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Janet Conway

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## **Transnational Feminisms and the World Social Forum: Encounters and Transformations in Anti-globalization Spaces**

By Janet Conway<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

What would it mean to place feminism(s) -- as movement(s), politics and ethics -- at the centre of our understandings of the World Social Forum? The author argues that transnational feminisms have been among the significant forces constituting the WSF, although this has been uneven across different time-spaces and scales of the WSF. She further asserts that transnational feminisms, understood as movement(s), politics and ethics, are making particular and irreducible contributions to contemporary emancipatory movements in and beyond the WSF. This study historicizes and analyzes some major expressions of transnational feminism at the WSF with implications for understanding the inter-relatedness of feminisms, anti-globalization movements and the WSF and for illuminating contemporary debates over the future of feminism taking place in transnational feminist networks.

*Keywords:* feminism, social movements, transnational networks

### **Introduction**

In an early article about the 'anti-globalization' movement, Angela Miles (2000) observed that despite the presence of great numbers of women and feminists, feminism as a discourse was strangely muted, both in the movement and in analyses of it. A similar claim could be made about the World Social Forum (WSF). A great variety of feminist activisms are everywhere apparent at the WSF yet feminism remains distressingly marginal to the discourses and politics of and about the WSF. What would it mean to place feminism(s) -- as movement(s), politics and ethics -- at the centre of our understandings of the World Social Forum? How would this shift dominant discourses about both the World Social Forum and transnational feminisms, and associated understandings of the anti-globalization movement, and contribute to fuller and more complex understandings of all of these and the relations among them?

Much of the scholarship produced thus far about the WSF is insufficiently sociological and ethnographic in exploring who is populating the WSF and how, through their discourses and practices, they are making the social forum what it is. Furthermore, much of this scholarship is profoundly masculinist in simply not seeing the presence of feminists and feminisms in the forum nor addressing their meaning. For our part, feminists have been too often preoccupied with questions of gender vis-a-vis the WSF or the anti-globalization movement rather than addressing these more broadly as political phenomena in feminist terms. In this article, I seek to contribute to knowledge about the WSF through a study of feminisms in, of and against the World Social Forum, and about

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Conway teaches social movements, feminism and democratic theory at Ryerson University in Toronto. She is a long-time feminist and activist in women's and antipoverty movements in Canada; through the 1990s, in cross-sectoral social justice coalitions; and since 2002, in the Toronto Social Forum.

the contours of contemporary transnational feminist politics as they have been articulated in, around, and through the WSF.

Conceptualizing both the 'World Social Forum' and 'transnational feminisms' is fraught with difficulty as the meanings of both are plural, contested and constantly emergent, and are shifting in relation to each other. The analytical task is made more difficult here in that I contend that (1) transnational feminisms have been and remain among the significant forces constituting the WSF; (2) the degree to which this has been so is uneven across different time-spaces and scales of the WSF; (3) that transnational feminisms, understood as movement(s), politics and ethics, are making particular and irreducible contributions to contemporary emancipatory movements in and beyond the WSF; and (4) that these contributions should be made visible and claimed as feminist.

In focusing on 'transnational feminisms' at the WSF, this article will not do justice to the 'grassroots feminisms' of the host countries, nor the women's and feminist activism in mixed movements which, in diverse expressions, are very apparent at each WSF. Localized, grassroots and popular feminisms, as well as women's groups in mixed movements, produce a plethora of small-scale, often uni-lingual, events at the WSF which can be invisible to feminists coming from outside, including those active in transnational feminist networks (Moghadam 2000). These less visible feminisms, their practices and discourse with respect to the WSF, their effects on particular social forum events and processes, and the impacts of the WSF on feminisms in specific places and movements, deserve greater attention in any study of feminism and the WSF than I can give them here.

This article is one of a series on the World Social Forum. I have been a participant-observer at each WSF since 2002, at the Americas Social Forum in Quito, and at numerous local social forums in North America, and have been involved in organizing the Toronto Social Forum. In addition to participant-observation at numerous social forum sites over five years, I have relied on interviews, email contact, and on-line reports and interviews produced by key networks on their involvements, their understandings and assessments of the WSF. There is, as yet, little academic literature in English on feminisms at the WSF but there is some in Spanish rooted in the histories of and debates over Latin American feminisms, on which I have drawn.

In this article, I begin with the challenges of conceptualizing and representing the WSF, its feminisms and the relations between them. I then survey and historicize the presence of some major feminisms at the WSF. The 2004 WSF in Mumbai and the Americas Social Forum in Quito merit special attention as historical high points in making the forum feminist. Then, drawing on a range of feminist commentary about the forum, I suggest that feminist positionalities have varied historically and that they continue to shift vis-a-vis the forum. Furthermore, feminist encounters in, over and around the WSF involve contestations among major transnational feminist networks over the character of feminism itself. Throughout, the discourses and practices of the World March of Women (WMW) are important reference points, especially in terms of feminist struggles over the shape and future of the WSF as they are playing out at the WSF's International Council. While no one feminism can represent the heterogeneity of feminisms at the WSF, the character of the WMW's presence, involvement and positioning provides a window into wider debates and dilemmas posed by the WSF, particularly among transnational feminist networks, and regularly anchors my discussion

in a specific feminist practice. I conclude by returning to the analytical questions with which I began by advancing some claims arising from this study about (1) the inter-relationship of feminisms, anti-globalization movements and the WSF and the implications for scholarship about all three; (2) the character of transnational feminisms/its positionalities vis-a-vis the WSF and contests over the future of feminism more broadly; (3) the significance of place and scale in studies of feminisms, anti-globalization movements and the WSF and the relations among them; and (4) feminism's particular contributions to emancipatory politics at the WSF and beyond.

### **The Forum and its Feminisms: Problems of Representation**

The development of the World Social Forum, understood as an annual event, is central to most discussions. However, the WSF is more accurately represented as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process that is evolving daily. The WSF is often characterized as a space of spaces, a network of networks, and a critical instantiation of the movement of movements against neoliberal globalization, but it is not itself a social movement. In this and any discussion of the WSF, it is critical to maintain a distinction between the WSF and its constituent social movements. Likewise, it is important to distinguish between the WSF and its governing and organizing bodies, the key one being its International Council (IC).

