

## Decolonizing knowledge/politics at the World Social Forum <sup>1</sup>

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Since its appearance in 2001, the World Social Forum has become the preeminent site for the agglomeration, encounter and transformation of movement knowledges arising from subaltern struggles rooted in specific social and geographical locations/identities. This paper will examine the World Social Forum as a praxis that is remaking the manner in which social movements from around the world recognize and interact with each other and, in so doing, is transforming the political culture of anti/alter-globalization movements worldwide.

In the discussion that follows, I propose that the Social Forum is a pedagogical and political space that is enabling the emergence of communicative practices across previously unbridged, indeed largely unrecognized, differences. In particular, I will analyze the methodology of “open space” as central to the dynamics of recognition and dialogue across difference at the WSF. However, this putatively horizontal and utopian space is also marked by unequal power relations and, in particular, legacies of colonialism. The praxis of open space is contested, conflictual, and permanently incomplete, marked by inequalities and incommensurabilities. However, it is also reflexive and, in some time-places of the WSF, giving rise to a deepened praxis of decolonization.

This paper is part of a larger, longterm research project on the World Social Forum and its significance for imagining democracy in post-Marxist, post-modern, and post- (neo)liberal directions. This paper is based on participant-observation at the World Social Forum since 2002 as well as at numerous regional and local-scale Social Fora.

### **The World Social Forum: Concept and history**

Originally conceived as an alternative to the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, the World Social Forum (WSF) was initiated at the height of the anti-globalization mobilizations to convene groups and movements of insurgent civil society from around the world. The idea was to create an ‘open space’ for the free and horizontal exchange of ideas, experiences and strategies oriented to enacting and generating alternatives to neoliberalism. The forum would be ‘self-managed’ with the majority of its programming being generated by the participants themselves. It would be a ‘non-deliberative’ space in that it would issue no statements and make no decisions, thereby freeing its participants to encounter each other rather than contesting for hegemony over the forum. The gathering would be thoroughly international but anchored geographically and experientially in the global South.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is one of a series on the World Social Forum and is the fruit of an ongoing research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. For other related works, see (2004b; 2004a; 2008a; 2005; 2007; Conway, 2008 forthcoming)

The first WSF, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001, attracted 15,000 participants. Its astounding success led organizers to commit to the WSF as a permanent process. Each January since then, the event has taken place, growing exponentially in size, diversity, complexity, and importance so that it is now regularly attracting over 100,000 people annually.

After three years in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the WSF moved to Mumbai, India in 2004 and in 2007, to Nairobi, Kenya. Brazil remains the homeplace of the WSF but there is a widespread commitment to moving the world event geographically to other sites in the global South. This is a strategy for expanding and deepening the Forum's inter-continental and cross-cultural character. In a related move, at the second WSF in Porto Alegre in 2002, organizers called on participants to organize similar processes in their own places, defined by their own priorities, and at whatever scale made sense to them. Social forums have proliferated inspired by the world event and organized in accordance with the WSF's Charter of Principles, with regional scale processes emerging with particular vigour and importance.

The civil society entities present at the World Social Forum vary considerably depending on the location of the event but are in every case amazingly diverse in their demographic make-up, organizational forms, cultural expressions, geographic roots and reach, strategies, tactics, and discourses.<sup>2</sup> In any analytical discussion about the WSF, it is critical to maintain a distinction between the World Social Forum and its constituent social movements and networks. The latter act in and beyond the WSF but also help constitute the WSF as event and space. The WSF is both more than and different from the sum of these movements; and the movements are more than and different from the sum of their practices vis-a-vis the WSF. The WSF and its constituent movements all have their own particular and evolving praxes.

The development of the World Social Forum, understood as an annual event, is central to most discussions, but it is important to recognize that the WSF is more accurately represented as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process. 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, although not in any mechanistic or predictable way. 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 its constitutive social movements.

### **‘Open space’: breakthroughs, conflicts and contradictions**

The WSF is an in-gathering of the groups and movements of civil society of unprecedented scope and scale. Even though there are antecedents--in the UN conferences and parallel NGO fora, in the *encuentros* of the Zapatistas, in the mass anti-globalization demonstrations-- the expanding array of forces now regularly convened in one space by the WSF is unprecedented. This is true in terms of the diversity of groups, movements, modes, issues, and constituencies represented, the expanding geographic and cross-cultural reach, the sheer numbers of participants, and in the accessibility of the Forum and the program to any group anywhere who can mobilize the resources to participate. It is a public space imbued with the ethos of the

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<sup>2</sup>The WSF is open to any group anywhere in the world who professes opposition to neoliberalism, who is not a political party and who is not engaged in armed struggle. See the WSF charter of principles at <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>.

anti-globalization movements in their stunning diversity: simultaneously militant and oppositional, alternative and innovative, affirmative and festive. Its pluralist, multi-centric and non-deliberative character allows the movements and groups of globalizing civil society to make themselves visible to one another on their own terms, and to encounter and transform one another in new ways.

