

## **There's Something Happening here: the U.S. Social Forum in Context**

Jackie Smith, Jeffrey Juris and the USSF Research Collective\*

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In late June, 2007, an estimated 15,000 people gathered in Atlanta Georgia for the first United States Social Forum. The meeting was arguably one of the largest and most diverse political gatherings in U.S. history, as it attracted large numbers of people of color, low-income, indigenous, disabled, and non-gender conforming people. More importantly, the meeting was part of a much larger and truly global World Social Forum movement that has, since 2001, mobilized hundreds of thousands of people from over one 130 countries. Given the size and the diversity of World Social Forum (WSF) gatherings-- global meetings of the WSF have attracted as many as 150,000-- as well as their transnational character, it is rather surprising that hardly any U.S. sociologists researching social movements have devoted much attention to the World Social Forums or their many local and national manifestations.<sup>1</sup> In fact, we continue to be surprised that many scholars studying social movements (particularly those in the United States) have little or no knowledge of the WSF. And this is despite the fact that a scholar as respected and prominent as Immanuel Wallerstein ( 2004) has compared the World Social Forums their associated movements with the world revolution of 1968.

But this would not be the first time the scholarly community was not prepared to anticipate and make sense of significant social movements emerging before its eyes. The theoretical traditions of contemporary social movement scholarship emerged out of critiques of existing social theory during the movements of the 1960s and 70s, and they were developed largely by scholars who were themselves active in these movements. Then, and possibly now, social movements' emergence may help us adapt and improve the theories and methods of social research.

Oliver's research on the repression of African Americans in the U.S. offers further insights into the systematic blind spots of our theoretical traditions, which have led scholars to overlook "movements by the most oppressed and repressed members of U.S. society" ( 2008:1).<sup>2</sup> She argues that predominant approaches to the study of political repression have focused on state responses to public protest, and thus scholars haven't noticed how the U.S. state used crime control and discriminatory policing practices to diminish the Black Power movement starting in the 1960s and continuing today.<sup>3</sup> Such disproportionate use of surveillance and arrest by the state, Oliver argues, constitutes political repression on an enormous scale. The fact that the scholarly

community missed this story has considerable practical as well as theoretical implications.

The World Social Forum is another example of how our theory has limited our ability to see important developments in the world around us. This paper aims to help familiarize scholars with the U.S. Social Forum and its relationship to the larger World Social Forum process. We use collaborative, global ethnography (Burawoy, Joseph A, George, Gille, Gowan, Haney, Klawiter, Lopez, O'Riain, and Thayer 2000; Gille and O'Riain 2002), and the extended case method<sup>4</sup> to describe some of what took place during an intense five-day meeting that helped connect U.S. social movements with a global process of movement-building that is the World Social Forum process. In this sense, we are helping to “ground globalization,” or to demonstrate how the processes associated with global integration are impacting social movement actors in various places and over time. The WSF is a global process that seeks to help local organizers understand and analyze their experiences within a global economic and political context. At the same time it seeks to nurture new identities that encompass the global and that can forge unity across diverse geographic, political, and cultural groups.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in the spaces of the Social Forums, the local and the global are mutually constitutive (Burawoy et al. 2000).

The report we provide here is an attempt to describe and analyze the USSF as an iteration of the WSF process. Because of the superpower role of the United States, as well as U.S. belligerence and intransigence in global affairs, counter-hegemonic mobilization within this country is both necessary for improving social and ecological conditions throughout the world and probably more difficult.<sup>6</sup> What we provide is an admittedly limited window on the Forum—which was far too large and dispersed for our 21-member observer team to fully capture. We have summarized our observations along some general themes that have emerged in the course of the WSF process and through dialogue and debate among activists and scholars. In many ways, the result is more descriptive than most articles appearing in the pages of *Mobilization*, but we believe our account can help expand awareness of this important global movement while fostering critical reflection on our theories and methods of studying social movements in the contemporary global era. We hope the report will generate new questions and interest in this process and to provide an empirical basis for further investigation of coalition-building and transnational impacts on today's social movements.

Much work in the study of social movements is state-centric. It fails to account for the fact that states are dynamic entities, evolving over time and in interaction with a variety of social actors. Contemporary states are both shaped by their position in the world economy as well as by their embeddedness in relationships to other states, international institutions, and entities such as transnational corporations and social movements. Many activists within the WSF process see themselves as advancing new forms of politics that are necessary because of the failures of representative democracy within the global neoliberal context. They speak explicitly about “experimentation” with new forms of democracy, and some are aware of their role in helping articulate new institutional arrangements to remedy the democratic deficit that has resulted from economic globalization. Our existing theoretical lenses lead us to consider movements that influence or target states and other recognized authorities as the most worthy of our

attention. But this approach may be the equivalent of looking for the lost key under the lamp-post rather than in the dark alley where it was dropped.

We approach this work not just as scholars, but also as citizens. Our interest in the WSF process grows in part from our sympathies with its goals of enhancing global economic justice and democracy. Our study does not aim to say simply “hooray for our side.” However, we do celebrate what we see as important accomplishments and potential of the WSF process, since our assessment of its historic role can affect its appeal to potential supporters. But our main concern here is to examine how place matters within the WSF process. That is, we ask how its location in the United States impacted the ways WSF process manifested itself in “the belly of the beast.” We also situate our observations in a historical context. Many activists who helped shape the USSF had experiences at other Social Forums, and thus the USSF built upon lessons and ideas forged through earlier iterations of the WSF process. And the lessons of the USSF are likely to help shape other instances of the WSF process both in the United States and in other parts of the globe. Thus, we make some explicit as well as implicit comparisons across different social forums while understanding the USSF as an instance of counter-hegemonic mobilization within a global hegemonic state.

Our analysis emphasizes how the location of social forums impacts their form and content. The USSF, in contrast to other national, regional, and global Social Forums, reflected distinctive positions in regard to the core tensions or debates that have characterized the WSF process ( cf. Smith and Karides et al. 2008). These differences in how U.S. activists responded to questions of whether the Forum should remain an open space or develop a more formal political platform, who can participate, what sorts of changes are sought, and whether action should be focused on local, national, or global levels reflected the particular political culture and institutional context of the United States. Discussions of these core tensions, moreover, were shaped in important ways by individual leaders. It was clear that those with more experience working in coalitions and in the World Social Forum process helped advance learning and channeled conflicts in productive directions. This highlights the role of the WSF as a pedagogical space that contributes to political socialization within a global political arena (Cardinale 2007; Fisher and Ponniah 2003). As this case demonstrates, activists’ attempts to manage these “creative tensions” contribute to the learning and dynamism of the Social Forum process.

As an iteration of the WSF process, the USSF should be seen as one attempt to respond to earlier experiences and to move the overall process closer to an ideal of inclusive, participatory democracy that is also effective at challenging militarism, social exclusion, and global neoliberalism. As they related to global-level organizing processes, USSF organizers also worked to adapt the WSF model to their particular national context. Thus, we must consider the multiple spaces or arenas that are simultaneously engaged through this single event. In addition to this spatial complexity, the USSF encompasses a

time dimension, since it builds upon eight years of WSF organizing while also shaping subsequent social forums. WSF organizers were paying close attention to the USSF, and many noted its importance to the global process. And prior to the USSF, organizers put forward 2010 as the date of the second USSF, and this provided a context focal point for long-term strategizing and planning at the forum itself. The USSF process thus interfaces with the wider WSF process, integrating national experiences into a global process of experimentation and adaptation of methods for practicing global democracy.

### **Methods**

Our methodology for attempting to describe and analyze the USSF is a rather unorthodox one, and in many ways it reflects some of the norms and values of the forum itself, such as those promoting participation, decentralization, collaboration and collective ownership. Although other methods can provide breadth, demographic context, and comparative perspective, collaborative qualitative research is uniquely capable of capturing the size and complexity of the social forums events. Any single observer's sense of the character of the Forum is shaped by the session(s) s/he attends. For instance, most sessions—especially those on international trade and on the media and information technology -- were primarily educational. Other sessions were more participatory, for example, having attendees share specific tactics for fighting gentrification, or participating in group songs and chants. Our varying levels and positions of embeddedness within social movement networks and familiarity with the social forums provide greater (though by no means comprehensive) leverage to analyze the political processes that took place at the USSF.

To provide a richer analysis of this multi-location event, we assembled a multi-campus team of students and scholars to observe the Forum. A draft observation protocol was circulated to the group prior to the Forum, and participants were invited to help modify or adapt this document, which was based on an earlier prototype developed for use at the 2004 European Social Forum in London. They were asked to select any combination of workshops they wished to attend. We met in Atlanta prior to the opening of the Forum to introduce research collaborators and review our research plan. We discussed which issues each participant planned to focus on in their observation work in order to ensure that we would cover the major themes with minimal overlap in terms of the sessions researchers planned to attend. We also met at the conclusion of the Forum to debrief, offering preliminary observations and comparisons of what we observed, and to provide guidance for team members on how to prepare their summary field notes for this project. Field notes were collected and reviewed by Smith and Juris,<sup>7</sup> who collectively prepared a draft text which they then circulated to a secondary round of team members who had experience at other social forums. Finally a third round of revisions were undertaken by the rest of the observer team, which included many students just beginning the process of learning about the social forum. In addition to our observations, we draw from secondary accounts of the Forum in our report. The on going nature of the WSF process presents a unique set of methodological challenges for our participant-observation approach. Through various listserves and websites as well as through our writing, many of us are engaged in a worldwide conversation on the meaning and future of the WSF. At the same time, we nurture contacts and relationships made at previous

forums and establish long-term networks so that we are perpetually participating in, observing, and writing about the WSF.

This report, then offers multiple windows on the USSF and WSF process, even though we acknowledge that the perspective we can offer here is constrained by our own physical, cultural, and conceptual limitations. We situate our observations within a broader historical and political context, and we believe that this is essential to understanding the significance of any gathering that takes place within the WSF framework. **Table 1 provides a summary of our observations.**

**Table 1 About here**

In the following text, we provide a general overview of the USSF, followed by an analysis of how the core tensions of the WSF process were expressed there.

