

2008

Book Review of The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance and Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum

McCarthy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McCarthy. 2009. "Book Review of The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance and Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum." *Societies Without Borders* 3 (1): 198-201.

Available at: <http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol3/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.

The World Social Forum: Strategies of Resistance by José Corrêa Leite (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2005, 262 pp., softcover, \$12.00).

Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum edited by William Z. Fischer and Thomas Ponniah (London: Zed Books, 2004, 364 pp., softcover, \$29.00).

Reviewer: Michael A. McCarthy, New York University, USA

Margaret Thatcher's mantra, TINA (there is no alternative), championed the near universal application of a monolithic economic model – free market liberalism dominated by the financial forces of the West. Intensified by the fall of the Soviet Union, this futile disposition toward alternatives defined the ethos of the first half of the 1990s. It seemed that capitalism was as inevitable as aging, maybe even more so with the use of Botox.

However, with the emergence of movements in the mid-1990s such as the popular insurrection launched against NAFTA in 1994 by the EZLN and the massive labor action of the French public service workers in 1995, the iron cage of a pro-capitalist ideology appeared a little less sturdy. By the time 50,000 demonstrators in Seattle, on 30 November 1999, blockaded the ministerial meeting of the WTO it became evident that many people had rejected capital's "Hobson's choice." The World Social Forum (WSF), a plural and open meeting space for reflection, development of ideas, and coordination of actions, emerged on this wave of social dissidence.

Both *The World Social Forum* by José Corrêa Leite and *Another World Is Possible* edited by William Z. Fischer and Thomas Ponniah grapple with various questions related to the WSF. Together, they suggest that the WSF represents a new type of activism, what Leite calls, "the twenty-first century Left" (2005, p. 19). Unlike the old left or even the new left, this "new new left" is made novel by its retreat from national movements and political parties. It rejects the old universalism and defines its particular brand of radicalism on the liberation of difference. However, it retains the "left" by continuing to position itself firmly against militarism and capitalism. Fischer and Ponniah argue that the new new left envisages a future that goes beyond the goals and tactics of socialist or identity based movements (2004, p. 15). In terms of goals, instead of a post-capitalist democratization of production, the new new left seeks the democratization of "ecological, epistemological, gendered, ethnic, sexual, cultural, social, political, intergenerational and interpersonal relationships" (p. 15). In terms of tac-

tics, the new new left calls for networks of all progressive forces to replace an exclusive reliance on unions or identity groups. Both works attempt to explain this new layer of activism and form of dissidence from unique vantage points.

Leite's piece is informative, clearly written, and provides an excellent introduction to the WSF and the issues that surround it. For instance, many chapters include subsections that give useful summaries of the various IFIs, agreements, and issues that are most contested in the realm of global governance and economic development. There is also a very helpful section at the end of the book that lists the main organizations involved in the formation of the WSF along with their contact information. In addition, Leite includes a number of short essays in the book by other authors. Most notable is a bitingly well-written piece by Naomi Klein entitled "A Fête for the End of the End of History."

At its core, *The World Social Forum* is a history of the emergence and development of the WSF. Overall, the account it gives is quite convincing. Leite claims that the WSF emerged out of changing social relations such as the internationalization of finance capital, transformations in management methods – the development of lean production, the growing salience of Bretton Woods institutions, a space-time compression, the fragmentation of movements, and a recomposition of the working class in the West. These changes generated a response by the various movements mentioned above, which in turn created the conditions within activism to make the WSF a possibility.

