac* wrote on the debate page of the same paper (Feb. 7, 2002), reporting "euphorically" from Porto Alegre as the article was framed by the editor of the page. Articles based on web materials and sympathetic with the WSF could often be found in regional papers and, of course, in alternative or radical media – increasingly so over the years.

In Sweden the coverage of the WSFs has increased over the years. As in Russia (see below) it has been "balanced" by the simultaneous reporting from the World Economic Forums (WEF), held in Davos or New York City. In the Swedish press these two events were often given space on the same page, by different correspondents. This illustrates the balanced "neutrality" of Sweden, with a political culture within which also truth is considered as an outcome of negotiations. The WEF was seen as more serious and responsible, talk about economy etc., purportedly having consequences for the world, whereas the WSF many times was described in terms of spectacle, carnival, party, play, colours, singing and dancing – by definition (in this journalistic context) the opposite of seriousness.

Many journalistic presuppositions are at work here. When it came to the WSF: "Anyone who expected violence and devastation will be frustrated" and "well-behaving participants" (*The Dagens Nyheter*). Religious metaphors also appear – the 60.000 participants are said to have pilgrimaged to Porto Alegre. There are also kitchen activities: "The forum has been boiling of opinions, and accompanied by casserole drums.." Mostly the "utopian" trait was highlighted, which meant that the WSF on

the whole could be seen as an "unrealistic" project, as a dream not to be taken seriously.

The World Economic Forum, on the other hand, gives "(a) sober picture of the world's economies" (headline). In this case the future is under control and wishes are not at all unrealistic. For instance, it is said that "(t)he next meeting is already a success" (headline about the upcoming meeting in Monterrey, Mexico). The contrast between the coverage of these respective Forums is all the more striking as they appear on the same page in the leading Swedish daily, the *Dagens Nyheter*. The dominant discourse on the WSF is strikingly similar to that of the Carnivalistic and Utopian frames in the Brazilian press. The photographic material strongly underlines this perspective on the WSF. Two favoured pictures showed a burning dollar note and posters with Che Guevara.

During the different WSFs there have been all kinds of media-critical activities. This mobilization, in particular against transnational media as part of the problem with neo-liberal globalization, has largely gone unnoticed in the national coverages (with the possible exception of Brazil). This has been the case in Sweden in spite of its relatively broad coverage and the use of correspondents sent to the sites. In various alternative media, web-based or not, on the other hand this is sometimes a major issue. This is a classical dilemma: the media as the white spot of the media. There is an exception to this, however, and this concerns the reiteration, in the reporting, of some well-grounded commonplaces about media's coverage of rallies and demonstrations. Minor disputes arise now and then between more and less popular media. It is often noted that there is a focus on the dramatic elements and on the sometimes violent moments. But this focus is mostly naturalized, it has to do with "newsworthiness" and there is seldom if ever a discussion of this ontological strategy in the mainstream media about its possible political causes and consequences. What is newsworthy is mostly taken as a given.

Russia

Russia has a unique position in the Post-Soviet world. Of special interest in this context is the ways Post-Socialist media stands out from others, if they do. What does the label "Post-Socialist", or "Post-Communist", signify today other than a reference to past conditions? Is it a social formation in its own right, reflected also in its media system (as all social formations)?

What about *Russia*, the major post-Socialist, or Post-Communist (a matter of terminological dispute) country? It is a common observation that a small number of oligarchs and more or less anonymous banks and oil companies control major newspapers, often via financial or investment firms and strategic ownership shares in media holding companies. What has changed during the Putin administration since 2000 is that TV as a medium is now directly and indirectly controlled by the Kremlin apparatus, which has caused a lot of concern also internationally. There is now one official government TV channel, the *RTR (Rossija)*, but through state-owned companies the government indirectly also controls the nationwide *ORT* and *NIV* - after ousting the two best-known oligarchs, Berezovskij and Gusinskij from these respective channels. The independent and very popular *TV6* was closed down early in 2002 and then re-appeared as *TVS*, a "private model of quasi-public TV" (Vartanova & Zassoursky 2003: 100ff). Right now there are two 24-hour sports channels.