For already well-established transnational networks, the WSF allows activists to advance their work in focused and concrete ways while simultaneously communicating it to a broader audience and building broader alliances. For highly localized movements, who are just finding their ways into transnational civil society spaces, or those who have little cross-sectoral coalitional experience, the WSF is a place both to learn of new 'others' and to assert one's own right to be present in and to this worldwide convergence against neoliberalism.

From the beginning, there has been a *de facto* recognition and valorization of the emergence of resistance and alternatives to neoliberalism from the most local to the most global. The creation of conditions for contact, recognition and inter-change among movements and organizations working at a variety of scales, in a range of modes, and on a multiplicity of issues and fronts, and with a pluralism of strategic approaches has been one of the most significant innovations of the World Social Forum. Each instantiation of the WSF in whatever place at whatever scale is characterized by the participation and valorization of activism operating at a variety of scales, and the (possibility of) horizontal exchange among them.

Valorizing the local has particularly enabled the growing presence, role and status of 'place-based' subaltern movements. A dramatic claim by 'local' movements on the 'world' event took place in Nairobi in January 2007. A slum-dwellers' organization called the People's Parliament stormed the gates and disrupted a press conference to protest the cost of registration fees which they claimed made the World Social Forum inaccessible to poor people from the city. At an assembly of social movements on the last day of the Forum, their spokesperson, Wangui Mbatia, had this to say:

For many of us this is the first WSF. What I like about the WSF is that it brings the world to me as a Kenyan poor person: not only the world but the best of the world. In this room, I have met people who believe in the same things as the Peoples Parliament and people who are courageous enough to believe that a better world is possible. I am concerned that there are many Kenyans have not been able to attend the WSF. We have had to come every single morning to get those doors open so that ordinary Kenyan citizens can attend the WSF. We believe the WSF is a conversation by, between, and amongst people. It is not fair that 90 per cent of the people in the rooms are not Kenyans. That is not just. We have fought day after day after day to get in. But we are not just fighting to get in: we are fighting to be recognized because we are people too (*Short report of the Social Movements Assembly, World Social Forum, Nairobi, 16h-18h, 24 January, 2007*).

This eruption by a poor people's organization politicized the question of who the 'open space' of the WSF is for, which constituencies should have privileged access to it, and whose presence should not simply be left to their own self-organizing capacities, especially in terms of resource mobilization. Furthermore, it intensified the questions of place and scale: which places and scales of activism should be privileged at any particular Forum? Should a *World Social*

Forum in Nairobi privilege the participation of Nairobi slum-dwellers? Kenyan organizations? Or strive first and foremost to be a pan-African edition of a world process, as the leadership of the African Social Forum had in mind? The protests by the Peoples' Parliament, which attracted much support from WSF delegates and some organizers, signalled a boiling point for issues that have been simmering from the beginning of the Social Forum process with varying intensity in different places and with various responses by different organizing committees: how 'local' should the world event be? how cosmopolitan? what kind of international? how subaltern? how intellectual?

Perhaps most notably, these issues had come to the fore in the 2004 edition in Mumbai, India. Of the 80,000 official delegates,<sup>3</sup> about 30,000 were dalits (untouchables) and a great number of these were adivasis (tribals). Of these, 40-45% were women. The presence of these movements in such numbers transformed the political culture of the WSF. It foregrounded issues central to the survival of tribal peoples: their subsistence rights to lands, rivers, forests, and water against the destruction wrought by mega-development projects, resource extraction, privatization and corporate control of nature. These movements are rural, communitarian, oriented to subsistence livelihoods and embody the links between bio- and cultural diversity. Their survival struggles forced ecological questions to the centre of the WSF's agenda, which before and since have been relatively marginal. Their presence also posed deep challenges to the modernization, urbanization, and development discourses that continue to underpin the utopias of much of the 'anti-globalization' movement. These movements of extremely poor and marginalized people had heretofore been largely invisible on the international stage despite impressive levels of self-organization and forays by individual leaders into UN-sponsored international fora. These groups recognized and helped construct the WSF in India as a transnational political space of a new kind--even relative to earlier instantiations of the WSF itself.

Similarly in Nairobi, the Mau Mau Veterans' Association, survivors of the mid-20th century anti-colonial struggle against the British, enjoyed their first opportunity to speak of their experience to an international audience while, in their own words, they "are the unseen and the unheard of Kenyan society," their claims for land and recognition repeatedly rebuffed by successive post-colonial regimes. The Masaai, a tribal group of pastoralists being systematically displaced from their land by 'development', were in the 2007 WSF in the hundreds, visibly present in the space and organizing their own discussions primarily for their own constituency.

