

# Decolonizing Cosmopolitanism in Practice: From Universalizing Monologue to Intercultural Dialogue?

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*There has been a veritable upsurge in the debate on cosmopolitanism not merely as a philosophical ideal but also as a socially grounded concept denoting an individual or collective stance towards world openness. Postcolonial scholars, however, have criticized new cosmopolitanism's Eurocentric and universalizing stance. Pointing to the impossibility of global conviviality in a world in which non-Western epistemologies and cosmologies continue to be marginalized, they have challenged the exclusions and silences within the new cosmopolitan project. Decolonial scholars have also put forward cosmopolitanism as a decolonial political project challenging Western hegemony. These scholars have identified the World Social Forum as a privileged site for developing cosmopolitan projects. Overcoming the binary polarization between cosmopolitanism as imperial monologue or as privileged positionality of the subaltern, feminist scholar activists have developed knowledge-practices for dialogic encounters that offer a reading of cosmopolitanism as emancipatory self-transformation. This paper sketches the tensions and contradictions of the contemporary cosmopolitan debate in order to scrutinize the Inter-Movement Dialogues, a workshop methodology developed in the context of the World Social Forum process, as a way of grasping the contours but also ambiguities of embodied emancipatory cosmopolitanism.*

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Cosmopolitanism and Transnationalism: Visions, Ethics, Practices

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Cosmopolitanism is rapidly becoming academia's favorite trope for characterizing the worldview deemed appropriate for today's globalized world (Delanty 2009, 3). Previously perceived as primarily a philosophical ideal characterizing the belief in the existence of a global community of humankind,<sup>2</sup> cosmopolitanism is increasingly used by social scientists as a socially grounded concept describing actual social practices or outlooks (Skrbis *et al.* 2007). This "actually existing" or "new" cosmopolitanism (Calhoun 2002; Fine 2003, 452) acknowledges that there is an interplay between the local and the global and locates cosmopolitan orientations not merely in a locally rooted appreciation of the global but rather in an active engagement with the cultural Other. The insertion of the Other into the cosmopolitan logic, bearing echoes of Kant's call for providing hospitality to a stranger (Cheah 2006, 488), transforms the abstract appreciation of the global into an affirmative stance towards intercultural communication. Being cosmopolitan, in this 'new' approach, inevitably entails being "open to otherness" (Kahn 2004, 6).<sup>3</sup>

The sociological debate on cosmopolitanism in particular follows this line of thought, framing cosmopolitanism not only as an appropriate outlook for acting and thinking in today's globalized world but also as an everyday strategy applied when encountering those who are different. This "willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz 1996, 103) is perceived as a core cosmopolitan skill, entailing the management of different systems of meaning and a constant state of readiness to enter, examine, and enact other cultures. But even Hannerz, who has put forward cosmopolitanism as a cultural skill, cautions that such cosmopolitanism displays a "narcissistic streak" as it grants "a sense of mastery" to those able to navigate between cultures, enabling them to feel that "a little more of the world is somehow under control" (Hannerz 1996, 103). This underlines that new cosmopolitanism is no innocent ideal but entwined in the power play of social relations. The cosmopolitan knack for intercultural communication might help undermine cultural (if not necessarily state) borders, leading to cultural hybridity.

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2 This broad definition is also reflected in the etymological meaning of cosmopolitanism, which connects *cosmos* (the world) to *polis* (community) (cf. Go 2013, 3). For Skrbis *et al.* (2004, 116), this general understanding depicts cosmopolitanism's predominant use in the literature as "a progressive humanistic ideal" broadly tied to ideas of world openness and global interconnections. Owing to its high level of abstraction, however, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been adapted to be of use for empirically examining human practices and outlooks.

3 In debates within new cosmopolitanism, 'Otherness' tends to be used synonymously for the figure of the stranger, constituted as being culturally different but yet approachable and, finally, intelligible. Postcolonial theory, on the other hand, generally understands the 'Other' as, by definition, not fully accessible, as the constitutive outside constructed by hegemonic discourses inevitably constituted by asymmetrical power relations. The repercussions of such an approach for evaluating the cosmopolitan desire to engage with the Other will be discussed in this paper.

However, it also ascribes social status in a globalizing world (Hage 1998 in Calcutt *et al.* 2009, 172). Managing cultural codes and being fluent in the practices and norms of various cultures might be accompanied by an increased striving for global justice, but just as well by the appropriation of other cultures as mere means of broadening one's skillset. Skrbis, Calcutt and Woodward (2009) consequently argue that one should take into account the implications of the wider social and political context for studies on cosmopolitan outlooks (see Lamont *et al.* 2002; Skrbis *et al.* 2007; Woodward *et al.* 2008). Postcolonial scholars broaden this perspective, underlining the fact that the context of social interaction worldwide is, inherently and inevitably, always shaped by colonial legacies. Framing cosmopolitanism as openness towards the Other, therefore, requires reflecting not only on the global dynamics that engender the encounters between culturally different peoples but also necessitates a critical reflection of the kind of openness that might enable an intercultural dialogue instead of a mono-directional inclusion of the Other into hegemonic designs.

This paper argues for the inclusion of postcolonial feminist insights in the new cosmopolitan debate and traces the argument for rethinking the political potential of cosmopolitanism as openness to the Other. It will illustrate the possibilities and limits of cosmopolitanism as an emancipatory consciousness by discussing the embodied practices of feminist activists observable in those global spaces where 'an-other' possible world is formed.

