

---

# ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE : GLOBALISATION BY THE PEOPLE

---

SCENES AND STORIES FROM THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM 2002,  
PORTO ALEGRE, BRAZIL

theresa wolfwood

“We do not sound the clarion of romantic literature, nor the broken chains of hard labour, nor the drums of war...we bang the pots and pans”.

Herminia Denot, *La Resistancia de las Cacerolas*

It was a week in the humid heat, torrential rain, and relentless sun. More than 30,000 activists from 150 countries, speaking four official languages and many more, banged pots and pans of activist wisdom and then used the pans to create a potluck of food for that other possible world.

The WSF was exciting, frustrating, frightening and fun. It was a positive project, work in *progress*, not *protest* in a hostile place. It reminded me of the 1995 UN NGO Forum at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. The city and its citizens welcomed us everywhere — on the wonderful transit system with poetry on its windows and with one day of free travel a month — with polite concern for any lost looking foreigner in parks, street corners and cafes. I look back on the growth of global social movements since 1995 and I am awestruck. Who could have predicted that in seven years, social organisations would be making their own events, without the constriction of UN bureaucracy or a top-down fixed agenda of one group? In Beijing I had felt the beginning of a new globalisation : in Porto Alegre I knew I was part of it. There were about 800 events to attend in five days, so my report is very personal and selective.

By the time the Forum opened — at a rally and a ceremony in an amphitheatre

by the river — I had met Breton French organic farm activists and a famous South African anti-apartheid poet; women in white scarves — the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo from Argentina; a sleazy corporate Canadian coming “to help Brazil”; an accordion-playing communist MP from Switzerland; Brazilian students wanting to talk English and help me with Portuguese; Brazilian women trying to stop a new hydroelectric project; indigenous music groups playing everywhere; Italian veterans of the Battle of Genoa; and many more.

The banners and slogans had defined one major theme : STOP THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT OF THE AMERICAS — the biggest political issue of this hemisphere. With 160 million people, a large educated and consuming class, a well-developed infrastructure and industrial base, immense natural resources and incredible biodiversity, Brazil is a magnet for multinationals. Most Latin American countries have been de-stabilised and impoverished by US-backed wars, economic havoc wrought by international institutions like the IMF and World Bank and a sell-out of national sovereignty.

I listened to Marina Silva, a senator from the Amazon. The frail, dark-eyed, gentle forty-one year old woman, a daughter of rubber tappers, was illiterate until she was an adult, then acquired education and political office in spite of neurological problems caused by mercury poisoning. She leads the struggles against biopiracy in a process she says is as important as the product. Proposing “collective legislation” that comes from social discussion and the wisdom of her society, Silva believes laws must protect the knowledge and benefits of genetic resources for all — even as giant corporations like Novartis move in to grab the estimated \$3 trillion worth of biodiversity in the Amazon. She works for policy that includes the social, economic, cultural, political and ethical values that preserve the obvious and intangible benefits of a healthy ecosystem. I met Muriel Saragoussi from a Brazilian NGO, who calls on us to assert “the right not to consume”, to raise public awareness everywhere, that biodiversity is not a raw material to exploit. Her vision includes people and biodiversity as compatible, and people protecting ecosystems from the minority control of economic industry, and that we are all part of nature and by preserving nature we preserve ourselves.

Ana Filippini of the World Rainforest Movement is based in Uruguay. She told me about their campaign to stop the spread of monoculture tree plantations. The products of these environmentally destructive methods are often labelled as being certified from responsible forestry by the Forest Stewardship Council, leading us to think they are ecologically grown, but the opposite is true.

José Hoffman, Secretary of Agriculture in Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil, said that world hunger is a *political* problem and cannot be solved by genetic modification (GM). Saying that seed patents destroy sovereignty, and people have a right to clean, natural food, he deplores the loss of family farmers. His government returns land to people, and recently to 13,000 women farmers. Non-GM products are an important part of Brazil’s export economy and their integrity needs protection. The state funds and supports farmers and agriculture organisations to farm organically and to restore a balance between farms, forest and fishing. Porto Alegre has a large organic food market and the conference had a cluster of organic food cafes and booths.

