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Note from the Editors

Blau

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Societies Without Borders
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Aims & Scope

Societies Without Borders is a bi-annual journal, co-edited by Judith Blau and Alberto Moncada. One of the main ideas behind Societies Without Borders is bringing scholars from different continents closer together by showing their different approaches of the same research material, especially human rights and public goods. Many scholars from developing countries, paradoxically, have utopian ideas that they pursue, whereas progressive US scholars, for example, are more engaged in criticism. Societies Without Borders aims at bridging this gap; the journal also aims at breaking down the walls between the disciplines of Social Sciences, Human Rights (as formulated in the international standards of the UN-related organizations), Environmental Sciences, and the Humanities. Next to the work of scholars, Societies Without Borders will include articles by activists, teachers, and practitioners who understand the importance of collaborative efforts to affect and study change, for the dissemination of knowledge, and for case-based prototypes.

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Note from the Editors

The Forums have varied greatly in scope, militancy, in their demands, and in their racial, ethnic and tribal diversity, but they all have aimed at undoing neoliberalism, imperialism, and ending environmental exploitation and militarism. Participants affirm time and again the importance of deep democracy that is locally grounded but the great importance of global networks and cosmopolitan connections. Although there is critique, debate and disagreement, the spirit of any Forum is collective, integrative, and harmonizing. It could not be otherwise since the alternatives put forward at the Forums highlight economic equity, social justice, racial equality, gender equality, global peace, collective ownership, deep democracy, eco-socialism, the end of militarism, peoples’ rights to self-determination, and the advance of human rights. This is a newly focused vision of a world that is better for the people, not a world that serves political, economic, and military elites, which is the sort of world we have now. In fact, the motto of the World Social Forum is “A Better World Is Possible,” to which the organizers of the 2007 US Social Forum added, “Another US Is Necessary,” no doubt in recognition of the fact that the US is a hyper-capitalist and hyper-militarist superpower that imperils the entire world.

The WSF has taken place mostly on an annual basis since January 2001, usually at the time of the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. It convened four times in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2001, 2002, 2003, 2005), once in Mumbai, India (2004), once as polycentric forums in Bamako (Mali), Caracas (Venezuela), and Karachi (Pakistan) (2006), and once in Nairobi, Kenya (2007). The plan for 2008 is having plural forums and the one for 2009 is to have a World Social Forum in the Amazon region. Depending on location, recent Forums have attracted anywhere between 66,000 (Nairobi) and 155,000 (Porto Alegre, 2005) participants. Delegates come from around 110–149 countries, and again depending on location, between 110 to 125 organizations register, and the number of workshops have varied from 1296 in Nairobi in 2007 and 2300 in Porto Alegre in 2005. An important part of the process has been to have regional and specialized forums including a European Social Forum, a World Trade
Unions Forum, a Forum of Sexual Diversity, the Boston Social Forum, and, most recently, the US Social Forum held in Atlanta in July 2007. But the real success of the Forum is, as Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, not as events but through the creation of global networks.

Any Forum is a magical combination of social movements, trade unionists, peasant farmers, feminists, fisherfolk, miners, indigenous peoples, NGOs, students, environmentalists and intellectuals. Just to illustrate, some of the groups that gave workshops in Nairobi were: Shack Dwellers International, Pavement Dwellers, Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l’Aide aux Citoyens (ATTAC), World March of Women, Dalit NGO Federation, Third World Network, and Via Campesina. To elaborate with one example, Via Campesina is a global social movement that advances the rights of peasants to their lands and seeds and to sustainable rural agriculture, and Via Campesina members also make up a peasant’s movement who regularly demonstrate and protest at the meetings of the World Trade Organization. Via Campesina is also an international NGO with many chapters and affiliates, and in that capacity works with governments and other NGOs for reforms that will benefit peasants. The same is the case for many participants of the Forum. As a consequence, they bring multiple and varied experiences with them – in movements, as political actors, from their work in NGOs and sometimes in trade unions. Individuals themselves have overlapping and complementary roles allowing them to be cosmopolitan political actors and global citizens at the WSF.

The Forum is “magical” for other reasons. Yes it is true, there is an air of uncompromising, no-nonsense seriousness – there is work to be done – yet, the Forums have an atmosphere of vibrant youthful utopianism. Because the assumption is that another world is possible, the work, the proposals, and the diligent efforts hinge on, “what if?,” “how can we change it?,” “what must be done?,” “how can we unite?,” “how can the struggle move forward?,” and “where do we go next?,” The Forum was first created with the understanding that we – we the world’s peoples – share much in common – all the victims of an out-of-control imperial power, growing economic inequalities, militarism, and capitalist exploitation. Slowly, year by year, the Forum is building solidarities, uniting people behind the idea that building comprehensively democratic, pluralistic egalitarian social orders can undermine the concentration of power, monied elites, and a capitalist world order.

The articles in this special issue deal with various aspects of the World Social Forum and the US Social Forum. We want to highlight that we feel
specially pleased to have such a wonderful mixture of authors – from three continents and authors who cover aspects of both the World Social Forum and the US Social Forum. We are also pleased that Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF, has contributed a piece. He raises a point that we need to follow up on here to suggest why these articles are especially useful for “Forum watchers.” Since none, as he notes, according to the Forum Charter, can speak on its behalf, discussions about the Forum such as those presented here, are eagerly followed and help to move the conversations along from one Forum to the next.

Patrick Bond (from the University of KwaZulu-Natal) had an especially close involvement with the Nairobi Forum because he participated in the preliminary planning, and as a social scientist he is reflective of its significance in global civil society and vis-à-vis global capitalism. The first four articles – by Karides and Ponniah, Frezzo, Conway, and Pleyers – focus on various aspects of the WSF: as a political space, as an engine of human rights, as a plural space, and as a democratizing force. Whitaker challenges WSF participants to be reflective about the tradition of the forum and its methodology.

The next papers, although very different from one another, highlight how the WSF has unexpected consequences in realms beyond the Forum – for communications (Juris et al.) – for feminism generally (Hewitt) – epistemology (Sherman) – and labor (Waterman). The two final papers, by Michael Guerrero and by Thomas Ponniah, deal with the 2007 US Social Forum. American progressives, indeed, the world’s left were apprehensive approaching July 2007. As it turned out, they had much to celebrate. Many participants including those from the Global South, as Michael Guerrero explains, headed home, feeling this marked a new political beginning for the US.

Judith Blau and Alberto Moncada

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