

The World Social Forum as a Portal of Globalization: Complex Spatialities in Social Movement Studies

Micha Fiedlschuster

ABSTRACTS

Applying the concept of portals of globalization, the goal of this paper is to capture the significance of the World Social Forum (WSF) for the alter-globalization movement. Since 2001, the WSF brings together social movements and other civil-society actors that are ideologically or geographically disconnected. It offers a transnational space for sharing experiences about globalization processes and for facilitating the flows of ideas on how to influence the course of globalization. Analysing the politics of space, place, network, and scale in the WSF, the paper shows that the concept of portals of globalization helps to capture the spatial complexity of the forum. I argue that the WSF is not simply a place of anti-neoliberalism but a portal of globalization that inhabits different actors competing for the recognition of their interpretation of the nature of globalization.

Anhand des Konzeptes „Portale der Globalisierung“ soll die Bedeutung des Weltsozialforums (WSF) für die globalisierungskritische Bewegung aufgezeigt werden. Seit 2001 bringt das Forum soziale Bewegungen und andere zivilgesellschaftliche Akteure aus verschiedensten Regionen der Welt zusammen, die zudem oft von einem unterschiedlichen ideologischen Hintergrund geprägt sind. Das Forum bietet dieser heterogenen Teilnehmerschaft einen transnationalen Ort für den Erfahrungs- und Ideenaustausch über Globalisierungsprozesse und wie diese beeinflusst werden können. Dieser Artikel analysiert die politischen Dimensionen von Raum, Netzwerk, Ort und räumliche Maßstabsebenen im WSF und zeigt, dass das Konzept „Portale der Globalisierung“ nützlich ist, die Komplexität des Forums zu erfassen. Zudem zeigt der Artikel,

1 I would like to thank Helena Flam, Matthias Middell, Ulf Engel, and the participants of the workshop “Portals of Globalization” for their helpful comments.

dass das WSF ein Portal der Globalisierung ist, in welchem verschiedene Akteure um die Anerkennung ihrer Interpretation des Wesens der Globalisierung ringen.

1. Introduction

In the autumn of 1999, a coalition of social-movement organizations and trade unions staged a series of protests during a ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle, in the United States (US). Protests at summits had happened before, but this one ignited a public debate in North America and Western Europe about “the very nature of the global system.”² The Seattle protests are widely considered the birth of an alter-globalization movement. This movement, which is also called the global justice movement, is not a single entity but a “movement of movements.”³ It is not characterized by a single political line, ideology, or geographical centre, but rather by the participants’ critical stance towards the contemporary form of globalization. In their view, globalization is geared towards maximizing the profits of transnational corporations, which is not to the benefit of the majority of the people. In the years following the Seattle events, networking among social movements intensified worldwide. The World Social Forum (WSF) is one of the most significant results of this process.

Since 2001, the WSF is a meeting place for social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil-society groups. It was initiated by a group of mainly Brazilian and European activists, as a counter-event to the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland. Oded Grajew, the then coordinator of the Brazilian Association of Entrepreneurs for Citizenship (CIVES); Bernard Cassen, the then chair of the Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Aid to Citizens (Association pour la taxation des transactions financières et pour l’action citoyenne, ATTAC); and Chico Whitaker, a Roman Catholic activist, were the key initiators of the event.⁴ The organizing process was supported by Brazilian authorities, as well as various Brazilian civil-society groups, among them trade unions, the Landless Workers’ Movement, and the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas, IBASE).⁵ Since then, the WSF has been supported by a geographically and thematically diverse range of social movements and NGOs, but a strong presence of Brazilian and French activists in the organizing process has remained.

The declared aim of the forum is to discuss alternatives to neoliberal policies. The alter-globalization movement rejects neoliberalism because of its social, economic, and

2 M. Kaldor, “Civilising” Globalisation? The Implications of the ‘Battle in Seattle’, in: *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29 (2000) 1, p. 106.

3 T. Mertes, *A Movement of Movements. Is Another World Really Possible?*, London 2004.

4 See T. Teivainen, *The World Social Forum and Global Democratisation: Learning from Porto Alegre*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002) 4, pp. 621–632.