In the first section, I will sketch how cosmopolitanism has been debated in the social sciences, paying particular attention to the ways in which the cosmopolitan debate has been confronted with its global history by postcolonial scholars. I then link this debate to decolonial approaches to cosmopolitanism, which frame cosmopolitanism as a political project challenging the epistemic hegemony of Eurocentric universalism, striving for a world in which a multiplicity of belief-systems and ways of living fit. In the second section, I focus on the World Social Forum process, which has been perceived as cosmopolitanism in the making. I show how feminist commentators have contested easy notions of cosmopolitanism as the privilege of the subaltern by pointing out the many ways in which the Other is excluded and marginalized in the supposedly open space of the World Social Forum (hereafter WSF). Consequently, I propose to trace emerging cosmopolitan practices within the actual organizational practices of social movement actors addressing the exclusions and marginalizations within and between social movements. By aiming to politicize difference, social movement actors are invited to confront their internalized resistances to difference, thereby promoting the latter's self-transformation towards cosmopolitan openness. But taking Otherness as

subalternity seriously also means acknowledging the inability of the WSF – and of the practices developed within its spaces – to reach into subaltern space. Cosmopolitan self-transformation towards emancipatory futures necessarily reaches its limits when confronted with the deep structures of subalternity unalterable through pedagogic encounters with difference.

### **The universalizing monologue of contemporary cosmopolitanisms**

In recent decades, there has been such an explosion of academic writing on cosmopolitanism that some scholars already presume the existence of an academic field of cosmopolitan studies (cf. Inglis 2012). While the sheer number of publications on the topic certainly supports the suspicion that some form of collective debate is taking place, the plethora of different approaches, systematizations, contestations, and negations is not resulting in much clarity. Some scholars have tried to make sense of the debate, but even they have disagreed on how best to sum up the field: Vertovec and Cohen (2002), for example, identify six perspectives on cosmopolitanism in the social sciences, Delanty (2009) four and Rovisco and Nowicka (2011) three. A broad overview of the cosmopolitanisms debated in the social sciences that merges but does not strictly follow any of the approaches cited above includes the following four perspectives: First, there is cosmopolitanism as a philosophical worldview entailing certain normative assumptions regarding global justice and world citizenship (Vertovec *et al.* 2002, 10). The spectrum of approaches in this category ranges from Nussbaum, who has famously claimed that any moral commitment narrower than to humanity as a whole is a “morally questionable move of self-definition by a morally irrelevant characteristic” (Nussbaum 1996, 5), to Appiah’s concept of a localized “cosmopolitan patriotism” (Appiah 1996). Notwithstanding the differences in these philosophers’ views on the appropriate anchoring of cosmopolitanism, they concur that cosmopolitanism implies both the affirmation of moral obligations towards the Other as well as the pedagogic responsibility to learn from those who are different (Nussbaum 1996, 11; Appiah 2007, 31; Mendieta 2009, 250).

Second, cosmopolitanism can be approached as a global political project built on normative understandings of world citizenship, global democracy, and human rights (Delanty 2009, 4). Two forms of this political cosmopolitanism are observable (Vertovec *et al.* 2002, 12): One is cosmopolitanism from above, which is mainly concerned

with constructing the ideal institutional settings for furthering cosmopolitan global democracy (Archibugi *et al.* 1995; Archibugi *et al.* 1998; Held 2006; Archibugi 2008). The other is cosmopolitanism from below, which believes that transnational social movements, migrant communities, and travellers make up the core of a growing global community identifiable by their transnational experiences and their cosmopolitan outlooks (Hannerz 1996; Pieterse 2006).

Third, cosmopolitanism has taken shape as an analytical method in the social sciences responding to the challenge of how to examine and, ultimately, understand the transnationalization of social relations with scientific tools that are implicitly assuming the frame of the nation-state. Beck, in particular, has called for the overcoming of methodological nationalism and for a cosmopolitan social science (Beck 2002a; Beck *et al.* 2006). The anthropologist Hann, moreover, has argued for a redrafting of his discipline that is based on a “radical comparative cosmopolitanism” (Hann 2008, 80).

Fourth, cosmopolitanism has come to depict a “mode of engaging with the world” (Waldron 1992), a sense of belonging to a post-national community of humankind that expresses itself through the appreciation of global diversity and the celebration of difference (Stevenson 2002). In contrast to those putting forward a cosmopolitanism from below, the proponents of this way of perceiving cosmopolitanism prefer to examine specific social settings within or cross-cutting national borders and are not as much concerned with processes of community-building on the global level. Several studies have developed analytical methods to examine these outlooks empirically (Lamont *et al.* 2002; Phillips *et al.* 2008).

From this short overview of the very varied cosmopolitanisms being discussed in the social sciences it is clear that cosmopolitanism has the potential to express more than just the aesthetic stance of those familiar with frequent flyer lounges and high-end ethnic cuisine. Its capacity to grasp the imaginations of those living in today’s globalizing world and give a name to practices that respond to the increasing transnationalization of everyday life might partly explain why the term has become so popular. Its common core, describing a way of relating to the world positioned somewhere between locality and globality, particularity and universality (Mendieta 2009, 242) is furthermore abstract enough to be universally applicable as an explanatory frame for social outlooks and practices that seemingly stem from the contemporary processes of globalization.