The present media situation originated in the mid-1990s. Throughout the 1990s there were fierce struggles over all major media and information wars raged between groups of media moguls. The forces were realigned before the presidential election in 1996, with the Communists in the lead in the opinion polls. To ward off this threat the media moguls lined up to support Yeltsin (aided also by American public relations experts). The victory of the incumbent had several consequences for the media system. In the next few years Berezovskij (*ORT* etc.) and Gusinskij (*MOST-Media* with *NIV* etc.) were to build up TV empires in which political influence could not be disentangled from economic profit.

After Yeltsin, however, the new president started a political and

admini-stra-tive campaign against these oligarchs (and later others). The tax police (the chief of which was appointed prime minister in March 2004) was one weapon used, for instance against Guzinskij's *NIV*, since 2001 in the hands of the state-owned Gaz-prom. *NIV* was one of the media outlets with a critical voice during the first Chechen war. Boris Berezovskij, former secretary in president Yeltsin's security council, actively supported Putin's presidential candidacy, but soon turned oppositional. Now he controls *Kommersant*, *Noviye Izvestia* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, all of them critical of the present Kremlin administration. With the exception of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, put in arrest during the months before the 2004 presidential elections on the charge of financial frauds, the remaining oligarchs do not express political ambitions.

The position and role of the media in between private capital and political power seems to be the key to understanding not only media in present-day Russia, but Post-Soviet transition in general: "A 'traditional' political history of Russia in the nineties would be incomplete if it did not include media issues and the rise and fall of Russia's first media magnates".¹⁰ One could argue that it is not unique that media issues nowadays everywhere form an integral part of modern political history. The following excerpt from an article titled "Russia: A normal country" and written by two university professors, at Harvard and UCLA respectively, gives us some relevant comparative insights: "Russia is typical of middle-income market economies. Almost all of these – from Mexico and Brazil, to South Korea, Malaysia and South Africa – are dominated by a few politically influential tycoons who receive special favors from the government and often abuse minority shareholders..."¹¹

In Russian media the WSFs have so far received scant reporting compared to the Davos and New York City meetings of the World Economic Forum. Reports focused mostly on the WEF, sometimes with references in passing to the WSF. A systematic search in connection with the WSF in Porto Alegre in 2002 and the simultaneously held WEF in New York City only yielded agency materials and translations from foreign media as far as the WSF was concerned.¹² Strong criticism was raised against the verbal

aggression by the American administration against countries defined as belonging to the "axis of evil". Russia had another definition.

Some of the WSF materials was published by www.rambler.ru and the web edition of *Nezavisimoe obozrenie*. A few business weeklies, like *Kompanija*, published relatively neutral material on the WSF, describing its objectives. Sources used were EuroNews Information and Deutsche Welle. Russia was not on the agenda in Mumbai in spite of Chechnya and the anti-war rallying during the 2004 WSF.

China

In spite of the official trust in competition in other areas the media structure in *China* is still rather monolithic. All media are controlled by the huge Information and propaganda ministry, television is centralized under the China Central Television (CCTV) and the major national newspapers follows the party line, with the *People's Daily* in Beijing as its leading organ. Other voices, also mildly critical ones, may be heard in English-language media (like CCTV's Channel 9) and in business magazines. Mostly, however, there is a strikingly positive tone in daily reporting, celebrating progress in various areas. To some extent this is the result of 'paid journalism' (cf 'black marketing' in Russia), a phenomenon recognized as a major problem with journalism in today's China. Part of the problem is that also public authorities engage in paid journalism as sponsors. There are cases when media coverage has resulted in public outcry with political consequences. In one case a widely reported court sentence was changed and there are many similar examples. In this way the market orientation of the media, also of official ones, may sometimes serve political democratization.

