

WORLD SOCIAL FORUM ACTIVISM IN BELÉM AND BEYOND¹

Elizabeth Smythe

Department of Political Science

Concordia University College of Alberta, Canada

elizabeth.smythe@concordia.ab.ca

Scott C. Byrd

Department of Sociology

University of California, Irvine

sbyrd@uci.edu

BELÉM 2009: THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM GOES TO THE AMAZON

A young man dressed as a clown shelters under our umbrella in the center of Belém in the downpour before the opening march begins while a group of people with painted bodies and feathered headdresses chant and charge up the middle as thousands of marchers push apart to let them pass to the front. The words “save the Amazon” are spelled out with human bodies. Union members are present in force, all donning shirts with their syndicate’s name and logo. All these scenes are just a small part of the kaleidoscope of images that are the World Social Forum in 2009. But what do they mean; and what does this most recent manifestation of the World Social Forum process tell us about this nine-year struggle to define an alternative vision to global neo-liberal capitalism? This article provides a brief reflection of nine years of Social Forum activism against the backdrop of the most recent World Social Forum held in the city of Belém, in the northeastern state of Para, Brazil from January 27-February 1, 2009.

As with all World Social Forums, Belém brought together a wide array of activists, organizations, and individuals united under the slogan “Another World is Possible.” Involving over 2000 activities and in excess of 130,000 participants spread over two university campuses, each one of which included a dispersed set of venues, any attempt to provide an overview of the event and its significance is challenging. Thus, all views presented here are thus partial, and should be taken as such. As editors of this special issue we both attended the Forum and are part of a network of scholar activists who have attended a number of forums. We knew at the outset our own experience of the Forum would be a limited one. So we put out a call to a number of our colleagues in this network who were in Belém and asked for their input. We were interested in

¹ The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of the Belém Research Collective to this report: Marc Becker, Truman State University; Scott Byrd, University of California, Irvine; Janet Conway, Brock University, Canada; Michael Hardt, Duke University; Matt Kaneshiro, University of California, Riverside; Thomas Ponniah, Harvard University; Ruth Reitan, University of Miami; Peter J. Smith, Elizabeth Smythe, Concordia University College of Alberta, Canada, Alberto Teixeira da Silva, Federal University of Para, Brazil; and Sylvia Escárcega Zamarrón, Loyola University, Chicago. Contributions are cited by last name in parentheses.

receiving their observations on the themes or groups that they were following; on who was or was not represented there; what major themes or issues emerged and how well they were addressed; the extent of contention or consensus among groups and networks; and any other aspects of the Forum they felt were noteworthy. We received responses from nine scholars and thus the Belém Research Collective was born. The participants are drawn from a variety of social science disciplines and countries including the United States, Canada, Brazil and Mexico.² While its size, scope and chaotic nature make any view of the WSF partial it is our hope that by bringing their insights together and drawing from them we can provide a somewhat more complete understanding of the Belém WSF.

World Social Forums and the Political Dimensions of Time and Place

When the first World Social Forum was organized by a group of Brazilian and French activists in Porto Alegre Brazil in January 2001 to coincide with the meeting of the World Economic Forum and challenge neo-liberal globalization under the slogan “Another World is Possible” few would have expected it to grow and spread to the extent that it has (see Smith and Smythe this issue). Organized under a set of principles outlined in its charter the WSF was intended to be an “open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals and free exchange of experiences” (World Social Forum 2002). Opposed to neo-liberalism it was to be a “permanent process of seeking and building alternatives” and “open to pluralism and diversity.” While clearly political the Forum was intended to be distant from partisan or party representations. As a space of debate the Forum is not a body that makes decisions and participants do not deliberate on its behalf. According to the charter “no-one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants.” Over the years, however, the Forum has taken on some limited structure with a small Secretariat and staff in Sao Paulo, Brazil and an International Council of about 150 representatives of NGOs and social movements who meet periodically and take decisions particularly around the dates, frequency and location of future World Social Forums.

