

## **Social Fora: Representing Resistance and Alternatives? Critique and Alternative Interpretation From a Feminist Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

The World Social Forum is only one in the worldwide process of social fora,<sup>2</sup> which mark a new phase in the era of globalisation. This critical form of globalisation from below challenges neoliberal hegemony and sets up a space to develop alternatives symbolised by the Forum's motto, "Another World is Possible". Collectively, the fora make up a part of the forces of global resistance, but in a more concrete way, opinions on resulting strategies and aims diverge concerning the foras' character and function. At the same time, criticism is formulated inside the fora, leading to heavy debates. Among these critiques are feminist and women's organisations arguing that the fora are strongly dominated by male activists and intellectuals while groups marginalised by hegemonic society and neoliberal rule are confronted with similar structures within the fora. Patriarchy, racism and North-South inequalities are reproduced in the social fora, weakening the prospects of another world right from the beginning. In this article, the concept of a laboratory will be suggested. This allows for the idea of a Social Forum Process *and* for integrating the dynamic of resistance that stems from our own entanglement in structures of domination to be sustained.

*Keywords:* Social Forum, Feminism, Resistance

Activists and theoreticians around the globe have linked a lot of hope and enthusiasm to the new forces of critique against neoliberal hegemony. After a decade of widely undisputed neoliberal politics, summed up by Margaret Thatcher's dictum, "There Is No Alternative," protest arose more vividly again in different regions of the world. Resistance against dam projects and against IMF programs in several parts of the world were followed by the Zapatista guerrilla movement in Chiapas, Mexico in 1995 (Waterman 2004). In 1999, thousands of people gathered in Seattle to express their disapproval of neoliberalism, more concretely in this case with the WTO, which was meeting there. The first World Social Forum (January 2001) in Porto Alegre marked the turn towards a new understanding of resistance on a global scale. This form of resistance, first introduced by the Zapatistas' struggle for autonomy and auto-representation, takes

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<sup>2</sup> This article refers to all social fora from local to global scale which position themselves in the tradition of the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001. The acceptance of the Charta of Principles of the World Social Forum serves as the main criterion.

place to a large extent on the level of discourse. It addresses civil society and citizens in all parts of the world without demanding any form of exclusive unity.

With the first World Social Forum (WSF), the “anti-globalisation” movement found a point of rotation but not necessarily a center. Its identity is based on the opposition to neoliberalism, but not on a shared utopia. The lack of an alternative model and of a positive common interest underlines the frictions among the different protagonists. As a result, one of the main discussions concerns the definition of the exact character of the World Social Forum Process. On the one hand, the WSF-Charta of Principles quite clearly states that the forum is thought to be an open space, characterised by inclusiveness, openness and plurality (Charta 2001). On the other hand, there are strong tendencies to strengthen homogeneity and to develop a common program in order to make the WSF a true “movement of the movements” or a social movement as such.

Apart from this conflict, supporters and activists expect the WSF and its subsequent local and regional fora to be a new form of resistance, creating awareness of the many forms of domination – and are able, therefore, to make the world move forward, beyond neoliberal and patriarchal interpretations of economy, politics and society. After six years of social fora, experience has proven once more the difficulties of strong, worldwide resistance, especially from a feminist point of view. Feminist activists and theoreticians criticise that the self-imposed standards of inclusiveness and democracy are not met by the fora themselves when it comes down to the question of redistribution of resources and deep-seated patriarchal structures.

In this article, I will argue for an analytical *and* normative concept of the fora. The social fora could and should be understood as a laboratory: a space, as it is proposed by some of the initiators like Chico Whitaker (e.g. 2003), but going beyond this concept without touching the monolithic model of a movement. Such a concept gives all those opposed to neoliberalism the option of gathering without homogenising differing positions or losing the power of the many. This concept is thus a proposal to overcome the above-mentioned conflict about the fora’s character and provides a strategy to deal with its own limitations and tendencies towards exclusion. In a first step, I will outline the controversy around “space versus movement.” In a second step, I will delineate the central points of a feminist critique. Finally, I will show how far these two issues are connected to each other and how the proposal of a laboratory can be seen as a solution to both aspects.