I learned that Amazonia — a bio-region including parts of Brazil and other countries — now harbours a sinister unacknowledged international space station said to be for atmospheric research. Alfredo Wagner, a Brazilian anthropologist, says that a joint effort of the USA, Germany, Russia and the Ukraine is developing the base for rockets because launching is cheaper and more accurate close to the equator. Thousands of indigenous people have been evicted from their land and now only the military can enter this secret area. He said military control of Amazonia is related not only to the corporate space industries but also to mining and biotechnology transnational companies, and that information and research is used and protected by the military — making a powerful coalition of compatible interests. This power block always requires the complicity of national governments. Here is where social movements must act to inform and resist. I thought of the Canadian north and I wonder how many of us know what is really going on ‘up there’ in our own country.

In Colombia, the protection of corporations and the interests of Standard Oil dates back to 1916. Another speaker, Hector Mondragon, said that the in *Mein Kampf* of the social genocide of peasants, *Accelerating Development*, was written by a Canadian, Lauchlin Currie, advisor to five presidents of Colombia. His recommendation was to lure peasants into the wage economy or push them off the land. His advice was followed and accelerated by political genocide of all peasant opposition. The most popular peasant leader and candidate for presidency, was assassinated. Any opposition is murdered, including mayors, city councillors, congress people and senators. Even more social leaders are killed in human rights and peasant groups, and last year alone, 157 labour leaders were assassinated. Mondragon says that narcotic traffic is a *result* of militarisation, not the *cause* of it. The USA claims that Colombia is a democracy, but Mondragon says, then it is a “genocidal democracy”. The economy of Colombia is so warped by war that it now *imports* coffee. When Mondragon finished speaking, I felt ill, looked at him and wondered, how long will *you* live ?

I was stunned listening to Palestinians and Israelis talk about the constant killings, house demolitions, detention and control of movement. The lack of food and water in Palestine are leading to a major humanitarian crisis in the impoverished region, on top of the political betrayal and military oppression.

In a testimonial by Guatemalan Nobel Laureate, Rigoberta Menchu, the Mayan leader was confident of the success of our dream. She said activists were dreamers — of unity in diversity, peaceful feminist transformation and dedication to the real world of solidarity. She recalled that the elimination of indigenous peoples and their culture had been predicted for the new millennium. One of her main projects is to promote the use and teaching of Mayan languages in Guatemalan schools. “Hurrah for life !” she laughed as she encouraged us to stick to our common agenda of justice while “we love more and strive more”.

**“Action is the Mother of Hope” — Pablo Neruda**

I went to the Forum, beyond hearing important information and analysis, to learn how to create that other possible world. To see, as Hilary Wainwright, Editor of UK’s *Red*

Pepper said, how “action creates ideas”. Wainwright, an activist in political parties and social movements, says that successful political movements are based on the *creativity* of practice of worker groups at the grassroots. Last night in Victoria, I attended a planning meeting about the G8 meeting in Canada. As we discussed possible local events, I was amazed that out of my mouth came the idea of a circle of eight tents representing the eight countries where actors would try to explain the corporatisation and failing economies of their countries, while activists talked and distributed real information on globalisation, picnicked and played around the tents. I had not thought of it until that instant, but somewhere in the recesses of my memory, I must have an image of something similar somewhere else and it took that group discussion to recall it. For me that is creativity.

At the WSF, activists from all continents discussed strategies — how youth and women in Uganda and Kenya can write and perform dramas on social and political issues, how banners can be used to connect people, how the Women in Black movement has grown from Israel and Palestine to groups everywhere including Canada, and how dates that are secretly imported from Iraq — a country and people under the rule of the empire — are sold in Europe and at the WSF. A woman from Zambia told of a movement to stop the President from running for an illegal third term. Everyone, including civil servants, wore something green — on Friday night at 5 pm., every car horn was sounded, people on foot blew whistles — it worked !

Silence can also be activism. I think about the global network of Women in Black standing silently, as a witness against violence and war. Recently at our Women in Black vigil in Victoria, a woman passing by shouted angrily at our signs, ‘Dream on, women’, and I thought, “Yes, we will dream on, as no one can take our dreams away from us”. Dreaming, silences, listening, are all important aspects of activism.

In Brazil, there are over 20,000 ‘free radio stations’ operating out of homes and vehicles to serve community interests. Five thousand T-shirts were distributed with instructions printed on them on as to how to set up a transmitter. An Italian activist suggests that all people in social movements pay a TV tax until each region can produce independent TV programmes. Another works to set up websites now threatened by Italy’s rightwing regime. They are backed up in other countries. One memorable presentation was by students from York University in Toronto who with a lively skit, cheers and costumes, told the story of one of Canada’s most successful strikes of recent years. This was followed by a good discussion with Brazilian students and the realisation that activism could begin in high school and that we need to work with these younger students everywhere.