The present author recently travelled in China and had opportunities to inter-view news editors and staff and students in the communication departments of major universities in Beijing and Shanghai. The WSF was largely unknown. In fact not one researcher or student answered that she or he had heard about it and a few journalists only vaguely, if at all (although all of them were heavy web users). The sampling is of course highly unrepresentative, but it indicates that the WSF is not simply an

issue in China. One might have expected that Communist rule implies a receptivity for and attention to anti-Capitalist manifestations and propaganda around the world. But things are not that simple and clear-cut, any longer, if they ever were. After the opening of 1976 the market orientation has become evermore outspoken and this combination of Communist one-party rule and a high-speed capitalist market growth might seem enigmatic, but only if one subscribes to the belief that capitalistic markets are free in all respects. As in the Western world media oligopolies tend to get the upper hand (Padovani, 1998).

Recently China also entered the WTO, something that might make it less prone to join the out-spoken enemies of this organization. The recent orientation towards the EU is another marker of its close affiliation with Western capitalism, not only in Hongkong and the south-east provinces, but also in Beijing. Present official Chinese policies strongly favour economic globalization. Cultural globalization is a different matter (Curran, 1996).¹³

However, China did appear on the agenda of the WSF in Mumbai in January 2004. Mostly on critical issues like the Tibet question and the shortage of water in rural areas in some northern provinces because of governmental priorities given to water supply in the metropolises. Other than that there was a focus on regional Asian issues, in particular the China-India Intercultural Dialogue. Problems with governance in China (not to be confounded with "good governance" as used by the World Bank) were also addressed.¹⁴

Comparisons and conclusions

After this quick perusal of national media coverages, or non-coverages, of the possible birth of a "global civil society" we will now turn to a final discussion. How to understand differences and similarities from a cross-national perspective? What use do we have of received categorizations in comparative studies?

Generalizing broadly and far beyond the scant empirical material presented here, how are we to categorize these countries, what parameters are the most relevant ones if we want to explain the diverging responses, or non-responses, to the WSF (or any other global event of potential political significance)? How to explain that a "global" event like the WSF gets so different coverage – as to both quantity and content – in different countries which are all globalized in one sense or another? One would hypothesize that large-scale occurrences with political relevance would get equal treatment in dominant national news media around the world (with differing opinion materials accompanying it). The macro-sociological approach taken here urges us to try to explain, in interactional terms, the actual differences in media coverage. How do global *and* national factors combine to explain differences and similarities?

The idea of the WSF runs contrary to that of the nation state as a system for formal and hierarchical decision-making based on some principle of representation (be it of divine power or popular consent). The Forum is just an arena for the generation of ideas about another world. In that it is not congruent, neither with the principles of the nation state, nor with those of journalism, the two "pillars of modernity".¹⁵ As a consequence one should not expect national media, always immersed in one political culture or another to hail anti-statist manifestations or forms counter to the established procedures and processes of opinion-formation. The form of the WSF is in itself a protest against politics as we are used to know it (it *is* utopian and sometimes it *is* carnivalistic!). And this our four countries have in common: their national media do not endorse the basic ideas at the WSFs, either by being silent about them or by patronizing them, sometimes comparing them with the more "sober" expression of the WEFs. This is what could be expected and in this respect the national contexts make for similarity.

In two of our countries, *China* and *Russia*, the WSF is a non-issue. Or, there is a passive reporting relying on agency materials or translations from foreign media. As far as we have been able to detect there have been no critical exchanges, public debates or deliberations relating to the ideas

of the WSF, not even in Russia where material is available in certain print media and on the Web. This material may serve at least micro-public spheres, with political deliberations taking place outside public arenas, in an otherwise weekly developed civil society.

How do *Russia* compare with *China*, in terms both of system characteristics and WSF coverage? Differences are of course striking. In 1989 the military brutally curbed the protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and political opposition has since then been very weak, if existent. In 1991 the Soviet union collapsed and a coup installed a non-communist leadership. There have been eight democratic elections (for the Duma and the Presidency) since then. Political opposition can, however, not really be found in the Duma, controlled by the president in the sense that no oppositional parties managed to get in the last elections. And the "golden era", 1992-3, for the media is over. Real political opposition is largely found on the web, not on national television. There is a certain pluralism in the press. As in China the English-language media seem to have less tight (self-imposed or not) reins than the vernacular ones and this also goes for part of the business press.