Over time the World Social Forum has been accompanied by a proliferation of regional and local Forums (see articles in this issues as well as Glasius and Timms 2006). In addition World Social Forum gatherings grow in size and change in terms of organizing processes and priorities. Each WSF proves to be very much a creature of the time and place in which it occurs. Thus, the first three Forums from 2001-3 in Porto Alegre, Brazil look much different than those of 2004 in Mumbai, India, or the three polycentric Forums in Mali, Pakistan and Venezuela in 2006. Most recently the WSF has taken place in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007 and again in Belém, Brazil in 2009. In 2010 the WSF will facilitate a global day of mobilization in place of one WSF

² The participants were: Marc Becker, Scott Byrd, Janet Conway, Michael Hardt Matt Kaneshiro, Thomas Ponniah, Ruth Reitan, Peter J. Smith, Elizabeth Smythe, Alberto Teixeira da Silva and Sylvia Escárcega Zamarrón. Note that portions of the Ponniah contribution appeared on www.zmag.org, Conway’s on www.rabble.ca, and Becker’s on his website at www.yachana.com.

event, and in 2011 it will return to Africa as Dakar, Senegal will play host.³ In each instance the location choice is deliberate and intended to both highlight key concerns or issues and stimulate and further develop regional and local networks. Consequently, the International Council made a calculated political decision to hold the Forum in the city at the mouth of the Amazon in Northeastern Brazil, a region at the very heart of the struggle over a model of development and its environmental consequences that threaten the way of life of indigenous peoples with global implications.

While it is normally the case that each Forum draws from the local region, the 2009 WSF was very much a Brazilian Forum because of its remote location and cost of international travel. In terms of numbers involved Belem was large compared to other gatherings. According to one of the organizers, Candido Grzybowski of IBASE, 115,000 people registered. There were 15,000 in the youth camp and in total, 133,000 people participated, coming from 142 countries, although Brazil was by far the best represented (estimated at around 60%).⁴ It included 1,900 indigenous people of 190 ethnic groups and tribes, plus 1,400 "quilombolas" (descendants of runaway African slaves). Of the 5,808 organizations involved, 4183 were from South America, 489 from Africa, 491 from Europe and 334 from Central America, 155 from North America and 27 from Australia and New Zealand (Kirk 2009). Thus, the thematic landscape of the sessions and events was related to the host's continent and the struggles reflected there. In this case, neo-liberal globalization influences the nature and pace of development in the region and its implications for people, especially indigenous people, and for the environment. At the same time broader themes such as climate change and concerns over human rights are also addressed—shaped not just by place, but also by the temporal context in which the Forum occurs.

As in 2003, the looming US invasion of Iraq shaped its themes and preoccupations, so in 2009 the financial crisis and the accompanying economic dislocation of the United States, and the election of a more progressive African-American president had an impact. The further development of global climatic and food crises as focal issues, and the recent Israeli incursion into Gaza also clearly shaped the themes and discussions in Belém. There have also been major political changes in South America since the Forum began. As Thomas Ponniah observed "the Forum arose in 2001 in a context in which social movements were strong but progressive state actors were weak" in Latin America. In contrast in January 2009 it is safe to say that the left has been on the rise as reflected in the presence of four of these leaders in Belém during the Forum which we discuss below. Now as Mark Becker points out, the "rejection of neoliberalism had quickly become the dominant discourse."

³ See the World Social Forum website (<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>) for upcoming social forums and other mobilizations including the US Social Forum occurring June 22-26, 2010 in Detroit, Michigan (www.ussf2010.org).

⁴ This estimate is based on estimates from registrations and the total number of participants. One of the problems with such estimates concerns the manner in which people registered on site; with many people having not been asked for contact information which would include country of origin. Numbers can be accessed at www.ibase.br.

Belém Organization and Key Themes

The way in which themes are identified as the framework around which the Forum is organized has evolved over time. The thematic consultation has moved away from a top-down process of organizing themes and highlighting them with major events anchored around well-known public intellectuals and activists like Noam Chomsky or Aruhdhati Roy. After some criticism the WSF in 2005 moved to a more bottom-up process where groups participated in on-line consultations and offered proposals for themes. These were then cross-referenced and common elements identified. In 2005 this resulted in 13 themes, each of which was assigned a physical venue on site where events and activities were held. The WSF has continued to follow this process of encouraging organizations and movements to participate in the identification or modification of themes and to organize theme-linked activities. In the case of Belém, the WSF built on the nine themes identified for the WSF in Nairobi and launched an iterative consultation process around them in May 2008. Three hundred groups and organizations responded by the close in late July and the result was the identification of ten “theme objectives for action” to which groups could link up to four self-organized events. The additions made to the 2007 themes from the 2009 WSF are indicated in bold below as well as the percentage of self-organized sessions and workshops in 2009 facilitated for each theme in parentheses.