### **What We Have: Space versus Movement**

Form or structure and content are closely linked to each other (Sartre 1975). Strategies of resistance are bound to an organisation’s formal dispositions. Therefore, any discussion about the impact of resistance must be reflected with reference to the structure of the respective [collective] actor. In the case of the social fora, a conflict on this issue can be observed. The line of dispute runs between those who argue for an open space concept and those who stick to the movement option.

The dispute is fought out on two levels. First, it expresses itself in material aspects: the fora’s organisation and their concrete practise, which is determined by all participants and not in advance by an organising body. Second, the form is negotiated by the intellectuals of single resistance groups and organisations who express their points of view in written texts. Their theoretical reflections are bound back to the practise of the

fora. Discourse and texts are understood as interventions in social processes and as a practise with material consequences to social reality. This article refers to an analysis done in 2004 by the author, which is based on a corpus of texts consisting of about 50 texts by activist-theoreticians.<sup>3</sup> The dispute on form in earlier texts (before 2003) is seldom explicit, yet all texts on the fora still base their argument on the one or the other concept. Recent texts (Anand et al. 2004) show that the conflict has come to be discussed more openly, yet no real progress has been made in resolving it.

The two models, space and movement, can be framed by using the following four dimensions.

*Arena or Actor:* The fundamental decision between those two dimensions has been made by the WSF from its very beginning. The Charta of Principles fixes its character as a meeting point and open arena, implying in this definition that it opposes something without taking any action. It is supposed to be a meeting place to exchange ideas and thoughts, but actions are to be taken by individual groups and participants, not by the forum as such (see Whitaker 2003, Bello 2003, Sen 2004, Diouf 2004, Hersent 2003). Nevertheless, many groups within the fora—and even more those outside, e.g. the media—try to draw conclusions and search for common strategies for action in the aftermath of each forum. Such attempts revert to the classical idea of resistance: a more or less hierarchically organised movement focuses its attention on a limited number of clearly defined targets; common strategies are identified and put into practice.

*Results and Aims:* In accordance with the above outlined dimensions the aims are two-fold and they are set differently. The first interpretation stresses the importance of communication within the field of resistance and wants to provide a space for learning and exchange. Thus, the openness of the fora should be guaranteed; the aim is to continually include more people in the process (see Cassen 2003). Concrete outputs are demanded by those who see the fora as a new actor on the international scene. This strong output orientation is formulated as a demand to install a common programme or action committee. Instead, the proponents of this position can mainly be distinguished by their concentration not on the forum event itself but on the meeting of the social movements, which traditionally takes place after the official closing ceremony of the forum. The resolution of this meeting is often mistaken to be the output of the forum. Moreover, such a position aims at a radicalisation, not at an enlargement of its basis.

*Participation:* The Charta of the WSF clearly points out its democratic orientation. This standard is not met in reality as various forms of discrimination—mostly (re)produced involuntarily—hinder true equality among participants. Gendered speaking habits and exclusion by language levels, academic versus grassroots, might serve as examples. Therefore, this basic demand needs to be constantly reflected upon and supported. The concept of a movement, on the other hand, needs basic structures of decision-making and thus falls short of democratic demands and enhances more exclusive structures. Deliberative bodies can be democratic as well, but the analysis of texts and existing tendencies shows that this concept is often based on an understanding of

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers concerning the WSF are taken from the official website [<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>]. The article is mainly based on the analysis of the fora's resistance model undertaken by the author in 2004. See Freudenschuss, M. (2004). *Sozialforen als Widerstand: Widerstandskonzepte in der Konfrontation*. Innsbruck (M.A. thesis).

resistance going back to Marxist-Leninist ideas meaning that the idea of an avant-garde is preferred to inclusive democratic models.