Central to the functioning of the WSF to date has been the understanding that the WSF is not a deliberative space. The WSF *qua* WSF does not make decisions, issue statements nor embark on common actions. No one can represent the WSF because it is not a unitary entity and its architects repudiate the notion that it should be. This position is occasionally contentious in and beyond the WSF's International Council but it has been definitive of the WSF thus far. While IC deliberations are an important pole in shaping the world-scale WSF process, the proliferation, dynamism, geographic dispersion and multiculturalism of WSF processes continually overwhelm the IC and any occasional attempts to control and or represent the WSF. In terms of this study of the character of the forum and its feminisms, it is important not to conflate the conflicts and limits apparent at the IC with the forum itself.

In 2002, at the second WSF in Porto Alegre, organizers called on participants to organize social forums in their own places, defined by their own priorities, and at whatever scale made sense to them. Hundreds of social forums have appeared world-wide on every continent inspired by the world event and organized in accordance with the WSF's Charter of Principles. Notably, important and increasingly autonomous regional processes are emerging. In 2006, the World Social Forum was 'polycentric,' meaning that the global event was dispersed over three sites: Caracas--Venezuela, Bamako--Mali, and Karachi--Pakistan. This innovation in the process is reflective both of the depth and maturity of regional processes and the arguments of many on the IC that the WSF has to be more regionally rooted in order to reflect and respond to the specificities of popular struggles underway in different parts of the world.

The annual global gathering known as the World Social Forum is a critical node in space and time for the consolidation and articulation of the process on a world scale, but the world process cannot be reduced to it. The annual event is growing exponentially and is spawning parallel forums, thematic forums, and forums within the forum. As a global process and multi-faceted phenomenon, the social forum is evolving daily. It is

characterized by great ongoing creativity and dynamism and some degree of shape-shifting that presents multiple problems of representation and analysis. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly untenable to refer to the WSF, as event or process, in the singular.

Furthermore, the world event/process is significantly re-created when it is taken up by groups in different parts of the world, and this changes what follows, locally and globally, as happened with the move from Porto Alegre, Brazil to Mumbai in 2004 and to Nairobi in 2007. Likewise, when the social forum is enacted locally and regionally, it assumes specificities that flow from place and scale, the historical-geographic conjuncture in which the process/event occurs, and the discourses, practices, preoccupations and strategies of the social movements and organizations that constitute any particular iteration of the social forum. Furthermore, particular movements that make a claim on particular instantiations of the World Social Forum through the particularities of place and or scale, are also intervening in the world process, albeit unevenly. These assertions and their relevance for feminisms at the social forum will become more clear in the discussion below of events in Mumbai (2004 WSF) and Quito (1st Social Forum of the Americas).

So there is no one “World Social Forum” even as there are distinguishing features of the social forum as a specific political-cultural form. In my view, the power and potential of the social forum rests on four features: (1) its character as a non-deliberative yet highly participatory and inclusive space of spaces with multiple centres; (2) its global diffusion as a form and method through the proliferation of local and regional social fora; (3) the increasing internationalization, inter- and multi-culturalism of the global process, signaled by the WSF’s move from Brazil to India in 2004 and to Kenya in 2007; (4) and a growing recognition of multiplicity, of diversity and pluralism as organizing principles in fostering a new politics for a new world with the space for many worlds within it. Feminist actors and influences are implicated in all of these.

The feminist presence in and character of the social forum is similarly unstable and difficult to represent, both in any one instantiation of the forum as the forum mutates across time and space. Feminisms manifest themselves across the myriad issues and sectors apparent in any single forum event, appearing in many guises and languages, in regionally- and culturally-specific ways, and in a vast array of grassroots as well as institutionalized, localized as well as trans-nationalized, expressions.

Even considering one identifiable feminism, the World March of Women, there are problems of representation. The March is a multi-sited, multi-centred, geographically-uneven and -dispersed network. It is itself an ensemble of diverse practices and discourses, always emergent and in the making, yet constituting itself as an entity, the World March of Women, that makes decisions, embarks on actions, acts in coalition, produces discourses, carries its feminism into the interstices of the WSF, and in so doing, makes the forum feminist. In representing the March and other transnational feminist networks, I have relied heavily on organizational publications and the writings of key activists, recognizing that these are always partial and contingent expressions of emergent phenomena.

The World March of Women has been a key actor in the World Social Forum, active on its International and Regional Councils, organizing activities and fostering the participation of women and feminists in the forum. In the diversity of its constituent groups in terms of sectors, scales and modes of activities, in its reliance on “contentious

politics” more than lobbying, and in its articulation to the anti-globalization movement, especially through its involvement with the World Social Forum, the March represents novel developments in the field of transnational feminist politics (Dufour 2005, 3).

The World Social Forum is itself a new development in transnational social movement politics. It is rightly celebrated by many feminists as an autonomous space for the convergence of an unprecedented array of movements, networks, campaigns, organizations and activisms, including a great variety of women’s movements, from all over the world. As such, it provides unparalleled opportunity both for encountering diverse feminisms and for engendering non-feminist movements that are otherwise broadly aligned in the struggle against neoliberal globalization. Women and feminists have populated the WSF in great numbers but have persistently struggled for voice and visibility, with uneven results. After six years of growing involvement and investment in the WSF, some feminists therefore approach the WSF, despite its richness and undisputed strategic importance, with some trepidation and ambivalence. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, significant feminist networks like the World March of Women continue to struggle over the shape and future of the WSF.

### **Feminist Anti-Globalization Politics: Considering the World March of Women**

Over the last several decades but accelerating through the 1990s, UN conferences have been sites for growing convergence and mounting opposition to neoliberalism among civil society organizations from all over the world. Among the most significant outcomes of these UN processes has been the global proliferation of grassroots feminisms and, through the 1990s, an increasingly militant transnational feminism opposed to neoliberalism. One new expression is the World March of Women, a world-wide and now permanent mobilization of over 6000 grassroots women’s groups on every continent, unified by a common platform of demands and punctuated by periodic global mobilizations.