1. For the construction of a world of peace, justice, ethics and respect for different spiritualities, free of weapons, especially nuclear ones (6.6%)
2. For the release of the world domain **by capital**, multinationals corporations, imperialist, **patriarchal, colonial and neo-colonial** domination and unequal systems of commerce, **by cancelling the impoverish countries debt** (8.0%)
3. For universal and sustainable access to the common property of mankind and nature, for the preservation of our planet and its resources, particularly water, forests **and renewable energy sources** (10.5%)
4. For the democratization **and independence** of knowledge, **culture and communication** and for the creation of a system of shared knowledge **and acquirement** with the dismantling of Intellectual Property Rights (8.6%)
5. For the dignity, diversity, ensuring the equality of gender, race, **ethnicity, generation, sexual orientation** and elimination of all forms of discrimination and caste (discrimination based on descent) (9.1)
6. For ensurance (during the lifetime use of all people) of the economic, social, human, cultural and environmental rights, particularly the rights to food, health, education, housing, employment and decent work, **communication and food security and sovereignty** (21.8%)
7. For the construction of a world order based on sovereignty, self-determination and on people's rights, **including minorities and migrants** (4.2%)
8. For the construction of a democratic, emancipator, sustainable and solidarity economy, focused on **every** people and **based on ethical and fair trade** (5.4%)
9. For the construction and expansion of truly **local, national and global** democratic political **and economic** structures and institutions, with the participation of people in decisions and control of public affairs and resources (12.0%).

10. **For the defense of the environment (Amazonic and others ecosystems) as source of life for the planet Earth and for the originary peoples of the world (indigenous, afro-descendent, tribal and riverine), that demand their territories, languages, cultures, identities, environmental justice, spiritually and right to live.** (6.1%)
11. Other: for proposed sessions and workshops that submitted no theme by choice or omission (7.8%)

Clearly the insertion of the tenth theme is a reflection of the significant emphasis on the environment, the Amazon ecosystem and indigenous peoples in 2009. Notable as well is the addition of explicit references to food security and sovereignty. The dominant theme, as in other WSFs, was number 6 which is chiefly concerned with the issue of human rights, with over 20% of the sessions and workshops. Environmental issues (if you were to combine theme 3 and 10) saw a clear increase in its percentage, nearly 17% of events, compared with previous Forums (2005 and 2007) where the theme was under 10% of the total sessions and workshops. Following the identification of the themes the activities and the program are organized around them. Unlike the WSF in 2005 however, the venue was not organized according to the themes rather the activities were split between two very different universities; the Federal University of Para (UFPA) and The Federal Rural University of the Amazon (UFRA) (Conway).

In addition the venues included a series of thematic tents which had organized activities for groups of people expected to be between 100 to 300 participants. The Federal Rural University of the Amazon hosted the bulk of these tents some of which were thematic and others that were issue specific. They included: Curumin Ere (dealt with children and adolescents); Afro-negritude-Quilombola; Indigenous Peoples; Panamazonica; three Multi-use tents; Collective Rights of Stateless People and Nations; Sister Dorothy (a reference to Sister Dorothy Stang—an activist nun who was murdered for her work in the Amazon); Urban Reform; Human Rights; Social Cartography. Most of these tents were stretched out along a long dusty road with fenced lush tropical green spaces. UFRA also hosted the large youth camp along the sides of the road. In contrast, the rest of the thematic tents, including the ecumenical and inter-religious space, the world of work (labour) and the Cuba 50 Year Anniversary Tent, were located at the other university, the Federal Public University of Para. Some critics argued that this physical dislocation of events had the effect, given the difficulty of moving easily or quickly from one venue to the other in the traffic, heat, humidity and daily afternoon downpour of rain, of essentially re-enforcing the gap between the more resourced non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements—a perennial issue at the World Social Forums. The reality however, is that many groups and organizations had activities located in both venues, however the capacity of individuals to more easily from one venue to the other was clearly limited.⁵

The new emphasis on indigenous people and the Amazon was also reflected in the program and activities which began with an opening ceremony on January 27 followed by the traditional march through the city's downtown. This was followed on January 28 by a day of

⁵ Attempting the journey by land taxi was nearly impossible during certain times of the day, but for more adventurous individuals there was a fleet of agua taxis making the trip back and forth in much less time from each campus (both campuses were located on the riverbank) for 2 Real—approximately \$1.50 USD.

activities devoted to Pan-Amazonia and the impacts of activities such as mining and deforestation particularly on the indigenous peoples of the region.