*Differences:* Taken together, the above-mentioned aspects linked to the movement idea, converge in a process of homogenisation of ideas, concepts, strategies and demands in order to strengthen the position of forces against neoliberalism. On the contrary, in a space characterised by openness and inclusiveness, plurality guarantees the respect for differences. Resistance needs to take into account local differences as well as those of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, health, etc. Thus, social changes are supposed to be undertaken by majorities and not by minorities (a revolutionary avant-garde) leading societies to a fundamental social, political, and economic change.

A strict distinction between space and movement as it is proposed in the above scheme draws a rather polemical and simplistic picture of the issue. Each position, whether defending space or enhancing a movement, does not accurately describe reality nor provide a normative model for the future.

The concept of a movement within the fora derives its strength from its strong foundation in history. Many participating groups and individuals are themselves rooted in traditional protest movements; simply transferring their concepts to the level of the WSF is a logical continuation of their work. Due to the existing plurality of positions, interests and aims, the project to make the WSF a movement—or, as is often stated to understand it as a “movement of the movements”—is inevitably linked to the necessity of homogenisation. As a result, the risk of absorption constantly hangs over the fora since not every group has the same amount of influence, resources and presence. Moreover, measured by its second rather undisputed standard of democracy, such a process of unification is a fundamental challenge to grassroots concepts of participation. Such attempts tend to rather introduce deliberative structures that work with representation—and thus again, undermine the principle of equality and grassroots democracy. In summary, one can say that the movement model is only feasible in connection with exclusion.

The space position refuses to see the forum as an actor. Instead, the ideal is a quasi-neutral space of encounter, dialogue and discussion. But looking at the history and the functioning of the fora this quasi neutrality concerning agency proves to be wrong. In the beginning, the first World Social Forum was set up as a counterpart to the World Economic Forum (WEF) traditionally taking place in Davos, Switzerland. On a symbolic level, the first WSF in Porto Alegre was a strong expression of disagreement with the existing power structures. Not only the name took up this oppositional standpoint (“social” replacing “economic”), the date of the event corresponded with the WEF and competed for media attention by using the WEF as a counterpart in time, name, and in its specific features. Agency was present from the beginning. Agency continued to be an important element of the fora, but with the years, the two events lost their strong symbolic tie in public attention, while the social fora grew in number and extension, involving more and more people and issues. Widening its impact could be seen, at least indirectly, as action as well. The underlying concept of resistance to these features is not one of intentional agency and clear aim. It does have an impact on a global and a local scale by changing the “landscape” of resistance. Providing a space also means enlarging the scope of understanding and producing alternative knowledge of globalisation.

Finally, beyond the limitations of both models, the relation of continuity and break in resistance traditions present in the social fora has to be taken into account. The fora mark a turn in the “landscape” of resistance. They globalise the new form of resistance introduced by the Zapatistas, which is rooted in a fundamental acknowledgement of difference and human dignity (Holloway 2000). It combines characteristics of a space with certain traces of agency and therefore, can be taken neither as a space nor as a movement. Openness, grassroots democracy, inclusiveness and plurality are those features challenging the monolithic structures of neoliberalism at its core. In this sense, they involve the fora actively in the process of changing societies; they contribute to another world as much as they make thinking about it possible in the first place. Still, the fora are not to be seen as a movement: up until now, there is not one distinguishable path that could be identified as a unifying utopia. On the contrary, there are many.

Moreover, choosing one of these models would deny the potential of the social fora to work for another world, which is not only possible but necessary. Therefore, one has to reflect upon an alternative model of resistance which allows an accurate description of the fora’s character as it is now and, at the same time, proposes a common path for resistance while respecting the rule of heterogeneity. To fulfil these demands, I would like to introduce the concept of a laboratory.

### **What We are Missing: Feminist Critique of the Social Fora**

The WSF’s Charta of Principles defines domination as a structure that has to be fought against with the aim of building a world and societies of equality and justice (see Charta 2001, paragraph ten). Patriarchy is subsumed among these structures of domination. Unlike neoliberalism, however, patriarchal domination is not unanimously put among the top issues on the agenda nor does it have the same presence in documents and discussions. It certainly is included – but in which ways, by whom, and under what conditions?

