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Margaret Thatcher’s mantra, TINA (there is no alternative), championed the near universal application of a monolithic economic model – free market liberalism dominated by the financial forces of the West. Intensified by the fall of the Soviet Union, this futile disposition toward alternatives defined the ethos of the first half of the 1990s. It seemed that capitalism was as inevitable as aging, maybe even more so with the use of Botox.

However, with the emergence of movements in the mid-1990s such as the popular insurrection launched against NAFTA in 1994 by the EZLN and the massive labor action of the French public service workers in 1995, the iron cage of a pro-capitalist ideology appeared a little less sturdy. By the time 50,000 demonstrators in Seattle, on 30 November 1999, blockaded the ministerial meeting of the WTO it became evident that many people had rejected capital’s “Hobson’s choice.” The World Social Forum (WSF), a plural and open meeting space for reflection, development of ideas, and coordination of actions, emerged on this wave of social dissidence.

Both The World Social Forum by José Corrêa Leite and Another World Is Possible edited by William Z. Fischer and Thomas Ponniah grapple with various questions related to the WSF. Together, they suggest that the WSF represents a new type of activism, what Leite calls, “the twenty-first century Left” (2005, p. 19). Unlike the old left or even the new left, this “new new left” is made novel by its retreat from national movements and political parties. It rejects the old universalism and defines its particular brand of radicalism on the liberation of difference. However, it retains the “left” by continuing to position itself firmly against militarism and capitalism. Fischer and Ponniah argue that the new new left envisages a future that goes beyond the goals and tactics of socialist or identity based movements (2004, p. 15). In terms of goals, instead of a post-capitalist democratization of production, the new new left seeks the democratization of “ecological, epistemological, gendered, ethnic, sexual, cultural, social, political, intergenerational and interpersonal relationships” (p. 15). In terms of tac-
tics, the new new left calls for networks of all progressive forces to replace an exclusive reliance on unions or identity groups. Both works attempt to explain this new layer of activism and form of dissidence from unique vantage points.

Leite’s piece is informative, clearly written, and provides an excellent introduction to the WSF and the issues that surround it. For instance, many chapters include subsections that give useful summaries of the various IFIs, agreements, and issues that are most contested in the realm of global governance and economic development. There is also a very helpful section at the end of the book that lists the main organizations involved in the formation of the WSF along with their contact information. In addition, Leite includes a number of short essays in the book by other authors. Most notable is a bitingly well-written piece by Naomi Klein entitled “A Fête for the End of the End of History.”

At its core, The World Social Forum is a history of the emergence and development of the WSF. Overall, the account it gives is quite convincing. Leite claims that the WSF emerged out of changing social relations such as the internationalization of finance capital, transformations in management methods – the development of lean production, the growing salience of Bretton Woods institutions, a space-time compression, the fragmentation of movements, and a recomposition of the working class in the West. These changes generated a response by the various movements mentioned above, which in turn created the conditions within activism to make the WSF a possibility.

The first WSF was held Jan 25–30, 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Four thousand delegates, 16,000 registered participants, and an unknown amount of walk-ins made it an overwhelming success in terms of attendance (Leite 2005, p. 82). Leite offers the reader an initial balance sheet on the forum. He attempts to answer two questions, “what is it?” and “what is it doing?” In terms of the former, Leite claims that the WSF is a space rather than an organization (p. 136). Along these lines the WSF, “does not issue positions as a body.” Furthermore, he claims that it is a process that is part of a larger movement. It acts as a kind of reference point for a global movement that it does not represent (p. 137). In terms of the latter question, Leite argues that by creating autonomous learning experiences, the WSF is, “... contributing to altering the ideological climate of today’s world,” based on marketization and militarism (p. 138). Finally, he claims that it is a place for meeting and incorporating a new political generation into the left by facilitating the formation of networks of action and activism.