MULTIPLE CRISES: FROM ECONOMIC TO ECOLOGICAL TO CIVILIZATIONAL

In this section we try to summarize our impressions of the major themes and issues that were addressed by participants at the Forum. Ruth Reitan describes these in terms of a series of crises which we use to organize some of the observations and comments of our contributors.

The Economic and Financial Crisis

Among the themes outlined for the Forum several addressed aspects of the international economic and financial system including 2, 6 and 8 above. As with many past WSF gatherings the Belém Forum combined elements that included the analysis of the origins and implications of the global financial crisis and testimonies of its real impact on people and communities. Organizations and networks like the Transnational Institute and Our World is Not For Sale participated in a three-part workshop on “A Global Answer to the Financial Crisis: A Cross Networking Seminar”. These activities culminated in a series of events focussed specifically on defining an alternative set of proposals under the title “Citizens Response to the Financial Crisis: A New Financial System is Possible” which were presented in the Assemblies discussed below. These go far beyond the regulatory and stimulus proposals of governments and look at alternatives which put finances at the service of people and communities and address issues of redistribution and progressive taxation. A call was also made for activists to mobilize and come to London on April 2, 2009 to challenge leaders at the G20 meetings.

The focus of another set of activities linked very specifically to the second theme outlined above and the power of multinational capital. Panels on “Rolling back the power of Transnationals” linked activists in Latin America with those in the European Union countries to examine ways to hold European MNCs accountable for their actions in Latin America through the use of Peoples Tribunals. The issues raised had clear links to a number of other crises discussed below and are part, as one participant noted, of “inter-linked crises”. Participants recognized that while recent events have led to surprising state actions to preserve capitalism they do not herald a new way of thinking and many of the measures to date have benefitted multinationals and the financial sector. There was broad agreement that while this crisis may pose an opportunity there is a real need both to articulate alternatives and mobilize trans-nationally.

The trade policy of the European Union was the focus of two more sessions “Unmasking the Global Europe Strategy and Partnership Agreements” and followed with a discussion of Trade Policy of the European Union in Latin America and Strategies of bi-regional resistance and alternatives. Again activists from the European Union countries and from Latin America discussed the role of European multinationals and strategies to expose the extent to which their activities in extractive sectors, financing dams and the privatization of public services threaten local communities, the environment and indigenous peoples in regions of South America.

The Belém WSF saw as well an enhanced attention to re-localizing economies represented in the huge number of activities addressing the solidarity economy outlined in theme eight above. This presence has been facilitated by the creation of an international network and

many activities during the Belém WSF linking local activists in Brazil with those in countries such as India to Canada and addressed questions ranging from re-localizing food systems to land rights for women.

Climate Change, the Amazon, and Environmental Crisis

The Belém WSF saw for perhaps the first time the environmental crisis come to the forefront at a WSF. As Alberto Texeira da Silva notes the choice of a city in the Amazon region, “a rich and vital territory of resources, cultural heritage and biological diversity” which is shared by eight countries was not an accident. It is, he argues, the epicentre of the struggle over a sustainable future for the planet. Beset by threats such as “poverty, inequality, economic stagnation, corruption, violence and climatic catastrophes”, the situation in the region cries out for linking across networks and movements. As he points out the Pan Amazon day included three major themes: Development, climatic change, environmental justice, security and food sovereignty; Work, human rights, economic, social, cultural and environmental; and Land, territory, identity, national and popular sovereignty, regional integration.