### **Overview of the USSF**

Participants in the USSF came from all 50 states and Puerto Rico, and international delegates from 68 countries participated as panel speakers and observers. There were over 950 self-organized workshops alongside six plenary sessions addressing each of the Forum’s key themes: war, militarism and the prison industrial complex; immigrant rights; workers in a globalized economy; women and queer liberation; indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice; and the right of return for Gulf Coast survivors of Katrina & Rita. In some important ways, the USSF “raised the bar” for other social forums as one of the most diverse forums in terms of the participation of the most

marginalized groups –including racial and sexual minorities, indigenous peoples, and the physically challenged --than other Forums {Ponniah, 2007; Cardinale, 2007 #156}.

As an open space designed to foster democratic and grassroots participation, the USSF built upon organizing models used in other social forums to encourage organizations to submit proposals for workshops and panels. These self-organized activities comprised the core of the Forum’s activities, and participants were asked to organize their sessions according to daily themes of consciousness-raising, visions of social change, and strategy. The final day of the Forum consisted of a “People’s Movement Assembly,” where workshop leaders were invited to report to the larger assembly the analyses and action plans developed during the Forum. When participants were not attending workshop or plenary sessions, they could peruse literature, view films, purchase fair trade goods and handicrafts, and meet with organizers in themed tents such as solidarity economy, right to water, immigrant rights, indigenous peoples, women, or peace and justice. There were also designated “open spaces” where groups could meet to continue conversations begun in workshops or to otherwise network and relate Forum activities to ongoing organizational work.

**Place Matters.** As is true for all social movements, social forums are reflective of their local context, that is, they are situated in particular geographies of space and time. Conway claims that “narrating the place(s) of movements is central to representing any particular movement and to discerning the processes of identity formation and knowledge production that constitute them” (Conway 2004 :35) Moreover, places are not static, they are socially constructed and dynamic and are continually constituted by forces beyond a

particular place. Accordingly, the USSF must be seen as reflective of the particular history(ies) and political culture(s) of the United States.

Neoliberal globalization greatly shapes local dynamics, contributing to cutbacks in municipal services, gentrification, rising poverty, and other social problems. These problems are experienced differently in different parts of the world. Although U.S. citizens are increasingly aware of how they are affected by the global economy, dominant media and popular discourses tend to downplay global interdependencies and perpetuate widespread ignorance of the global effects of U.S. policies. Many, but not all, participants at the Forum understood the implication of the U.S.'s political economic nexus to the rest of the world, and indeed the WSF process itself aims to help activists better understand these connections.<sup>8</sup>

Particularly salient within the U.S. context is the lack of the strong socialist and communist parties and labor unions, which are found elsewhere in the world. While in some contexts this organizational base has helped a stronger left to coalesce, in other cases the institutionalization of left parties stifled the articulation of alternative visions of social justice that are reflected within the social forum process. Moreover, as the world's sole superpower and a driving force behind neoliberal globalization, the United States represents a key site of ideological struggle, and thus may reflect a more extreme version of the depoliticization that has characterized the spread of neoliberal ideology ( cf. Brunelle 2007). The U.S. two-party political system has served to submerge ideological debates and encourage more pragmatic approaches to political activism than is typical in countries with multiparty systems that permit a wider range of policy discourse.



In the 1990s, class-based politics in the United States remained under-developed as neoliberal policies put labor organizers on the defensive and many movement groups set out to empower their organizations by emphasizing culture and identity. Neoliberal policies such as deregulation and financial liberalization caused major declines in unions in the U.S. and worldwide. As its traditional base declined, identity-based movements helped strengthen the U.S. left by expanding participation from groups such as women of color, Chicanas, African Americans, Asian Americans, and the queer movement. These groups helped articulate understandings within the U.S. left of the diversity of experiences within U.S. society and economy, and this has laid a foundation for dialogue that can contribute to collaborative politics and coalition building.

The negotiation of the tricky shoals of identity politics was a key factor shaping the dynamics of the USSF. In the past, differences in identity politics have proven to be an obstacle in hosting a successful social forum in the U.S., as the collapse of the planned Northwest social forum attests (Center for Communication and Civic Engagement 2007). Finally, the USSF was held just as a thaw was underway in the chilly climate that faced dissenters in the U.S. in the post 9/11 environment. The events of 9/11 and its aftermath clearly dampened public dissent in the U.S., even as public protests on economic justice issues continued to flourish elsewhere in the world (Podobnik 2005). It also occurred in the midst of wartime, a heated Congressional battle over immigrants' rights, state-level battles over same-sex marriage, a historic split within the U.S. labor movement, and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, which raised public consciousness about the persistence of poverty and racism within U.S. society.

### **What is the U.S. Social Forum? Open Space or Actor**

A core tension within the WSF process—perhaps the main tension—is the question of what the Forum is or should be. Some take the position that it has served its role well as a space for convening diverse movements and organizations from around the world to develop shared analyses and action plans, but that it is time for participants in the “movement of movements” to become more unified (Bello 2007). They argue that the WSF process should work to consolidate the power of its diverse constituencies and mobilize them around a shared political platform of action. In other words, they want the WSF to become a global political actor, uniting its multitude of diverse forces to leverage its power against a formidable adversary.

Others, like a WSF co-founder Chico Whitaker,

think that the Social Forums are not this power but only spaces – open spaces - that facilitate the building of this power. The power to change things will be the one of the organizations and movements of the society. This position is that the Forums must function as big “nests” making possible interrelations and articulations among our many organizations and movements, in mutual respect of their diversity. This common space would make possible the appearance of new ideas, propositions and convergences, overcoming the sectoral limits and the local or national dimensions of the struggles, reaching to the planetary level” (Whitaker 2007).

The USSF process deliberately sought to incorporate the open space notion into its organizing agenda, and the self-organization of workshops as well as the provision of meeting spaces for more spontaneous encounters certainly reflected this ideal. Even as it was committed to creating open space, the USSF planning committee explicitly urged attention to strategy and action by defining thematic emphases for each day of workshops. The first two days of the USSF aimed to help set the stage for day three, which focused on articulating concrete strategies for achieving collective goals. The conceptual schema behind this framework emerged at least in part from the grassroots educational work of Project South, a member of Grassroots Global Justice, a coalition of grassroots U.S. social justice groups that serves as a liaison between U.S. movements and the WSF International Council. Project South's publication *The Critical Classroom: Education for Liberation and Movement Building*, utilizes this three part frame of consciousness raising, vision, and strategy.

Those seeking to use the WSF to further unite social activists developed the Assembly of Social Movements, through which participants issue global calls to action (Reitan 2007). Along these lines, the USSF and other recent World Social Forums had tended towards the generation of "final documents" and programmatic statements that some may see as contradicting the notion of open space and others as opening it up. The proliferating social forums regionally and nationally are not required to abide by an organizational structure although they are guided by the precedents of previous forums and the WSF's charter of principles. The USSF was certainly guided by an intent to move the U.S. forum process towards concrete steps for political action. Similarly, at the last WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, the 4<sup>th</sup> day was dedicated to consolidating platforms for actions

within the major themes of that meeting. The USSF reflected organizers' desire to foster united action through the social forum process, consistent with recent efforts to move the WSF beyond an "open space."

**Workshops.** Our reading of the workshops we attended was that many participants made an effort to follow the planning committee's organizational guidelines, but many sessions incorporated aspects of each of the themes of consciousness-raising/ vision/ and strategy. Particularly, sharing of testimonies of concrete problems or actions commonly occurred in the workshops, especially workshops on day three of the forum. Most participants at the USSF seemed largely unaware of the larger debates surrounding the WSF and its purpose, despite the fact that USSF organizers provided background to these debates in the Forum program and website.<sup>9</sup> The larger debate in the WSFs about the character of the Forum as open space versus actor was not a major concern for most activists, but it is highly salient for those engaged in organizing and analyzing the WSF process. Many expressed appreciation for a space where their voices were heard and where they could hear about the experiences and organizing work of others around the country and the world. For most participants, this was the first social forum they were attending, and they relished the chance to expand and strengthen their national networks, to learn from other groups, and to compare notes about what tactics have worked and how others have struggled against similar injustices.

At the same time, participants did not just want to talk. Most had done extensive fundraising work to raise the bus, train, and plane fares to come to Atlanta, and they wanted to return home with some concrete results. Rank and file participants in the Forums seemed to know or care little about abstract debates, preferring to focus their

attention on their work for social change. Our observer team found ample evidence of concrete actions being proposed and developed in many—perhaps a majority of—workshops, making the Forum something like a giant brainstorming session. Some workshops made steps toward building issue-based or cross-issue coalitions, but there were no apparent efforts to build a more formal, broad structure within which to organize. These efforts may be more prevalent among organizers of the social forums than rank-and-file forum participants. While some sessions failed to live up to their promise of generating concrete strategies for change, overall, we saw what could be characterized as very pragmatic uses of the open spaces created by the USSF to coordinate, disseminate, and build solidarity around shared actions or campaigns. Most importantly is that activists and groups that worked explicitly in a single sector were unavoidably exposed to other analyses and methods of struggle.

**The People’s Movement Assembly (PMA).** Following the model of the Social Movement Assembly established early on in the WSFs, the People’s Movement Assembly (PMA) was intended by the USSF organizers to provide the locus for planned and coordinated political action across the U.S. The name People’s Movement Assembly was adopted by organizers who believed the phrase “social movement” had little resonance with U.S. civil society. Each morning of the USSF a program was offered that summarized the PMA, which convened on the last day of the Forum to articulate ideas for actions to follow-up Forum discussions and move the process forward. The promotion of the PMA was organized to create regional coalitions across sectors. At the USSF, representatives from particular organizations that represented specific types of

movements and struggles and from regional assemblies volunteered to present proposals for action that they developed during the USSF or had come prepared to deliver.

Like the social movement assemblies in past forums, the PMA came at the end of the Forum when activists were weary and before they had time to fully process ideas from the Forum in relation to their local responsibilities. Guiding the PMA were hopes that calls to action would materialize in World Social Forum's 2008 Global Day of Action throughout the U.S., and many groups announced their action plans in response to the Call from the WSF.<sup>10</sup> Other common threads in the procession of statements at the PMA helped link the enormous variety of workshops and groups. For instance, the notion of human rights clearly helped unify diverse groups around common goals. Many groups mentioned the intention of organizing around the 2008 International Human Rights Day (December 10), the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The notion of self-determination and liberation for oppressed nationalities also ran across many calls to action, including those of African-American and indigenous activists, as well as calls for the sovereignty of Puerto Rico and the Hawaiian islands. And in many statements, there were expressions of solidarity with other groups, reflecting that the cross-sectoral dialogue envisioned by USSF planners had been advanced through the USSF. While the atmosphere was largely celebratory, there was a sense of purpose and seriousness to the assembly. A Philippine activist captured a sentiment expressed by others, saying, "There is no smooth road to building a movement"<sup>11</sup>

The number of statements presented at the PMA exceeded the expectations of USSF organizers. This created a strain on time and may have diluted the impact the PMA was

intended to have in delineating particular struggle or calls to action. Especially missing was evidence of coalescence of a global perspective on U.S. struggles.