5 See H. Gautney, *Protest and Organization in the Alternative Globalization Era: NGOs, Social Movements, and Political Parties*, New York 2010, p. 47.

political consequences. However, as sociologist Geoffrey Pleyers argues, alter-globalization activists share many features with their neoliberal adversaries: the individuation of activists' commitment, executive careers, networked organization, and the importance of communication.⁶ Furthermore, the movement stands not in opposition to an increased global interconnectedness, but it is developing its own agenda about the nature of such interconnectedness. With regard to how they organize themselves internally, these actors value interconnectedness in the form of convergence on agendas and activities that respect diversity and promote an equal footing among participating actors. The model of convergence in the WSF – though often more an ideal than a practice – is an experiment of a non-hierarchical form of internationalism for social-movement actors.⁷

Transnational social movements are influenced by globalization processes, but they also shape such processes to some extent. According to the assessment of activists, the protests at the summits of political and economic leaders demonstrated that collective action on a global scale is possible. At the same time, activists thought that so-called “summit hopping”⁸ does not help to build the long-term strategies necessary for transnational social-movement building.⁹ These activists sought a format that would not depend on the dynamics of direct confrontational protests, but one that would still gain public attention. Their solution was to propose a meeting that would take place parallel to the WEF in Davos, but in a distant place and preferably in the Global South. The simultaneity of both events secured coverage of the WSF by the international media. The spatial distance to Davos removed the constraints of contentious protests from the organizing process of the WSF. The city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, which was chosen as the venue of the first WSF, met two important criteria for organizing the forum: it is located in the Global South, and it offered a social-movement-friendly environment. Both aspects – the spatial distance to contention and the politically friendly environment – contributed to the fact that the WSF facilitated a space for long-term strategy building. Dieter Rucht termed the WSF in this respect as a “public stage and infrastructure for global justice movements.”¹⁰ In a similar way, I hold that the organizers of the WSF have identified the need for a “portal of globalization” that would fit the purposes of the alter-globalization movement.

Portals of globalization, which has been put forward as a concept in the study of global history,¹¹ are those spaces or places in which condensed experiences of processes of glo-

6 G. Pleyers, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age*, 2010, p. 18.

7 G. Pleyers, *The Social Forums as an Ideal Model of Convergence*, in: *International Social Science Journal* 56 (2004) 182, pp. 507–517, and J. Conway, *Edges of Global Justice: The World Social Forum and Its 'Others'*, Abingdon, Oxon; New York 2013.

8 Summit hopping is when activists follow major international policy meetings such as the G8 and the World Economic Forum in order to protest on-site.

9 J. Smith, *Social Movements for Global Democracy*, Baltimore 2008, p. 207.

10 D. Rucht, *Social Forums as Public Stage and Infrastructure of Global Justice Movements*, in: J. Smith et al. (eds.), *Handbook on World Social Forum Activism*, Boulder 2011, pp. 11–28.

11 M. Middell, *Erinnerung an die Globalisierung? Die Portale der Globalisierung als lieux de mémoire: Ein Versuch*, in: K. Buchinger, C. Gantet and J. Vogel (eds.), *Europäische Erinnerungsräume*, Frankfurt; New York 2009, pp.

balization are observable. They are incubators of cultural knowledge about globalization processes and labs for the development of social and political skills that are deemed necessary to handle such processes. In this sense, these places play a significant role in the synchronization and regulation of globalization processes. I argue that the WSF is a portal of globalization that facilitates the exchange of experiences and strategies of actors in the alter-globalization movement.¹² The concept of portals of globalization allows us to discuss the significance of the WSF for the alter-globalization movement, and it offers us a route to scrutinize the complex spatialities that are involved in the WSF.

Social-movement scholars have paid considerable attention to the spatial dimension of their research objects. Charles Tilly provides an overview of the many different strategies of protests during the seventeenth and eighteenth century in Britain and France.¹³ He shows that the particular places and routes of protests were seldom chosen by chance but according to their symbolic meaning. Analysing the meaning that movement actors and authorities attribute to contested places can be decisive for understanding the dynamics of protest.¹⁴ James Scott calls attention to the importance of spaces, where the individual experience of oppression is transformed into a “collective cultural product.”¹⁵ Resistance and mobilization do not appear out of the blue, but they are nurtured in community structures that exist out of sight of the ruling elite. His analysis is exemplary of an ongoing debate about the role and usefulness of the concept of so-called free space in collective action.¹⁶ Paul Routledge has applied John Agnew’s theory about place to Indian social movements. He argues that “[w]hile struggles are not necessarily confined to the local level [...], they do reflect the cultural and political specificity of the locale in which they occur.”¹⁷ These studies have pointed out the ways in which spatial dimensions affect the course, character, and formation of resistance.

Other scholars have scrutinized the networking and scalar dimension of social movements. Since the 1990s, the question of scale shifting has become more prominent in research. Scholars began increasingly asking, “Under what conditions does contention grow beyond its localized beginnings to become a force for transnational change?”¹⁸ Networking became a prominent part of the explanation. According to the sociologist Jackie

296–308, and M. Geyer, *Portale der Globalisierung*, in: W. Eberhard and C. Luebke (eds.), *Die Vielfalt Europas: Identitäten und Räume*, Leipzig 2009, pp. 545–559.