These claims on the Social Forum by localized subaltern groups appear to be growing over time and as the WSF moves geographically, as place-based movements recognize the potential for their own struggles in the Social Forum's arrival in their city, country or region. The degree to which place-based subaltern groups can make these claims is also, of course, contingent both on their organizing capacity and on the particular politics of in/exclusion practiced by the local organizing committee. However, as the world process has unfolded and each major social forum event throws up new problematics and plural visions of both the Forum and the movement, organizers have demonstrated considerable reflexivity and constant innovation. The process is not perfectly linear, systematic, nor comprehensive, and certainly not conflict-free, but the culture of learning and the openness to experiment seems deeply entrenched and is creating conditions for great political creativity.

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<sup>3</sup>It is commonly claimed that over 150,000 participated in total.

To borrow a formulation from Nancy Fraser, the WSF embodies an emergent “alternative, postbourgeois conception of the public sphere.” (Fraser, 1997, p. 72)<sup>4</sup> It is ‘placed’ but transnational, localized but characterized by an expanding globality. Although Fraser is silent on the questions of place and scale, her rethinking the public sphere in response to Habermas is helpful in illuminating the significance of the WSF’s praxis of open space. In contrast to Habermas’s defense of a single public sphere of rational democratic deliberation, Fraser observes and argues for a plurality of competing publics (in permanent struggles for democracy). In particular, she notes the regular emergence of “subaltern counterpublics” who expose and contest the exclusions of the formal, official, putatively egalitarian and universally accessible liberal public spheres (Fraser, 1997, pp. 75,81).

The WSF is a new kind of political space created by and may be helping to consolidate a transnational subaltern counter-public, or what Keck and Sikkink (1998) call emergent “transnational civil society.” However, the WSF is not a single, overarching public sphere and, to date, its key architects have repudiated the notion that it can be or should be. It is a ‘space of spaces,’ a sphere of multiple public spheres.

Dalits, tribals, feminists, queers, indigenous peoples and others constitute subaltern counterpublics within the WSF. They participate in the WSF, intent on the need for their own spaces on their own terms, engaging in their own deliberative processes, or not. They are also simultaneously making a claim on the WSF as a whole and on its constitutive movements, agitating for recognition, inclusion and solidarity. Their voices are still muted in the deliberations about the WSF process in the International Council, but the WSF methodology allows space for “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs.” (Fraser, 1997, p. 81)

Fraser argues that multiple publics are preferable to single public in both stratified and (relatively) egalitarian societies because of the persistence of inequality and the cultural/rhetorical specificity of any one public sphere and the effects of both these conditions on the participation of marginalized groups (1997, pp. 82–83). She goes on to argue that this does not rule out the possibility of more comprehensive cross-cultural arenas. This becomes a question of practical politics and experimentation, not a conceptual impossibility. The WSF is that kind of more comprehensive, cross-cultural, political space that is allowing for the social learning and multicultural literacy that Fraser thinks are necessary pre-conditions for more inclusive processes and spheres of democratic deliberation.

The WSF as an autonomous, open, pluralistic and non-deliberative space is allowing for the communicability of struggles across different kinds of difference. In the WSF, movements recognize each other as friends and allies, across barriers of language, caste and class, gender, sexuality, religion, way of life, political practice and civilizational difference. However, I don’t want to over state how far along this process is or that simply being in the same space makes communicative relations an inevitability. Huge chasms, including civilizational divides across regions, religions, and world views remain apparent in the WSF. It is possible to attend the WSF and speak only to those you know or whose political discourses are familiar.

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<sup>4</sup>To the extent that the WSF has been theorized, scholars have drawn on various theories of the public sphere. I am ambivalent about the appropriateness of such theories vis-a-vis the WSF. My use of Fraser here is in the service of describing some dynamics of the open space and should not be interpreted as an endorsement of these theorizations.

Inequalities among movements get reproduced in the open space unless there is affirmative action to ensure that marginalized and minority populations are present and their voices and perspectives amplified. Feminist commentators on the WSF have been most insistent about this, noting that women regularly make up half the participants but only a tiny fraction of the speakers at the WSF, and protesting the historical marginality of feminism as a perspective despite the founding presence of feminist networks in the WSF (Conway, 2007; Vargas, 2003; Alvarez, Faria & Nobre, 2004). In some Social Forum processes, organizers have made explicit choices to reach out to marginalized constituencies to encourage and support their participation. Indian organizers sought out the *dalit* movements. In Nairobi, organizers subsidized the participation of 6,000 slum dwellers. Organizers of the Caracas edition of the 2006 polycentric World Social Forum actively supported and subsidized the participation of poor peoples' organizations from the US and of indigenous peoples from the Andean region. In the practical politics of organizing Social Forums, some groups of organizers have actively sought to compensate for historical marginalization and contemporary inequalities. However, thus far, these practices and other kinds of political decisions by organizers affecting the character of the space of any particular event have not informed the discourses about the praxis of 'open space,' including by the organizers! Here, as in many instances of movement-based knowledge production, practice is leading and theory is lagging.