The origins of the World March of Women lie in the organizing of a ten-day “Marche du pain et des roses” by the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ) in the early 1990s. The intention of this march was to make concrete demands on the government of Québec to counter poverty and violence against women through a mass mobilization of grassroots women activists and their supporters across the Québec territory. The March was so successful, both as a grassroots mobilization bridging divides in the women’s movement and as a pressure campaign, that Québec feminists introduced the idea of a world march at the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. A series of actions orchestrated by local and national scale committees around the world, unified by a shared platform, constituted the World March. The actions began on March 8, 2000 (International Women’s Day) and continued over the next eight months, culminating in an action at the UN on October 17, 2000 (International Day for the Elimination of Poverty) in which a petition with over 500,000 signatures was presented. Six hundred groups from 163 countries participated, mobilizing at every scale, and supporting the demands of the World March’s platform (Dufour 2005, 2). By 2003, 5500 women’s groups were participating (World March of Women 2004a, 234) and by 2005, over 6000 (Dufour 2005, 6).

Following the 2000 mobilization, intense debate ensued within the FFQ, which was still responsible for the World March co-ordination, about the merits of continuing

the March. With the ascendance of neoliberalism and the rising power of religious conservatisms at the UN, the efficacy of working internationally, primarily through UN-focused lobbying, was increasingly in question. At the same time, in the context of the exploding anti-globalization movement, some World March activists were arguing for the importance of relating to and intervening as feminists in the mass mobilizations. Simultaneously, there was also a growing sense that feminists needed to create their own autonomous spaces and processes to generate alternatives to neoliberalism and the March was seen as such a space and process.

From the 2001 decision that the March would continue, the March has become a prominent presence on the international scene: in the spaces of social protest, from anti-G8 protests in Evian (June 2003), the People's Forum for Alternatives to the WTO in Cancun (September 2003), and major anti-Iraq war manifestations, to UN conferences against racism in Durban (August-September 2001) to Alternative Finance for Development in Monterrey, Mexico (February-March 2002), to global feminist encounters as the Association of Women in Development (AWID) conference on alternatives to globalization in Guadalajara in October 2002, to the World and Regional Social Forums and the World Assembly of Social Movements. In these and other involvements, the WMW asserts the following:

the WMW believes in the globalization of solidarity; we value the diversity of the women's movements; we believe in the leadership of women; the importance of debating our ideas with other feminist groups and social movements; the importance of an international autonomous women's movement that is transparent, democratic and creative; and the necessary alliance with other social movements. (World March of Women 2003a)

Since 2001, when the World March of Women became a permanent process, it publicly committed to participation in the anti-globalization movement through processes like the WSF. The women of the WMW recognized the change in political terrain for women's struggles wrought by neoliberal globalization, the worsening of conditions and life chances for the world's majorities, and the centrality of this struggle for feminism. At the same time, they recognized in many iterations of the anti-globalization movement, including at the WSF, a reliance on the rhetorics of the old left that screen out women and feminism in giving primacy to the struggle against capitalism (World March of Women 2003c, 6).

In the 2002 WSF, the World March contingent included women from twenty countries. Their lavender flags and T-shirts were everywhere, especially in the massive street manifestations of the WSF. In the caucus meetings of the 'social movements of the WSF,' the March was a visible and vocal feminist presence and ensured some feminist content in final declarations. Its slogan, 'the world will not change without feminism; and feminists cannot change women's lives unless we change the world' met with roars of approval at the closing ceremonies at the 2002 WSF. In 2003, the World March was even more visible, with a large booth and a whole program of gender-related events, including a major event in the youth camp on 'feminism and a new political generation' (World

March of Women 2003b, 5–6).

The March's commitment to grassroots mobilization, street action and the claiming of public space resonates with many other iterations of the anti-globalization movements, especially among youth, and also characterizes its presence in the WSF. Drumming, chanting, singing and theatrics enrich and disrupt the spaces of the social forum, especially in Brazil, and "question the practices, codes and consciousness of those who are our 'partners' in the daily fight to make another world possible" (World March of Women -- Globalization and Alliances Collective 2005).

In the WSF, the WMW has been a consistent and critical participant, functioning as an autonomous feminist power, pushing for the integration of feminist struggles against patriarchy into all the major movements' and their debates. In addition to its steadfast participation in the International Council (IC) of the WSF since 2001, the March has also committed to the Social Movements World Network which emerged from the 2002 WSF. This network meets in assembly at each WSF and formulates common declarations.

Our participation in the Network can be characterized as the continual search for common, creative solutions and the effort to make these meetings more democratic so they can be more than an information exchange among groups. Our objective is to establish a long-term dialogue leading to common analysis; a pluralist and transparent process for coordinating local and global struggles; and the reinforcement of relations between the Network and the process of the Forum. (DiGiovanni 2004, 3)

The WMW is increasingly asserting that feminists have intellectual and political resources to share which are essential to building alternative worlds. The March aims to foster dialogue on the role of women and feminism across all the progressive movements (World March of Women 2004a; Burrows 2005).

### **Feminisms at the Forum: The Forum as Feminist?**

In each of the WSFs in Porto Alegre, women have been well represented among the participants, and comprising more than half (52%) the delegates in the first year. The huge and diverse Brazilian women's movement is always in evidence in numerous Portuguese-language events each year, but notably not in the large-scale and multi-lingual events. In 2002, women comprised a less impressive 43% of delegates and continued to be woefully under-represented as speakers in the major panels and conferences.

By the 2003 WSF, in response to feminist pressure and protest, there were signs of improvement in women's representation in the major events and efforts to incorporate a gender perspective throughout the program. However, the continued marginalization of women and feminism in the leadership, large-scale events and more internationalized discussions of the forum was obvious, even as "gender" appeared as the second most widely addressed issue in a keyword survey of the 1700 self-organized activities of the 2003 WSF (Miriam Nobre quoted by León 2005, 17). This phenomenon, in which feminists and feminisms are impressively present in a proliferation of grassroots, self-



organized and often small-scale activities in the social forum program, as well as in the popular spaces and streetscapes of the forum, while being systematically ignored intellectually and politically in the non-feminist spaces of the forum, has continued to characterize WSFs in Latin America as recently as the 2006 event in Caracas.