The first WSF was held Jan 25–30, 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Four-thousand delegates, 16,000 registered participants, and an unknown amount of walk-ins made it an overwhelming success in terms of attendance (Leite 2005, p. 82). Leite offers the reader an initial balance sheet on the forum. He attempts to answer two questions, "what is it?" and "what is it doing?" In terms of the former, Leite claims that the WSF is a space rather than an organization (p. 136). Along these lines the WSF, "does not issue positions as a body." Furthermore, he claims that it is a process that is part of a larger movement. It acts as a kind of reference point for a global movement that it does not represent (p. 137). In terms of the latter question, Leite argues that by creating autonomous learning experiences, the WSF is, "... contributing to altering the ideological climate of today's world," based on marketization and militarism (p. 138). Finally, he claims that it is a place for meeting and incorporating a new political generation into the left by facilitating the formation of networks of action and activism.

Despite the many merits of the book, a particular weakness in Leite's work was the lack of an explanation of the decision making process. He gives the reader a basic idea of the bodies that make up the institutional structure of the WSF, but he fails to tell us how they are formed, who or what groups are chosen to compose them, how they are organized, and how decisions are navigated.

Whereas Leite's work gives an introduction to the history and the current state of the WSF, Fischer and Ponniah introduce us to the plenary sessions, workshops and the central cleavages of difference and agreement within the 2001 WSF. The book is made up of twenty-seven chapters, each tackling a different issue from a different perspective. The chapters are written by individuals representing organizations, organizations themselves, or transcribed from workshops held at the forum. In this sense, *Another World Is Possible* engages the issues tackled at the WSF more so than *The World Social Forum*. The scope of the issues addressed is also wider in *Another World Is Possible*. Notable additions include chapters on health, cities, indigenous peoples, education, culture, violence, democracy, and values.

Standout chapters include a piece written by Jeff Faux that attempts to formulate a global strategy for labor. Describing neoliberalism as a set of investor protectionist policies, Faux suggests the remedy lies in, "... the democratic regulation of capital and the development of long-term planning" (Fischer and Ponniah 2004, p. 87). Vandana Shiva's chapter on the intersection between practices that effect the environment and sustainability successfully emphasizes alternatives to what she describes as "... enclosures of the remaining ecological commons" (p. 116). Finally, a piece written by Walden Bello on the international architecture of power argues forcibly, against the reformers, that it would be a mistake to try to salvage the potentially useful parts of the international financial institutions (pp. 285–289).

More or less in line with the position of Leite, Fischer and Ponniah argue that the WSF is the articulation of an emergent civil society, constituted by a growing network of transnational alliances among activists who are "not dazzled by the promised land of globalization" (p. 2). However, beyond Leite, they draw attention to five central debates that emerged out of the forum. These include: the familiar leftist debate over reform or revolution, labor's call for full-employment versus the environmentalist's call for a reduction in growth and consumption (p. 112), how a human rights law can be developed that simultaneously "respects differences" but

avoids “universalism” (p. 190), constructing a new set of values, and the geography of political demands and actions – be it local, national, or global. The authors helpfully identify each cleavage as potential fault lines within the WSF process and present alternative views within the WSF in a helpful way.

Despite many strengths, both works leave absent an engagement with the broader criticisms of the WSF itself. For instance, both rely on a reductionist dichotomy that is left inadequately explored – that is, civil society, presented as invariably positive and grassroots, versus the traditional political realm, described as invariably negative and corporate. The legitimacy of this distinction is seriously questioned when one considers the various loci of progressive change occurring in the contemporary world. Given the widespread changes in South America (Venezuela, Bolivia, and to a lesser extent Brazil), a fuller analysis would have brought some theoretical insight to the WSF’s choice to keep political parties at a distance in exchange for an emphasis on the discourse of autonomous and localized change from below. For instance, when Leite says that the new new left seems to have abandoned the traditional political party (be it reformist or revolutionary), it becomes paramount to question whether that is a sound choice. A logic needs to be developed that explains if this can lead to the winning of political power – are networks of NGOs and grassroots groups enough? Unless new analyses get to the question of how change will be made, wonderful ideas like the Tobin tax will never develop beyond capital’s stranglehold on the political process.

Copyright of *Societies Without Borders* is the property of Brill Academic Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.