On the question of difference, recognition, and the possibility of communicability, the challenges are far greater than the discourses of open space admit. As a new kind of movement space, the WSF is enacting a new culture of politics among social movements that is both allowing for and requiring communicative practices across identities/differences that had not previously encountered one another, or if they had, had not been ready, able or open to negotiate their differences. However, mutual intelligibility among movements, including those who share opposition to neoliberal globalization, is not a given. Ever-expanding diversity is arising from sheer multiplicity of forms of domination/resistance to which the movements of the Social Forum attest and the array of places and scales from which they arise. Some movements are more experienced with working across (some kinds of) difference than others. For all the movements, the sheer array of diversity in the WSF is confronting them with a historical challenge and invitation to unprecedented degrees of reflexivity, solidarity and transformation.

The WSF constitutes a new kind of public space and a new culture of politics in its foundational recognition of difference and irreducible multiplicity, coupled with a will to mutual intelligibility and concrete solidarity. However, this dynamic is very uneven and highly contingent on the particularities of place. With the move to India and the entry into the WSF of the tribals and the dalits, for example, the process seemed to enter a new phase. Before Mumbai, the impressive diversities in the WSF had been at least partially bridged through mutually-intelligible discourses of Western emancipatory political traditions. Those from outside the West who did attend the WSF in Brazil were likely to be Western-educated, or schooled in the transnational movement discourses of the NGO and UN networks. But historic silences and exclusions *within* the West were also reproduced in the WSF, rendering indigenous political discourses marginal, even unintelligible, to a majority of participants, for example. The cultural particularity of the putatively universal discourses of Western emancipatory traditions has become more apparent and is more broadly acknowledged by key European and Latin American voices in the WSF since Mumbai, although the effects on the WSF as a global phenomenon and particularly on its Latin American/Brazilian pole remain ambivalent. The mounting of the 2007 world event in Nairobi foregrounded African movements, histories, and discourses in ways very

important for the WSF, but the barrage of criticism following the event emanating largely from European sources and with scant reference to the particularities of the African context highlighted the coloniality of knowledge/power in and over the WSF (Conway, 2008b).

### **Recognizing ‘colonial difference’: toward an epistemology of the South**

The movements of the WSF are encountering each other on a historically unequal playing field constituted by the coloniality of power. Recognizing the character of contemporary world order as one of “global coloniality” (Escobar, 2004) has put decolonization on the agenda of movements world-wide, not just in their frontal contestations with hegemonic powers, but in the relations between movement themselves, especially across North/South, non-indigenous/indigenous, and modern emancipatory/subaltern ‘other’ divides. The movements of the first halves of the foregoing couplets have been hegemonic relative to their ‘others’, historically and currently, in and beyond the Social Forum. Those ‘others’ remain far more excluded and ‘subaltern’, including in the WSF. This raises very profound questions about the character of the WSF’s putatively ‘open space,’ its limitations, inequalities, and exclusions and, in particular, the need for a praxis of *decolonization*. In profound ways, this demands a decolonization of knowledge, including the emancipatory knowledges of modernity which have been so central to the politics of many progressive movements worldwide.

In an effort to think through these issues, I have drawn on the insights and arguments of the Latin American modernity/coloniality research group especially as represented through the work of anthropologist and social movement scholar, Arturo Escobar.<sup>5</sup> In particular, I want to explore their notions of coloniality and colonial difference, their strategies for the decolonization of knowledge, and the possibility of “‘a new conceptualization of post colonial politics’ that is able to imagine ‘joining the radical political tradition of Bandung ... to an ethos of agonistic respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference’.” (Escobar, 2004, p. 208; Scott, 1999) In terms of the possibility of communicating across place-based identities while also recognizing that different places/identities are differentially located in various fields of power, their notion of subaltern or “colonial difference” is an important theoretical resource that also resonates constructively with scholars like Escobar who, along with many indigenous and other subaltern movements, call for place-based epistemologies, economies and ecologies.

Central to the work of this research group is the claim that coloniality has been constitutive of the modern world system from its inception in 16th century Spanish and Portuguese imperialisms in the Americas to the present. Coloniality is the underside of modernity. Colonial difference is that which has been rendered different through the coloniality of power, invalidated, shunned and suppressed, and thus ‘disappeared’ from world history through the global hegemony of discourses centred on Western civilization, that is, through eurocentrism. Furthermore, it is through their peculiar claims to universality, their systematic rejection of their own historical-geographical particularity, and their discrediting other forms and

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<sup>5</sup>I cannot do justice to this body of scholarship here. See Mignolo, 2000; Dussel, 2000; Dussel, 1998; Dussel, 2002; Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2002; Mignolo, 2003. The work of Portuguese social theorist and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos is convergent and often referenced by these thinkers. See Santos, 1999; 1995; 2003; 2004a; 2004b. I first encountered Santos and Quijano at the WSF, where both have great prominence movement-based intellectuals. Santos has become one of the most prolific and influential scholarly commentators on the WSF and its significance. For my purposes in this article, I am representing this work very selectively, particularly through Escobar (2004) whose concerns and orientations are very close to my own

traditions of knowledge as unscientific, that Eurocentric forms of knowledge have silenced the colonial other. This “epistemic ethnocentrism,” including of the left, makes inclusive political philosophies grounded in Western traditions virtually impossible (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66). These scholars converge in their agreement that solutions to the problems created through the modern/colonial world system will not be found in the traditions of Western knowledge or, indeed, within modernity<sup>6</sup>.