We conclude from these observations that U.S. activists tended to focus on the task of “movement-building” as a response to the open-space-actor question. In a sense, this response straddles both tendencies in the WSF process, as it recognizes the need to cultivate movement identities, analyses, and networks while maintaining a focus on movement and action. The NPC maintained, and the Fact Sheet handed out before the PMA clearly stated that the Forum is an Open Space and that the PMA was a separate, though related process. Although many were probably unaware of this, any group could volunteer to present their workshops’ statements or calls for action during the PMA, and speakers represented a wide variety of movements, social groups, and each geographic region. Moreover, the voices calling for the USSF to take collective action, the need to be more than an open space, to build a united movement, etc. were extremely loud throughout the event. Many of the loudest voices during the plenaries and public presentations seemed to conceive the Forum more as a movement, or a movement-building process. This was clear during the PMA, which reflected in many ways what our observers saw at other regional and world social forums.

In part, this tension between providing open space and a platform for action is due to different understandings (both within and across countries) of what it means to build or be part of a movement. Whereas some activists clearly want to pursue a common political program, others often speak of seeking “unity” more in terms of building of a collective identity—and simply attending a forum is a step to building such an identity.

Some came to the forum to do both things but others arrived to find out what this much talked about forum process in activist sectors is about. The open space concept meant that groups from diverse strains of political activism felt comfortable to express their political goals, did not feel shuffled into a single direction of thought or action, and could claim the USSF as their own. In some ways, the USSF represented a hybrid form that fused the culture of the broader World Social Forum process with movement dynamics in the U.S., particularly the large base-building organizations that led the organizing process.

#### **Who participates? Identity and Issues at the USSF**

Movement-building is about creating collective identity. Thus, a major challenge for proponents of open space is to ensure wide participation from groups typically excluded from institutionalized politics. The open space idea in the WSF process, therefore, emphasizes inclusion as a core objective. In practice, however, the notion of open space neglects the ways power and privilege amplify certain voices over others, while deep-seated structures of inequality generate unintended exclusions. For example, informal rules of presentation and social interaction marginalize some groups. Poor people lack the resources required to travel and participate in the forums. The very idea of openness can often mask these “invisible” exclusions. As a result, participants at prior WSF meetings in Brazil and other regional social forums have been predominantly white and middle class (Alvarez et al., forthcoming).<sup>12</sup>

A major achievement of the USSF was the high level of diversity, not only among participants, but also in terms of who organized the event. A strategic decision had been taken back in 2002 to delay the start of the U.S. process until there was sufficient



awareness of the forums at the grassroots level. The Grassroots Global Justice coalition, which had been founded in 2002 and helps community-based organizations participate in the WSF, agreed to help promote a U.S. Social Forum at the November 2003 International Council (IC) meeting in Miami. After two subsequent meetings in Washington, D.C. in April 2004, a call went out to grassroots groups to join a national coordinating committee. Twenty-two organizations replied. By the first USSF, what was then called the National Planning Committee (NPC), consisted of thirty five organizations, the majority of which were grassroots, member-based, people of color-led organizations.<sup>13</sup> This reflected a deliberate outreach strategy on the part of USSF organizers. In addition to the NPC, a local Atlanta-based Organizing Committee, also grassroots-led, took care of the logistics on the ground, while a number of committees were responsible for specific areas, including Communication, Program, Culture, Fundraising, Outreach, etc. Finally, regional committees helped mobilize participants from around the country.

As with other movements, organizers in the WSF struggle over whether to treat the participatory aims of this movement as long-term political ends or both means and ends, and whether or not there is a necessary trade-off between means and ends ( cf. Polletta 2002). The USSF succeeded perhaps more than any other large-scale forum—with the possible exception of Mumbai—in assembling participants from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of privilege/deprivation (Ponniah 2007). Our observers disagreed on whether the USSF organizing process ensured inclusivity and equity. Some saw the highly intentional process implemented to ensure inclusion of and leadership by base-building organizations of working class and marginalized social groups as an obstacle to

greater openness and publicity for the forum (see Juris, this volume). Others, such as Karides (2008) argue that USSF organizing strategies emerged from the experiences and situated knowledge of an NPC made up primarily of women of color NPC.

Despite limitations in achieving an ideal of inclusiveness, the USSF clearly expanded many participants' self-understanding. For many, this was the first time they had considered how their struggles might be related to those of others in other parts of the country and world. Khasnabish speaks of how the global justice movement generally and the WSF process in particular helps expand people's "political imaginations" (2004). Della Porta speaks of how the WSF process contributes to the articulation of "flexible identities and multiple belongings" (della Porta 2005).

Although on the whole, the USSF was quite diverse, workshops tended to be less integrated. Issues such as housing attracted predominantly African-Americans. Other, more abstract issues such as models of economic democracy, attracted predominantly white male audiences. The counter-culture Hip-Hop workshops, on the other hand, had a predominantly African-American male audience. Workshops addressing gender issues were mostly attended by women. Some sessions, however, such as those on indigenous people's issues and those specifically aiming to bridge identities, attracted more mixed audiences. The segregation of workshops may result in part from mistrust or a fear of co-optation of small/grassroots/black groups by big/wealthy/white groups. And it corresponds to class, racial, and other inequalities existing in U.S. society. . Several workshops generated discussion of the tendencies of more privileged groups and activists to displace the voices of less powerful groups.

Another observer noted that, particularly for indigenous groups but perhaps others, a generation gap complicates unity even among those with a common racial or cultural identity.<sup>14</sup> Several of our observers noted the social forum's success at creating a space where people could openly discuss their differences and sources of mistrust. As a space designed to bring together diverse groups, the USSF helped raise participants' awareness of these social divisions, and there were a number of workshops that intentionally sought to create solidarities, such as those fostering black/brown dialogues, labor and social movement bridges, cross-racial alliances among women of color, transnational labor coalitions, and cross-class peace and justice organizing. But it is clear that no one event could overcome the many structural barriers to such solidarity building.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps because of the great diversity of people attending and the levels of gender, racial, and other forms of exclusion in U.S. politics, identity was a highly salient theme in the Forum's plenary sessions and workshops. Each plenary session was consciously organized to include speakers of diverse and less privileged backgrounds, such as African Americans, immigrants, GLBTI people, the indigenous, etc. Relatively few whites presented at plenary sessions. And activists exhibited an unusual sensitivity to how their relative privilege may be affecting their views and actions. In addition, many workshops were organized around specific social identities, such as those focusing on issues affecting women, workers, immigrants, GLBTI communities, indigenous peoples, and black and brown communities.

The notion of the South as a generalized site of social exclusion or marginalization was also very prominent in the discourse at the USSF. Virtually every

plenary session and most of the USSF's publicity literature highlighted the fact that the Forum was being held in the southern part of the United States, a "historic site of brutal oppression, exploitation and resistance and struggle" (Katz-Fishman 2007). As with the WSF process's location in the global South, the USSF sought to draw a very conscious parallel between marginalized peoples in the U.S. south and those of the global South. According to Colette Pichon-Battle, an organizer in the People's Freedom Caravan,

If the United States was a body, the Deep South would be its unmentionables. It's the place that is demonized, victimized, and otherwise covered for fear of offending. The Social Forum process is playing the very difficult and often unpleasant role in the south of bringing to light many of the worst and longest on-going levels of violation. This land of dichotomies is home to Southern Hospitality and Racist Domination; it's the Bible belt that whips women and people of color back into a place of subservience and self-hate; it's the home of the majority of this country's natural resources and to its poorest citizens. The caravan took root in the South as a catalyst for the rest of this country to join the fight against this persistent, ingrained hypocrisy. {#157 Pichon-Battle 2007}.

Another highly salient identity emphasized by USSF organizers was the fact that the people organizing the Forum and a vast majority of participants were from "grassroots" or "base-building" community-based organizations and progressive unions rather than larger, well-funded, and mainstream, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Many, if not most, of the groups active in organizing the USSF represented mainly working class people of color.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps because of the salience of issues of identity, marginalization, and inclusion, our observer team noted considerable self-reflexivity on the part of many workshop and plenary participants. For instance, at plenary sessions as well as in workshops and informal conversations, participants frequently referred to the diversity of the “we” that comprised the USSF. At the same time, many participants also actively engaged questions about how to involve those who were not present. At a session entitled the “peace caucus,” which explored how peace organizers could better integrate social justice issues and diversify their ranks, one speaker referred to his generation as “freeze-dried hippies” as he urged his colleagues to expand their visions of peace work. And labor activists frequently reflected critically on the history of trade unionism, urging greater attention to workers excluded from the ranks of organized labor, such as immigrants and those in the domestic and service sectors.

Black-brown alliance sessions—Generated observations about how dominant forces exploit differences between groups in order to undercut their power potential.

GLBTI activists were well-represented on plenary sessions and among participants, forcing the question of sexual identity to the forefront rather than allowing it to remain a secondary concern. GLBTI activists’ strong numbers, enthusiasm, and prominence in the USSF program forced activists in other sectors to reflect on their own biases and on their willingness to overlook the interests of another marginalized group.<sup>17</sup>

The same could be said for indigenous rights. The visible translation of speakers’ voices into American Sign language during plenary sessions and the participation of deaf

panelists at various workshops also helped to raise consciousness about the rights of deaf people.

At the same time, the emphasis on identity at times gave observers a sense that the diversity of this movement seemed to trump its unity. One team member noted, “events were marked by many people clamoring to present their views and be heard sooner than they were ready to listen” At the same time, it was clear that not all participants had much awareness of the ideology and inclusive aims of the forum process. One observer, for instance, noted how a white man presenting on a panel on immigration was insensitive to the needs of his translator and the desire of audience members for a more participatory session. Other observers noted that many workshops seemed more oriented towards fostering discussions about particular issues than towards generating dialogues or alliances across different issues and movements. Nevertheless, our team witnessed many occasions where activists were able to make connections with diverse workshop participants after the formal sessions. Such informal exchanges could lead to more sustained interactions. Among other factors, this tension seems to emerge from a desire to both engage activists working on other issues and also to move forward in highly nuanced discussions within networks that have been in dialogue for some time.