Unfortunately, abstractions have the tendency to gloss over contradictions and exclusions. The German sociologist Beck, for example, has been at the forefront of developing a sociological cosmopolitanism seen as a universally valid ethical response to globalization. In today’s inevitably interdependent world, he argues that a global

community based upon shared risks already exists. In order to respond adequately to the global risks threatening human survival, a cosmopolitan perspective has to be developed, not least through transcending the nation-state-centric tools of academic analysis (Beck 2004; 2002b). He has been called out, however, for his Eurocentrism: In a recent contribution to the debate, Bhambra (2011) shows through a careful textual analysis how Beck reinforces a Eurocentric reading of history on the basis of which he attributes certain qualities to the West, implying that these attributes are lacking in the non-West (Bhambra 2011, 318–322). She also argues that, by characterizing the first modernity as the time of the nation-state and framing the challenge for the second modernity as the search for a post-national constellation, Beck does not consider the crucial role played by colonial empires in the development of current global relations. Beck's cosmopolitanism, when put to a postcolonial reading, is therefore "defined by the European experience. Its intellectual genealogy is seen to be European as is its political practice" (Bhambra 2011, 318).

But Beck is not the only scholar constructing cosmopolitanism's European genealogy: In many versions of cosmopolitanism, the global roots of cosmopolitan concerns are obscured, even though these concerns have been expressed in many cultures and are sustained by intercultural influences and ideas. From Vedic and Buddhist imaginations of the world as one family to the Japanese theorist Makiguchi, the idea of belonging to a global community of humankind is neither unique nor exclusive to European civilization (Giri 2006, 1279–1280; Hansen 2010, 153). But the general cosmopolitan lineage more often than not reads

Aristotle, Stoics, Renaissance humanism, Kant, Rawls, Habermas, Derrida. The main stations in this account are Greece, Renaissance, Enlightenment, the West, United States. (Pieterse 2006, 1251)

A similar process can be observed with regard to empirical studies on cosmopolitan outlooks: In cases where cosmopolitan attitudes are traced in the Global South (cf.

Werbner 2006; Notar 2008),<sup>4</sup> these studies are mainly ethnographic accounts of how certain groups or individuals express outlooks that value diversity and respect difference in interaction with other ethnic groups. Their observations seldom feed back into the general debate on cosmopolitanism conducted mainly in sociology and political science. These dynamics seem to mirror the disciplinary boundaries installed during colonialism when certain academic disciplines, such as anthropology, produced knowledge about the exotic Other, whilst others, such as sociology or what is today known as political science, produced universally valid knowledge on topics of general concern (Castro-Gomez 2005, 1–20; Restrepo 2007). Pointing out these continuities, critical scholars have commented on the many ways in which the debate on cosmopolitanism in the social sciences is still marked by Eurocentric parochialism (cf. Calhoun 2002; Hann 2008; Mendieta 2009; Bhabra 2011).

Without a doubt, nearly all new cosmopolitanisms are thoroughly anchored in Western (post-)modernity: Without the postmodern critique of the universal standpoint and the accompanying dissolution of stable and fixed identities, the new cosmopolitanism in its current shape would not have been possible, and without the uncertainties, hopes, and imaginations accompanying processes of globalization, it would not have become so popular (cf. Delanty 2006, 5).

Nonetheless, situating cosmopolitan approaches in global history, which reaches far beyond the European continent (cf. Sen 2002), is indispensable for a cosmopolitanism that strives for global conviviality and understanding. Provincializing cosmopolitanism (cf. Bhabra 2011, 314) would imply that the influences of trade, colonization, and conquest as well as of non-Western schools of thought would be recognized as crucial components of the conceptual development of cosmopolitanism (cf. Mignolo 2000b, 2010; Mendieta 2009, Grewal 2008). The global histories of colonialism, imperialism, and racism have not only shaped the conditions that have made current cosmopolitan projects possible, they also provide the epistemic basis for cosmopolitan debate. Decentering the dominant understanding of cosmopolitanism then also makes it possible to ask whether – by assuming that cosmopolitan outlooks are increasingly

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4 I use the term ‘Global South’ when referring to those societies that are geopolitically grouped on the periphery or semi-periphery of the modern world-system, to use Wallerstein’s terminology (cf. Wallerstein 1979). While the concept of ‘South’ has been used in international relations since the 1970s to denote the collectivity of ‘developing countries’ which, while being heterogeneous, were facing similar challenges and sharing similar vulnerabilities, the notion of ‘Global South’ points to the call for transnational solidarity between those countries detrimentally affected by the advent of neoliberalism. It is consequently a relational as well as a political concept (Cairo Carou *et al.* 2010, 43).

available for everyone, regardless of wealth, education, or nationality – cosmopolitan dispositions are too easily associated with progressiveness, casting all those who do not or cannot join the cosmopolitan ranks as parochial at best and fundamentalist at worst. The openness to the Other constitutive of cosmopolitanism seems to represent, in many versions, a “conspicuous openness to diversity” (Buchanan *et al.* 2002; Ollivier *et al.* 2002, 2; Yegenoglu 2005) that does not always reflect the many ways in which “the cosmopolitan appreciation of global diversity is based on privileges of wealth and perhaps especially citizenship in certain states” (Calhoun 2002, 108).

