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Toward a Vision of Sexual and Economic Justice  
Thought Paper

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## SEXUAL JUSTICE AND ALTER-GLOBALIZATION

One way to consider actual or potential relations between sexual justice and economic justice is to ask, how is, or isn't, sexuality included in the actually existing alter-globalization (or anti-globalization) movement? How do (or don't) sexual-rights advocates see the alter-globalization movement as relevant for their struggles?

In the post-Cold-War period, the most vibrant and extensive calls for economic justice at the transnational level are the disparate political projects that loosely cohere under the labels global justice or anti/alter-globalization. These movements crystallized in the series of protests beginning dramatically in 1990 in Seattle. They came together at the World Social Forum, a large gathering that took place primarily in the global south between 2001 and 2007. Feminists have noted that the relation of alter-globalization movements to feminism is uneven, incomplete, or not thought through.<sup>i</sup> If that is so for feminism, the place of sexual justice has been even less clearly articulated. My focus here is on the World Social Forum as one manifestation of global justice movements, a cardinal site for working out the "rhetorics and practices of resistance in the present context: and for "reimagining global justice," to quote from the questions that framed the Barnard colloquium.

As political projects, sexual justice and global justice entail differing geographies, scales, and paces, differences that hold implications for their engagement. The World Social Forum is premised on the notion that transnational forces require transnational struggles, ideally centered in/on the global south (but not exclusively so). Even where the struggle are "local," such a global focus is obviously relevant for the mobility of capital and the transnational forces. Organizing for sexual rights, however, has a complicated, somewhat paradoxical scalar quality. Organizing around sexual issues takes aim at the diffuse realm of culture, attitudes, and public opinion – one where transnational venues can matter for shaping political discourse worldwide.<sup>ii</sup> Many of those activists for sexual rights at the World Social Forum had taken part in 20+ years of international organizing for sexual rights within Human Rights groups, the UN, and through NGOs.<sup>iii</sup> LGBTQ and women's sexual-rights advocacy thus targeted the transnational scale of the UN orbit or the global civil society in order to advance discourse about sexual rights. However, at the same time, in general, the ultimate target of such advocacy remained the national level of state governments. Advocates for sexual rights have targeted the transnational arena for strategic reasons more than for a worked out analysis of the transnational as domain salient to sexuality.

Sexual rights advocates find a sympathetic ground at the WSF although the incorporation of sexual politics into WSF visions is piecemeal and partial. The limited attention to sexuality in Forum texts shows that sexuality does not "count" in the same way that food security, sovereignty, and US imperialism do for constructing alternative visions to the dominant world order. WSF documents range from silent to erratic on the question of sexual rights. The 2005 WSF "press release" of sorts, the "Call from social

movements for mobilizations against the war, neoliberalism, exploitation and exclusion,” writes:

We recognize diversity in sexual orientation as an expression of an alternative world and we condemn mercantilization. Movements commit to participate in the struggle against exclusion based on identity, gender and homophobia. We will unite our voices against all forms of mercantilization of the body of women and GLBT.<sup>iv</sup>

The WSF paragraph (and others) presents sexuality mainly in two ways: as a positive part multicultural diversity and as a symptom of the exploitation of global capitalism, notably trafficking in women and girls and sex tourism.

The first component – the WSF recognition of “sexual orientation as an expression of an alternative world” represents an expansive shift from the origins of the WSF as protest against capitalist globalization (and the World Economic Forum) in 2001. Sexual and to a very limited extent gender diversity is now at least occasionally included in a broad vision of global justice. The emphasis is on welcoming diversity *within* the progressive movement itself. The WSF in Brazil and India are characterized by a marked emphasis on political means as vital to progressive politics. The WSF and alter-globalization movements represent not only critiques of global capital but also critiques previous left movements, notably the centralization and normativity of parties, and attempting among other things to avoid the sexism, homophobia, nationalism or other violent exclusions found in the history of struggles for economic justice. One of the ways sexuality enters into the Forum is within the commitments to diversity in post-communist, processual, inclusive politics, a tacit rebuke of the homophobia found historically (and still) in many progressive struggles. As a corrective, a political emphasis on inclusive alternatives allows sexuality to be part of the movement for, and in theory part of a vision of a more just world.