Indeed, the conflicts that emerged in public settings, as well as some of the discourse of participants suggested a pervasive need to be heard. Several speakers thanked organizers and attendees for listening to their stories. For example, at the Plenary on War, Militarism, and the Prison Industrial Complex, a Native American woman who had served for 22 years in the U.S. army made a point to explain how, as a woman of color, she felt “listened to” at the USSF. Another Native American activist thanked the

organizers for allowing indigenous people to have a place at the front of the USSF march, which he contrasted to the anti-WTO protest in Seattle, where Native Americans had to fight their way to the front.<sup>18</sup>

**Inequality, Identity, and Open Space.** The articulation of identity and recognition of how one's identity relates to broader structures of power and inequality is a basic element of the consciousness-raising that is required for social movement mobilization. As one of our observers remarked, "perhaps this forum was more about confidence-building and empowerment for the long-term than immediate strategy and change." Many USSF participants were attending their first national organizing conference and displayed deep enthusiasm for the opportunity to meet others who were struggling for the same goals. This helped counter the sense of isolation activists typically feel in their day-to-day organizing work. By consciously creating a space to confront inequality and exclusion and to explicitly foster inclusion, the USSF aimed to reverse the social marginalization caused by neoliberalism. Moreover, USSF organizers recognized that open spaces often create invisible barriers, and thus in the plenary sessions they prioritized inclusion over openness. Interestingly, there seemed to be widespread agreement, even among those sectors most committed to openness and direct democracy, that this was necessary given previous inequities in the U.S. global justice movement. Some workshops were even closed to the public, such as some of the workshops organized by the newly formed alliance of domestic worker organizations, which focused on establishing and consolidating their new network. Some feminist workshops were closed to men, and a workshop on sex-workers' rights was also closed to those not employed in the industry.

The relative absence in the United States (and elsewhere) of open, democratic spaces that bring together many diverse groups with the aim of fostering cross-sectoral dialogue may have contributed to the tendency in many sessions to emphasize work on a single issue or campaign and to focus on sharing experiences and stories of oppression over the building of broader alliances. Nevertheless, our team saw considerable evidence of new alliances being formed, albeit at national rather than international levels. Many thus seemed to view this event as a rare opportunity to meet with their counterparts in other parts of the nation. The absence of political parties with sustained grassroots organizing strategies (Norris 2002) and the historic decline of associations that cut across class and other social divisions (Skocpol 2003; Wuthnow 1998) mean that U.S. citizens have few opportunities to deliberate about social policy and give thoughtful consideration to diverse voices. Such opportunities to learn skills in democratic politics are essential for any effective democracy (Baiocchi 2003; Polletta 2002), and in this sense, the WSF process contributes to the democratization of politics both nationally and globally.

What also becomes clear from our observations is that activists' experience working in social movements more generally and in the WSF process in particular had a major impact on how much a workshop advanced the Forum's transformative goals of building unity while respecting diversity, bridging ideological differences, and cultivating analyses of neoliberalism that helped organizers see connections among issues. The sessions that were best linked to each day's theme and which focused on building alliances across groups tended to be organized and run by activists with some experience in the WSFs and/or with transnational organizing more generally {Smith et al., forthcoming #4180}. Also, the plenary sessions represented structured efforts to impart



to an audience largely unfamiliar with the WSF process its lessons and key principles. They helped communicate the WSF goal of fostering more inclusive and respectful forms of political engagement.

Organizers on the National Planning Committee, for instance, demonstrated highly effective leadership qualities when they confronted conflicts that erupted in the course of the Forum. Steve Williams, of People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), began the plenary session on the forum's second day by apologizing for the planning committee's selection of a non-Palestinian speaker to address the issue of Palestine and the Middle-East conflict. His statement highlighted some key values and norms that are part of the WSF culture, but that are largely ideals towards which participants strive. This public apology made explicit the notion that nobody may speak for another, and that those most affected by problems must be included in deliberations about what needs to be done.

Similarly, one of the emcees during the PMA on the final day of the USSF offered an extremely emotional apology for having grabbed the microphone out of the hands of an indigenous speaker from Ecuador after he and his colleague went over their allotted two minutes. The apology was offered after a large group of Native Americans took the stage to denounce the continued silencing of indigenous voices and enacted a public healing ceremony [Can we REFERENCE an account of this?]. What started out as a divisive incident turned into an opportunity for learning and solidarity-building. In other instances, USSF organizers also skillfully defused potential conflicts by stressing what participants had in common rather than their differences, as when NPC member Cindy

Wiesner intervened when a young media activist began denouncing the perceived marginalization of youth and poor people saying, “We are not your enemy, Girl!”

The forum spaces also allowed individual participants to find ways to address potential conflicts stemming from their different identities. A telling example is what happened on one of the buses taking activists home from Atlanta. A young white woman activist expressed her displeasure at a movie that was being shown, which depicted stereotypes of African-Americans. Her comment provoked outrage among the African-Americans on the bus, who perceived it as another way to silence African-Americans. The white woman activist went to talk individually to the most vocal African-American woman activist and the two spent more than an hour clarifying each one's position. For the rest of the trip, the bus aisle provided a platform for African-Americans and for whites to take turns at the microphone to express their frustrations and opinions.

The need to provide a space for articulating and negotiating diverse identities while at the same time cultivating self-awareness and outrage at the ways powerful groups exploit differences in identity is central to all social movements. But the contemporary global justice movement's effort to be a movement of all movements makes effective leadership in this regard crucial ( see, e.g., Nepstad and Bob 2006). Our observations at the USSF showed that such leadership was clearly present on the USSF National Planning Committee. Project South and the broader grassroots coalition, Grassroots Global Justice, played important leadership roles in the USSF process and brought many decades of organizing experience. NPC member and co-founder of Project South, Walda Katz-Fishman, reflected on the process of organizing the USSF:

...what kept and keeps us grounded and centered is our understanding that this process is not about a forum or a gathering. it is about the historic moment we are living in where the survival of humanity and the planet is in the balance; where building a movement to challenge all of the ills and evils and destruction of society and ecology that our communities are experiencing is what this is about. It is about creating a clear and shared vision of the world we are fighting for and a strategic plan to get us there. it is about the unity of theory and practice - converging our many struggles into a broad and deep movement; engaging in principled struggle to build unity across historic structural divides (class, race/nationality, gender/sexuality, age, ability); learning and correcting the errors of subjectivity, individualism and privilege; being willing to engage in criticism and self-criticism; taking responsibility for challenging US imperialism, militarism at home and abroad; developing a resource strategy that keeps our movement financially and politically independent of the forces that oppress and exploit us. (Katz-Fishman 2007)

Katz-Fishman's remarks demonstrate her long experience in civil rights and social justice organizing. She emphasizes the need for a long-term and historically informed perspective, the need for a collective vision of the sort of world movement proponents want to realize, and the need for constant attentiveness to the ways power and privilege affect one's perspective and interactions with others. The WSF emerged from the organizing experiences of people like Katz-Fishman, as well as from the fresh young

activists' perspectives and energy. The process has grown because these insights resonate so much with the experiences of organizers in diverse settings around the world.

Moreover, the self-reflexivity that was built into the Social Forum helped contribute to the socialization of activists. It made participants aware of the strategic thinking as well as the challenges confronted by the National Planning Committee, and encouraged participants to reflect more broadly on the historic and political context than they might otherwise have. Workshops on the social forum process and its implementation in the U.S. challenged participants to both draw from the organizing lessons of the USSF and to help advance the process.

In sum, the question of “who is at the table” was probably the defining feature of the U.S. Social Forum. And the articulation of identity and issues at the forum reflected both an advancement of the WSF process as well as a reflection of the political culture and context of the United States. In regard to the WSF process, the USSF demonstrated the need to modify notions of open space to engage in deliberate efforts to bring the most marginalized groups to the table (or, more precisely, to the Forum). In an effort to broaden the base of the U.S. left, the NPC focused most of its energy on mobilizing among oppressed nationalities, migrants, low-income communities, and queer people. Organizers assumed that whites, middle-class, and straight people would hear about the forum and would show up anyway. They recognized that developing alliances with middle-class activists would eventually be necessary to develop more political clout, but insisted that these alliances need to be forged later on, when they could be pursued on more equal footing (Karides 2008). Observers noted that this had a dampening effect on working class white participation in the forum.

JEFF

NEED TRANSITION HERE LEADING FROM WHO PARTICIPATES TO THE RADICAL/REFORM DIVISION—Perhaps referring to how the convergence of race and class complicate organizing work, but how the WSF open space provides a setting unlike much of mainstream of American political life where people with different identities and experiences can come together for the explicit purpose of expanding their understandings of each other and of the forces that shape their common experiences.

### What Do We Want? Radical or Reformist Change or a New Politics Altogether?

A perennial source of tension in social movements regards the question of whether social change can happen through measures to reform existing social structures and institutions or whether more radical social transformation is required. Divisions between radicals and reformers have caused impermeable rifts within movements, and they have played an important role in the WSF process and in the wider global justice movement. Our observer team looked for evidence of whether and how this debate played out in the USSF sessions, and we found that the U.S. context shaped this debate in important ways. To a large extent, the Cold War limited the appeal of socialist critiques of capitalism and the state's role in its promotion, producing a qualitatively different slant on debates about the best route to power for marginalized groups in the United States.

In resisting hierarchy of all kinds and challenging the depoliticization that is inherent to neoliberal policies, the WSF, and particularly the USSF process has encouraged organizers to speak less about the more traditional radical-reformist divisions and more about how to foster new forms of politics that can avoid the strategic pitfalls of

**Commented [JS1]:** JEFF: CAN YOU ADDRESS THIS AS YOU SEE FIT-- HERE's the key bits of discussion that have emerged in the course of this back-and-forth:

Jay, I think this is a very important point. At a time of huge growing inequities of wealth in the US and a rising fear of job losses from globalization, issues of distribution and economic uncertainty are beginning to reappear in US political life. A failure to build a coalition on bivalent claims of identity and social and economic justice will limit, I think, the USSF to a minority position in terms of power. What was Martin Luther King doing in Memphis when he was assassinated? Building a coalition between the black oppressed working class and the white working class. This was a huge potential threat to powerful economic and political interests. It is ironic, then, that in Atlanta that the building of coalitions across all class color lines was rarely stressed.