In the two other countries, *Brazil* and *Sweden*, the WSFs are made a political issue, although within limits. The "Latin American model" implies that competing elites and struggles within elites (the Brazilian government itself harbours such in-built conflicts) make for ideological struggles also in public spaces (Waisbord, 2000). Limited disputes over the meaning and impact of the WSF may be found in *Swedish* opinion materials because of the long party-press tradition. The major cleavage in reporting, however, goes between the news pages or news casts of the national media on the one hand and the cultural pages and a number of smaller magazines on the other. These two media sectors constitute relatively secluded worlds, corresponding loosely to the idea of the two-world system, discussed today among political scientists: the state-centric and the multi-centric worlds. This is a distinction that cuts through both the global and the national. The state-centric and the multi-centric systems are both found on both global and national/local levels.

Let us take a look at some existing classificatory schemes and see how they might help us explain differences or similarities. For instance, the division between *Western* and *Non-Western* ("the Rest") countries is obviously not applicable. With the possible exception of Sweden these countries all include extremely "westernized" spaces side by side with pre-modern pockets or even regions. The *urban-rural* division is very strong and obviously accelerating in China, Russia and Brazil alike. This means that the *North-South* dimension, is equally inapplicable and for the same reasons, and this also goes, of course, for the Cold War partitioning of the world into a *First*, a *Second* and a *Third*, and *Fourth* one. This does not mean that the differences and socio-economic cleavages that these distinctions refer to are gone. On the contrary, they cut through macro-regions, nations and metropolises. The (anti-neoliberal) anti-globalization movement is largely a political and cultural global response to the local repercussions of economic globalization. This is a complexity seemingly beyond the given genre capacities of most national mainstream journalism.

In terms of *socio-economic inequality* Russia and Brazil rate very high in international comparisons. Sweden has experienced increasing inequalities since the 1980s (as a de-regulating post-welfare state). China shows increases with the rise of a large social group of rich people (more than 100.000 dollar millionaires and 200 million people below the poverty line) and growing unemployment, especially on the countryside, creating fast-developing socio-economic cleavages, urban-rural differences and regional inequalities.

Even the distinction between *capitalist* and *socialist* formations is problematic. The present Chinese brand of socialism gives a lot of freedom to market forces. Brazil's capitalist economy is administered by a Workers' Party president. Russian Post-Socialism entails strong governmental involvement in big business. It is an emerging law and order capitalism (Zassoursky, 2004).

There is one dimension, the existence of *formal parliamentary democracy*, along which these countries are easily sorted, with China standing out. There are elections on local levels, but the system is not "available"

nationally, in the official language.

The difficulties in finding easily applicable classificatory principles are reflected also in attempts to sort countries as to their *media* systems. For the simple reason that these systems are reflections of the socio-economic order. Curran & Park, in their *De-Westernizing Media Studies* volume from 2000, introduced the following two major dimensions as a way of sorting the media systems in today's world: *democratic* vs. *authoritarian and neo-liberal* vs. *regulated*. However, as noted above they have to include an extra, fifth category for "*transitional or mixed societies*", including China, Eastern Europe, Russia, South America and the Middle East. Since three out of four countries in our study fall within this category it is obvious that some fine-tuning is needed. Or rather, we need to introduce other factors. It is even reasonable to ask whether there exist any non-transitional or non-mixed societies. At least it seems as if most countries are on the move along both these dimensions. This move, its *direction* and not least *speed*, may be as significant as any temporary position in a classificatory scheme like this.

What is it then that exists? *Speed*, the rate at which a society has been transformed in the recent past seems to be significant factor for at least two reasons. First, there exists a collective experience of change in society and in everyday life for a large portion of the population. Second, fast-sweeping changes in a society, in the form of a more or less revolutionary transformation of the socio-economic order are bound to have repercussions on the system of social classes. This is not just a matter of the emergence of a class of *nouveaux riches* (and other groups thrown into poverty), but of a much more complex social structure with new strata overlaying the old ones. As has been shown by the Mexican sociologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen old and new strata tend to accommodate to one another in the longer historical run (as when feudal lords or, for that matter, party officials turn into capitalists). But this process implies an extremely complex society with strong built-in social and political tensions. Nowadays globalization has a role in this process and it strikes differently depending on the preconditions at hand. Nations like post-

socialist Russia and still-socialist China have both experienced a relatively sudden immersion in the global capitalistic system. What they have in common is that capitalism with its class structures have not been in existence in modern times. The high priority given to economic growth and economic globalization also opens the doors for a global consumer culture that further differentiates society.