The criticism of feminists involved in the fora aims mainly at misrepresentation, which can be analysed, as an example, in the case of the (national) Austrian Social Forum 2004 in Linz. A daily meeting of feminists was set up in order to discuss limitations and problems confronted during the events of the main Forum. Their points of critique can be applied to the fora in general; an analysis undertaken on structures of exclusion within the fora provides similar insights (see Freudenschuss 2004). The high standard of inclusiveness set by the Charta is not met in reality. These deficits lead to the necessity of rethinking the structure of the fora: the challenge can probably be met by using the concept of a laboratory as role model and as a basis for interpretation.

First, the social fora are rooted in societies shaped—to different extents—by neoliberalism and patriarchy. They are social phenomena, not independent from the general features of the societies, which structure the respective contexts of initiators, participants, and organizers. Therefore, none of the dimensions of domination can exclusively be seen as something which can be considered as opposing and lying outside one’s own identity, group or precisely the social fora. They are all present within the fora itself. If not intensively reflected upon and worked against, discriminative mechanisms are easily reproduced. The fora’s policy whereby exclusion is reproduced needs to be analysed with regard to two aspects: firstly, its sensitivity towards all mechanisms of exclusion and secondly, the measures taken to avoid and to compensate for

discriminations already inscribed in the fora's structure. Although the Charta mentions the fora's opposition to all forms of discrimination, in its quest for alternatives a hierarchy of those forms seems to be set up: its aim is "to solve the problems of exclusion and social inequality that the process of capitalist globalisation with its racist, sexist, and environmentally destructive dimensions is creating internationally and within countries" (Charta 2001, Paragraph 11). In this statement, racism and sexism are obviously subordinated to capitalism as structures judged destructive. In consequence, it can be noted that the sensitivity for gender-based forms of exclusion and discrimination are likely to be weakened by such basic orientations.

Secondly, the question of representation can be taken as a numerical indicator of inclusiveness. Organisational tasks are coordinated by the International Council of the WSF. Less than one tenth of the 139 represented organisations and networks are explicitly feminist or women-centered. The formal structure is quite open to new organizations, yet constant participation at meetings etc. nevertheless, demands quite large financial and staff resources (see George 2002). Often feminist and women's organisations cannot meet these implicit materialistic conditions. A similar economic challenge hinders participation with the same rights at preparatory meetings on the regional and national level. The feminist forum at the Austrian Social Forum in 2004 reproached the main sponsoring bodies, such as church organisations and trade unions, for certain blindness to financial inequalities. In addition to travel expenses and time resources, inequalities due to the global digital divide – access to communication media, particularly the Internet—must be considered (see Deutscher Bundestag 2002, 264).

While women are strongly present among participants (exact numbers are not available), their representation on panels lies far behind that of men. Finally, the fora are commented and discussed on a theoretical level by its own intellectuals. Few women are among the debaters; publications do include gender and feminist perspectives, but they are mostly concentrated in one or two articles written by feminists and neglected by most of the others. In this case, the re-production of exclusive patriarchal structures within the fora becomes evident. Feminist and women's standpoints tend to be reduced to one topic among others instead of being woven into all issues. Measures that only aim at mere numerical equality run the risk of reducing the matter to a simple question of representation. The problematic of patriarchal features within the fora is under such conditions not sufficiently taken into account. Gender and the linked norm of heterosexuality are set behind the statistically defined relation between men and women. It is a tightrope walk to fight for equality and to point out women's discrimination while not producing other exclusions by referring to a strictly dual, heterosexual norm. Going beyond such reductions would mean adding oneself, one's collective, and one's individual identity on the agenda for reflection – and probably to start changing society at exactly this point.