...  
FROM JAY: I would be happy if Marina is right but this is not what I saw. I did not see much of the white working class union oriented environment that I was raised in. Perhaps an analysis of the programme might provide insight but I saw little influence of the politics of distribution in the USSF, a staple of class politics. But then the forum is a many splendoured thing. I do agree that the middle class was held at bay (good too) but that does not mean that the white working class was present and prominent however else class may have been present. I look forward to reading your article Marina.

3/11 FROM JACKIE: Reflecting on this discussion, I think both Marina and Jay are right (and I modified the text here to try to integrate some of this nuance): NPC and organizers did seek to address racial and class inequalities, but the result was less than perfect, at least at this stage of the U.S. Social Forum process. We should build time into our discussion, since no group can be expected to overcome the long-term policies and structures that have replicated racial and class divisions in order to advance a particular class's interests. Perhaps we need to mention how the convergence race and class here have complicated organizing work—something King was recognizing through his organizational experience...

MARINA: It is interesting think about unions. The AFI-CIO was certainly a player on the NPC as were worker centers representing working class people of color. I agree with not seeing white workers or even the politics of Appalachia. I haven't gone through the program but maybe we could check also "white" religious organizations as a place that white workers hooked in.

...  
JJ: ...For example, many activists in other parts of the world, and in the U.S., are skeptical of U.S. style of identity politics. The danger is that we may have brought the forum back to a politics of identity that characterized the 1990s, rather than moving forward with the new ethic of solidarity based on working across diversity and difference. Also, what were the costs of such a strong focus on grassroots people of color-led base building groups? What other sectors were left out? In talking with Jay and Liz Smith, for example, we wondered what white working class people would have thought about the forum? Are we foreclosing the broader alliances that will be necessary to win? In my observations and interviewed I noted a tension between the desire of many organizers to use the USSF as a vehicle for organizing one sector of the movement (grassroots base-building organizations) and a seemingly contrasting desire to use the forum as a way to build a much broader movement. This may be a necessary tension at this stage, and perhaps a tension specific to the U.S., which would add an interesting new wrinkle to our argument, but at some point it needs to be resolved. Again, these are very sensitive issues, and we need to tread lightly. I dealt this tension a bit in my paper)

the past. This idea has been articulated in discussions on a “new politics” that are prevalent in the WSF process and explicit in several workshops at the USSF. Marisa Franco from San Francisco’s POWER (People Organized to Win Employment Rights) articulated this idea well in her opening remarks at a workshop on the Alliance of Domestic Workers on June 29:

We’re not talking about a platform or demands here. We’re talking about how we can make things work better. We must connect with each other, walk vision as well as talk vision. No one else will do it for us. *If another U.S. is necessary, another “us” is necessary, too.* {#158 quoted in Rein 2007, emphasis added}

The idea of new politics responds to the exclusion and hierarchy of traditional forms of politics. It places emphasis on new, or non-traditional political actors, new political identities, new political practices that might overcome historic obstacles to social transformation.

Chico Whitaker, a co-founder of the WSF process describes the Forums as laboratories for experimentation in democratic politics (Whitaker 2005). Indeed, what one observes happening in these spaces is that, by engaging participants in an ongoing political process that transcends national political divisions, the WSF encourages activists to expand their perspectives on politics. It helps them to think more broadly about the political community of which they are a part, and in many ways it complicates traditional conceptions of reformist/radical divisions. For many activists at the USSF, this meant that, for the first time, they were aware of their connection to a national struggle. By exposing local activists to international organizers and by discussing more generally how

the USSF relates to the wider WSF process, the Social Forum helped many participants see themselves as part of a global movement. Some confronted for the first time the notion that they had a special responsibility as U.S. citizens to challenge the foreign policies of their government which limit the freedoms and capacities of people around the world. What is less clear, but what seems to be being worked out in the course of the WSF process, is how to best respond to the challenges of neoliberalism, militarism, and other forms of social oppression.

Debates about whether radical or reformist tactics are most appropriate permeate social movement histories, but we should note that the current context of neoliberal globalization bears on this debate in important ways. For instance, Brunelle ( 2007) discusses the ways neoliberalism has relied upon deliberate efforts by elites to depoliticize citizens and policies through conventional politics and parties. Neoliberalism has given professional economists and other elites privileged roles in national and global policy making, at the expense of citizens (Coleman and Porter 2000; Markoff and Montecinos 1993; McMichael 2003; O'Brien 2002) Santos ( 2006) speaks of the role of the WSF process in helping counter this tendency in modern politics by questioning relationships between knowledge and power. Intellectuals and writers well known for their criticisms of the status quo, such as Eduardo Galleano and Noam Chomsky, were featured prominently at prior WSF meetings. At the same time, various other WSF workshops emphasized the ways social exclusion and other social and ecological ills result from the privileging of professional and technocratic knowledge over indigenous and popular forms of knowledge. In these ways, the WSF process helps empower participants as agents of social change. **Many activists had internalized this understanding**

of themselves and were extremely sensitive to any perceived attempt of more powerful groups to influence them. A healthy skepticism of the role of academics in movements was apparent in many spaces of the forum, and this grew in part from a history of problematic experiences with some academics as well as a broader critique of power and representation. As with other Social Forums, USSF organizers were critical of the prominent role played by intellectuals at some WSF meetings and were careful to not include them among the featured speakers at the large plenary sessions. To deter the cult of celebrity we inhabit in the United States, well-known critical intellectuals played only a minor role at the USSF, appearing only at a few workshop panels.

A key manner in which this tension between radical and reformist politics was articulated at the USSF was in the discussions about what was called the “nonprofit industrial complex,” an issue popularized through the circulation of Incite! Women of Color Against Violence’s (2007) book *Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-profit Industrial Complex*. This nonprofit industrial complex has, many Social Forum activists argued, shifted political work away from popular organizing and towards elite lobbying efforts and other professional political strategies. Professionalized organizations, often referred to as “NGOs,” are seen as mirroring the hierarchies and inequities of the political system that excludes so many disadvantaged groups. They therefore are unlikely to seek to fundamentally alter those structures in which they enjoy a relatively privileged role. Directors and staff of NGOs are also dependent on wealthy donors and private foundations for funds, which also constrains their goals, tactics, and activities.<sup>19</sup> Such reflections resemble discussions in the wider WSF process, where



skepticism of NGOs and an emphasis on more participatory forms of “grassroots” or popular organizing is prominent.

The attention to this issue was somewhat ironic given the prominent role played by professional organizers, most of whom worked for non-profit community-based organizations, within the National Planning Committee and broader efforts to organize the USSF. Yet, NGO staff is often intimately aware of the constraints that their reliance on foundations and their employment within hierarchical organizations creates for their activist work. Such constraints are often most keenly felt by smaller and less-well funded NGOs, such as those involved in organizing the USSF, who are often critical of larger “mainstream” NGOs. Yet, even some of these smaller NGOs rely heavily on paid staff or resourceful members who can devote time to volunteer. At a workshop called “Another Politics is Possible,” some of the participants in smaller, more informal grassroots collectives discussed their efforts to build a horizontal politics among grassroots people of color. They criticized not just of larger NGOs, but also of the paid organizer model itself.

Such criticism of the non-profit industrial complex could lead to the alienation of potential allies within the non-profit sector. Outside of a workshop that was highly critical of non-profit management of public housing, one man exclaimed, “I’m not sure what to do. They’re criticizing the program directors, but what they don’t get is, that’s me, and I came here to work with them!” Nevertheless, some foundation representatives attending the USSF left with a greater self-reflexivity about their work:

[W]hat will be the actual significance of the first USSF [...] to our grantees and to us as donors and funders? Are we now likely to see increased collaborations in

issue and resource development among previously fragmented movement sectors? How might we alter the structure of some of our grants when large, already well-funded nonprofits present joint proposals with smaller, struggling community based organizations? Can we/should we simultaneously foster the capacity of our organizational grantees, providing sufficient support for them to effectively get the job done and, at the same time, revisit our standard success measures for “outcome-based” grantmaking? From where we sit in our grantmaking offices, some steps above the fray, what reasonably constitutes “change” and/or “progress” at the base and are one year, two and three year grant cycles reasonable time periods in which to achieve some of these outcomes? Will longstanding donors of the Baby Boom generation be willing to move their financial support to a new movement that will be largely led by Gen X and Y’ers? To people of color? ... American philanthropy came of age, so to speak, at a time when the mass movements of the US left were on the wane. A quarter century later, in the early dawn of a revitalized people’s movement, many grassroots activists are now questioning the limits of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit model of organization. Some even seek to return to the old left movement building model, i.e. where fiscal viability is achieved via the route of constituent-based funding. Thus, although the question is currently quite rhetorical, dare we avoid asking it of ourselves: if and when true social justice is achieved in America, will there even be a need for philanthropy? As we labor daily to do the very best we can to support the building of a people’s movement, are we truly and consciously wedded to the notion of our own eventual demise? Will there be, should there be,

a substantial increase in philanthropic funding support for the next USSF in 2010? Either way, how might our gift and grantmaking responses over the next three years influence the agenda and demographics of the next US Social Forum? (Davis 2007)

Organizers on the National Planning Committee remained highly skeptical of private foundations as a primary source of funding for either the Social Forums or for social activism more generally. Instead, groups like Project South and Grassroots Global Justice encouraged financial self-reliance and more selective reliance on foundation and government funding. The USSF itself was highly affected by this debate, and organizers aborted the first attempt to develop a National Planning Committee when it was clear that the voices of more established and foundation-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were overwhelming those of less formal and less well-resourced “grassroots” organizations. Several workshop sessions with titles such as the “nonprofit industrial complex” or “the revolution will not be funded,” were well attended, and this theme was also emphasized in plenary sessions (Davis 2007). This tension was also visible in workshops not specifically addressing the issue. For instance, more hostility towards more formal and professional groups was seen in the environmental justice movement, less in the discussions on participatory budgeting. In a workshop on welfare rights, one of the workshop leaders discussed the need for grassroots welfare rights organizations to build their own alliances rather than depend on larger non-profit organizations to do this work. They claimed that such larger organizations, and their funders, were not as committed to the cause over the long haul as those directly affected by the issues, citing

the recent shift away from welfare rights issues by the Community Change Coalition as one example of this.