### **Subaltern knowledges from the edges: Cosmopolitanism as a political project of the oppressed**

Scholars taking the positionality of the Global South, and, in particular, of Latin America, have developed a form of cosmopolitanism reminiscent of cosmopolitanism from below, which they call “decolonial” or “subaltern” cosmopolitanism (Mendieta 2009; Mignolo 2010; Santos 2007; Go 2013).<sup>5</sup> Assuming a position at the ‘relative exteriority’ of European modernity,<sup>6</sup> they concur with mainstream approaches to new cosmopolitanism that states that modernity lies at the basis of cosmopolitanism. But modernity, according to them, is necessarily accompanied by its darker side, coloniality: Without the colonization and subjugation of the Americas and the social relations that were developed at that point in time, the modern world would not have taken its current shape. Modernity, therefore, cannot be disentangled from the “transhistoric expansion

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5 Mignolo, who in earlier writings used the adjective ‘critical’ to describe his approach to cosmopolitanism (2000b), currently prefers the term decolonial cosmopolitanism (Mignolo 2010). Santos, focusing on cosmopolitanism as a counter-movement to neocolonial and colonial oppression, uses the term ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ (Santos 2007, 13). Within the decolonial paradigm, the subaltern are understood as those whose epistemologies and world-views have been constituted as Other to Western modernity. Contrary to the usage of the term in postcolonial studies as those that are not recognized as political actors in their own right and who are cut off from all lines of social mobility (Venn 2006, 27; Krishnaswamy *et al.* 2008, 6), the authors formulating a subaltern or decolonial cosmopolitanism use the term to characterize those possessing an awareness of their subaltern position in the current geo-political distribution of epistemic power (Mignolo 2000b, 745). Postcolonial scholars, however, argue for a more complex understanding of the term and warn against the use of the term as an identity marker (Spivak 1988).

6 The notion of exteriority, for these scholars, should not be taken to mean that they assume that there is an ontological outside to Western modernity. On the contrary, they employ the concept to show how the ‘colonial difference’ has constituted an outside framed as the Other by the hegemonic discourse on modernity (Escobar 2004b): “Exteriority in other words, is the outside, invented in the process of building the inside” (Mignolo 2010, 122).



of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times” (Moraña *et al.* 2008, 2), which naturalizes difference as inferiority and stabilizes the epistemic privilege of Cartesian thought (Escobar 2004a; Quijano 2008).

As a counter-move to mainstream cosmopolitanism, these scholars consequently hold that the Other, who lives in the border-zones of colonial difference,<sup>7</sup> retains the possibility of thinking from a space of difference that negates the singularity of the epistemological perspectives affirmed in Eurocentrism and, therefore, is the privileged source of cosmopolitan orientations (Mignolo 2000b, 744–745; Escobar 2004b). Cosmopolitanism’s ‘openness to the Other’ is then reframed as the consciousness of those very Others who have been excluded and marginalized in the modern/colonial world and their desire to challenge this exclusion (Mignolo 2000b; Mignolo 2010). In Mignolo’s words, cosmopolitanism thus “demands yielding generously . . . toward diversity as a universal and cosmopolitan project in which everyone participates instead of ‘being participated’” (Mignolo 2000b, 744).

As the current system of global relations normalizes difference as inferiority, such a cosmopolitan project, they argue, would inevitably entail not only the transformation of economic and political power structures but also the overcoming of the hierarchical ordering of epistemologies and cosmologies installed by Western hegemonic rule (Castro-Gomez 2005). Cosmopolitan politics therefore entail the political move of building a contentious consciousness and a subaltern politics of emancipation as a “cultural and political form of counter-hegemonic globalization” (Santos 2007, 13–15; Mendieta 2009; Mignolo 2010).

The primary agents of such cosmopolitanism are seen as those movements from the Global South that aim to challenge and transform the global structures of domination from the bottom up. In particular the World Social Forum process<sup>8</sup> has been identified

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7 The concept of ‘colonial difference’ was originally formulated by Chatterjee (1993), who stresses that colonial domination posited an absolute difference between colonizer and colonized, based on the inferiority of the latter. The devaluation of practices and perspectives of political actors from the Global South, together with the co-optation of their knowledges, is in this interpretation a corollary of the colonial difference and the starting point from which cosmopolitanism has to be thought (Mignolo 2000a).

8 The World Social Forum is a worldwide process that gathers social movements, trade unions, NGOs, and other civil society actors that share an opposition to neoliberal globalization. Originally inaugurated in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 as a counter-event to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, it has triggered a wider process consisting of a plethora of meetings, networking efforts, and events on local, national, and transnational levels. The program of these gatherings is generally self-organized and is not geared towards producing joint declarations or statements. Rather, these forums aim at facilitating an unrestrained exchange of ideas in the spirit of pluralism and diversity.

as a privileged cosmopolitan space, mainly because of its emphasis on being an open space, its positionality in the global South, and its emphasis on the plurality of world-views that exist (Hardt *et al.* 2003, xvi; Santos 2006).

Already this very brief sketch of the decolonial approach to cosmopolitanism shows that these scholars tend to base their theorizing on a polarization between Western modernity – which for them is inherently colonial and therefore, in the last instance, unsalvageable – and the emancipatory knowledges emerging from the Global South, which in many cases draw on ancestral or indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies. They tend to reinforce the binary between the

liberal, modernist, universalist camp and, on the other hand, the camp of those who denounce racism, western hegemony, and emphasize plurality, multicentricism, and cultural relativism. (Chhachhi 2006, 1329)

The postcolonial feminist philosopher Spivak (1995, 115) explicitly warns against the move to construct subalternity as a marker of identity:

Subalternity is the name I borrow for the space out of any serious touch with the logic of capitalism or socialism. Please do not confuse it with unorganised labour, women as such, the proletarian, the colonized, . . . migrant labour, political refugees etc. Nothing useful comes out of this confusion.