Thirdly, exclusion is based on the social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990) of activists. On the one hand, the social and cultural capital depends on one's position in society; on the other hand, it is inscribed in societal power relations. These two elements—social position and power relations—determine the scope of possible interventions for each individual and group in a specific context. The character of the fora is strongly shaped by western concepts of meetings and congresses. With regard to the debates on the fora, academic discourse is dominant. Consequently, the required (though

not directly demanded) social and cultural capital corresponds to an ideo-typical male activist rooted in western social movement traditions, with an academic background, speaking several languages, used to speaking in conferences and before several dozens of people, etc. Most fora concentrate on classical types of events: seminars, lectures, panel discussions. The WSF in Mumbai/India in 2004 enlarged the spectrum of gathering formats by including a large range of activities in the streets initiated partly spontaneously by participants (see Marin 2004). Still, the discussions about the future of the fora are held mainly in a traditional, academic manner, whether they take place at the fora themselves or via written and printed debates. The fora therefore, unintentionally reinforce inequalities by lacking sensitivity to symbolic power relations. These include patriarchal structures that hinder equal possibilities of the gender groups in the accumulation of social and cultural capital. Such discriminatory structures reach from unequal access of boys and girls to primary education (UNDP 2003) to unequal career chances in civil societies' top positions (as in other sectors of course).

Language perpetuates further exclusion along the lines of symbolic power relations. As long as the legitimate way of speaking is predominantly an academic one, exclusion will shape the character of the fora. Part of this language of power is a technical terminology which often demands a trained background to be understood. Additionally, in strongly gendered languages such as German, French, or Spanish, the male (subject) is taken as norm and the female (subject) marginalised. Moreover, studies show that women's speaking behaviours differ from those of men. Women tend to keep their opinion to themselves if not completely convinced of their contributions; they speak less than men; they are more often interrupted by men than the other way around, etc. (see Pusch 1984). Classical methods of discussions favour the "male" style of speaking. Similar mechanisms can be found along the lines of social class.

Some fora officially ask participants and panellists to use gender equal language, to support equality in speaking times, and support positive discrimination in order to give women the same space in discussions as men (e.g. at the Austrian Social Forum or at single panels and events at the European Social Forum 2003). But plurality and openness as the fora's basic features make it impossible to generally implement such measures. They have to be accepted and adopted by each participant. Gender equal language is a necessary instrument to raise awareness, but it cannot be the only instrument, especially as problems of exclusion prevail.

To sum up, the social fora's basic non-neutrality, the deficits in equal representation and participation and finally, the subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination, outline a less than satisfactory situation. The fora's actual form inevitably perpetuates exclusion. Existing differences in the access to resources are not sufficiently met by counter-strategies. But also, well beyond the materialistic dimension, awareness is lacking among the involved parties, especially among those who are well-equipped with social and cultural capital. Their capacities to define and to form the future of the fora are higher because they know how to speak and are listened to. But as equality and democracy are by definition core principles of the fora, one has to look for their consequent implementation in reality. As argued above, the two prevailing concepts – space and movement – neither provide appropriate descriptions of what the social fora are now nor of what they could and should be(come). Feminist criticism as outlined above shows clearly that another world is not only a question of changing the adversary but of

focusing on society as a whole, including oneself—and that means the fora’s structure as well.

### **Alternatively: The Laboratory Concept**

A laboratory dissolves the chronological differentiations between different resistance phases: instead of analysing and criticising in a first step, developing a utopia in a second, and fighting for the power in order to implement change in a last step, criticism, resistance, and the construction of “another world” should be taken as the same action. Regarding the social fora as such a theoretical concept can be described more concretely in the following dimensions: the relation between the fora and civil society, the relation of theory and practice and the relation of material and symbolic struggles. With the term “symbolic struggles” I refer to the social fora’s potential in challenging the neoliberal symbolic order, whereas material struggles include actions reaching from manifestations to feminist grassroots social work inspired by a vision of another world.