Although the critique of professional organizations and conventional politics was pervasive, it is difficult to characterize the overall tendency of USSF participants in regard to this radical-reformist divide. Many participants in the USSF seemed to adopt a flexible, pragmatic approach to tactics, although a large majority of participants stressed popular education and participatory democracy. Such flexibility may be a calculated response to the realities of the U.S. electoral system and the broader political culture. A long history of red-baiting, a relatively weak labor movement, limited inter-party competition, and extremely narrow range of policy debate, coupled with a highly conservative and corporate-dominated mainstream media lead to conflict avoidance in U.S. politics.

In contrast to other polities, ideological debates in the U.S. are less explicit and often obscured in an effort to avoid overt conflict over core principles and values. The absence of strong ideological tendencies also makes co-optation of movements more likely, thereby heightening conflict within movements. This is partly an effect of the cold war, but it also reflects the normalization of neoliberal ideology and the related process of depoliticization. Effectively, it diverts public attention and debate away from vital questions about how resources are used and distributed.

Several organizers with more international experience stressed the particular challenges organizers face in the United States. For instance, Samir Dossani, of the group 50 Years is Enough, observed at a peace organizing workshop that the United States, in his experience is the hardest place to organize. He attributed this to the fact that both

**Commented [JS2]:** JEFF-- CAN YOU SEE IF I'VE CAPTURED THIS DEBATE-- ANd/OR modify as you see fit.

MARINA: Right, so I see this as a pattern of US political progressives, it is not as if they are not having these debates but these debates are not occurring with the general constituency because of the culture and media of the US is so strong.

JJ note: I would see these sorts of ideological debates were much more muted than at other forums- my view is that U.S. activists tend to be much more practical, and much less politicized, reflecting the overall political culture)

MARINA -- Not so certain about this—I think it is watching these groups in action on the ground in their local communities. So practicality is one step towards further politicization in the communities they work in—many hold politicization forums.

Jay: I think emphasizing practical and pragmatic in terms of political culture is misplaced. All political actions and decisions are embedded in an ideological/cultural context. The difference here may be that the ideological overtones of US political culture are implicit not explicit as they are in other countries giving the impression that ideology is not at work. It is. It is much like the notion that only foreigners have accents, we don't. Of course you do. However, Americans tend to encounter their "ideological accents" only when they travel and others point them out.

Liz: I think what follows the comments of Jay, Marina and JJ in the text also sheds light on the matter and could be moved up. That is there is a hesitance in articulating these ideological divisions, for the reasons outlined in the rest of the paragraph but they are there. Rather I would say that there has been a historical effort to depoliticize.

major political parties supported neoliberal policies, thereby preventing any serious debate or elite support for different economic approaches. Njoki Njehu, international organizer for 50 Years is Enough, noted how U.S. citizens generally lack a basic awareness of neoliberalism and that there are important language barriers here when one seeks to engage in more advanced critiques of global capitalism. She urged organizers to remain sensitive to this in their work in order not to marginalize people with less experience. The WSF process must, she said, continue to provide space for people to learn about critiques of neoliberalism even if they have not decided whether or not they oppose these policies.

Given that the USSF took place as the mainstream media was beginning their intensive focus on the presidential primaries, there was surprisingly little evidence that USSF participants were very attentive to formal electoral politics. This is probably largely due to the weakness of left parties within the U.S. and many activists' skepticism towards the two-party system. For instance, one panelist lamented that "there's not one voice in Congress" willing to help workers against the power of corporations, and a woman at a workshop organized by Solidarity claimed, "In no way will I lift a finger to help the Democratic Party." This tendency contrasts with experiences in other parts of the world, particularly Europe and South America, where political parties have actively engaged with the social forum process (Baiocchi 2004; e.g., della Porta et al. 2006). In the U.S. there is no danger of cooptation, as the parties want little to do with grassroots movements, save the possible exception of Kucinich and some Greens. This may explain why many groups do not focus on the state at all, and it provides activists with more

freedom to operate without party influence. But it also limits the ability of movements to shape policy debates.

Although electoral politics were largely secondary to the USSF's agenda, within workshops,<sup>20</sup> activists engaged in considerable discussion about the role of electoral politics and other conventional political strategies (collecting petitions; working with all levels of government, but mostly the local; using the court system). This seemed particularly true for sessions focused on international trade and environmental justice, where labor organizers in particular came under fire for emphasizing lobbying over grassroots education and mobilization. Workshop participants also discussed the need for greater, and more principled, unity between the labor movement and immigrant rights movement around immigration policies, criticizing the compromises that the AFL-CIO and other groups were willing to make in order to pass the recently defeated immigration reform bill.

Workshops focusing on labor issues also showed evidence that a new kind of politics, often called social movement unionism, was underway within the U.S. labor movement (Taylor and Mathers 2002; Waterman 2004). Many of these workshops featured community-based organizations alongside representatives of national unions. They emphasized the importance of grassroots participation by workers, building labor-community alliances, and the use of non-traditional tactics and alternative media. They also called for the expansion of non-traditional labor organizations, such as workers' centers, and labor solidarity networks involving students and faith-based groups. Closer ties between immigrant workers' centers and traditional unions were being forged through the AFL-CIO's National Day Labor Organizing Network.

U.S. political culture makes it difficult to organize in explicit opposition to capitalism. Despite the fact that many U.S. citizens would find no objection to the WSF goals of advancing human rights, environmental sustainability, and economic justice, and most would also agree that consumerism is a destructive force in today's society, few would readily join a campaign that advances "socialism." Recognizing this, one participant at a socialist workshop recommended against even using the term "socialism" when talking to U.S. workers about their rights, due to the negative valence of the word. Even so, socialists were highly visible within many workshops and at the tables outside the workshops. Socialists also organized various workshops on socialism and revolutionary organizing; various workshop presenters and participants also pointed out how various problems were linked to capitalism and imperialism. One of the featured speakers on the labor movement evening plenary denounced the "class war" being waged on workers, while another featured evening speaker representing the feminist movement named socialism as her vision of a better world. Many different styles of socialism were also evident.<sup>21</sup>

Observers noted a generally pragmatic orientation among USSF activists, while reflexivity on long-term goals or the broader systems of meanings attached to the tactics they used were not visible. Instead of articulating their ideologies, most groups participating in the forum seemed to prefer to define themselves in terms of their successful past actions (through testimonials) or through what they currently do (through their action toolkit). Actions, however, are not separable from ideologies for our actions

are suffused with ideological values even though these values may not be formally articulated.

The idea that the WSF process is cultivating a new form of politics is an attempt to move beyond traditional reformist/radical cleavages in social movements. Since ideological polarization in the U.S. is much less pronounced, we saw much less emphasis on the notion of new politics at the USSF than at other forums. Yet for the U.S., a national meeting across social activist sectors not initiated and organized by major funders, a political party, or a major union is undoubtedly a novelty. In events such as the Left Forum it was acknowledged by several grassroots organizers--some who did not even attend the USSF-- that the way politics were practiced in their local organizations and networks have been distinctly changed since the USSF. Thus, we see here variations in the “transnational resonance” (Khasnabish 2005) of particular ideas circulated within the global justice movement, as the constraints of U.S. political culture may be constraining the speed at which ideas spread, if not their ability to flow across borders.

### **Where is the Action? Local, National or Global?**

One of the most significant aspects of the World Social Forums is their ability to help connect local social and political processes with global ones. Indeed, the Forum’s continuity across time and space help distinguish it from most other social movement campaigns and make it a key element of contemporary efforts to counter the power of globalized capital. As a *process*, it develops the connective tissues that link local and global action. As a *space* that brings together diverse groups to exchange ideas and insights, it encourages the articulation and dissemination of new tactics and strategies for



confronting global adversaries. But the development of new repertoires of political action is not something that happens easily, and organizers in the Social Forum process frequently complain about the tensions between organizing globally and locally. In fact, the World Social Forum's adoption of polycentric and decentralized forms in 2006 and 2008, respectively, reflect organizers' attempts to respond creatively to this tension.

As the very first national Social Forum in the United States, the USSF organizers faced some particular challenges in regard to the level or scales of action. The U.S. position as the sole global superpower contributes to a particularly unilateralist, jingoistic, and even racist public discourse that mirrors those of earlier empires. The absence of political leadership in Congress to constructively engage the U.S. in multilateral problem-solving work means that movements promoting multilateralist policies face an uphill struggle. At the very least, such movements must do a significant amount of educational work, and they may even be criticized as unpatriotic. These factors probably help account for the comparatively late entry of the U.S. into the WSF process.

Our observer team reported that a vast majority of workshops focused on actions that could be taken at local levels. This is likely due at least in part to the particular constituencies that USSF organizers sought to attract. The emphasis on mobilizing grassroots and less well-resourced groups ensured that participants would be most familiar with local contexts and best prepared for localized action. Indeed, it seems that the strategy of embedding local-level activities within a broader (national or increasingly global) political frame may be a hallmark of contemporary movement politics. Campaigns such as the World March for Women (Dufour and Giraud 2007), global days

of action (Wood 2004), and even the WSF process itself (Reitan 2007) exemplify this strategy.

It was interesting to see as well that there were also many local issues from specific locations in the U.S. that seemed just as relevant at the forum as Atlanta issues or national issues, such as Katrina relief, Chicago or Miami housing crises, and the deportations and other attacks on immigrants happening in many towns and cities throughout the U.S.

But local actions discussed in the context of the USSF would necessarily help expand the scope of participants' political landscapes. By comparing notes with other local groups, they gain important insights into how national and global forces create similar problems in different communities. They also see how variations in local contexts affect the outcomes of different tactics. A particularly powerful example of this was in a closing workshop on immigration, where more than fifty people from around the United States presented testimonials of what was being done in their communities, urging others to take their ideas back home. On the bus from Atlanta, a group of Latino/a activists from Chicago talked excitedly about encountering Brooklyn youth who had found a unique way of combating harassment by the police: as officers walk their beat, several youth follow them with digital video cameras. A young woman said, "We realized the police were doing the same thing to us as they were to them, and we've invited the New Yorkers to come to Chicago to teach us how to go about this."

At a workshop called "Another Politics is Possible" local grassroots collectives from cities such as New York and Los Angeles shared their experiences, successes, and obstacles in trying to build and implement organizational models and practices based on

horizontality and direct democracy. Another session on anarchism provided a similar forum for sharing and exchange among local anarchist collectives around the country. In addition, a workshop about promoting the rights of domestic workers included representatives from various grassroots groups across the country, each aiming to provide support and encouragement to its counterparts. By thinking of their actions not as isolated efforts in a single locale, but rather as part of a larger set of local confrontations against a similar enemy, participants are invited to expand their political imaginations beyond their local contexts to identify the root causes and possible solutions to locally experienced problems. At a follow up meeting after the USSF, one Chicago youth who was working on youth-employment opportunities explained, “It was like meeting a mirror image of myself. People doing the same work as me... and without going to Atlanta, I never would’ve known.”