The general tendency of the advocates of decolonial/subaltern cosmopolitanism, I would argue, to attribute cosmopolitan consciousness to people perceived as subaltern creates its own exclusions that, in the end, endanger their emancipatory project. By focusing on those groups that have been able to express political agency,<sup>9</sup> they do not take into account the subaltern – those who have internalized their condition of disenfranchisement as ‘normal’, and who, lacking the resources to form a political consciousness, do not participate in struggles for emancipation (cf. Dhawan 2013, 154). In the following, I will illustrate this claim by exploring how the WSF, whose participants are often divided not only by ideological or cultural, but also by epistemological and cosmological divides, deals with difference. I first address the critiques that have been raised against drawing an easy connection between the WSF process and the decolonial

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<sup>9</sup> Santos (2005, 24) holds that “[s]ubaltern cosmopolitanism manifests itself through the initiatives and movements that constitute the counter-hegemonic globalization”.

cosmopolitan project. Then, I will exemplify what feminist knowledge arising from activist circles can contribute to the cosmopolitan debate, focusing in particular on one of their approaches – the Inter-Movement Dialogues – that has been developed and adapted in the context of the World Social Forum process. This approach, based on a dialogical approach to alliance-building, is based on the belief that in order “to have a space to struggle for recognition, it is necessary to politicise difference” (Vargas 2004, 230).<sup>10</sup> I end with a discussion on the opportunities for, but also the limits to, portraying these embodied dialogic practices as cosmopolitanism in the making.

### **Inter-movement encounters in feminist world social forum spaces – politicizing difference, practicing dialogue**

Postcolonial feminists, in particular, have criticized approaches that depend on a unified collective subject, as the latter obscure the internal power relations within the presumed emancipatory agent, silencing those that are different within the movements themselves and pushing into the shadows those that lack the material, but also epistemic, social, and political resources necessary to participate in organizing social movements. They concur with decolonial approaches that emancipative politics have to be directed not only towards transforming economic and political power structures but also towards dissolving the hierarchical ordering of epistemologies and cosmologies in wider society. Nevertheless, they ascertain that this holds just as much for the dynamics within counter-hegemonic movements. Unjust and colonizing systems of rule are expressed in the “social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication” (Vargas 2003, 912), which are also perpetuated in supposedly open social movement spaces.

The debate on how to deal with difference has been constitutive of the feminist movement and theory: The internal debate on the role and place of heterogeneity in the women’s movement was initiated by colored women in the nineteenth century and taken up by Black and postcolonial feminists in the 1960s (Hill Collins 2000; Hernández Castillo 2008). Activist experiences during the transnational encounters of the UN

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<sup>10</sup> My analysis of the Inter-Movement Dialogues is based on secondary and primary materials, undergirded by fieldwork conducted at the WSF 2013 in Tunis as well as other spaces of the global justice movement. As no Inter-Movement Dialogues were organized in Tunis, I have no personal experience of how the Dialogues are carried out. The richness of material on the Dialogues available, both in the form of scholastic analyses as well as material produced by the organizers of the Dialogues, is sufficient for my research purposes. I am aware, however, of the limitations of my approach.

Decade for Women of 1975–1985 and the ensuing Beijing World Women’s Conference in 1995 further spurred on these debates. Whilst for the most part neither explicitly connecting to the cosmopolitan debate nor claiming the label ‘cosmopolitan’ for their undertakings, feminists have long since theorized and practised communication across difference under the banner of transversal politics and standpoint epistemology (cf. Hill Collins 2000; Yuval-Davis 1999; Lugones and Spelman 1983): While standpoint epistemology ascertains the partiality of all perspectives on the world and reclaims the necessity to situate one’s knowledge claims, transversality offers an approach to political dialogue based on standpoint epistemology implemented through the twin processes of ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’:

The idea is that . . . each participant in a political dialogue . . . would bring with them the reflexive knowledge of their own positioning and identity. This is the ‘rooting’. At the same time, they should also try to ‘shift’ - to put themselves in the situation of those with whom they are in dialogue and who are different. (Yuval-Davis 1999)

Nonetheless, while feminist philosophers like Nussbaum or Benhabib have formulated some of the foundational texts in the philosophical debate on cosmopolitanism, the views of postcolonial feminists and feminist activists are not part of the new cosmopolitan debate (Chhachhi 2006, 1333). This paper does not intend to provide an explanation for this chasm, but puts forward the claim that, even though few postcolonial or Black feminists have claimed the cosmopolitan label for their discussions, important insights for the new cosmopolitan debate can be drawn from these debates, as they directly address some of the new cosmopolitan’s blind spots concerning the understanding of difference and the possibilities of cosmopolitan conviviality.

In the following, I show how feminist theorizing, arising from activist practices within emancipatory social movements, might provide a way of transcending Eurocentric thinking within the new cosmopolitan debate without producing insurmountable binarisms and polarizations. I focus on the World Social Forum process, as it has repeatedly been cited as one of the arenas where the emancipatory cosmopolitan project is taking shape. Moreover, it provides a vibrant environment in which new cultural politics are discussed and tried out. Feminists have also been able to assert their presence in the World Social Forum, shaping for example the politics of the Forum by steering the discourse of shared opposition towards the recognition of a multiplicity of oppressions, struggles, and political subjects (Conway 2011a, 50). Notwithstanding

the limitations of the WSF process, it provides one of the most innovative experiments in overcoming the universalizing monologue dominating contemporary social relations.

### **The world social forum: A cosmopolitan open space?**

One crucial characteristic of the World Social Forum process is the emphasis on fostering strategies of alliance-building that do not rest on shared identities or experiences in order to establish a “world in which many worlds fit”, to use the widely known Zapatista slogan (Walsh 2002; Waterman 2004, 24). This insistence on the politics of “open space” (Whitaker 2004) is reflected in its Charter of Principles, which states that the World Social Forum is

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth. (World Social Forum 2001)

The methodology of the World Social Forum might provide opportunities for communicative encounters across previously unbridged differences. But the overwhelming majority of commentators on the process have acknowledged that, due to the influence of the hierarchical ordering of knowledges and cosmologies prevalent in society at large, there still exist significant ongoing limitations and asymmetries in the relations between those sharing the space at World Social Forum encounters (Conway 2007; Alvarez 2009).