We cannot rely on the mainstream media, indeed, even our own movement media to write our histories. We can and must be our own historians, recorders, photographers, artists, and filmmakers. Like stones we must never forget and as human beings we must never stop creating, dreaming and working for our vision. Gigi Francisco of the Philippines

warned against too much centralisation of social groups, saying that we must do our best work in the community, but link it globally, as her group links women in communities with sex trade and sweatshop workers and not allowing a concentration of effort and resources to accumulate in a few large groups. Trevor Ngwane, a South African activist, talked about ‘Operation Light-Up’, the illegal reconnection of electricity for the poor who have been disconnected by new private utility owners.

**“Art is not a mirror we hold up to reality; it is a hammer with which we shape it”.**

**—Bertolt Brecht**

One day as I wandered around the Forum’s outdoor market, I found the Movement of the Landless (MST) — one of the most successful social movements in Brazil, having withstood the murder of leadership and constant repression to claim and farm the unused land of the wealthy. Governments have also given land to MST groups — 300,000 families have settled on millions of hectares of now food-producing land. In fact, a moving story of one MST group in the state of Para, probably more than anything else, made me want to go to Brazil. This group wanted a memorial to the nineteen men killed by military police trying to drive them off occupied land. Claiming they were not artists, the survivors expressed their pain and anger until the image of chestnut trees used by peasants, but felled and burned by landowners, began to emerge. They created a stunning monument of nineteen charred and mutilated chestnut tree trunks. At the MST stall I bought a T-shirt with a photo of those nineteen trunks and the words : “The chestnuts remember. Do you ?”

There were other T-shirts on offer — with photos of anti-IMF demonstrations, paintings of Ché and Gandhi, cartoons of Disney figures being chased out of Latin America, and another favourite of mine with the quote, ‘Life is the most beautiful of the arts’. Everyday, there were music groups, drummers and indigenous musicians playing a haunting one string bow-like instrument and drama groups acting out acts of citizen justice in community life. There were posters of political cartoons, stilt figures, enormous banners and flags and even Carnival performers. The defining work of art for the WSF has to be the Mosaic of Citizenship. A colourful collection of stones brought by WSF delegates in 2001, it was inaugurated in a city park this year. The stones with inscriptions of place, name and philosophy are embedded in a radiating pattern about five metres across. The Mosaic is the creation of two French artists. One of them, Eric Varian, was on hand to receive the stones for the 2002 mosaic. We gave him a piece of cretaceous sandstone from our beach on Hornby Island, north of Victoria. While we chatted, I learned he lives part-time in the Larzac and was a friend of Jose Bové, French farmer-activist. I gave him a copy of [Briarpatch](#), September 2001, with my article on Bové, after he asked me if I had seen the barn that peace activists had built in 1983. Yes, and I showed him the photo of the barn in the article. He said, “It was my idea to have decorated and inscribed stones set into the barn walls”. Almost twenty years later he had the idea to use special stones again to make a mosaic in Brazil !

## The WSF : Challenging Empires

Diaries : The Experience of the WSF

I came home from Brazil full of action ideas and hope, convinced I had participated in a real 'globalisation by the people'. But then I faced reality. In Victoria, I found Camp Campbell, a makeshift community and home for fifty activists and street people that had been built on the Legislative Assembly grounds, being dismantled after a court order. I saw Canadian people and mainstream media going crazy over a hockey game. I returned determined to work harder on small local actions — but the hockey mania made me wonder. How do we inspire Canadians to care as much about defeating the USA in international agreements, like FTAA, as they do about a hockey game ?

APRIL 2002

Edited version of essay on WSF website, <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/us/therezawolfwood.asp>. First published in Briarpatch magazine (Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada), in April 2002. [www.briarpatchmagazine.com](http://www.briarpatchmagazine.com)

**Theresa Wolfwood** is Director, Barnard-Boecker Centre Foundation(BBCF), Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The BBCF works for peace and social justice, locally and globally. Recent activities have included organising a Small World Social Forum in November 2002, and public events on peace, specifically the Iraq war. She researches, writes and speaks on issues of militarisation and globalisation. She is a published photographer and poet.