12 Synchronization does not necessarily have to mean that a consensus or agreement is established among the actors.

13 C. Tilly, *Spaces of Contention*, in: *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 5 (2000) 2, pp. 135–159.

14 D.G. Martin and B. Miller, *Space and Contentious Politics*, in: *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 8 (2003) 2, p. 148.

15 J.C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990, p. 9.

16 Cf. F. Polletta, “Free Spaces” in *Collective Action*, in: *Theory and Society* 28 (1999) 1, pp. 1–38, and F. Polletta and K. Kretschmer, *Free Spaces*, in: D.A. Snow et al. (eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, Malden, MA; Oxford 2013.

17 P. Routledge, *Terrains of Resistance: Nonviolent Social Movements and the Contestation of Place in India*, 1993, p. 138.

18 S.G. Tarrow and D. McAdam, *Scale Shift in Transnational Contention*, in: D. Della Porta and S.G. Tarrow (eds.), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Lanham, Md. 2005, p. 121.

Smith, social movements have started to build a “democratic globalization network.”¹⁹ In his analysis of the alter-globalization movement, Jeffrey Juris has characterized the WSF as the place where these movements demonstrate their strength and diversity to the outside and establish themselves “internally as a terrain where diverse activist networks constitute themselves and symbolically map their relationship to one another.”²⁰ Despite the many benefits of these analyses, they were not free from criticism. The geographer Helga Leitner and her colleagues have claimed that analysts of social movements do not capture the spatial complexity of their cases adequately.²¹ These geographers have identified the tendency in these approaches to overemphasize one spatial dimension over others: this was the case with “scale” in the 1990s and with “network” in the early 2000s. As a result, the co-implication of the multiple spatialities is missing. Leitner and her colleagues emphasize that activists are “creative in cobbling together different spatial imaginaries and strategies on the fly.”²² In fact, this critique has some value considering that many studies of the WSF stress its networking dimension and its design as an open space. Focusing exclusively on these aspects, we might risk missing important aspects of the specificity of the WSF. My aim is to show that the concept of portals of globalization is a tenable approach that captures the spatial complexity of the WSF without compromising analytical clarity.

2. Portals of Globalization

Portals of globalization have been proposed as part of a debate about the spatial complexities and historical dynamics of globalization processes. In historical perspective, globalization is neither a social fact nor an actual or targeted state of the world, but an indeterminate and non-teleological process. It is shaped by multiple forces that do not spread out from a single region and embody dynamic tensions.²³ Political geographers have characterized globalization processes as dialectic processes of de- and reterritorialization.²⁴ Neil Brenner, for example, has made the influential argument that deterritorialization denotes the drive of capitalism towards diminishing its place dependency, and reterritorialization is the corresponding transformation of existing – as well as the emergence of new – configurations of territorial organization that are relatively fixed.²⁵

19 J. Smith (fn. 9), p. 100.

20 J.S. Juris, *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*, Durham 2008, p. 239.

21 H. Leitner, E. Sheppard and K.M. Sziarto, *The Spatialities of Contentious Politics*, in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33 (2008) 2, pp. 157–172.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

23 U. Engel and M. Middell, *Bruchzonen der Globalisierung, globale Krisen und Territorialitätsregimes – Kategorien einer Globalgeschichtsschreibung*, in: *Comparativ* 15 (2005) 56, pp. 5–38.

24 A. Appadurai, *Sovereignty without Territoriality: Notes for a Postnational Geography*, in: P. Yaeger (ed.), *The Geography of Identity. Notes for a Postnational Geography*, Ann Arbor 1996, pp. 40–58; here: pp. 54–55, and N. Brenner, *Beyond State-Centrism? Space, Territoriality, and Geographical Scale in Globalization Studies*, in: *Theory and Society* 28 (1999) 1, pp. 39–78.

25 N. Brenner (fn. 24).

In these accounts, the decentring of the nation state since the 1970s is one result of such dialectical processes.

Global historians like Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann agree with Brenner that globalization is a dialectical process of de- and reterritorialization, but they place more emphasis on the historicity of the contemporary form of globalization.²⁶ They discuss the explanatory value of the idea of “successive regimes of territorialization.”²⁷ They argue that regimes of territorialization are patterns of spatialization, which become globally accepted: “[r]egimes of territorialization [...] move certain types of spatial order into the centre of attention and shape beliefs throughout the world about what are efficient modes of organization and models worthy of emulation.”²⁸ These regimes can be used by different actors in attempts to control and regulate entanglements and flows between different spaces. Globalization appears in this approach to be less fixed and determined, but it is in fact shaped by competing political projects about the purpose and content of globalization.