In the Latin American iterations of the social forum, the World March of Women and The Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur have been two particularly visible streams of feminist participation. The Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur is a Latin American feminist initiative also born of the Beijing experience as a “space for feminist intervention in the global arena”. More particularly, the Articulaci3n confronts “*pensamientos unicos*” (unitary ways of thinking that suppress pluralism) which appear in oppositional movements as well as among neoliberals (Vargas 2003, 914). In the 2002 WSF, these feminists spearheaded a major campaign against fundamentalisms, linking the economic fundamentalism of neoliberalism with rising ethnic and religious fundamentalisms. Cardboard masks depicting giant lips were sported by thousands of participants in the WSF’s many street demonstrations. The accompanying slogan was ‘your mouth is fundamental against fundamentalisms’. In a single symbol, the masks captured the realities of people silenced by fundamentalisms, people who can speak but are afraid to, and those who raise their voices in protest. This mobilization reappeared in 2003 and 2005 WSFs in Porto Alegre and involved other feminist networks including AWID (Association of Women in Development) and WICEJ (Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice). Carol Barton of WICEJ commented:

We see it as a very powerful campaign for bridging differences in what have sometimes been different universes within global feminist organizing. It addresses issues around women’s rights to control their bodies and their lives as well as women’s economic and social rights. It has brought these two strands together. (Duddy 2004, 1)

The Articulaci3n has also organized numerous sessions in the WSF program, notably “cross-movement dialogues” which convene speakers from different movements of the WSF to explore their differences and foster mutual understanding and recognition. In a similar way, the Articulaci3n has recognized the need for dialogue across difference among feminists. In 2003, 120 feminists from a dozen networks primarily from Latin America gathered in a pre-WSF strategy meeting. A chorus of feminist voices, including from networks like the Women’s International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) and the Association for Women in Development (AWID), argued for the importance of feminists carrying feminist perspectives into global movements for social change and assuming greater leadership roles, particularly at the WSF. These feminists saw feminist analyses on the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, nation and so on, as critical contributions to global social justice movements, including the movement against neoliberalism. Likewise, in their foregrounding of fundamentalism, militarism, and patriarchy, feminist analyses and politics had much to contribute to the discourses of more narrowly economic justice movements. Feminists organized a dialogue among women’s, peace and economic justice movements at the 2003 WSF.

Towards the 2004 WSF, a number of regional and international feminist networks

agreed to collaborate and work more strategically toward fewer but larger scale events targeted to audiences of 1000-4000 participants. The leading groups were Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), INFORM Human Rights Documentation Centre (Sri Lanka), ISIS International, the National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups (India) and the Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice (WICEJ) with about 50 feminist groups participating in some form of consultation or planning. This collaboration built on the efforts of Latin American feminist networks at Porto Alegre, notably on the 2003 initiative by AFM in organizing pre- and post- WSF strategy meetings, and set the stage for a major breakthrough in Mumbai (Barton, in Duddy 2004).

### **Feminist Breakthroughs in Mumbai**

In 2004, the fourth World Social Forum and the first to be held outside of Brazil took place in Mumbai, India. It saw over 80,000 people attend from 132 countries, representing 2,660 organizations. Unofficially, as many as 155,000 participated. The event was noteworthy for the huge participation of mass poor people's movements. Women were over 40% of the dalit ('untouchable') and adivasi (tribal) participation and 51% overall. Feminist networks played a prominent role in organizing in Mumbai and share responsibility for expanding the political vocabulary of the WSF's Charter of Principles to include patriarchy, militarism and war, racism, casteism and religious communalism alongside neoliberalism as key axes of opposition characterizing the WSF (Sen 2004, 218). Among the many innovations of the 2004 WSF, this more explicit recognition of the multiplicity of oppressions and the expansion of political discourses beyond capitalism and imperialism was, in terms of feminism, probably the most significant development.

The feminists on the India Organizing Committee created a women's caucus pushing for gender parity among speakers and the engendering of debates more generally. The India Organizing Committee committed to gender parity in all the events it organized which were, by definition, large-scale, high profile, and highly internationalized (Duddy 2004). One of four mass events (of 25,000 people) in Mumbai, "The War Against Women/Against War", explored the links between patriarchy, militarism and cultures of violence. Among the more than 140 feminist events within the 2004 WSF program, Indian feminists mounted another major event addressing: "Religious Fundamentalism, Communalism, Casteism and Racism: the agenda of globalization?" The World March co-sponsored a panel on the future of the WSF process and organized another on "Diverse Alternatives for Global Change" in collaboration with other feminist (predominantly Latin American) networks, including Agencia Latino Americano de Informaci3n (ALAI), Red Latinoamericano Mujeres Transformando la Economía (REMTE -- Network of Women Transforming the Economy), South-LGBT Dialogue, and Women of Via Campesina. The March once again mounted events in the youth camp. In the International Committee, observing how the Indian organizers worked with one another and "how the men seem very conscious of who is speaking and ask, 'where are the women?'" Diane Matte of the World March of Women Secretariat concluded: "I saw the presence of feminism [in the 2004 WSF in Mumbai] more than I ever saw in Brazil."

The Indian National Network of Autonomous Women's Groups hosted a women's forum prior to the WSF in which regional and international feminist networks caucused to identify points of convergence and common strategies vis-a-vis the WSF (World March of Women 2003d, 2). "Building Solidarities: Feminist Dialogues" took place over two days, involved 140 women, and successfully broadened regional diversity relative to the feminist encounters in Brazil. For the feminist organizations and networks not rooted geographically in South Asia, the WSF in Mumbai was an occasion to build knowledge of and relationships with the feminisms of the region, including of their relationship to the political parties of the Indian left and to other Indian social movements (Barton in Duddy 2004).

With broadening participation, accumulating experience, and ongoing experimentation in terms of format and process, the Feminist Dialogues are becoming a unique forum for feminists to explore sensitive issues in the global movement: North-South dynamics/inequalities; differing priorities around such issues as reproductive rights, violence against women or economic justice; differing choice of scales, institutional venues and socio-cultural terrains for feminist work; differing assessments of human rights perspectives and strategies; women's engagement with religion and understandings of religious fundamentalisms in different cultural settings. The Feminist Dialogues are also an opportunity to advance feminist understandings of the linkages among neoliberalism, fundamentalisms, neo-conservatism, communalism and militarism in the present conjuncture and what this means for women's rights and feminist strategies (Barton in Duddy 2004). Organizers have sought to create an "ethical dialogue" that would recognize and respect the diversity of feminist approaches and strategies, while seeking convergence and building capacity for collaborative action (Santiago 2004, 5).