Certainly, the concept of a laboratory is not a completely new idea. Already the Charta of Principles gives several hints to such an interpretation. Authors and thinkers around and within the WSF process such as Michel Benasayag (2003), Nadia Demond (2003) or Patrick Viveret (2003) have already developed this idea in its basic features. Discussing its single features will make clear that “laboratory” is meant to be a label that allows for the fusion of existing models, practices and theories of resistance such as provided by feminist and women’s movements. What I want to suggest is thus not a fundamentally new interpretation and suggestion for the fora, but a consequent reading and a feminist and democratic theoretical foundation for such a reading.

Antonio Gramsci (1995) argues that fundamental change is only possible if hegemony within civil society is gained in advance. Taken together with the fora’s existing and desired plurality, hegemony can only be reached by alliances based on democratic structures (see Demirovic 1997). The continuing growth in the number of participants proves that the fora have an integrating potential, which strengthens a critical position towards neoliberalism within civil societies around the world. It has become an important reference point for those already engaged in it, and beyond its oppositional character to neoliberal centers of power, e.g. WEF or IMF, it addresses other parts of civil society. Politics of alliance between groups and organisations with very different focuses, strategies and even (short-term) interests are an immense challenge. The social fora offer an alternative way of building cooperations by offering a space *and* a nucleus of a common identity. For further developing this structure, feminist and women’s movements boast of great experience in handling differences. Feminist networks could be more intensively used as a model (see Zafari 2001) whereby problems and challenges could be more easily identified and dealt with. By this two-fold orientation towards the inside and the outside, the fora are neither exclusively agent nor exclusively space. Integrating more parts of civil society into the development of alternatives means that the search for such alternatives coincides with building them: democratic structures as aim and as principle.

Catherine Eschele outlines the features of such a democratically-led process very clearly

Such a process must be rooted in a recognition of the partiality of the perspectives that all context-specific mobilisations generate, with

agreement across differences sought through open, participatory and inclusive dialogue. The development of procedures for such a dialogue is urged, alongside efforts to overcome differential access to information, resources and agenda-setting imposed by geopolitical, ethnic and class locations. This model of democratic practice is dependent upon a notion of the actor as embedded within national locations and gender, race and class identities but also as struggling for empathetic mobility through participation in movement struggles. Finally, there is a complex model of transformatory change emerging here. An emphasis on the necessary plurality of sites and sources of struggle is combined with an insistence on the need to build more general alliances between movements (Eschele 2002, 333).

Knowledge is central to societal change. At the same time, knowledge is strongly connected to power. Therefore, its redistribution and democratic production is often considered to be an emancipatory strategy. Once more, the feminist and women's movements offer a point of reference not only on the practical, methodical level but also on a theoretical one. The above-discussed mechanisms of exclusion within the fora, on the other hand, show that the issue of theory and practise is highly susceptible to abuse. While the concept of a movement, formed by its history, tends to separate elite and mass in practice and even in theory, and thereby loses its applicability in a democratic organism (see Zibechi 2004), the concept of a space does not offer enough possibilities to openly deal with hierarchalisations based on knowledge. The ideal of an intellectual resulting from the principle of democracy can be described by Gramsci's idea of the "organic intellectual" (Gramsci 1995) and linked to the laboratory concept. Knowledge is provided and translated by those intellectuals in order to make intellectual advancement an advancement of the masses. Most events within the social fora underline this emancipatory understanding of science and knowledge. They even enlarge the concept by allowing different knowledge from different levels to confront each other and interact. In consequence, the multiplication of strategies can be observed. This enlargement of each agent's repertoire of action (Tilly, cited in della Porta & Diani 1999) through such processes of confrontation strengthens the fora's position as a laboratory. Moreover the fora already function, at least in part, as participatory democratic structures, thus practising alternatives right away *and* opening more possibilities for self-reflection and development.