The issue of climate change intersected with many other themes and activities during the Belem WSF—from trade to tourism, women’s and indigenous rights, food sovereignty and housing. Climate Justice Now!, a network of over 200 organizations from both the global south and north, held extensive meetings focusing on climate and ecological debt, the Amazon, and false solutions to the climate crisis. They also used the Forum as an opportunity to empower participation by more southern organizations, especially indigenous groups from the Amazon and the rest of South America (Byrd). Many indigenous communities throughout Amazonia have been hit hard not only by the effects of climate change, predominantly desertification and flooding, but also through the myriad of ways South American governments in concert with mostly outside private entities are seeking to take advantage of the “carbon offsets” that the Amazon provides. Indigenous populations are threatened by displacement both through “environmental protection” of fragile ecosystems and through the mono-cropping of tree plantations established to act as carbon sinks. Additionally, networks such as Climate Justice Now! and other organizations used the Forum space to plan mobilizations and common campaigns working towards the UNFCCC negotiations held last December in Copenhagen.

Indigenous Peoples, Buen Vivir, and the Crisis of Civilization

By far one of the most notable aspects of the 2009 Forum was the visibility of indigenous people and their concerns. Once confined to the margins of the Forum selling crafts, the struggles of indigenous peoples were highlighted both in the program, in the thematic tent and in the Assemblies on the final day. As Miguel Palacín from the Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas (CAOI) noted "for indigenous peoples, our participation in the Forum was very important." (Becker) The principle themes discussed included the crisis of civilization, decolonization, collective rights, self-determination, climatic justice, and defence of the Amazon.

The struggle for recognition of indigenous rights has often taken place in international arenas dominated, as Sylvia Escarcéga Zamorrón points out, by states and international organizations where a unified front was required, in contrast to the WSF, where indigenous people were able to interact with each other and an array of other movements. This created some

challenges however. While the struggles of indigenous people and issues of environmental justice were at the forefront of the Forum it does not mean there were not real divisions and struggles. Indigenous people had a limited voice in the organization of the Forum, were sometimes not treated appropriately or with respect, and were often seen by local non-indigenous Brazilians as exotic. At the same time their meetings and activities identified a “crisis of civilization” and put forward alternatives including a different view captured in the notion of “buen vivir”, living well. Indigenous delegates also sought to mobilize and made a call to organize a global mobilization for mother earth on October 12, 2009, the day often marked as the “discovery” of the Americas by Columbus.

Human Rights: An Expanding Theme

The prominence of various other themes has also changed over time. In recent gatherings of the WSF the theme of human rights has become a central one reflected in the growing proportion of activities and discussions at the WSF which link to it. This was seen again in Belém in themes 5, 6 and 7 above and the large number of activities linked to them. The Forum included a wide range of debates on human rights and the impact of globalization on them and the expansion, as Peter J. Smith observed, of the concept of rights, especially in relation to free trade and the right to food. He notes as well the concern about the loss of women’s rights to livelihood reflected in a series of panels which argued that “the concept of women’s economic, social and cultural rights must be expanded so that achieving a decent life becomes recognized by the United Nations as a human right” (Smith). Participants argued that “neo-liberal globalization and climate change threaten the key conditions necessary for women’s livelihoods such as the right to land, water, forests, food and income security”

Rights were also the focus of activities and discussion about strategies for holding corporations accountable for human rights violations and the need to develop norms that are part of an international human rights regime. The strong emphasis on the discourse of human rights was also reflected in the case of indigenous peoples and the challenge of implementing the recently passed UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” Indigenous participants from Kenya and the Amazon challenged the effectiveness of such declarations when they remain the domain of NGOs and lawyers. As these critics pointed out, without translation and dissemination few in their villages know their collective rights.

As in many other themes addressed at the WSF there were differences amongst participants over the rights discourse which has emerged and its uncritical reliance on universality, the UN human rights system, and its lack of attention to questions of power. In fact questions of political power have been a part of the Forum since its inception and we now turn to it as one of the perennial questions with which activists and scholars studying the Forum process have wrestled.