The alternative knowledges and practices that carry some possibility of redressing conditions of coloniality, i.e., the exclusion and suffering of the world’s majorities under capitalism, are those which have been suppressed by modernity (Escobar, 2004, p. 210) and which expose Western cosmologies as limited, particular, and arising from a geographically- and historically-specific cultural rationality that has projected itself as universal. Santos states bluntly that alternatives must be searched for in the South and calls for an “epistemology of the South.” (Santos, 1995, p. 506ff; 1999, p. 38) While for Santos, the South is more a positionality of suffering and exclusion than a geographical location, Walter Mignolo asserts a “ratio between places (geohistorically constituted) and thinking, the geopolitics of knowledge proper.” (Mignolo, 2002, p. 66) A decolonizing epistemology must be geographical in its historicity. (67)

In this framework, ‘the colonial difference’ is a privileged basis for knowing, an alternative standpoint. This is not a move to essentialize non-Western cultures but to recognize, in Escobar’s words, the

articulation of global forms of power with place-based worlds. In other words, there are practices of difference that remain in the exteriority (again, not outside) of the modern/colonial world system, incompletely conquered and transformed, if you wish, and also produced partly through long-standing place-based logics that are irreducible to capital and imperial globality.(221)

In the search for alternative futures, for ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise,’ Escobar advocates attention to the concrete practices of contemporary social movements from the perspective of colonial difference (210), to rethink theory through the political praxis of subaltern groups, (217) particularly the politics of difference enacted by those that more directly and simultaneously engage with imperial globality and global coloniality. (220)

Mignolo and Enrique Dussel (2000) especially are engaged in a polemic against postmodern critiques of modernity emanating from within Western civilization but which also express the ethnocentricity of Western philosophy. They are not advocating a rejection of modernity, rather a critical dialogue in which modernity’s underside, coloniality, in all its diversity, becomes an indispensable pole with which to read, critique and ultimately to fulfil the promise of modernity. Dussel has proposed “transmodernity” (rather than postmodernity) as a way of naming this possibility of a non-Eurocentric dialogue with alterity which “engages the colonialism of Western epistemology (from the left and from the right) from the perspectives of epistemic forces that have been turned into subaltern (traditional, folkloric, religious, emotional, etc. ) forms of knowledge.” (Mignolo 2000, 11, cited by Escobar, 2004, p. 219). Further, according to Mignolo, coloniality is “the platform of pluri-versality, of diverse projects coming from the experience of local histories touched by western expansion; thus coloniality is not a

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<sup>6</sup>For elaboration on their understanding of modernity, see Quijano, 2000, pp. 543–7.

new abstract universal, but the place where diversity as a universal project can be thought out.” (personal communication cited by Escobar, 218).

For the most part, these authors do not address very concretely the conditions for movement dialogues across the modernity/coloniality divide other than asserting its theoretical possibility. While Mignolo acknowledges the continued importance of the monotopic critique (i.e., critique from within a single unified space) of modernity by Western critical discourse, he suggests that this has to be placed in dialogues with critique arising from the colonial difference. The result is a ‘pluritopic hermeneutics’ a possibility of thinking from difference spaces which finally breaks away from Eurocentrism as sole epistemological perspective.<sup>7</sup> In this dialogue between subaltern and hegemonic knowledges (in this case, the hegemonic knowledges of oppositional movements arising from within modernity), the articulation must be from the perspective of the subaltern in that the oppositional movements arising from within modernity must be critically aware of the eurocentrism of their knowledges. They must be ready to engage with movements marked by colonial difference by first, recognizing their alterity and second, reading themselves and the dialogue through the lens of colonial difference.

While I have many reservations about this body of theory as a whole,<sup>8</sup> these arguments are provocative and potentially insightful both in analyzing what is underway at the WSF and in theorizing its significance. They see subalternity and colonial difference and they see it on a world scale. They see Eurocentrism as a knowledge order that is central in the creation and maintenance of coloniality and that thinking from inside eurocentric modernity, even if revolutionary, will not deliver a different world. This recognition is central --for feminisms, marxisms and other progressive, and preeminently modernist discourses, whether emanating from the historic-geographic first or third worlds-- and is the condition of possibility for dialogue with colonial difference. In important ways, this perspective illuminates the WSF as a praxis both grounded in and reaching for an epistemology of the south, how central this is and needs to be to the WSF’s opposition to neoliberalism and equally foundational resistance to the hegemony of any one way of thinking. As often as this is repeated in WSF spaces, including by key leaders, I worry that this perspective is not secure. It remains that discourses and practices that evince a

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<sup>7</sup>For elaboration see Santos, 1995, pp. 268–74.