Although the Feminist Dialogues were originally imagined as a way to strengthen the feminist presence in the WSF, their agenda quickly shifted to critical issues across regions and issues in global feminism, including linkages with other social movements but not limited to the WSF. The FD in Mumbai were "deliberate[ly] ambivalent" vis-a-vis the WSF, with feminists' actively participating in the WSF while remaining organizationally autonomous in order to mount pressure from outside (Gandhi, et al. 2006). "As a site of resistance, the WSF is one of the most dynamic spaces available to us as feminist activists and it is important to intervene in it while at the same time retaining our autonomy within the FD" (Jones 2005a, 2). However, during the 2005 FD the following year in Porto Alegre, participants actually demanded more focused discussion on the WSF (Gandhi, et al. 2006).

In terms of the WSF, fostering cross-movement dialogue and breaking down sectoral silos emerged as key priorities in the feminist strategy sessions. In Mumbai, feminists from across different networks and regions went on to host an inter-movement dialogue involving two speakers from each of four movements: women's, sexuality rights, labour and dalit rights/racial justice movements. Each was asked to speak to how their movement had incorporated class, gender, race and sexuality questions, the dilemmas and problems they had confronted and the strategies they had employed. Activists from the other movements were asked to respond. Then the second speaker from the original movement was asked to comment, refute or clarify. This proceeded through four rounds and was moderated. This format was repeated with great success the following year in Brazil (Gandhi and Shah 2006).

Organizers of the Feminist Dialogues have committed to them until 2007. From Mumbai to Porto Alegre in 2005 and Bamako, Mali in 2006, they have continued to grow in terms of absolute numbers, regional diversity and increased participation by young women.

### **Contesting the Shape and Direction of the WSF: Feminists on the International Council**

In addition to the public spaces and program activities of the WSF, feminists have also been active from the beginning on the International Council. Here, they carry long-standing feminist concerns about process, inclusion and participation in organizational practices and governance. The World March of Women has long advocated the need to expand the IC to incorporate greater diversity and to be more broadly representative of the world's social movements. This is contentious because key voices, including among the WSF's founders, argue that the IC's role is in constructing the WSF as an open space, that the IC does not engage in political debate nor take political positions, that it is not itself a space of power and that it is not and should not be construed as 'representative' of the social movements. While agreeing that the WSF is not some superstructure of the world's social movements and that the IC cannot be representative in this sense, the March has argued that the IC should recognize itself as making politically-laden decisions. Reflecting, for example, on the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, a WMW writer commented: "Every 'operational' choice we make about locations and functioning of an event is also a political choice" (DiGiovanni 2004, 3). The March's representatives maintain that such power should be recognized and that therefore the IC should acknowledge who is and is not at the table and who else should be included. The March has been among those pushing the IC to consider rotating membership, to allow for representation by regional social forum processes and to enshrine majority participation by entities of the global South (Matte 2005).

In the WSF International Council, the March has also been a strong proponent of moving the global event geographically: "to maintain the annual event in a country of the global South, while changing the location of the WSF at regular intervals. This allows different communities to mobilize and demonstrate their opposition to the war, exclusion, inequality and hegemony in all its forms" (World March of Women 2003c, 6). This is also critical to building regional diversity and influence in the governance of the WSF (IC) (Matte 2005).

Following the experience of the 2004 WSF, the March made three proposals to the WSF International Council. The first was about the periodicity of the forum. The March argued that the social movements and activist networks need time between social forums to return to movement life at their base, to replenish themselves and re-root themselves in their everyday struggles over their conditions of life. Therefore, they reasoned, the WSF should happen less frequently, perhaps every 2-3 years rather than annually. Secondly, they argued, it was imperative for the WSF IC to:

adopt the political principle of alternating the meeting location among different countries and regions. The success of the Indian experience, its enrichment of the international process and the opportunities for cooperation it has given to

movements in the region leave no doubt of the importance of this principle. More than simply a theory, diversity must be the engine driving our converging movements. The “spirit” of Porto Alegre should be a truly international one.

And finally, they reminded the IC that “the (WSF) process should be a reflection of the world we want to build...the experience of constructing the WSF should be one of the ongoing transformation of power relations -- between women and men and between life and market forces” (DiGiovanni 2004, 3).

Towards the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre, the WMW-Brazil participated as a member of the Brazil organizing committee. The March’s priorities for 2005 were to organize large-scale cross-movement debates with other movements from all continents; to showcase feminist thinking about the economy; and through “irreverent action to make the WSF territory free of male domination” (World March of Women 2004b, 8). At the 2005 WSF, the WMW also organized a debate on “Feminism and the anti-globalization movement” and a workshop which initiated evaluative discussions of the WMW’s participation and accomplishments in the WSF.

Regional iterations of the March have also been prominent in the emerging regional councils of the WSF and in the regional social fora, notably in Europe and the Americas. The WMW in Europe organized a European Assembly on Women’s Rights for the European Social Forum in Paris in November 2003 with 3500 in women and men in attendance. They also pressured to increase the representation of women speakers, resulting in 35% from a dismal 20% at the first ESF in Florence in 2002 (World March of Women 2003c, 5–6). Nadia Du Mond, of the WMW-Italy asserts that “the expansion of the WSF at the regional and continental level enabled the creation of international spaces of encounter and articulation [with other social movements] which the women’s movements would have had difficulty finding in other circumstances” and that the forum process has fostered the growth of feminism (quoted in Alvarez, et al. 2004, 202).

### **Gender and Diversity as Transversal: Feminist, Queer and Indigenous Movements in Quito**

Quito was a space for feminists to go further because the feminists are at the heart of the organizing process and at the heart of the social movements in Ecuador. They ‘imposed’ their vision of what the social forum means. No matter how frustrating, within all the social forums we have been able to make feminism present and our analysis visible. The ‘gender issues’ are there; but it’s the radicality of feminism that is absent (Matte 2005).

In terms of the politics of place and scale, feminist, indigenous and queer movements made a significant claim on the WSF through organizing the first Social Forum of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador in July 2004. Although the increased political visibility, substantive political content, process innovations and important dialogues among these movements that took place in Quito did not neatly transpose themselves to the following world event in Porto Alegre, it points to the political possibilities in claiming the regional process/space in itself as an intervention in the world process.