The Portuguese scholar Santos, who is one of the most prominent scholar activists of the World Social Forum proposing a subaltern cosmopolitanism, consequently argues for the need to establish cosmopolitan contact zones within every social movement that is part of the World Social Forum process in order to enable communication across the differences between movements (Santos 2005, 19–22). Anchoring this proposal in a wider argument regarding the work of translation, he recognizes the shortcomings of the World Social Forum process regarding the facilitation of non-exclusionary communication, but believes that the shared desire to challenge neoliberal globalization will make communication across difference possible (see Santos 2005).

Scholar activists involved in the World Social Forum process, many of whom identify themselves as feminists, question this hopeful reading, drawing attention to the fact that the Forum is far from being a cosmopolitan meeting place in which everyone can participate on equal terms (Conway 2011a, 34; Roskos *et al.* 2007; Conway 2013; Stephansen 2013). They discuss the numerous ways in which indigenous movements, dalits (the so-called ‘untouchables’ in the Indian caste system), slum dwellers, and women’s movements feel sidelined, silenced or excluded from the events of the WSF process. Starting from the insurmountable barriers to participation for many place-based activists – visa requirements and travel costs (Ylä-Anttila, 2005, 438; Doerr 2007) – to the formal exclusion of confessional groups, political parties, groups engaging in armed struggle, and those not opposing neoliberalism (cf. World Social Forum 2001) and ending with the actual dynamics during the WSF events that silence and marginalize those not accustomed to Western and male ways of speaking and debating in Left political circles (Ylä-Anttila 2005, 438; Conway 2013, 121–122), the ‘open space’ of the World Social Forum is closed for many activists and social movements. Indigenous people, furthermore, claim that the dominant intellectual discourses within the WSF do not mirror their outlooks and state that they hardly enter into communication with other participants (Conway 2011b, 222–227). Feminists have shown that, while feminist sensibilities and discourses have provided the conceptual core of the WSF process, women’s issues remain marginalized, especially when challenging the heteronormative or patriarchal practices of the WSF itself.<sup>11</sup>

Candido Grzybowski’s remark that “[t]here is a structural bias that obstructs the advancement of women’s issues [in the World Social Forum]” (Grzybowski 2001, cited in Vargas 2003, 914) therefore continues to be valid. The conclusion feminist scholars draw is that patterns of exclusion and marginalization, as well as patriarchal and colonizing systems of power and authority, have to be counteracted through tangible strategies, because otherwise, they will remain unchallenged even in supposedly progressive social movement spaces (Alvarez *et al.* 2004; Conway 2011b).

The experiences of the World Social Forum process, however, also show that transformative change can be achieved, and new actors and issues be introduced, but that such inclusions more often than not depend on direct challenges to the status quo:

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11 Feminist commentators have pointed, for example, to the invisibility of lesbians in the World Social Forum (Hawthorne 2007), to the silence surrounding cases of sexual harassment at WSF events (Koopman 2007), as well as to the prevailing marginalization of women and women’s issues in the lead-up to and during World Social Forum events like, for example, the WSF in 2007 in Nairobi, Kenya (Oloo 2006).

From the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, India, to the 2009 WSF in Belém, Brazil, to the 2011 WSF in Dakar, Senegal, and the 2013 WSF in Tunis, Tunisia, changes of place and space brought new actors and issues to the fore, transforming the political culture of the Forum to a certain extent each time.<sup>12</sup> Challenging and changing the practices of the WSF remains both a necessary as well as possible endeavour.

### **Tracing cosmopolitanism in the making in the feminist inter-movement dialogues**

One of the tangible strategies that feminist activists have devised to confront these dynamics is a framework to support communicative exchange between social movement actors divided by political and cultural differences. This framework has most prominently been implemented in the Inter-Movement Dialogues, workshops conducted during World Social Forum events that aim to make the multiple ways in which activism silences or dismisses certain points of view visible by focusing on the everyday practices of social movement activists. The framework for these workshops has been developed by a coalition of distinct feminist and women's movements from different regions of the globe.<sup>13</sup> Generally, the most known feminist initiative at the WSF, which most of the organizers of the Inter-Movement Dialogues have been co-sponsoring and which was an important precedent for the Inter-Movement Dialogues, is the Feminist Dialogues – feminist gatherings organized several days prior to the encounters of the World Social Forum. The Inter-Movement Dialogues, however, are particularly promising when aiming to examine how an embodied cosmopolitanism might take shape as their explicit aim is to make the radical difference of the Other tangible and real but not presuming a shared basis of identification, communicative

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12 The WSF in Mumbai 2004 was the first one to be held outside Brazil and witnessed a significant participation from poor peoples' movements, both dalit and indigenous, as well as from people with disabilities, sexual minorities, and sex workers (Stephansen 2011, 65). The WSF in 2009 in Belém was shaped by the critique of Amazonian and Andean indigenous peoples of modernist discourses of emancipation, while the WSF in 2011 in Dakar provided evidence of the salience of the struggles of African movements and at the most recent WSF at Tunis in 2013, activists of the Arab revolutions as well as of Occupy and the European anti-austerity movements participated in the WSF.