At the national level, numerous workshops were building upon the presence of organizers and activists with a more large-scale vision. Workshops aimed at developing new national coalitions to address major economic grievances. The Alliance of Domestic Workers, the Right to the City Alliance, Solidarity Network, the national coalition on public housing, the participatory budgeting campaign, and the Hip-Hop Caucus are examples of such efforts. Also, networks emerged to expand national campaigns working for immigrant rights, for victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and health care. A panel on Trade and Migration organized by the National Network on Immigrant Rights explored the relationship between free trade and immigration, with a particular focus on NAFTA, and then provided a space for networking and building national level alliances to organize around these issues. A workshop aimed at furthering “blue-green” alliances,

cooperation between the labor and environmental movements, generated a suggestion for national level coordination and expanding cooperation between the AFL-CIO and environmental groups. The USSF meeting also provided a rare opportunity for grassroots members of organizations affiliated with the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign—a campaign that helps frame the problem of poverty in terms of international human rights --to meet each other, exchange ideas and experiences, and coordinate future actions.<sup>22</sup>

In the United States, the absence of leftist parties and of any serious critique of globalized markets by party elites leaves U.S. organizers at a discursive and strategic disadvantage when compared with their counterparts elsewhere. For instance, as noted earlier, della Porta and her colleagues show how leftist parties in Europe integrated critiques raised by activists in the European Social Forums into their party agendas. And while labor remains a significant player in the USSF process, it is both comparatively weaker here than in other parts of the globe, and more divided strategically. For instance, panels relating to trade issues revealed dissent over AFL-CIO positions on bilateral trade agreements and criticisms of the tendency in the labor movement to emphasize lobbying over grassroots movement-building on trade issues.<sup>23</sup> Most crippling for any movement offering a critique of globalized capitalism is the enduring legacy of anti-communism. While these factors don't preclude national-level organizing in the U.S., they do prevent radical movements from having readily identifiable targets or allies at the national level. Also important is the size of the U.S., which makes national-level organizing more difficult than it is in smaller countries. These factors, in addition to the particular political

culture of the U.S. as a global superpower, may help account for the particular strategic orientation of groups at the USSF.

While the formal, national polity was not the focus of a tremendous amount of attention at the USSF, far more energy was devoted to building the Social Forum process in the United States. USSF organizers created opportunities for regional clusters to come together to discuss how they would carry the social forum process forward, and the Forum program and plenary sessions helped focus people's attention on the idea of continuous and multi-level actions. For example, activists from Madison, Milwaukee and Chicago gathered to meet other Midwest activists and to discuss plans for another Midwest Social Forum. An ad-hoc session on environmental justice split into groups based on region with the goal of developing regional strategies.

The international dimension of organizing was also important to the discussions in Atlanta. However, we found that international perspectives were largely confined to sessions dealing with labor, women, international migration, trade, and the WSF process itself. This does not mean that the global or international context was irrelevant to sessions on other topics, but that it did not occupy a significant amount of most participants' attention.<sup>24</sup> Some workshop organizers did link local issues to larger global forces and patterns however. For example, in one workshop organized by the Right to the City Network, urban gentrification was linked to global economic restructuring and the international spread of neoliberal policies. And a number of sessions dealing with food sovereignty were also explicit in connecting global policy processes to their analyses of local experiences.

International participation in the USSF tended to serve some key organizing functions, and can be seen in parallel to the ways cross-local exchanges at the USSF encouraged more systemic thinking among organizers. By bringing organizers from different countries together, the WSF process encourages activists to develop their analyses of global problems and to identify the links between global and local processes. As they do so, they gain insights into what strategies and tactics might best address the problems activists face. Experience sharing and testimonials by representatives from international movements were common. For example, in one session called International Perspectives on the WSF, activists from various countries, including Kenya, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the U.S, shared their experiences, achievements, and obstacles in organizing forums at local, regional, and global scales. A session on Justice in the Global Economy: International Solidarity Against Free Trade / For Fair Trade, organized by the AFL-CIO, brought together U.S. activists with activists from Brazil, France, and Italy. At a session devoted to mobilizing around trade issues, a group of Korean American students described their process of linking up with Korean Union and peasant groups in Korea and bringing them to the U.S. in order to raise awareness, especially among Korean-Americans, about the implication of trade agreements. And at a workshop organized by the Democratic Socialists of America, a young man from Venezuela mentioned plans to bring a group of Venezuelan workers to the United States to share their experiences in the worker cooperative movement. Each plenary session included at least one international delegate, reflecting the WSF aim of enhancing understandings of global interdependence and the need for solidarity.

In addition to developing strategic analyses and exploring new tactical innovations, international exchanges in the context of the Social Forums can build trust and contribute to the emergence of a collective, transnational identity that is crucial to sustaining the WSF process and the various struggles that comprise it. By coming together over several days and experiencing a range of political and cultural activities, organizers attain a set of shared experiences that can provide the social glue necessary for the more demanding aspects of cooperation. Arturo Silva of the Federación de Trabajadores Municipales de Chihuahua discussed this aspect of his collaboration with the UE (United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America) over the past fifteen years. He noted that he often gets the question, “Why do all of this cultural stuff?” His response was that “this is how we [get] to know each other and the dynamics of our organizations.”

Given the international structure of most of the labor unions participating in the USSF, it is not surprising that the most internationalist perspectives emerged from sessions in which trade unions were participating. One session of particular interest involved discussions and comparative analyses by public sector workers from North Carolina, Quebec, and Mexico. These international comparisons can help expand participants’ understandings of relevant international processes and laws. For instance a North Carolina organizer with Black Workers for Justice reported that at an earlier WSF he learned that South Africa’s national laws guarantee all workers the right to collective bargaining. He argued that ‘we need a national law like that.’ Moreover, his exchanges with other labor organizers at the WSFs increased his awareness of UN and other

international agreements that establish the right to collective bargaining as a basic human right.

Many women's sessions also incorporated international comparisons, and here too this was facilitated by the presence of transnational associations such as the World March for Women or Observatorio de la Transgresion Feminista (Women's Transformation Watch). The World March for Women, for instance, not only does local organizing, but works to have a global action project every 5 years. This is achieved through the national coordinating bodies rather than through a global coordinating structure, and with conscious efforts to nurture the grass roots organizing (Dufour and Giraud 2007).

International unions also use the WSF process to help strengthen international labor laws, employing what Kaldor refers to as the "double boomerang" effect (Kaldor 2003). This idea elaborates on Keck and Sikkink's notion of the "boomerang effect," whereby national actors such as human rights organizers gain leverage against national targets (typically governments) by engaging international organizations and other international allies. Kaldor emphasizes that by engaging international law in national contexts, civil society actors help reinforce and strengthen international law by enhancing its relevance and legitimacy in local and national settings ( see also Sassen 2007). In the USSF we saw this process at work in sessions organized by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other groups working on immigrant rights. At the Migrant Workers Assembly during the 2007 World Social Forum in Nairobi organizers circulated a petition to get the U.S. to sign the Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. The petition drew the attention of U.S. organizers to an



international Convention that has gotten very little attention, despite its relevance to policy debates on the rights of migrant workers.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, we found that most of the energy at the USSF focused on local level actions, but that by engaging in the USSF organizers were necessarily expanding their political horizons and developing deeper analyses of the causes and solutions to local problems. National level action in formal institutional settings was somewhat constrained by the particular political culture of the U.S., and especially its two-party system which limits the movement's access to influential allies. There were also a good number of sessions that enabled international exchanges and fostered transnational campaigns, and the numbers of such sessions should be expected to increase as U.S. citizens gain experience with the WSF process and develop their identification with a global imagined community.

### **The USSF and the World Social Forums**

The geopolitical importance of the United States made the USSF a particularly significant event in the life of the WSF process. For instance, a Social Forum organizer from Quito, Magdalena Leon, noted that, for many Latin Americans, the USSF was crucial for the advancement of the overall WSF process. She said that the USSF represented “the door to a new phase” of the WSF process, making the movement truly hemispheric.<sup>26</sup>

But while the World Social Forum was watching the USSF, it did not seem that most participants in the USSF had much awareness or connection with broader WSF

process. Our team found that overall, there were relatively few explicit references to the World Social Forums in most workshops. Our observers, however, noted uncertainty over whether or not this is unique to the U.S. context, as other regional and world forums reflected similar tendencies. However, plenary sessions were used to help frame national and local concerns within this wider context, and the **WSF process was explicitly mentioned in each of the six plenaries and in the opening plenary each day.** These larger public events provided an opportunity to raise awareness about the forum process, while smaller workshops often deal with specific issues and concerns. Also, the values that were apparent in the USSF events were consistent with the organizing principles of the WSF.

In part, this clearly stems from the “American exceptionalism” that characterizes U.S. political culture.<sup>27</sup> But it also is likely due to the fact that this was the first USSF and that comparatively few local or regional Social Forums have taken place in this country. U.S. residents have had relatively little exposure to the WSF process for a variety of reasons, including virtually nonexistent mass media coverage of this important global movement.<sup>28</sup> For many, the USSF served as an introduction to the WSF process, and organizers did a fairly good job to ensure that participants would understand the meeting’s larger context. Future research should explore the extent to which people’s engagement with the wider WSF process is enhanced by their participation in the USSF, and whether the next USSF engages with the WSF more extensively.

The engagement of some of the core organizers of the USSF in the wider WSF process is also going to be important in shaping the future of the Social Forum process in this country. National Planning Committee members have remained in regular contact

with the WSF International Council. In late 2007, the National Planning Committee received an invitation from Italian members of the WSF International Council to send a delegate to an assembly of municipalities in Rome. Organizers of this conference wanted to learn about the networks that were part of the USSF and exchange ideas about “how to create a ‘movement of movements.’”<sup>29</sup> This illustration shows how the network of organizers in the WSF process helps encourage ongoing engagement of organizers in multiple levels of activity and may help sustain the USSF process over time. It does so by providing regular opportunities to report to and get feedback from international organizers and to extend analyses from national to global level contexts. These inter-personal networks can help keep the WSF process higher on individual organizations’ agendas than it might otherwise be. They also help provide encouragement that may be essential to sustaining organizers, especially those working in a political context like the U.S.