The central argument for the fora as space refers to an exclusively materialistic understanding of social and political struggles. Therefore, the fora are not considered to be agents on their own. But actually the proponents of such a position do not take into account that political struggles also take place on a symbolic level. The power of definition within the symbolic order of a society is crucial to the stability of every system (see Bourdieu 2002). Once more, feminist history gives examples of such struggles: already during the French Revolution women like Olympe de Gouges adopted the revolutionary language to promote women's rights (see Amorós 2003) and through all generations of feminists, language played an important role in emancipation processes. Such an engagement on the symbolic level still proves necessary as language, images, and

metaphors are essential to our understanding of the world, to each individual's integration in society, and their possibilities to form and act autonomously within society. Alternative thinking cannot continue using the language that is linked to those structures it opposes. On the contrary, it is necessary to establish a language free of domination as part of the process of constructing another world. As Susan George (2002, 349) put it, the re-appropriation of language is one central gain of the social fora. Still, this process of re-appropriation has to be taken further—to an anti-racist, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist language. In this dimension of political struggle there is still a lot of hidden critical potential, which should be mobilised within the fora. Enhancing the concept of a laboratory may enable us to develop more sensitivity on such issues.

## **Conclusion**

The social fora play an increasingly important role for a globalisation process from below, which follows different paths from neoliberal globalisation. Despite the participants' plurality of interests, motivations, and aims, they agree upon the necessity for "another world." Based on the Charta of Principles as the only binding document for everyone, one can put it in more concrete terms: the fora oppose all forms of domination and aim at global and local societies living in justice and equality. If they do not want to lose all credibility (among civil society as a whole – according to the two-fold model of target groups), the fora have to apply these standards not only to utopias discussed during the meetings but first of all, to their own constitution. Thus, the issue of structure is crucial to the fora's presence and future since structure influences the contents. Both presently prevailing interpretations of the fora's structure – space and movement – provide neither a fully appropriate description of reality nor a productive model for the future.

Feminist critique has shown what the social fora presently fail to realise in terms of gender equality and feminist demands. The herstory of feminism is not only one of struggles against patriarchy; it is also one of differences and learning about the interconnections of various dimensions of domination (e.g. Klinger 2003). Therefore, any concept must take into account all dimensions of domination, all forms of exclusion in order to approach the aim of global justice. The analysis from a feminist perspective makes it possible to identify some demands to the fora's structure without drawing new lines of exclusion against other marginalised groups.

Both arguments – on form and on feminist critique – demand an alternative concept of organisation. The social fora contain a large amount of originality, certainly in the tradition of various long waves of resistance, but nevertheless strongly demanding new organisational forms. Among the features identified by feminist critique, such an alternative might be the concept of a laboratory. It is, above all, a dynamic concept, inherently dependent on the permanent shaping by all engaged groups and individuals. A culture of constant forming must be based on democratic principles. Therefore, democracy is not only an abstract ideal; it is the necessary predisposition for participation in equal rights. Democratic communication broadens each person's horizon of understanding and knowledge. Different groups will and do have different strategies. Communication and exchange on these can be undertaken at the fora. They can even be tried out there – using the fora as a laboratory – taken literally. The existing plurality can be fully used as an enriching characteristic, not as an obstacle to common action.

Obliging collective action in a materialistic sense is incompatible with the heterogeneity of agents. But an enlarged understanding of action allows consequent and precise interventions into the symbolic order of globalisation. By making alternative thinking and acting visible in strength and diversity, the social fora mark a turn in the course of globalisation. Using this potential means taking individuals as part of civil society, as serious and responsible citizens. Despite such a primarily symbolic understanding of resistance in the social fora's framework, the materialistic aspect of resistance has to be taken into account when it comes to resources. Participation depends on such resources, their unequal distribution between the gender groups, between the different regions of the world etc., and demands, not only awareness, but, even further, concrete measures and policies of redistribution than presently applied.

Finally, all these aspects are linked to one central idea: resistance is a dynamic process of critique. Utopia and action are based on a strongly self-reflective understanding of all agents involved. If we acknowledge our own entanglement in structures of domination, we necessarily have to apply emancipatory knowledge and strategies to ourselves. Thus, another world is not only necessary and possible, it is already being constructed.

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