<sup>8</sup> This body of work (by Dussel, Mignolo, and Quijano) is so macro-historical that it is almost metaphysical in its style of argumentation. Indeed, with some exceptions by Mignolo, it is abstracted from any concrete political practice. For this reason, I am favouring Escobar’s and Santos’ *use* of it in their theorizing place-based social movements and the World Social Forum, respectively.

This analytical framework is deeply binary in its perception of the world as modern/colonial. Although Quijano particularly is attentive to race and racial hierarchies and pays passing attention to gender in the making of modernity/colonialism, the binism inevitably erases multiplicity in favour of a singular focus on European capitalist imperialism as a single, overriding, and unified historical force that has produced a unified global order and that requires (and makes possible) a unified and totalizing theory. These scholars are recuperating and building on the legacy of dependency theory, which is an important project, but they reproduce many of the problems of marxism, including its theoretical overreach. They seem to retain a modernizing orientation. There is no ecological consciousness nor particularly indigenous perspective distinct from their Third Worldism. Theirs is a deeply masculinist scholarship, seemingly unaware of feminisms in theory or practice, North or South. There is no sense of the limits or specificity of their own knowledge arising from their own location, even as they critically analyze the geopolitics of the production of (Eurocentric) knowledge. They are reaching for the fulfilment of modernity, for some alternative totality, for what sounds like some perfect synthesis/knowledge, which will be achieved through modernity’s recognition and incorporation (on other than colonial terms) of its colonized other.

thorough-going defense of diversity and multiplicity as central both to the global struggle against neoliberalism and to the construction of alternative worlds are carried most consistently and disproportionately by women's and indigenous movements.

### **Towards a praxis of decolonization**

Movements have to recognize their own histories of colonialism and exclusion, male supremacy and racial hierarchy in order to engage with one another, in and beyond the Social Forum. Although this is a task for all, it is not equally so. It seems inescapable therefore, that subaltern perspectives must be privileged or, at least, met with thoughtful silence and practical solidarity while movements contemplate their historical and current positionality in creating colonial difference. This recognition is controversial but I believe foundational to advancing movement dialogues in and beyond the WSF

There are some very important initiatives within the Social Forum process that reflect this recognition. One of the most pre-figurative was the 1st Social Forum of the Americas held in 2004 in Quito, Ecuador. Ecuador is home to one of the strongest, most dynamic and politically potent indigenous movements in the world, where Aymara and Quechua peoples make up more than 40% of the national population.. The key national indigenous networks, CONAIE and ECUARNARI, were prominent members of the organizing committee of the ASF which declared gender and diversity as transversal axes.

In Latin America and beyond, this event issued a major challenge to prevailing Social Forum practices. In Brazil, the Social Forum has been the purview of more traditional constituencies of the Latin American left – in Brazil, notably the PT (Workers Party), the CUT (central labour federation) , and peasant (Via Campesina) and landless movements (Movimento Sem Terra--MST). While a plethora of other movements and political orientations have been present, these entities with their predominantly socialist and statist discourses have cast long shadows. The choice of Porto Alegre as the site of the WSF has also been significant. While it is a city that has had a PT administration since the late 1980s and is the home of globally-acclaimed experimentations in participatory budgeting, it is also in the south of Brazil. With a population of predominantly European origin, many small and medium sized agricultural operations, and a healthy economic base, it is a light-skinned and relatively prosperous part of Brazil, far from the favelas of Recife, the Black Brazil of the North East, or the indigenous presence in the Amazon. The experiences and political discourses of the Afro descendants and indigenous peoples have been barely audible in the World Social Forum in Brazil.

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.

The Americas Social Forum was organized by a coalition of indigenous, feminist and queer organizations. The Forum was also the occasion for the 1st Forum on Sexual Diversity. The tensions among the discourses of these movements were not resolved in Quito but they were on the table, being named and explored, even as these movement actively collaborated in conceiving and mounting the event. Their various constituencies co-occupied the space, shared

platforms, organized their own discussions, facilitated cross-movement dialogues, ate, assembled and marched together.

This Social Forum is an example of how an ensemble of place-based movements seized a Social Forum in its entirety, in this case, at the regional scale, to enact and advance the possibility of dialogue across colonial difference. There are also numerous smaller-scale cross-sectoral initiatives underway within the open space of other Social Forum events that, as a whole, demonstrate less awareness of colonial difference. One such example is the feminist-sponsored “cross-movement dialogues” which are explicitly premised on a recognition of the inter-sectionality of oppressions and identities represented by the major emancipatory movements.