The World Social Forum’s call for a decentralized forum in 2008 also provided a focal point for some of the energies that were generated from the USSF. The National Planning Committee devoted considerable attention to the Week of Action, and, as noted above, many participants in the USSF planned some activities around this week. The key point here is that the ongoing nature of the events surrounding the WSF helps maintain organizers’ engagement even as it challenges them to find new ways to connect their organizing work at national and local levels with global level processes.

Not only does the wider WSF process create a context that can sustain and further develop U.S. activists’ participation in the process, but the USSF also contributes to the evolution of the WSF itself. We noted earlier how the USSF has set new standards and

suggested new organizing methodologies to enhance the inclusiveness and diversity of the Social Forums. It also seems to be contributing to the evolving discussion of how to address each of the creative tensions we have reviewed above. In this sense, the USSF may be seen as an iteration of the WSF process that has set in motion simultaneously new networks extending across the U.S. as well as a deepening of existing transnational networks. Plans for a second USSF in 2010 will likely provide fuel to sustain these networks, encouraging them to expand and adapt along with the WSF process itself.

## Conclusion

*We better stop, hey, what's that sound/ Everybody look what's going down.*

Our collaborative method has allowed us to generate more rich descriptions of the social forums than might have been possible from one perspective alone. Some of us are deeply embedded within the networks that have planned the social forums, and these researchers have made nuanced contributions to the groups' understanding of how the USSF fits into broader pattern of transnational mobilization and the World Social Forum processes. Student observers, many of whom were attending their first social forum, were well-positioned to look upon the social forums with "fresh eyes" and to comment upon how some of the tensions we observed appear to relative newcomers to the social forums. As well as being multigenerational, our research team was fairly gender-balanced, composed of eleven women and ten men. Although all Northern American and mostly white, our research team included a South Asian-American, a Japanese-American, a Chinese-American, one Japanese-Native American, and one Latina. Seeming contradictions in our collective account reflect not only differences in our social and

political experiences, and respective positions relating to the USSF event, but also the impossibility of developing a truly comprehensive depiction of the social forums.

Despite the breadth of insights that our collective field research provided us, this account is still partial. There were more workshops and events than our small team could possibly attend. Someone spending the entire day in the healing arts tent or the Africa tent, for example, might have a very different perspective on the USSF and its participants. The content of our field notes might have also differed greatly had we focused more on the myriad of cultural performances and less on the workshops and plenary sessions. And a true understanding of the WSF process and its significance requires longer-term effort to “trace” participation of particular groups through the pre-, during, and post-forum stages.

Nonetheless, our descriptions provide insight into the promises and challenges of organizing an important global movement. It also reflects the complexities that global integration introduces to the study of social movements, and suggests a need for new theoretical and methodological tools.

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## Endnotes

\* Members of the USSF Research Collective include: Christopher Chase-Dunn, Gary Coyne, John Filson, James French, Christopher Hausman, Matheu Kaneshiro, Marina Karides, Ashley Koda, Daisy Lomeli, Peter Luu, Katie Miller, Bridgette Portman, Ellen Reese, Preeta Saxena, Peter (Jay) Smith, Elizabeth Smythe, Sarah Van Mill, Ana Velitchkova, Jason Wellman. We are grateful for the financial support of the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, the Center for the Study of Social Movements and Social Change, and the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame

<sup>1</sup>For instance, in the summer just following the U.S. Social Forum, it was only members of this research team who submitted papers on the WSFs to the American Sociological Association (ASA) annual meeting. This was also true—and more surprising—at the ASA Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements workshop prior to the ASA convention.

<sup>2</sup> We should also add “global” society to this statement, since movements on the growing periphery of the world economy have also not generated much scholarly attention.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver cites the startling statistic that 60% of all black men between the ages of 30-34 who are not high school graduates have been incarcerated.

<sup>4</sup> The extended case method "deploys participant observation to locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context" (Burawoy 1998:4).

<sup>5</sup> Although ultimately most participants in the WSF want to see action for social change, the process itself involves considerable attention to the cognitive and relational work that can inform and support action in changing and complex global environment.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, to the WSF slogan, “Another world is possible,” U.S. organizers added that “Another U.S. is necessary.”



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<sup>7</sup> Ana Velitchkova also assisted with this early review and summary, and she provided extra research assistance in assembling summary data on our observations.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, our observers noted that workshops like, “Introduction to Neoliberal Globalization,” conducted by the Center for Popular Economics, “Local Living Economies,” and sessions on participatory budgeting were particularly effective in this regard.

<sup>9</sup> This is also true at the WSF and ESF, though the group of activists who may be aware of these things is probably larger at the global and European scale.

<sup>10</sup> In its efforts to limit the tensions between local and global organizing and to maximize opportunities for participation in the World Social Forum process, the WSF International Council called for a “decentralized” world forum in January 2008, calling on people to organize local actions and link them through a web site devoted to the Global Day of Action ([www.wsf2008.net](http://www.wsf2008.net)).

<sup>11</sup> The content of statements also included, for instance, resolutions calling for an end to ICE raids and closure of detention centers, for groups reclaim public ports for peaceful purposes, calls to days of action against free trade agreements and for the global week of action called by the World Social Forum in January 2008. Others had specific suggestions or proposals for others to get the message of the WSF out on public access local broadcast USF, calls for collaboration in freeing access to software, Internet, communication rights. Although there were suggestions that efforts would be taken to somehow make public or perhaps synthesize statements to the PMA from the different workshops, thus far no action has been taken in this regard.

<sup>12</sup> Another important dimension of exclusion debated by WSF participants is whether participation requires a rejection of neoliberal globalization, as is stated in the Charter of Principles. While a reasonable case is made by WSF founders that opponents of neoliberalism need space to gather outside of the influences of neoliberal ideology, many organizers recognize that potential supporters of their movements may not have the knowledge they need to take such a position. In practice, people who don’t explicitly reject neoliberalism are not excluded from social forums, but they may be prevented from offering workshops.

<sup>13</sup> For a list of all NPC member organizations, see [www.ussf2007.org/nationalplanningcommittee](http://www.ussf2007.org/nationalplanningcommittee).

<sup>14</sup> For instance, indigenous elders criticized younger generations’ cultural preferences (hip-hop, art, clothing, etc.) as signaling their abandonment of tradition. Youth activists urged greater sensitivity among elders to the cultural and social conditions they face.

<sup>15</sup> We would expect that participants’ sense of common identity or solidarity with the diverse participants in the USSF will be related to the intensity of their involvement in the Forum, the extent to which they engaged with groups outside their issue-focus, and the extensiveness of their experience in cross-movement activism. The USSF may have been a first experience of cross-movement work for many activists, and the long-term impacts on collective identity-processes cannot be observed through the methods we use here.

<sup>16</sup> The term grassroots served as a code to highlight some important identity concerns. It is generally used to imply that grassroots groups are more local, participatory, and less well-funded than NGOs. There is also an implication that these groups are more

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accountable to a membership base than to external funders, even if they receive foundation funds. By extension, this implies that grassroots groups are more radical than the more formal and well-funded (and usually more white) NGOs. This oversimplifies, however, a highly complex voluntary sector and masks differences across national contexts.

<sup>17</sup>The selection of GLBTI plenary speakers for plenary sessions and workshops on, e.g., labor, indigenous rights, etc. also helped demonstrate the connections among issues and the need for a broad human rights framework.

<sup>18</sup> In order to be as inclusive as possible, the NPC continually increased the numbers of panels and the number of speakers so that in the end less time was available for dialogue. NPC organizers were conscious of this trade-off between providing opportunities for neglected voices to be heard and allowing open discussion.

<sup>19</sup> For instance, in one workshop, an activist from Philadelphia talked about how reductions in government funding for non-profits have led these groups to rely increasingly on funding from corporations, subjugating them to the whims of the corporations.

<sup>20</sup> The only presidential campaign that was visible in the vicinity of USSF activities was that of Dennis Kucinich. And the only prominent effort to draw any attention to the electoral arena was the “backbone campaign,” which staged a shadow cabinet meeting of progressive leaders on the eve of the USSF and which hosted a literature table where it distributed, among other materials, “spineless citation” postcards that could be issued by activists to politicians who fail to uphold campaign promises. Participants in various workshops and the People’s Movement Assembly also encouraged others to take action during the upcoming Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

<sup>21</sup>While some participants ardently defended orthodox Marxist ideas and organizational forms, calls for “left refoundation” were also heard. For example, at one workshop, socialist activists called for greater cooperation among socialist organizations and other kinds of leftists. Participants also called for greater reflection about what it meant to be a revolutionary in the twenty-first century in light of current conditions and the collapse of, and problems inherent in, state socialism. According to one panelist from Democratic Socialists of America, “history has proven” that the old socialist theories of central planning and a state-run economy are ineffective. Another activist acknowledged that much of the left was disheartened following the collapse of the Soviet Union, but said that she was glad to be rid of the “bogeyman of Stalinism.” Socialists also reflected on the need to address the ways that class intersected with race, gender, and sexual orientation. Evident in socialist workshops was the need to make socialism relevant to the working class in the United States today – which no longer resembles the predominantly white, male, industrial workforce of Marx’s era.

<sup>22</sup> Not all issues were readily framed in broader terms, however. For instance, one observer noted that environmental groups working on very local problems often found it difficult to forge trans-local networks.

<sup>23</sup> These strategic questions were discussed mainly as part of a workshop session called “North and South United Against the FTAA and Free Trade.” The United Electrical Workers were especially concerned on this strategic question.

<sup>24</sup> This may be due in part to the weakness of ideology in U.S. political discourse.

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<sup>25</sup> Although the treaty is clearly not likely to win ratification in the near term, simply drawing public attention to it helps shift the emphasis of popular discourse from questions of the legality of border-crossings to the question of whether or not human rights are truly universal.

<sup>26</sup> Friday 6/29 Workshop “International Perspectives on the WSF”

<sup>27</sup> Observations at the European Social Forum in 2004, however, noted a similar phenomenon of the workshops focusing more on European than world-level organizing.

<sup>28</sup> There was a conspicuous absence of mainstream media coverage of the USSF, despite concerted attempts to attract media attention and the fact that the Forum took place right in front of CNN’s corporate headquarters.

<sup>29</sup> Message to NPC list serve from Allison Budschalow, November 9, 2007.