These projects may result in the replacement of one regime of territorialization with another. Portals of globalization, such as the WSF, give insights into these dynamics of de- and reterritorialization, and the political struggles about them. They are those spaces or places in which a condensed experience of processes of globalization is observable. One way to study portals of globalization has been suggested by Michael Geyer, who analyses them as possible regulators of mutual influence of disparate social and political entities.²⁹ From this point of view, portals of globalization are the targets of control attempts by political elites. Others add a cultural perspective to this political dimension. Middell characterizes portals of globalization as those places where cultural knowledge, institutions, and practices that are necessary for dealing with globalization processes have been developed.³⁰ As such, portals of globalization are places where global connections crystallize.³¹ Considering the sociocultural perspective, portals of globalization can be thought of as an exchange point of global experiences. The WSF is illustrative here because it offers a place where otherwise disconnected actors can share their experiences and strategies, as well as form common actions.

Middell proposes the concept of portals of globalization as a framework for the study of global history. This framework allows, on the one hand, the analysis of different configurations of global flows and connections, and, on the other hand, the political organiza-

26 M. Middell and K. Naumann, *Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization*, in: *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010) 01, p. 152. They build on Charles Maier's idea of regimes of territoriality, see C.S. Maier, *Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, in: *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000) 3, pp. 807–831; *Transformations of Territoriality, 1600–2000*, in: G. Budde, S. Conrad and O. Janz (eds.), *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, Göttingen 2006, pp. 32–55.

27 M. Middell and K. Naumann (fn. 26), pp. 164–165.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

29 M. Geyer (fn. 11).

30 M. Middell (fn. 11), p. 302.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 301.

tion of space by which elites attempt to control people, goods, and ideas.³² Elsewhere, he defines – together with Naumann – portals of globalization as those places that “have served as entrance points for cultural transfer, and where institutions and practices for dealing with global connectedness have been developed.”³³ Both definitions are based on a dialectic of flows and control that may result in modifications or crises of regimes of territorialization. Middell and Naumann argue that portals of globalization are useful for two reasons: first, as territorial, fixed nodes in global flows, portals of globalization challenge the “seemingly stable territorial order” of their locations.³⁴ Secondly, portals of globalization provide the opportunity to analyse “the various means by which elites try to channel and therefore control the effects of global connectivity (among others, by the creation of political structures and social control).”³⁵ The dialectical character of portals of globalization suggests that it represents the spatial order that is used either to challenge or to establish a regime of territorialization, depending on the power dynamics of proponents and opponents of a particular regime. Against this background, analysing the WSF as a portal of globalization gives insights both into the transnational activities of social movements and the complex struggles over territorialization that take place at and around it. The following sections of the paper will analyse these complex spatialities, first with regard to the politics of space and network, and secondly, with a focus on the politics of place and scale.

3. The WSF as a Portal of Globalization

3.1 The Politics of Space and Network

The first WSF was held in Porto Alegre in 2001. The city offered a favourable political environment. At the time, the Workers’ Party was in power, and the city government was experimenting with participatory budgeting – an idea that seeks to increase democratic participation of citizens in the budgeting process of the city.³⁶ The local and regional government contributed USD 1.3 million in funding for the first forum, with Oxfam and the Ford Foundation providing additional funds.³⁷ Apart from the funding by Brazilian authorities, the donors of the subsequent fora were mainly located in the Global North. The organizational costs of a WSF amount to an estimated EUR 2 million on average, excluding the costs of participating organizations and individuals. The participation fees and travel costs constitute obstacles for resource-poor groups to participate in the WSF.

32 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 300.

33 M. Middell and K. Naumann (fn. 26), p. 162.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 D. Rucht (fn. 10), p. 14; L. Avritzer, *Participatory Institutions in Democratic Brazil*, Washington, D.C.; Baltimore 2009.

37 See B. de S. Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*, London/New York 2006, pp. 208–209, and T. Teivainen (fn. 4), p. 624.

As a result, large NGOs and local social-movement groups are usually over-represented in these fora.

The first forum attracted approximately 20,000 participants from more than 100 countries. The fifth forum, which took place in Porto Alegre in 2005, drew 155,000 participants from over 140 countries, most from South America, the US and France.³⁸ The number of workshops, panel discussions, and cultural events increased from 420 during the first forum to roughly 2,300 in the fifth, a peak in the WSF's participation rate. The forums that took place between 2013–2016, for example, had participation rates ranging from 30,000–35,000 people. Major themes in the WSF are democratic sustainable development; human rights, diversity, and equality; political power, civil society, and democracy; the democratic world order, and militarism and peace. The variety of activities turned the WSF into a laboratory of political and social skills in the context of globalization.

The organizational format of the WSF demonstrates its portal character: the structure of the first forum involved 16 conferences with high-profile panellists, 420 self-organized workshops “intended to allow groups, and coalitions, and networks to meet, exchange experiences, interlink, plan and define strategies,” and 22 testimonies from “individuals with a distinguished record of activity on behalf of freedom and human dignity.”³⁹ These activities allowed participants to share practical skills, raised the consciousness about issues in different parts of the world, and were sometimes used to develop plans for collective action.⁴⁰ For example, the WSF was one of the crucial places for the formation of a transnational feminist network, a labour network, and anti-privatization networks.⁴¹ The WSF created a physical space for mutual engagement and networking on a scale that did not exist before.