Yet how sexual orientation might be “an expression of an alternative world” has not been explored in Forum texts. There is a pronounced difference in the level of precision in discussions of such established material issues as food,<sup>v</sup> global trade, Cuba or Palestine and those of sex. Sex, in WSF texts, seem mostly to be an afterthought. The emphasis in 2005 documents on “mercantilization” is typical of the way that sexuality appears as an illustration of the harm of globalization. Yet “mercantilization” does not echo any mobilizations for sexual justice I know of. It could, along with mention of the “sex trade,”<sup>vi</sup> reference trafficking of women and girls. Yet while an obvious subject for critics of global capitalism, anti-trafficking groups were not present at the Forum. Rather, anti-trafficking groups have focused their efforts on laws and policies, targeting the United Nations, member states, and police forces concerned with international crime. (Anti-trafficking organizations like CATW have worked with the US department of state -- hardly a manifestation of alter-globalization politics.) Indeed, the WSF texts’ emphasis on “mercantilization” or the sex trade per se is at odds with most local radical organizing: sex-worker organizing, women’s organizations working on sex work and trafficking (not at all of which unite behind anti-trafficking measures), or most international GLBTQ organizing. In general these projects emphasize the rights of sex workers and insist that the sex-work component should not be the focus of efforts to address the problems of trafficking. By emphasizing mercantilization, the 2005 WSF text presents a *hypothetical* rather than a *political* interpretation of the relationship of sexuality and global justice, assessing the problem as the presence of the market economy rather than incorporating the demands of actual radical activists working on these issues. This gap between actual pro-sex advocacy and WSF texts points to a limited engagement between these

movements. It suggests that there may be profound differences in the analysis of what sexual rights/justice might mean for activism around sex work and activism criticizing global capitalism.

It would be a mistake to only discuss WSF documents as the way to evaluate the visions of these different movements. The textual level is limited in illuminating the relationship between alter-globalization and sexual politics. What is taking place on the ground at the WSF is different, particularly since the 2004 Mumbai Forum, and varies at Forum held in different regions. In Mumbai in 2004, there was a panel on “LGBT alternative strategies to exclusionary globalization.” Next year, the 2005 Porto Alegre Forum included a tent dedicated to “sexual diversity” and a number of panels that addressed LGBT issues, and stalls representing a Brazilian sex worker organization and the International Gay Games. Other sexual-rights groups present at the 2005 Forum included the US-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), South-South LGBT, and Brazilian organizations. In the 2007 World Social Forum in Kenya (which I did not attend), sexual rights were discussed at several panels. A leading left-male theorist of the Forum, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, is unusual for mentioning sexuality as part of political alternatives. In practice, some GLBT groups and feminists find the WSF a relevant site to link progressive sexual politics with other struggles. At the same time the presence of sexual politics at the forum is clearly limited.

vii

One Forum event offers a concrete example of the convergence between sexual and economic politics. Organized by the Feminist Dialogues,<sup>viii</sup> a network of women’s organizations in the global south, this panel aimed to model dialogue across four political sectors: feminism, GLBTQ, labor, and race. Each speaker discussed points of convergence as well as critique of other movements. While a conversation among four representatives on one hot afternoon in a riverside warehouse in Porto Alegre is obviously circumscribed, it provides a noteworthy model for incorporating sexuality with more recognized forms of radical political claims. The Feminist Dialogue’s other event also included attention to sexuality and sexual diversity in conjunction with discussion of global capitalism, US imperialism, militarization, and fundamentalism.

Organizations in the global south have done a better job making these links between economic and sexual justice. The Feminist Dialogues’ effort at intersectional analysis (showing how militarization and capitalism affect third-world women’s bodies) represents one example. A small organization, GLBT South-South Dialogue – founded by a black South African lesbian now based in Latin America and Ecuadorian lesbian – consistently emphasizes a critique of globalization. They have published a small volume and hosted panels at the World Social Forum to explore these connections.<sup>ix</sup> The southern feminist group DAWN – Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era – has issued statements on sexual rights as part of its work for feminist global justice.<sup>x</sup> Other groups that have struggled to shift projects on population, family planning, or health to reproductive and sexual *rights* often present a keen awareness of material, economic issues that is predicated on a critique of global political economy. Many progressive networks include individuals who are activists for both sexual and economic justice. Just one example: One of the only people to mention sexuality at the 2004 African Social Forum in Mali was an Afrikaans South African labor organizer, a lesbian, who had been imprisoned under apartheid.

Aside from the examples of Feminist Dialogue, GLBT South-Dialogue, and a few individual activists, I have not seen sexual-rights advocates dedicate consistent effort to linking sexual politics with critiques of global capital and visions for alternative worlds.

Many transnational sexual-rights advocates are allied with alter-globalization struggles, yet institutionally and theoretically have not often forged alliances or analyzed relations to transnational struggles for economic justice. Certainly this has to do with the different political domains of the sexual and economic. It also emerges from the different geographic scales of politics for each domain I noted above. Claims about the sexual usually target political institutions and cultural norms. Especially in the global north, some claims for queer sexual rights have benefited from the resources of corporate capitalism, such as selective gay-friendly policies for elite workers in US corporations (that are unavailable to subcontracted staff or overseas producers). Connections and failures of articulation among sexual and economic movements also are a consequence of specific political and institutional histories, on one hand the homophobia of various lefts and on the other hand, the strategies of mainstream LGBT organizing, feminism, and advocacy in the UN-NGO orbit, which have worked with market and state structures and ignored economic justice. The World Social Forum offers one concrete venue to explore linkages among actually existing projects for economic and sexual justice.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> On the relation of alter-globalization movements to feminism, see Catherine Eschle, "Skeleton Women': Feminism and the Antiglobalization Movement." *Signs* 30.3 (2005): 1741-70. On the World Social Forum and feminism, see the special issue of the *Journal of International Women's Studies* 8(3) April 2007 at <http://www.bridgew.edu/SoAS/jiws/April07/index.htm>; Sonia E. Alvarez, Nalu Faria, and Miriam Nobre. "Another (Also Feminist) World Is Possible: Constructing Transnational Spaces and Global Alternatives from the Movements." *The WSF: Challenging Empires*. 2006. October 20 (2004).