The Americas Social Forum in Quito issued a strong challenge to Porto Alegre from within the Latin American orbit in the 1000 strong indigenous people present, in

their prominent presence on panels not narrowly about indigenous issues, in the visibility of their art forms, music and dance throughout the event, in their distinct political discourses, visions, projects and processes, and in their twin insistence that they need the World Social Forum, and the world-wide movement against neoliberal globalization needs them. Queer activists from over 20 countries in the Americas organized the first Forum on Sexual Diversity.

Among the lead organizations of the ASF were the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), ALAI, Red Latinoamericana Mujeres Transformando la Economía (REMTE), and Diálogo Sur-Sur LGBT. The prominence of feminist, indigenous and queer organizations helps explain the shifts in both discourses and processes in Quito relative to the WSF in Porto Alegre. Although the program was structured along similar lines with many concurrent panels, the sessions in Quito were comprised of many fewer speakers, more diverse and gender-balanced line-ups and significant time for audience questions and comments.

In addition, the last morning of the ASF was dedicated to lengthy open microphone sessions in which participants were invited to report on various sessions that they had attended and share their reactions. This worked remarkably well, with many participating and all respecting the need to share airtime. Such sessions were organized to help more adequately systematize the discussions of the ASF. They also functioned to display the richness and depth of political experience among ordinary participants. In my view, this practice represented a breakthrough and a specifically feminist contribution to the social forum as a new political form.

Gender and diversity have formally been enshrined as “transversal axes” of the World Social Forum since 2002. Although an important symbolic acknowledgement of the need to counter androcentric and ethnocentric visions and practices in the movements and in the forum, this fact about the WSF remained opaque to me until my experience in Quito. There, the decisive leadership of women and feminists, the permeation of feminism as a discourse threading through many discussions, the practice of an open, plural, and dialogical feminism in collaboration with indigenous and queer movements and distinctly feminist innovations in the process and methodology of the ASF demonstrated what such a commitment could mean in practice.

### **Transnational Feminisms and the World Social Forum: Shifting Positionalities**

There is ample evidence of feminists finding each other in and around the WSF, of seizing the space provided by the WSF to mount activities for themselves and wider publics, and of encountering other movements and other feminisms. Feminists shape the public cultures of the WSF as they sing, dance, shout and demonstrate in visible contingents and large numbers and contest the organization, methodologies and management of the forum. Both the Feminist Dialogues and the WSF itself are increasingly important sites for cross-cultural encounter, movement and alliance building, and the advancement of transnational feminist politics. Certainly, feminisms are also being transformed by these encounters, as they have been in other historical periods by contemporaneous struggles.

Commentaries produced by activists in these networks all recognize the importance of the WSF as a space for feminists. In the wake of the growing contradictions and limits associated with the UN, the WSF has created conditions of

possibility for feminists that they could not produce alone. For instance, participants in the Feminist Dialogues testify repeatedly to the increased internationalization of their encounters in WSF contexts. A question for further research has to do with how to compare the feminist internationalism developing at the WSF with that of the UN conferences and parallel NGO summits of the last decades of the 20th century. Ghandi and Shah (2006) contend that in the context of the anti-globalization and anti-war movements and the WSF, the Feminist Dialogues signal a return to movement activism. However, ambivalence haunts the discourses of feminists about the WSF. The WSF is seen as also reproducing gender hierarchies, in the predominance of men speaking and leading the WSF, in the marginalization of feminist perspectives, and in incidents of sexist harassment and violence in WSF spaces. The mantra of feminists is that their participation must remain critical and autonomous.

This has prompted ongoing debates about feminists' meeting as feminists within this space, creating their own autonomous spaces, and feminists intervening in and over the WSF itself as a whole (Alvarez, et al. 2004). Similar ambivalence is evident in debates over the character of the Feminist Dialogues: how preoccupied should they be with the WSF; should they only be convened around the WSF. Even as feminists increasingly stress the need for dialogue and collaboration with other movements, histories of women's movements being co-opted, marginalized, and repressed by male-dominated movements haunt the present conjuncture and extend beyond debates about the WSF.

However, notions of feminist autonomy vis-a-vis other movements are shifting (Vargas 2003). Many feminists are seeking ways to collaborate with the whole range of emancipatory movements in their various contexts and at various scales. At the WSF and elsewhere, they are insisting that they have perspectives to offer on the whole range of questions confronting the movements.

In terms of our presence at the World Social Forum, we would make the bold case that you can not really understand the current dynamics in the world, in terms of the global economy, militarism, and the rise of the religious right in many countries and the impact these issues are having on people's lives, without a feminist analysis of patriarchy. It is an integral part of the way geopolitics are being played out...our long term goal is to bring that kind of feminist understanding to the social movements that are trying to challenge the current system. (Barton in Duddy 2004, 1)

Or, as Virginia Vargas suggests, women's affairs are democratic political affairs that affect everyone and that all 'democratic issues' have to be issues of feminist concern. This broadens the spectrum of feminist action from struggles for the democratization of gender relations alone to the concerns of all other movements, that is, to a 'transversal perspective'. Transversal feminist struggles, then, "augur the possibility of a different world, sustained by the recognition of the other, based on their difference" (Vargas 2003, 918).

For organizers of the Feminist Dialogues, what is underway is a recuperation of feminism understood as:

an ideology [that] attempts to understand the oppression and agency of women within a patriarchal structure and in the present neo-liberal economic, social and political systems (...) that is against fundamentalism, global capitalism, and imperialism (...) which allies itself with the marginalized, dalit and indigenous peoples (...) which unfolds its practice every day in our lives and continues the quest for collective and democratic functioning. (Gandhi, et al. 2006, 6–7)

In the communications of the World March, there is consistent recognition of the value of the WSF, its strategic importance for the March, its effectiveness in building convergence across different oppositional movements, and the synergies between the aims of the WSF and those of the WMW. However, it is an ongoing question for the March about whether to continue struggling over the organizational structures of the WSF or to simply exploit the spaces of the WSF as fully as possible (Matte 2005). For the WMW, because its orientation is so clearly activist, its longterm commitment to the WSF is contingent on those of other combative social movements and their strategic choices. Differences in emphasis among feminists on the meaning and strategic import of the World Social Forum mirror larger tensions:

For some actors, the WSF is a space of convergence of the anti-globalization struggle to coordinate an agenda of global mobilization; for others, it is a plural space to share and articulate democratic alternatives and democratic projects (*democratizadoras*).