13 The organizers of the first Inter-Movement Dialogues were the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups India (NNAWG), Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), Articulación Feminista Marcosur (AFM), and the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ), each of which is a network of women's organizations that, in turn, comprises different local, national, and transnational organizations (Articulación Feminista Marcosur 2003).

intelligibility, or the instant recognition of these differences. The *Articulación Feminista Marcosur*, one of the organizers of the Inter-Movement Dialogues, even perceives the WSF process as a whole as a “space-dialogue” that might contribute to “shorten[ing] the distance that must be walked to further the dialogue between the diverse priorities that movements have” (Vargas 2004, 230). What is not presumed is that the distance between social movements will necessarily be bridged or even superseded.

Inter-Movement Dialogues were held at the World Social Forum in 2004 in Mumbai, at the Feminist Dialogues prior to the World Social Forum in 2005 in Porto Alegre, and at the World Social Forums in Nairobi in 2007 and in Belém in 2009 (Conway 2012, 385). The framework has also been implemented at various encounters in Latin America in particular (Wilson 2007, 15–19). They intend to support a praxis of inter-movement, inter-cultural, and inter-epistemological communication that is based on recognizing not only the specificities of the distinct struggles of those involved, but also the probable incommensurability of some of their normative orientations and goals. Yet, they aim at creating understanding and acceptance that may then provide a basis for collective action (cf. Antrobus 2004, 19). For the organizers of the Inter-Movement Dialogues, such understanding can best be reached by collective and individual transformation through changing both embodied practices and subjectivities. Gina Vargas, one of the key activists within the Inter-Movement Dialogues as both an organizer and panelist of the workshops, displays a similar orientation when summarizing her interventions in the World Social Forum as the striving for “the transformation of subjectivities, and . . . the recognition of the vital roles of diversity” (Vargas 2004, 230). As Gandhi and Shah (2006, 73–74), two of the organizers of the first Inter-Movement Dialogues, assert, “Walking the Talk” is the only way transformative change might occur:

In our experience, social movement activists who have to strike a balance between pragmatism, theorization and strategy agree to a rejection of sweeping categorizations but usually retain the concept of categories itself. However, most have not sufficiently come to grips with the politics of differences and the notion of conflicting identities. As movement activists, we need to not only accept difference, diversity and plurality but try to incorporate these ideas within our movements and strategies.

These workshops aim to reveal the often-unacknowledged differences between activists through pedagogic interventions in a workshop format. Their aim is to motivate the participating movement actors to confront their own contradictions and to recognize



properly what it means that there exist multiple ways of imagining, embodying, and striving for democracy, justice, and freedom.

In practice, the Inter-Movement Dialogues are convened as independent gatherings commonly scheduled to take several hours and attended by up to several hundred activists.<sup>14</sup> They are organized in a talk show-format, with several activists from different movements invited as representatives of their respective movements. During the inter-movement workshops of the World Social Forum in 2004, for example, representatives of the labor, the dalit, the indigenous and the feminist movement discussed their daily practices at work and how these relate to issues of race, gender, and class (cf. Gandhi *et al.* 2006). Once one representative finished speaking the other movement representatives were invited to comment, to which the second representative of the original movement was asked to respond. After these rounds of interaction between the speakers, the audience could comment. A member of the organizing committee acted as facilitator and structured the interactions during the proceedings (Vargas 2003, 914; Gandhi *et al.* 2006; Conway 2007, 56).

In these workshops, I argue, a potentially cosmopolitan consciousness is being developed through actual dialogical practices that do not presuppose a privileged subject position but invite the participants to reflect on their own practices and belief systems within a space that fosters political identities. This approach to facilitating dialogue across differences bears a striking resemblance to Delanty's (2009) 'critical cosmopolitanism' based on "processes of self-transformation arising out of the encounter with others in the context of global concerns" (Delanty *et al.* 2008, 324).

Nonetheless, the Inter-Movement Dialogues also illustrate the fundamental problems of cosmopolitan aspirations as well as the particular ambiguities of the discursive and empirical realization of a politics of recognition in a social field characterized not only by cultural or political but also by civilizational divides: The discourse of the Inter-Movement Dialogues, by perpetuating the dominant categorizations of intersectional politics, fails to open up the dialogue with the actual 'Other' in the context of the World Social Forum – those not present, those not easily fitting into the categorical schemes of counter-hegemonic politics, and those not wishing or not able to engage with other social movements on their own terms. In the call for the first Inter-Movement Dialogues, the topics to be broached in the Dialogues were predefined as concerning violence, work, religious fundamentalism, and access to power (Articulación Feminista Marcosur 2003).

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14 Gandhi and Shah maintain (2006, 73–74) that the first Inter-Movement Dialogues in Mumbai, India, were attended by 800 people, and the second in Belém, Brazil, saw the participation of 330 activists.

By presuming a particular frame of intersectionality, the Inter-Movement Dialogues have appealed mainly to those already familiar with the terminology of intersectionality and fluent in conversations based on academic argument. Conway, in this context, comments that “[i]t was striking how the same discourses of intersectionality, often carried by the same individuals, set the terms for the dialogue across movements” (Conway 2010, 162).

By foreclosing other possible topics as well as the possibility of an unstructured conversation, the content of the Dialogues was prefigured. By adhering to a talk show-format, keeping to a previously agreed-upon order of speeches, and by moderating the sessions according to the topics set by the organizers in advance, the terms of the conversation were fixed (Conway 2013, 134).

The Inter-Movement Dialogues were nonetheless successful in underlining the necessity of politicizing how the concern for bridging difference is translated into actual practice, complicating the celebration of counter-hegemonic alliance building prevalent in the WSF. Desai’s (2008, 52) evaluation of the Dialogues is a good indicator of the disappointment felt by many scholar activists committed to the aims of the WSF process when confronted with their actual achievements in furthering transversality:

[I]f this session was an indicator of coalition politics, it did not seem very promising. Solidarities with other movements have become the hegemonic movement strategy. But as the intermovement sessions at the forum in 2004 and 2005 showed, movements haven’t done the serious work: namely the work of rearticulating their visions to integrate other visions; reorganizing their movements to include others; and rethinking strategies to address issues of all inequalities, such as inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexuality, among others.