I conclude with these speculative reflections which take us full-circle round to the WSF being a non-issue in China and Russia, whereas it received conflicting public treatment in in Brazil and Sweden. The new market economies, Socialist or Post-Socialist, have not yet had the capacity, or will, to develop a pluralistic media system. And it does not come automatically, neither as a result of a market economy nor of the institution of parliamentary elections. This is not to say that pluralism is unlimited in our two relatively old capitalistic systems, Brazil and Sweden, far from that. But here, other types of power conflicts determine the public agendas as can be shown in closer analyses of how the media represent and deal with an event like the WSF.

Notes

¹ Revised version of a paper presented in the Working group on Post-Socialist and Post-Authoritarian Media and Intercultural Communication, IAMCR, Porto Alegre, July 2004.

² Recent books: *Picturing Politics* (2000), *Russian Reports* (2000), *Discourses of Change* (forthcoming). The author has lectured at the UFMG in Belo Horizonte and conducted research in collaboration with colleagues at its Department of Social Communication. This has been published in articles as "Espetáculos midiáticos e comunicações democráticas", UFMG, 2004 and "Modernidades, mídia e transição política" (with Rousiley Maia and Maria Céres Castro), *Contracampo*, 2004.

³ The media strategies of the Forum itself is an issue that by all probability will come to the forefront in Porto Alegre 2005. See also Milan, 2004.

⁴ The following paragraphs are taken from Ekecrantz et al., 2003.

⁵ Defined by Beck: "(...) the explicit or implicit assumptions about the nation-state being the power container of social processes and the national being the key-order for studying major social, economic and political processes (...) A sociology that remains happily glued to its own society and times will not have much to contribute." (Beck, 2002:21)

⁶ John Downing mentions these two and a couple of other countries, but he also notes, in this context, that "even in small nations certain regional specifics may play a very large cultural as well as economic and political role" (Downing, 2001).

- ⁷ One approach along these lines would be the model recently suggested by Scott Lash in which "the global informational culture" is characterized by different class-determining zones, or spaces, traversing metropolitan and rural, uptown and suburban, and other types of traditional geographical areas (Lash, 2002:28ff).
- ⁸ This is taken from Sklair's identification of five "state-centrist" divisions based on income, trade, resources, quality of life, and blocs, respectively. But Sklair's point is that the whole idea of such state-centrist classification is questionable, as we have argued above.
- ⁹ This is developed further in my discussion of the CNN effect thesis (Ekecrantz, 2004.).
- ¹⁰ The quote is from Ivan Zassoursky's recent book *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (2004: 230). It contains a wealth of information about today's media and political and economic actors in Russia.
- ¹¹ Andrei Shleifer and Daniel Treisman, "Russia: A Normal Country", *The Moscow Times*, March 4, 2004.
- ¹² Thanks goes to Vladimir Khozikov who did this search. His general conclusion is that Russian did not pay much attention to the alternative Forum, because the general opinion has it that the anti-globalization movement is something frivolous that can not have any real influence on the world's economic and political processes.
- ¹³ CCIV carried brief reports, mostly from the openings and closings of all WSFs 2001-2004. In 2001 and 2002 the WEF and the WSF were framed as "rival shows" and in 2003 one covered the protests at the WSF against the US attack on Iraq.
- ¹⁴ <http://allies.alliance21.org/fsw/article.php3?id>
- ¹⁵ See further the analyses of incongruences between the organizational form of the WSF and journalistic practices and agendas in the contribution in this volume by Rousiley Maia and Maria Ceres Castro. For a discussion of metaphorical uses of "carnival" and "spectacle", representing alternative and mainstream cultural forms, respectively, see Ekecrantz, in print. As "utopia" the term "carnival" has both strongly negative and positive connotations in the different media worlds of the Swedish press.

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