For many social movements, it was attractive to participate in the WSF because it was constructed with the specific intention to create an open space, which is “open to people of all political persuasions.”⁴² The aim was to constitute a framework “in which groups and movements of ‘civil society’ can socialize, network, and develop their respective projects without having to adhere to a central body or political line.”⁴³ Considering the political and ideological diversity among activists of the alter-globalization movement, it was crucial for the success of the WSF to design the event as a space free of political

38 B. de S. Santos (fn. 37), p. 85.

39 H. Gautney (fn. 5), p. 48.

40 See J. Smith, et al., Introduction: Learning from the World Social Forums, in J. Smith et al. (eds.), *Handbook on World Social Forum Activism*, Boulder 2011, p. 2; W. Fisher, Th. Ponniah (eds.), *Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*, London; New York 2003.

41 I. Wallerstein, *The World Social Forum: From Defense to Offense, 2007*, Internet: <https://www.tni.org/en/archives/act/16216> (accessed 2 June 2017), and G. Pleyers, *A Decade of World Social Forums: Internationalisation without Institutionalisation?*, in: M. Kaldor et al. (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2012: Ten Years of Critical Reflection*, Basingstoke 2012, p. 177.

42 H. Gautney (fn. 5), p. 101.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

affiliation. The idea of an open space, though problematic in practice, reflects activists' desire for a form of globalization that allows for ideological heterogeneity.⁴⁴

Although the organizers had the ambition to bring groups together from diverse ideological backgrounds, it has been pointed out that the WSF "is predominantly a meeting place of a leftist [...] counterelite advocating on behalf of the most deprived and poorest people."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the organizing process has been criticized by activists and scholars alike for its opaqueness, as well as its domination by a small group of self-selected activists.⁴⁶ Power imbalances between different groups in the forum constitute continuous lines of conflicts, most notably between resource-strong NGOs and resource-poor grass-roots groups,⁴⁷ as well as between proponents of more hierarchical organizational styles of the traditional Left, or big NGOs and advocates of horizontal democracy. Another cleavage runs along discussions of the purpose of the WSF in the mobilization for global social change: some activists, most notably Chico Whitaker, advocated that the WSF's purpose is restricted to the facilitation of discussions about alternatives to neoliberalism. Concrete action should be organized outside the framework of the forum. Other activists, however, sought to transform the WSF into a political actor that is "capable of deciding and carrying out collective actions in the name of the WSF."⁴⁸ This cleavage, the power imbalances, and the ideological leanings characterized the landscape of transnational activism at the beginning of the new millennium.

The model of the social forum was taken up by activists in many places in the world from the local to the regional level. In 2002, the first European Social Forum (ESF) took place in Florence, Italy, with 60,000 participants, and an adjacent protest march was organized that gathered up to 1 million protesters. In addition, more than 50 local social fora were held in Italy alone during that time.⁴⁹ During the ESF, an initial call for globally coordinated protests against the looming Iraq War had been published. This call influenced the development of the protests against the war, which was the "largest civic-driven single-day mobilization in the history of humankind."⁵⁰ It is estimated that between 2002–2006 over 160 social-forum gatherings in more than 120 cities have been held – and more than 1 million people participated in them.⁵¹ This indicates that the WSF could be considered a role model and central node in an emerging network of spaces for social movements.

In 2003, the WSF met in Porto Alegre for the third time in a row. Participation in this forum doubled. The success of the WSF in Porto Alegre in the early 2000s indicates that

44 Cf. G. Pleyers (fn. 7).

45 D. Rucht (fn. 10), p. 19.

46 For example, T. Teivainen, *The Political and Its Absence in the World Social Forum – Implications for Democracy*, in: *Development and Dialogue* (2007) 47, pp. 69–79.

47 See P. Bond, *Linking Below, Across and Against*, in: *Development Dialogue* (2007) 49, pp. 81–95.

48 For example, B. de S. Santos (fn. 37), p. 121.

49 H. Gautney (fn. 5), p. 55.

50 T. Teivainen, *Global Democratization without Hierarchy or Leadership? The World Social Forum in the Capitalist World*, in: S. Gill (ed.), *Global Crises and the Crisis of Global Leadership*, Cambridge 2012, p. 193.