Fostering cross-movement dialogue and breaking down sectoral silos emerged as key priorities in the feminist strategy sessions preceding the 2004 WSF. 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 the following year in Brazil (Gandhi and Shah 2006) (Shah, October 2005).

Gandhi and Shah, two organizers of the inter-movement dialogues see this initiative as contributing to the evolving methodology of the WSF which seeks to promote exchange among diverse visions and struggles. They are also aware of the inherent tensions and contradictions in the movements’ attempts to simultaneously recognize difference while avoiding essentialism. They write:

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. This was the underlying motivation behind the organizing of the ‘Inter-Movement Dialogues’ as a methodology for a collective reflection on inter category and intra category approaches to deepen our theory and bridges across movements (Gandhi & Shah, 2006, p. 73).

Santos calls the dialogical and political task of building articulation, aggregation and coalition among all the different movements the work of “translation,” which allows for mutual intelligibility across difference. “The work of translation is to turn incommensurability into difference, a difference enabling mutual intelligibility among the different projects of social emancipation. The goal is to construct an ethical and political position without grounding it in any absolute principle.” (Santos, Nunes & Meneses, 2007, p. xl) Without prior consensus that there is not and can be no general theory of social transformation, translation is a colonial undertaking—no matter how postcolonial it claims to be. The task of translation is to generate new knowledges and practices capable of confronting neoliberal globalization and oriented to plural conceptions of social emancipation. Global social justice is not possible without global cognitive justice -- the recognition of and engagement with the subaltern knowledges suppressed by

modernity and rendered backward, primitive, or traditional by eurocentrism, on their own terms towards new and plural understandings of emancipation (Santos, 2005). The capacity for and fruit of translation appear to be cumulative as experience of the WSF accumulates. Santos argues that the extraordinary power of the WSF lies precisely in its refusal of the idea of a general theory. The alternative to a general theory, he suggests, is the work of translation. He and his colleagues further argue that “dialogues between knowledges may lead to regional or sectoral universalisms constructed from below, that is, to counter-hegemonic public spheres -- or ... ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’” which start from recognition of the plurality of knowledges and of world views. While I am more reticent about using the language of universalism, the foundational claim that recognizing pluralism creates new possibilities for political convergence is clearly borne out in the Social Forum.

### **Epistemologies for subaltern cosmopolitanism**

Struggles over hegemonic knowledges and the production of critical, oppositional knowledges are central to the praxis and politics of emancipatory social movements. The World Social Forum (WSF) is itself an innovation, or a product of the knowledges of the anti-globalization movement (Leite, 2005). The WSF’s practice and theory of open space is itself a significant movement-based political innovation, or a knowledge practice.

Through their everyday practices of survival, resistance, and solidarity, progressive social movements produce new and distinct knowledges about the world as it is and as it might be. Movement-based knowledge is largely tacit, practical and unsystematized. It is partial and situated, grounded in activist practice, arising from concrete engagement in social struggle, and embedded in specific times and places. However partial, these knowledges are crucial to imagining and enacting alternative and more emancipatory futures. Through their practices and discourses, which are permanently emergent, emancipatory movements are pre-figuring other possible and more just worlds. Movements are constantly inventing based on necessity, desire, and struggle. They are often informed by theory but they are not waiting for theory.

In my previous studies of knowledge production in social movements, I found that coalitions of social movements are a particularly fertile location for the production of new knowledges (Conway, 2006). They are pedagogical and political spaces in which the sustained encounter across constituencies and issues produces new cultural, political, and organizational practices. Coalitions are spaces of experimentation and this is especially important in a period of flux and uncertainty in both practice and theory. Because coalitions are constituted by a fundamental recognition of diversity and respect for pluralism, the knowledges that arise in and through coalition politics are particularly prescient for the building of a world with the space for many worlds, to use the Zapatista formulation. The knowledges produced in coalitions demonstrate the possibility of action premised on partial and provisional knowing -- on politics that is simultaneously committed and open to what it does not yet know.

Epistemologies arising from the experience of coalition politics indicate that most contemporary oppositional movements do not claim absolute knowledge about the world and how it should be and much less how to manage it. This involves a break with older imaginaries of science, emancipation, revolution and utopia and are provoking new post-modern democratic imaginaries. Feminists have theorized the new epistemology most systematically as one of partial, positional and situated knowledges. Drawing on experiences in coalition politics, they have argued for the possibility of dialogue among partial knowledges, mutual learning, expanded

solidarity and concrete collaboration that does not require either perfect knowledge or perfect agreement. In fact, this epistemology for “rainbow coalition politics” is premised on difference, on the recognition of diversity, on irreducible pluralism (Harding, 1998; Haraway, 1991; Yuval-Davis, 1993; Hill Collins, 2000).