For us, as Articulación Feminista Marcosur, the WSF is a space whose principal challenge is the development of new political cultures which guarantee the expression of a full range of actors emerging from the diversity and plurality [of the social reality] and which creates the possibility of dialogue among different movements, identities and agendas (Celiberti, et al. 2003, 587–88; my translation)

These distinct feminisms, WMW and AFM, both heavily invested in the struggle over the WSF, also have differing discourses regarding the specificity of feminist contributions to the movements and the forum. For Matte and the World March, feminism's unique contribution has to do with "questions at the heart of capitalism, about the basic relationship between men and women and between individuals and our collective societal relationship" (Matte 2005). Feminists insist on attention to women's oppression as a fundamental feature of contemporary social order, central to capitalism even as it predates it. Feminist understandings of the omnipresence of violence against



women and old and new forms of commodification of women's bodies and lives shift and stretch critical analyses of capitalism.

For the WMW, it has been important to be at the forefront of the WSF organizing process, where "it has been a struggle to get feminism recognized as an answer to neoliberal globalization...as a social movement that is bringing something that is central" and not simply as one of an infinite number of groups, identities, and strategies. "The central analysis [operating at the WSF] is still Marxist." (Matte 2005) In this view, feminism is itself a radical and egalitarian project of social transformation. It has its own specific and essential analytical and mobilizational resources to bring to a heterogeneous field of social struggles. In the anti-globalization movement and the WSF, feminists "have helped expand the anti-neoliberal agenda into an equality agenda" (World March of Women -- Globalization and Alliances Collective 2005). The discourses and practices of the World March, with their strong emphases on anti-capitalism, anti-imperialism, coalition-building with other movements of the left, draws clearly on the legacies of socialist feminism.

In some tension with the World March, feminists of the *Articulaci3n Feminista Marcosur* have seen the forum primarily as a space for advancing dialogue across difference among the movements. Emerging from post-dictatorship Latin America, these feminists are occupied with the question of democratization, in their societies and in the movements. For them, defense of diversity and the fostering of a political culture respectful of pluralism are foundational. In the forum, they recognize the tensions and contradictions arising from the different priorities, discourses and logics of the various movements that are sharing the space. Their insistence on the multiplicity of oppressions and social subjects and the cross-cutting character of feminist issues has placed them at the centre of efforts to build relations across movements. In its leading role in organizing the Feminist Dialogues, the AFM made the recognition of the multiplicity of struggles and strategies foundational. "Acknowledgement of the political differences and of the strategies [among feminists] is part of a process of growth of the movements that, undoubtedly, enriches the political plurality we defend for the whole society. Hiding those differences within a feminist sisterhood is de-politicising..." (AFM quoted in Santiago 2004, 5). And with respect to the WSF: "neither organizational centralisation nor an agenda of mobilisation can shorten the distance that must be walked to further the dialogue between the diverse priorities that movements have" (Celiberti 2002, quoted in Vargas 2004, 230).

Vargas, also associated with the AFM, argues for the importance of the movements all committing to

multiple democratizations, forms of justice, ways of constructing freedom...These dynamics, once assumed, also result in the transformation of subjectivities, and lead also to the recognition of the vital roles of diversity.

To have a space to struggle for recognition, it is necessary to politicise difference, 'to celebrate... the advancement of the idea of solidarity and the protection of differences as the political capital of democracy'. (Vargas

In its convening a stunning array of emancipatory activisms while affirming their irreducible diversity, the WSF is a privileged site for critical subjectivities in democratic dialogue, for processes of transformation of those subjectivities through contact and collaboration with others, for the production of new practices and knowledges relevant for emancipatory political struggle and for constructing more democratic forms of life. The AFM in particular and feminists more generally are in the lead, in the WSF and elsewhere, in constructing cross-cultural and cross-movement dialogues and politics. They bring substantial political and organizational knowledge, experience and resources to this undertaking from three decades of transnational and transcultural feminist organizing.

### **Conclusion**

I began this article by asking what would it mean to place feminism(s) -- as movement(s), politics and ethics -- at the centre of our understandings of the World Social Forum. How might this shift dominant discourses about both the World Social Forum and transnational feminisms, and associated understandings of the anti-globalization movement, and contribute to fuller and more complex understandings of all of these and the relations among them? To conclude, I want to distill some insights arising from this study that address these questions. I have clustered them broadly as claims about (1) the inter-relationality of feminisms, anti-globalization movements and the WSF and the implications for scholarship about all three; (2) the character of transnational feminisms/its positionalities vis-a-vis the WSF and contests over the future of feminism more broadly; (3) the significance of place and scale in studies of feminisms, anti-globalization movements and the WSF and the relations among them; and (4) feminism's particular contributions to emancipatory politics at the WSF and beyond.

1) Politics opposed to neoliberalism appeared in feminist networks prior to and independent of the eruption of the so-called 'anti-globalization' movement in Seattle in 1999. Important feminist networks helped constitute what we now call the anti-globalization movement. Anti-globalization activisms, including their feminist, women-led and women-centred expressions in both feminist and non-feminist movements, pre-existed the WSF. In response to the invitation and initiative of the WSF's Brazilian founders, many of them converged at the first WSF in 2001 and, since then, have made claims on the WSF, frontally through participation in its International Council and on the ground by occupying its spaces. In important ways, the movements that populate the WSF and participate in its governance constitute it, even as it is important to retain an analytical distinction between the WSF and its constituent groups and movements.

For example, this study narrates how the World March of Women emerged as an autonomous and localized feminist initiative of the mid-1990s and went on to become a constitutive entity of the world-wide movement of movements against neoliberal globalization. By focusing on this particular instantiation of transnational feminism, one can see that feminists/isms have been present from the earliest days of the WSF, co-constituting it through their participation in its leadership structures, debates over its directions, discourses and practices, and through the great numbers of women and feminists who have populated WSF spaces and produced WSF events. Even as feminists

have struggled for visibility, voice and influence within and against the masculinist discourses and practices that have dominated the leadership of the WSF, they are simultaneously contributing to what the WSF is and what it is becoming. This is so despite the silence about feminism in many origin stories of the anti-globalization movement and the WSF, both activist and scholarly, and the reticence of many feminists to claim the forum as their own.