51 D. Rucht (fn. 10), p. 17.

the city may be seen as an emerging portal of globalization for social movements. The yearly gatherings of activists from all over the world turned the city into a place where practices for dealing with global interconnectedness have been developed.⁵² Over the years, the city gained a reputation for its competence in hosting social movements. Until today, Porto Alegre regularly hosts thematic social fora. Social-movement organizations from around the world can build on the support and experience of local institutions and social-movement organizations in Porto Alegre.⁵³ This is why it makes sense, for example, that a social forum on Palestine in November 2012 was held in Porto Alegre, and not in an Arab-speaking country.

The organizational design and the intention of the WSF can be interpreted, first, as a space for sharing experiences about globalization processes and, secondly, as a project facilitating the flows of ideas on how to influence the course of globalization. Considering the variety of actors that are involved, the WSF is a space of mutual influence of otherwise disconnected social entities. According to the scholar and activist Hilary Wainwright, “encounters within the WSF have enabled traditionally marginalized groups that lack obvious strategic power to move from a consciousness of injustice and oppression to an awareness of feasible connections and directions through which they can achieve change.”⁵⁴ For example, the social fora have been one of the incubators of a European as well as an African network against the privatization of water, which connects locally rooted struggles.⁵⁵ In conclusion, the activities in the WSF can be considered an important step in the effort of the alter-globalization movement to become a global actor. The politics of space and networking established the WSF as a portal of globalization for the alter-globalization movement.

The city of Porto Alegre could be considered the location of this particular portal. However, Porto Alegre experienced a significant setback in this respect: since the third WSF, the Brazilian organizers were faced with an increasing critique about the style of organization and the influence of the Workers’ Party. Together with the concern about the under-representation of participants from Africa and Asia, this critique led to the decision by the International Council (the steering committee of the WSF) to rotate the location of the WSF. The rotation of the forum brought the politics of place and scale to the fore.

52 Cf. M. Middell and K. Naumann (fn. 26), p. 162.

53 To a certain extent, Porto Alegre also seems to become a *lieu de memoire* [a site of memory used to order, concentrate, and secure notions of the past] of global social-movement organization. Historians might be interested to inquire about the possible changes in city legislation that must have been necessary to accommodate an event like the WSF.

54 H. Wainwright, *Civil Society, Democracy and Power: Global Connections*, in: H.K. Anheier, M. Glasius and M. Kaldor (eds.), *Global Civil Society 2004/5*, London 2005, p. 112.

55 G. Pleyers (fn. 41), p. 177.

3.2 The Politics of Place and Scale

The rotation of the forum deepened the intended global character of the WSF. The 2004 forum took place in Mumbai, India. The choice reflected the organizers' assessment that Mumbai represents a critical intersection of economic, social, and cultural globalization processes.⁵⁶ On the one hand, the city is one of the largest financial centres in the Global South; it houses important parts of India's thriving and globally connected IT industry, and it is home to India's main film industry, Bollywood, which attracts a global audience. From this perspective, the city benefits from globalization processes. On the other hand, more than half of its inhabitants live in poverty, and the society is riveted by social and religious tensions. This side of Mumbai is a stark contrast to the economic and cultural success story of a globalized Mumbai.⁵⁷ The WSF in Mumbai articulated these contradictions and gave voice especially to the most marginalized in Indian society through the participation of an estimated 30,000 Dalits, formerly known as "untouchables." If we wanted to analyse the spatial politics of the WSF and its relation to regimes of territorialization, then we cannot start from a conceptualization of place as a physical site or area alone. Political geographers have put forward conceptualizations that interpret place as a cultural or social location, which sheds light on how places bear different meanings for different actors.⁵⁸ Others, most prominently Doreen Massey, emphasize the dynamic and changing character of place over time. In Massey's view, place is shaped by human activity but, in turn, also influences the opportunities and barriers for those who respond to broader shifts in political and economic structures.⁵⁹ Agnew has conceptualized place as a social process. He unpacks the concept into three dimensions:

*Locale, the settings in which social relations are constituted (these can be informal or institutional); location, the geographical area encompassing the settings for social interaction as defined by social and economic processes operating at a wider scale; and sense of place, the local "structure of feeling." A key tenet is that the local social worlds of place (locale) cannot be understood apart from the objective macro-order of location and the subjective territorial identity of sense of place.*⁶⁰

All three conceptualizations of place are valuable for the analysis of the WSF, but Agnew's conceptualization provides the best link between the spatial politics of movement actors and the framework of regimes of territorialization. The latter are accepted patterns of spatialization that can be used to control and regulate the entanglements and flows in a particular place. From a place perspective, such regimes represent relatively stable

56 H. Gautney (fn. 5), pp. 59–60, and B. de S. Santos (fn. 37), pp. 72–77.

57 Cf. B. de S. Santos (fn. 37), pp. 75–76.

58 For example, T. Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place. Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Minneapolis 1996.

59 L.A. Staeheli, *Place*, in: J. Agnew, K. Mitchell and G. Toal (eds.), *A Companion to Political Geography*, Malden 2003, p. 162, and D.B. Massey, *For Space*, London 2005.