Where pluralistic and open-ended attitudes to knowledge prevail in the movements, new politics are flowering, with implications far beyond the movements themselves. This dynamic has been central to the political convergence that produced the ‘anti-globalization’ movement. It is evident in movements like the Zapatistas and in spaces like the World Social Forum. Santos talks about this as a recognition of the “ecology of knowledges” and argues that it is not possible to imagine let alone advance alternatives for emancipatory social change without profound epistemological shifts associated with this recognition of the plurality of knowledges (Santos, et al., 2007, p. xlix).

The WSF is not a coalition but, as a space of sustained encounter across difference, is a site for similar dynamics in terms of movement-based knowledge production and for the emergence of knowledges premised on recognition of diversity and pluralism and on dialogue and solidarity across difference.

In my view, the power and potential of the Social Forum as a new political form and process rests on five 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) the incorporation of place-based and localized movements in a new kind of internationalism; and (5) 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. These features have emerged in practice and become definitive even as their significance can only as yet be dimly perceived. Their possible meanings depend on how future political practice, experimentation and debates over the future of the WSF unfold. Nevertheless, that the World Social Forum is a world-historic movement-based political innovation is indisputable. The practices that constitute it are knowledge practices which embody new ways of doing politics. They are harbingers that point beyond themselves.

The Social Forum as a particular political form and methodology can be characterized as itself a praxis of knowledge production that is generating new discourses and practices for an alternative world. The Social Forum is fostering new cultures of politics among social movements. One can discern the outlines of a new democratic imaginary taking shape in the global “convergence of difference.”

Central to the new democratic imaginary is a new epistemological stance captured in the Zapatista slogan, “walk forward questioning” (quoted in Hardt and Negri 2003). This attitude toward knowledge undergirds all the new social movements even as it remains contentious on the left. It embodies the recognition of the limits of ones’ own knowledge (and the knowledge of any particular movement, organization, politics, or program), alongside the necessity and possibility of acting while remaining open to what one does not yet know.

The primacy of diversity, pluralism and participation in the politics of the new social movements is in opposition to the neoliberal and neo-imperial project that is systematically suppressing difference, even the *possibility* of difference, through its monocultures. But this politics of recognition and difference is and needs to be premised also on an “epistemology of the South,” on the acknowledgement of colonial difference and the need to break with

eurocentrism. This is underway but highly uneven and contingent on the place and the place-based movements of particular iterations of the Forum.

In promoting the “convergence of difference,” the World Social Forum recognizes diversity and pluralism, not as problems to be overcome but as conditions to be embraced, valued, promoted and protected. Recognition of diversity and the promotion of pluralism are fundamental to the WSF and to its deep-seated resistance to the hegemony of “any one way of thinking.” Diversity will simply always be. New differences -- new identities, ways of life, belief systems -- will always be emerging. No one politics will ever adequately incorporate this irreducible reality. At the same time, the WSF is actively and successfully promoting the *convergence* of difference and increasingly, *dialogue* across difference.

In important ways, this is a ‘post-liberal’ politics in that it is situated within a shared, indeed non-negotiable, opposition to neoliberal globalization and grounded in acts of practical, cross-movement solidarity that transcend seemingly incommensurable differences. Commitment to dialogue and a foundational recognition of pluralism does not imply the absence of firmly-held values or political commitment, but it does require an epistemology embracing partial, situated, positional knowing as the basis for open, provisional but ‘reliable-enough’ knowledge for politics. Movements’ need to act and the diverse discourses and practices constantly emergent will always outstrip the best available theories.

The belief in and demonstrated capacity to act on provisional knowing, and to act together with others who think, live and dream differently, relies on a culture and politics of social learning and capacity building, and a shared willingness to confront the exclusions of one’s own movement. It suggests notions of democracy, revolution, and utopia as open-ended projects-in-process, worked out in practice, open to question and to new ‘others’ and always needing renovation. The architects of the World Social Forum embody this in particularly powerful ways when they insist that the WSF is not a unitary entity or agent, but rather a “pedagogical and political space.” (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003, p. 6)

The new democratic imaginary places a premium on practice. A new world is coming into being in and through the practices of progressive social movements. In this roiling politics of seemingly limitless diversity and pluralism, one recognizes one’s allies through their concrete practices of solidarity. It is also through practice that the movements are producing the knowledges they need in the making of another world with the space for many worlds within it. Through countless concrete initiatives, experiments and projects, and reflection on their successes and limits, the movements learn, teach, change, try again.

The World Social Forum has been central to the convergence of both anti-globalization and anti-war movements. It has been the site for the emergence of the inter-movement dialogues and the growing claims of indigenous peoples on progressive movements world-wide. Its processes and methods are promoting extraordinary levels of self-organizing world-wide and sowing new transnationalisms. The Social Forum is successfully fostering *convergence* among movements world-wide through the promotion of *pluralism*. It is this extraordinary paradox, that embracing diversity is producing unprecedented co-ordinated action on global and other scales, that is key to the generative power of the Social Forum and suggestive of a new democratic, decolonized and decolonizing politics on a world scale.

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