PERENNIAL QUESTIONS

The WSF and its Relationship to Political Power

Political power both private and public has been a recurring tension and issue in the development of the World Social Forum as a space which is supposed to be political but not partisan. Clearly the support of left governments in the city of Porto Alegre and the state Rio Grande do Sul were crucial to the development of the Forum in its early years. This was no different in Belém where the PT controlled government of the state of Para provided 11 million dollars worth of infrastructure and funds (Kirk 2009) and had a prominent presence in publicity and sponsoring of various facilities. As Hardt indicates the relations between social movements and left governments in Latin America has reflected two conflicting attitudes. The first is one of resistance which refuses the structures of representation and the second one of support which trusts in them. The state is necessary to achieve the goals of the movements, as Ponniah points out, because of the resources it provides but while outright resistance may be unwise, naïve support may be as well. The presence of five political leaders in Belém once more highlighted this tension within the WSF and made for a number of ironies.

Political leaders in Latin America from Lula to Chavez have continued to claim the WSF and the social movements gathered under its name for their own since the beginning. Groups and movements within the Forum continue to be divided over their presence. The delicate balance has usually been struck by having such leaders speak at a venue which is adjacent to, but not formally part of, the WSF venue. While cheering crowds greeted the newly elected Lula in 2003, his assertion in 2005 “I belong here” just before he jetted off to Davos and the World Economic Forum was met with some jeers as disillusionment with his presidency had set in, while Chavez was cheered. Belém reflected the new reality of the rising tide of left governments in South America and the desire of at least some movements to engage with them. The gathering of the four leaders of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Paraguay, at the invitation of the Via Campesina network and its most prominent member the Landless Workers Movement (the MST) to meet with a select group of 1000 activists on the afternoon of January 29 reflected this ambivalence, since Lula himself had deliberately not been invited. While showing a willingness to engage with the political leaders of Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and Venezuela, Stedile of the MST made clear, according to reports (Gonzalez 2009), that they had to move more quickly and undertake more radical structural change. It was only at the invitation of the other four leaders that Lula joined them in the former airport hanger turned auditorium for the evening event, a roundtable discussion on “Latin America and the challenges of the international crisis.” With the presence of Hugo Chávez, Rafael Correa, Fernando Lugo, Evo Morales, and Inacio Lula da Silva on stage media around the world took notice. Correa called for a new model, “a socialism for the twenty-first century.”

Yet many of the issues that were being addressed back at the campuses the next day including issues of de-forestation, bio-fuels and the impact of mining and agri-business on traditional and indigenous communities occurred under Lula’s watch. The president continues to regard the Amazon as an “inexhaustible resource” which requires more roads and dams to develop.

Voices Heard and Not Heard

The city of Belém and its 1.4 million inhabitants provided a major contrast with the city of Porto Alegre which has hosted the Forum four times previously in Brazil. Poorer and more ethnically diverse, Belém showed the stark contrasts of first world with its gleaming revitalized waterfront areas of chic restaurants and bars and the dusty, crumbling roads, sidewalks and allies of the very poor neighbourhoods surrounding the two university venues, much like the 2007 Nairobi Forum had.

As our articles in this volume illustrate the issue of inclusion continues to be a concern. NGOs dominate at the WSF because they have the resources. Yet the space of the WSF is intended to be inclusive and diverse. However some voices are not heard. In the WSF in Nairobi it was those of the slums, Africans themselves. In Belém there was a clear commitment to raise up the struggles of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and indigenous people in general as reflected in the opening ceremonies, the march on the first day, the Pan Amazonia day on the 28 of January and the assemblies on the final day.

Those outside Brazil, even from neighbouring countries in South America, were also there in relatively small numbers as were those from more distant areas of the global south. Part of this silencing of other voices was related to language. At this Forum translation was limited to only a minority of the sessions—1400 of the over 2000 events were in Portuguese only (Brand and Sekler 2009). Many dealing with the most pressing issues of the region including the struggles in the Amazon were only in Portuguese. Much of the translation in the self-organized sessions which was provided was paid for by better-resourced NGOs reinforcing the communication gap with local movements and activists.

On the other hand, new voices were heard, those of the indigenous peoples, especially of the Amazon region, those of the quilombolos, albeit much less loudly than those of the Amazon peoples, and the stateless people of Palestine. While clearly their issues were linked to the thematic tent addressing Collective Rights of Stateless People and Nations their concerns were often linked to broader themes at the Forum. For example in a panel organized by Via Campesina, including participants from Haiti, Mozambique, and Palestine the environmental/agricultural dimensions of the conquest of Palestinian territory and issues like Israel's appropriation of the water resources in the territory in 1967 and the more recent burning of fields of crop land and olive trees were highlighted allowing Palestinians struggles to be framed within broader land issues and concerns (Kaneshiro). Organizations such as the network of Arab women brought Palestinians refugees face to face with Brazilian peace activists (Bourque 2009).