60 J. Agnew, *Place and Politics: The Geographical Mediation of State and Society*, Boston 1987, p. 28.

configurations of locale, location, and sense of place. From my point of view, the WSF destabilizes such configurations.

The destabilizing moment is carried out by providing a representational space for the “sense of (global) place” of marginalized groups. Holding a WSF in Mumbai – with the specific policy guideline “to democratize the organization of and participation in the WSF as much as possible, so as to render more visible the social inequalities that characterize India” – gives weight to those who are marginalized by globalization processes.⁶¹ Such a strategy has already been applied by social movements in Thailand, which brought attention to the consequences of globalization for the rural population, with the establishment of a “village of the poor” in Bangkok in 1997.⁶² The occupations of squares in North Africa, Spain, Greece, and by the Occupy movements in 2011 have followed similar strategies. The analysis of the politics of place of the WSF helps to understand how the story of marginalized local groups are becoming embedded in a narrative of competing projects about globalization.

The inclusion of marginalized groups in the WSF process is part of an endeavour to build an opposition of a “global Left” against neoliberal and corporate-driven globalization. However, this formation process is not free of power imbalances. According to Janet Conway’s assessment, the participation of subaltern subjectivities takes place in a subordinate way.⁶³ The WSF mainly provides visibility of the margins but does not sufficiently include their topics in the discourses of the WSF. For example, the 2009 WSF in Belém, Brazil, was characterized by several different discourses of crisis; the global financial crisis and the food, climate, and ecological crises were among the most prominent ones. Indigenous groups of the Amazon and other Latin American regions brought a discourse of civilizational crisis, which began with the colonization of the Americas. The idea of civilizational crisis was taken up by other groups in the forum.⁶⁴ However, as Conway points out, the indigenous discourses were “heard and incorporated insofar as they are resonant with available non-Indigenous understandings.”⁶⁵ She argues that those indigenous discourses were more readily appropriated, which “deployed political categories familiar to the global left, such as capitalism and the state.”⁶⁶ The idea of civilizational crisis was incorporated into an anti-capitalist narrative of the global Left. However, the dimension of indigenous discourses, which saw the Left itself as part of a “civilizational matrix” that has caused the crisis for indigenous people, remained under-explored in the declarations that were published during the forum in 2009.⁶⁷ The mutual influence of different dis-

61 B. de S. Santos (fn. 37), p. 73.

62 B. Missingham, *The Village of the Poor Confronts the State: A Geography of Protest in the Assembly of the Poor*, in: *Urban Studies* 39 (2002) 9, pp. 1647–1663, and *The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand*, Chiang Mai 2003.

63 J. Conway (fn. 7), p. 145.

64 See for example *Assembly of Social Movements, Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements, 2009 WSF – Belém, 2009*, <https://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article12821> (accessed 2 June 2017).

65 J. Conway, *Global civil society as ‘contact zone’: Indigenous discourses of civilizational crisis and their reception at the World Social Forum, San Francisco 2013*, pp. 25–26.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

67 J. Conway (fn. 7), p. 26.

courses in the WSF seems to take place with a power advantage of leftist interpretations of globalization. Whereas the global Left frames globalization predominantly in terms of a critique of capitalism, some indigenous groups were pushing for a view of globalization as a Western colonial project. The WSF is not simply a place of anti-neoliberalism, but it is a portal of globalization that inhabits different actors competing for the recognition of their interpretation of the nature of globalization.

Notwithstanding her critique, Conway points out many positive aspects of the WSF. Among them is the spatial praxis of the WSF. She argues that this praxis is unique because it enacts “horizontal relations among places and scales in a radically alternative vision of globalization.”⁶⁸ It is the idea that a horizontal exchange between local and global struggles is possible. Conway sees a new form of internationalism emerging, one that recognizes the right of groups to participate “regardless of the spatial scale(s) at which they operate.”⁶⁹ This parts with previous forms of internationalisms, which implied a hierarchical order of organization and networking along a relatively fixed order from the local to the global level. Similarly, Pleyers associates one of the most significant changes in global civil society in the last ten years with the WSF because it helped grass-roots networks to realize that “their internationalisation did not necessarily require NGOs.”⁷⁰ The scalar politics of the WSF is indeed noteworthy, and I wish to highlight another aspect of it. If we understand scales as socially constructed spaces of engagement, we can ask how these scales are constituted by the different actors involved.⁷¹ It follows that we can analyse how the WSF underlines claims of legitimate engagement in a socio-spatial order through scale-framing. In 2013, the WSF in Tunis, Tunisia, cut across scalar distinctions, which favoured the separation of the local/national and the global. The WSF constructed the local Tunisian civil society as a matter of global importance. Tunisia was the starting point of the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010 and, hence, it became a place of global importance for the alter-globalization movement. First of all, it should be noted that the WSF process and the alter-globalization movement had no significant impact on the Arab Spring during the confrontation of the opposition with authoritarian regimes. Hence, during the 2011 WSF, participants questioned the use of the forum as it did not seem to have contributed to the “bottom-up” regime change in the Arab region.