This study therefore makes an important claim about the historical constitution of anti-globalization movements and their feminist character and an analytical claim about how we conceptualize contemporary social movements, especially those arrayed against neoliberal globalization, their putative boundedness, and their mutually-constitutive relationships. In doing so, this study also challenges masculinist scholarship that dominates knowledge production about both the anti-globalization movement and the World Social Forum which systematically erases the originary presence of feminism and its ongoing and specific contributions to emancipatory politics world-wide in our time. Similarly, this study is a contribution to feminist scholarship in suggesting how deeply feminism is co-constituted by other emancipatory movements, growing up alongside, inside and sometimes over against them, in context-specific ways. This is not to occlude the specificity of feminism nor indeed of other major movements, nor to make light of the importance, historically and currently, of debates about feminist autonomy vis-a-vis other movements. It is to observe the relationality among contemporary emancipatory movements, historically and currently, and how through their intensifying encounters under conditions of globalization, of which the World Social Forum is one important facet, the character of that relationality is deepening and complexifying, with many implications for social movement scholarship.

(2) There is a plurality of transnational feminisms active in and over the social forum, emerging from different world regions, expressing distinct political histories and feminist politics, but which are actively collaborating and appear broadly convergent. However, there remain different feminist positionalities vis-a-vis the WSF, which are shifting over time in relation to each other and to WSF processes. While some important feminist networks wage struggles over the feminist character of the WSF and the politics of its constituent movements, other feminists, also significant and numerous, have been reluctant to engage very fully in/over the WSF. Depending on their readings of the WSF, they have argued variously that: feminists should use the occasion of the WSF to organize their own autonomous feminist or women's spaces within or alongside it; feminists should use the occasion to interact with other progressive movements that are present at the WSF; or that feminists should be deeply engaged in struggles over the WSF itself and engage with its constituent mixed or non-feminist movements as allies in the struggle against neoliberal globalization for social justice and also as feminists seeking to further en-gender the politics and practices of those movements.

Several factors seem to be operating in these varying feminist positionalities vis-a-vis the WSF and its constitutive movements. The most obvious is long-standing feminist concerns borne of bitter experience about the importance of political and organizational autonomy of women's movements vis-a-vis male-dominated movements of the left. A number of feminist commentators testify to this. However, as Vargas (2003) observes, the meaning of autonomy for feminist movements is shifting historically. The question for the future of feminism is how open, plural, dialogical and coalitional feminist movements

will be, not just vis-a-vis each other, but in relation to movements that are recognized as broadly emancipatory but in terms other than feminist.

A second possible factor is the much-observed “NGO-ization” of feminism worldwide as an effect of the UN Decade and associated development strategies. Alvarez et al. (2002) argue that this has had contradictory political effects for feminist movements, including growing class, cultural and strategic divergences between highly professionalized, internationalized feminist policy experts and advocates and grassroots women’s, poor peoples’ and indigenous movements that have grown more combative in the face of aggressive neoliberalism. How feminist networks position themselves on the activist-femocrat continuum (recognizing that many move back and forth more or less successfully between these poles) is a question worth asking in exploring feminist positionalities vis-a-vis the forum and its constituent anti-globalization movements. Feminist debates over the WSF are an instantiation of a struggle underway in transnational feminist networks over the future and character of feminism itself.

(3) A third observation arising from this study is that the place and scale of particular instantiations of the social forum have had differing effects on their feminist character. Much depends on the character of feminist movements in the host locality, how strong they are organizationally and politically, in general, and vis-a-vis other progressive movements of the place. Also significant is how coalitional local feminisms are, with one another, with women activists and organizations struggling primarily in non-feminist movements and with other progressive organizations and emancipatory movements of the area. While internationalized feminist networks have been key actors struggling over the governance of the WSF at its International Council, it has been the feminisms rooted culturally, politically and organizationally in India and Ecuador that have most successfully made the forum feminist as they have made claims on it in their homeplaces. It has been in and through the process of seizing the forum and working successfully with other movements rooted in their localities that these feminists have contributed to expanding feminist power in the spaces of governance of the WSF at global and regional scales and that feminism as movement, politics and ethics is permeating and reconstituting the WSF.

(4) Finally, feminism as movement, politics and ethics is making particular and irreducible contributions to contemporary emancipatory movements in and beyond the WSF. The movement-specific knowledges arising from two decades of feminist transnationalism are permeating new spaces of emancipation like the World Social Forum, and I suggest that they need to be claimed as such. The proliferation of feminisms and transnational feminist coalition politics has been premised on a hard-won and now foundational recognition of the irreducible diversity of women’s situations, identities and visions of the future for themselves, their families and communities. This is not to occlude ongoing inequalities among women and the continuing struggles against racism, class exploitation, homophobia and religious prejudice being waged by women the world over, including within women’s movements. But it is to say that feminism is changing the world through a tenacious search for convergence across difference, a reflexivity about unequal power relations within the movement and a commitment to inclusion, participation and amelioration of those conditions of inequality both within and beyond the movement. Central to this politics is the recognition of a multiplicity of oppressions, the search for ways to understand their intersection, and in so doing to build more

inclusive and effective movements with more expansive and transformative visions and powers. And it is doing this without seeking state power (which is not to say that states are irrelevant) nor indulging in the dangerous fantasy of a single common platform. Finally, feminists learned the hard way that there is no one transhistorical “patriarchy” that produces a common oppression among women, let alone a unified political subject “women”, nor a unitary feminist politics. Feminists are bringing these political knowledges to the WSF.

The central claim of the WSF is that another world is possible. As important is the WSF’s resistance to the hegemony of any single way of thinking. Among the most promising developments in feminism has been its growing recognition of the irreducible diversity of women’s lives, identities and political perspectives combined with its successful construction of feminist networks and coalitions at every scale. We feminists can “generate new dialogues across our differences and ... explore the possibilities of common projects and larger coalitions--both among ourselves and with other progressive movements” (Santiago 2004, 9). The World Social Forum needs feminism and feminists need initiatives like the World Social Forum to make another world possible.

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