WSF organizers have also continued to try to use technology to bridge the distances of geography and include more voices. Belem Expanded—a new way for those who cannot come to Belém to express their participation was introduced in 2009. Local events and action were connected with a group in Belem via the internet, telephone, radio broadcasts and screening of video using the social networking website of the WSF (www.openfsm.net). The Forum continued to offer itself as a space where existing networks can broaden, reinforce and develop further as has been the case in the past.

Networking

Expanding and developing transnational networks remains a key aspect of the social Forum process. As Matt Kaneshiro points out, surveys of past social Forums conducted by the Department of Sociology and the Institute for Research on World-Systems (IROWS) at the University of California, Riverside “indicate that 46.2% of the sample attended the Forum to network, and 30.7% to organize. A sizable portion of activists reported an intention to connect with others and collaborate on campaigns at the Forum.”⁶ Many of our contributors saw evidence of this along with the interconnection of many of the themes and campaigns. As Kaneshiro notes:

A common grievance at the indigenous tent was agribusiness’ effect on the indigenous lifestyle: land dispossession, pollution, and deforestation – all of which threaten the very lives of the indigenous people. Here one sees the intersection between environmentalism, indigenous rights (and race relations), and basic human rights. Agribusiness leads to the displacement of peoples, leading to the death of children from polluted rivers, or poverty and prostitution in towns due to the complete overturning of their (previously sustainable) economies. The linking of environmental issues with other movements was a ubiquitous theme found in the self-managed activities, the Environmental Tent, and the Human Rights Tent.

In Belém there was a real emphasis on encouraging and facilitating cross-network convergence as reflected in the final in a workshop on Friday January 30 where a cross network space was devoted to addressing alternatives and strategies of mobilization around the crises of food, climate, finance, social, labor, and water.

Mobilization

The development at recent Forums of a space on the final day for thematic assemblies to develop and present their alternatives, proposals for changes and calls to action and mobilization seems also to have laid to rest in large part the debate about the Forum as space or movement. The argument of a number of its founders that it is intended to be a space—“non-deliberative and non-decision-making” space had been challenged particularly in 2005 when 19 eminent persons during the WSF issued a manifesto of common proposals. Since that time Forums have allowed space on the final day for assemblies which are separate from the Forum where statements, proposal, and calls to action can be issued, as did the Assembly of Assemblies in the mud and rain on the final afternoon in Belém. The final Assembly of the Social Movements issued a statement “We Won’t Pay for the Crisis, the Rich have to pay for it!” that called for radical change that meets “social needs and respects nature’s rights as well as supporting democratic participation in a context of full political freedom.” (Assembly 2009) While divisions still exist between more radical and reformist elements as they have for some time in the global justice movement the statement identifies some proposal that all share and recognizes a different ethos of living articulated by the indigenous people in a call for “the construction of a society based on a

⁶ Much of IROWS’ research on the Social Forums can be found here: <http://www.irows.ucr.edu/>

life live in harmony with oneself, others and the world around by acknowledging the active participation and contribution of the native peoples.”

CONCLUSION

The global financial crisis taken together with other interconnected global challenges questions the legitimacy of global neo-liberalism capitalism. Given that the Forum was intended as a space to define alternatives and struggle against neo-liberalism there was a sense of a crisis of civilization and of the immanence and real possibility for change and transformation which stood in stark contrast to the glum images of bickering political leaders and bewildered CEOs at the 2009 World Economic Forum. Clearly the climate crisis, environmental issues, and the struggles of indigenous peoples were more central to WSF than ever before. As Michael Hardt notes the way the Forum organizers “have continually sought to open it to new populations and experiences” is impressive. New networks addressing real concrete alternatives such as international solidarity economies, reparations and adaption funds for climate victims, and an international declaration of rights for displaced peoples have emerged. The rapid economic decline during 2008 had, as Ruth Reitan observed, created a “decentered and radically open plain of collective uncertainty, vulnerability, and possibility. In the space of the Belem Forum, I could sense that another world IS possible, but it is a wild one, in all its connotations, good and bad.”

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