<sup>ii</sup> But in the realm of public opinion, LGBTQ prominence in the media is a double-edged phenomenon. It helps to shape a cosmopolitan worldview that is against homophobia, at the same time, being presented in corporate media, this presence reinforces an association of sexual-rights or sexual diversity with the materialism, capitalism, and imperialism of the West and also presents queer rights as a *fait accompli* – even a domain of special privilege (e.g., films about straight white men masquerading as gay to realize some institutional or political benefit) – rather than a period of entrenched backlash and struggle.

<sup>iii</sup> In those years of organizing in the UN-NGO orbit, advocates found that sexual rights are not remotely as legible as calls for political rights or economic justice. It was considered either a luxury issue of the industrialized West or a form of Western, materialist imperialism. The form of sexual rights that obtain most visibility is *negative* rights, that is, freedom from harm, in issues like sex trafficking or sexual violence – issues that also happen to fit with commonplace notions of women's sexual purity and vulnerability. To consider positive rights – the right to a full sexuality, to sexual pleasure – is much more difficult to frame, particularly as a *material* issue. In some venues, sexual rights are most visible when they articulate with the market economy. For example, in the U.S., it is easier to argue that gays and lesbians should not face barriers to employment (except in faith-based organizations) than it is to argue for other rights. Another limit that sexual-rights advocates confronted both in the UN-NGO orbit and in more radical circles is the repeated assertion that sexual rights were a Western, Northern issue, one either reserved for advanced economies (which developing countries could only arrive at later) or else another example of the imperialist force of Western materialism. For years, the major organizations concerned with sexual rights – IGLHRC, ILGA, Amnesty International -- did not directly address this perception. Arguably, they still have not fully presented arguments about the material dimensions of sexuality. The recognition of this limit may explain why some sexual-justice advocates see the importance of aligning their projects with the WSF and with the alter-globalization movement. See Ara Wilson, "The Transnational Geography of Sexual Rights." In *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*. Eds. Mark Philip Bradley and Patrice Petro. Pp. 253-265. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002.

<sup>iv</sup> WSF, January 31 2005.

([http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/wsf/portoalegre2005/0131call\\_from\\_social\\_movements.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/wsf/portoalegre2005/0131call_from_social_movements.htm), accessed 3/8/05).

<sup>v</sup> On food, the 2005 World Social Forum statement speaks with great precision:

We struggle for the universal right to healthy and sufficient food. We struggle for the right of the peoples, nations and peasants to produce their own food. We manifest against subsidies to exports which destroy the economies of rural communities. Let's avoid food dumping; another agenda item, We reject GMO foods because besides threatening our

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health and the environment, they are an instrument for five transnationals to have control of all markets. We reject patents on any form of life and in special on seeds, since the intention is the appropriation of our resources and the knowledge associated to them. We demand the Agrarian Reform as a strategy to allow the access of peasants to land, and healthy and sufficient food, and not to be concentrated in the hands of transnationals and latifundiários.

<sup>vi</sup> Supporting the World March of Women, the Forum text writes, “We call all movements to organize feminist actions during this period against free trade, *sex trade*, militarization and food sovereignty.”

<sup>vii</sup> At the regional forum, the African Social Forum, held in Mali in 2004, there was barely any mention of sexuality; it remained implicit in discussions of AIDS and rights of the girl child. While organizing around these issues has been fraught outside of South Africa, there are African gay, lesbian, and trans organizing efforts. But they were not integrated into a broader progressive African movement that affiliates with the WSF.

<sup>viii</sup> "Feminist Dialogues 2005 Focus on Militarism, Fundamentalism and Globalisation". 2005. Online. Isis. Isis Women.

<http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/we/archive/msg00202.html#fd>.

<sup>ix</sup> Irene León and Phumi Mtetwa, eds., *Globalization: GLBT Alternatives*, Quito, Ecuador: GLBT South-South Dialogue, 2003.

<sup>x</sup> DAWN consistently attends to reproductive and sexual rights. One example is the talk at the 2007 World Social Forum in Africa, “Sexuality in Africa Regional Perspective” given by Bene E. Madunagu, the General Coordinator of DAWN. Available at [http://www.dawnnet.org/ARCHIVE/NOTICE\\_BOARD.HTML#aff](http://www.dawnnet.org/ARCHIVE/NOTICE_BOARD.HTML#aff) (accessed 8/30/07).