Taking into account that the transformation process in Tunisia was still underway and precarious, the organizers of the Tunis forum saw a chance to revitalize it. The Tunisian grass-roots civil society was faced with marginalization in the transformation process. A mass gathering of social movements lent support to Tunisian civil society in the critical phase of constitutional change: first, in the form of symbolic support, by showing solidarity in demonstrations during the forum, and secondly, the networking space of the forum facilitated the transfer of skills and knowledge deemed necessary for a strong civil

68 Ibid., p. 145.

69 Ibid.

70 G. Pleyers (fn. 41), p. 176.

71 D. Harvey, *Spaces of capital: towards a critical geography*, New York 2001, p. 233.

society. The idea to revitalize the WSF as a global actor that is able to assist grass-roots struggles in democratization processes is a form of scale-framing and part of the spatial politics of the alter-globalization movement.

The support for the democratization process should not be seen as a politically neutral project. It is a democratization process as imagined (mainly) by a global Left. The organizers were critical towards the participation of what they called “fundamental Islamist groups” in the forum. Furthermore, unions had been the privileged partners at the local level. The WSF mostly benefited leftist progressive groups and unions in Tunisia. In addition, the organizational necessities of this global event resulted in an ambiguous relationship with the Tunisian government. In practice, how far the WSF in Tunis was capable and willing to support the Tunisian “grass-roots” civil society can be questioned. On a discursive level, however, the global support for Tunisian civil society through a WSF points to an important aspect of studying globalization from the perspective of social movements. The regime change gave hope that “bottom-up” social change and democratization is possible in the twenty-first century. As a result, the questions for the alter-globalization movement were, first, whether there can be a sustained influence of grass-roots civil society in the transformation process, and secondly, whether the WSF is capable of supporting grass-roots groups to maintain such an influence. As researchers, we can study how local developments become embedded in global processes through an actor that promotes a bottom-up conception of global change.

4. Conclusion

The WSF has sparked many hopes and expectations among activists of the alter-globalization movement around the world. As one observer put it, the WSF “is making striking contributions to the reinvention of global politics.”⁷² This assessment might be too optimistic, but it exemplifies the significance the alter-globalization movement attributes to the WSF.

The major aim of this paper was to capture this significance with the concept of portals of globalization. This concept enables us to describe the WSF as a place where the many different and geographically dispersed actors in the alter-globalization movement can share their experiences and strategies. The WSF is a global crystallization point of social movements, which enables researchers to study experiences of processes of globalization in a condensed way.

The open-space format of the WSF facilitated the mutual engagement of activists at the transnational level. It created a space for networking between ideologically or geographically disconnected groups, who felt or feared the negative effects of globalization processes. The forum has shown the ability to facilitate convergence on issues, and it helped to

72 Grzybowski cited in D. Rucht (fn. 10), p. 23.

build coalitions as well as global solidarity.⁷³ To varying degrees, the development of the WSF has shown that it is a learning space for civil society groups where they can acquire competences for dealing with the challenges of globalization processes.

Another major goal of this paper was to scrutinize the complex spatialities that are involved in the WSF. I argued that regimes of territorialization can be understood as relatively stable configurations of locale, location, and sense of place. The WSF is not a portal that helps to enforce such configurations but rather (discursively) destabilizes them to some respect. With the help of the example of the WSF in Mumbai, I suggested that it gave weight to alternative versions of sense of place in a globalized Mumbai. The forum provided those, who became or remain marginalized in globalization processes, with a voice. My aim was to point out the advantage of an analysis of place as social process, which may lead to an answer on how the WSF uncovers and discursively challenges the global entanglements of the social order of hierarchies in the locations where the forum takes place.

The WSF interacts with regimes of territorialization in a second sense. This interaction includes spatial imaginaries of appropriate scales of interaction. The mobility of the WSF strengthened the character of the forum as an event that can deliberately be placed into a particular location of (perceived) global importance, which interacts with the territorializing regime of that particular place and its global entanglements. The idea to revitalize the WSF as a global actor that is able to assist grass-roots struggles in democratization processes is a strategy to cross-cut scales of legitimate engagement. The spatial politics of the WSF give reasons to argue that the WSF is one of the places where the alter-globalization movement attempts to shape a “bottom-up” global social change. Whether this entails that the WSF puts forward a profoundly different regime of territorialization than other global actors, remains to be studied.

73 For the model of convergence applied here, see G. Pleyers (fn. 7).