Reflecting on the failure of transversal politics and on the hard work necessary to transform the Self and collective practices, the difficulty of connecting to the Other present in the same space but still distant becomes the first pedagogical lesson of cosmopolitan encounters geared towards emancipation. The postcolonial feminist Lorde (1984, 113) issues a similar call:

I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears.

Such an act of self-reflection is still concurrent with decolonial cosmopolitanism's conviction that the first step of decolonial cosmopolitanism is the recognition of how one's desires, expectations, and practices are intertwined with a system of social relations that is based on the inferiorization of other epistemologies, cosmologies, and practices. What the evaluation of the Inter-Movement Dialogues shows, however, is that the building of a counter-hegemonic movement is neither an automatic nor a logical consequence of such cosmopolitan self-transformation and that reaching towards the Other through endeavors overburdened by hopes and expectations must necessarily fail.

While some might find Spivak's assessment that the World Social Forum "is at best based on a hastily cobbled relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern in the broadest possible sense" (2009, 36) unnecessarily harsh, her analysis of the central crux of the pedagogic project of the WSF is poignant. The Other as subaltern – understood in the actual meaning of the term – remains untouched by the WSF process and if members of a marginalized group find their way to the Forum, the dynamics of its spaces often make it impossible for them to be heard (cf. Conway 2013, 154–157). Epistemological hierarchies also persist in open spaces, and while the Inter-Movement Dialogues provide a framework for acknowledging and challenging some of the inequalities within the open space of the WSF, they might provide but moments of cosmopolitan clarity. Those who perform the intellectual labor of comparing and abstracting their practices to make them intelligible for others are – for the most part – members of the world's middle class that are active in the name of the Other (cf. Waterman 2012). Cosmopolitan openness, even in its emancipatory or decolonial form, is achievable only for some parts of the globe, and while the WSF and practices like the Inter-Movement Dialogues can broaden the frame, they do not overcome its inherent limitations.

### **Conclusion: Practices of self-transformation and the necessary impossibility of cosmopolitanism openness**

The upsurge of debate on the nature and scope of cosmopolitanism is evidence that there is a desire to find new ways of global conviviality that somehow manage to include everyone on equal terms. Such a desire, laudable as it is, should nonetheless be paired with the recognition that former global projects have inevitably led to the exclusion and marginalization of large parts of the globe, which has had not only material and social but also epistemic consequences. The reproduction of class-apartheid in the global South testifies to the persistence of these consequences in contemporary times (Spivak 2004;

Dhawan 2013, 154). Including everyone and recognizing the Other, a core cosmopolitan concern, might thus be more challenging than just acknowledging their co-presence in a shared global community.

Seeing the development of a dialogue across cultural and civilizational worlds as a major challenge in today's world, Delanty and He (2008, 324) argue that cosmopolitan dialogue is distinct to intercultural dialogue as it involves the transformation of self-understanding and not merely the recognition of other perspectives. Decolonial and subaltern cosmopolitan approaches insist that such self-transformation has to depart from a political positioning that challenges the persisting coloniality of the world. Postcolonial feminists, in turn, hold that self-transformation must include the acknowledgement of one's dominating practices, as well as a strategy for creating non-dominating practices of collective contestation, to be truly emancipatory. The Inter-Movement Dialogues of the World Social Forum provide a continuously developing proposal of how cosmopolitan practices geared towards critical self-transformation might look like. They also show the pitfalls of endeavors based on an understanding of colonial difference as marginalization and not subalternity. To counteract exclusions, including new actors and facilitating dialogue between those already present, is a promising choice. To counteract subalternity, a more nuanced – and painfully slow – strategy of pedagogic intervention in the formation of subjectivities on both sides of the colonial difference is needed (see Spivak 2004). This includes the transformation of subjectivities towards cosmopolitan reflexivity and practice beyond the unilateral inclusion of the 'Other' into already fixed cosmopolitan projects. Critical projects such as the Inter-Movement Dialogues, focused on the practical and embodied aspects of cosmopolitan concerns, provide a way of politicizing difference and consequently de-essentializing alterity. They fail, however, to overcome the unilaterality of emancipatory projects in a world still characterized by colonial divides – even though they provide the space for recognizing this failure. The Other remains in the shadows (cf. Spivak 1988) – even after more than 10 years of striving for 'an-other' world.

Nonetheless, the acknowledgement of the distance yet to be travelled and of the painstaking process of self-transformation that is still unfinished is a more appropriate starting point for cosmopolitan openness than the self-assured certainty of openness of new cosmopolitanism already achieved. As Gandhi and Shah (2006, 75) testify, “[t]he crucial mind-shift from common hierarchies and concepts is painfully slow and gradual.” But even in such frameworks, cosmopolitan consciousness is the outcome of material and agential privilege.

To sum up, cosmopolitanism is neither a privilege of the transnational elite nor an already inherent characteristic of presumably subaltern movement actors. It is formed and filled with meaning through actual encounters with Otherness – as well as the acknowledgement of the limits of such encounters – resulting in a shifting of perspectives and a radical questioning of one’s openness to the Other. In order to further cosmopolitan aspirations of global conviviality, the impossibility of achieving cosmopolitan openness in a world in which the difference of the racially and gendered Other is still marked as inferiority has to be taken as the starting point for the emancipatory political struggle.

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