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Windows on the Ninth World Social Forum in Belém

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Abstract

This essay provides three windows on the Ninth World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. We show the multiple ways in which the World Social Forum's plurality and reflexivity challenge traditional dichotomies to build the foundation for a new politics. We argue that the social forum process has developed mechanisms for remaining an open space while simultaneously creating opportunities for unified collective action. We show that the Forum produces complex analyses and comes up with strategies that correspond to these analyses. We provide some evidence for how the social forum process is trying to overcome organizational challenges related to resource distribution and specialization by capitalizing on the network structure of its participants. Finally, we argue that the social forum process is also working on addressing spatial and temporal challenges by trying organizational innovations.

Keywords

World Social Forum (WSF), alter-globalization movement, response to the global economic crisis, anti-slavery campaign, Belém expanded

[T]he Forum is [...] continuously being formed and renewed, like an anthill. I suggest that we may today be witness to the construction of what is possibly going to be one of the great pieces of architecture in history – but as architecture redefined. It is something that one can only watch in awe and wonder. Just as in the case of all great conventional architecture, the ontological meaning and role of the Forum is to allow us to comprehend the larger world we are a part of, and through this experience to relate to it in new ways. (Sen 2007: 514)

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has developed as a process for bringing together what has become known as the “movement of movements” working to advance more humane, just, and sustainable alternatives to

globalized capitalism. The WSF “process” extends over time and space, and it has mobilized millions of people in countless local, national, regional and global gatherings around the world around the slogan, “Another world is possible.” Given its scope and breadth as well as its focus on some of the most urgent conflicts of our day, the WSF is arguably the most important social and political development of our time. It therefore merits far more attention than it gets from social scientists (particularly those in the United States) and the mainstream media.

This essay provides readers several windows on the most recent World Social Forum. As three observers, we can only scratch the surface in describing what took place over five days in Belém, Brazil, since the meeting itself involved over 2,000 simultaneous sessions organized by more than 5,000 different organizations and movements. Moreover, interpreting actions in Belém requires some familiarity with the Forum process itself as well as with its history and the histories of the groups involved. We bring to our observations of the Forum some of this background knowledge, but we admit to many limitations in our understandings of this very complex and dynamic process.

In the text that follows, we each describe what we “saw” of the 2009 WSF. Two of us – Austin and Ana – were in Belém, while Jackie remained in snowy South Bend, observing what could be seen of the Forum from outside of it. Because an important innovation of this year’s Forum was its attempt to make it easier for people to participate in local events that were tied to the WSF, we believe this particular “window” is essential to having a full appreciation for the WSF process and its wider implications. To help us learn from the WSF process over time and to consider whether and how the process is evolving, we use the theme of the Forum’s “creative tensions” to guide our three different accounts of the Belém WSF.¹

The ninth World Social Forum drew over 130,000 people from more than 140 countries, and its location in the Brazilian Amazon aimed to highlight the urgency of today’s environmental crises. Similar to other forums, the vast majority of participants came from the region where the meeting took place. But sizeable contingents also came from Africa and Europe. What was noteworthy about this version of the WSF was the comparatively large presence of indigenous people, the global financial crisis which was both confirming the analyses of forum-goers while also making their work more urgent, and the large number of heads of state (5) who attended events surrounding the Forum.

¹ E.g., Smith and Karides et al. 2008.

Since the inception of the social forum process, two major debates have sparked the interest of participants, organizers, and observers alike: Is and should the Forum be a space or an actor? Who is the Forum for: large policy-oriented NGOs or grassroots groups; radicals or reformists; etc.? We argue that, while informed by these debates, the Forum is moving beyond them to offer a possibility for a new type of politics. The new politics advanced at the Forum challenges the idea of dualisms and promotes instead uncertainty and ambiguity, taking advantage of the “creative tensions” that these bring along. The co-presence of contradictory elements, rather than hurting the Forum, appears to be the main engine that helps the Forum to move ahead. It encourages reflexivity and willingness to adapt to new demands. Ultimately, the Forum does not appear to satisfy anybody in particular, as no single movement is in control, but rather it seems to be moving toward a true “new public sphere.” The idea of “making a path by walking” appears to guide many participants in this process. Many see themselves engaging in “walking questioning,” as expressed by Zapatista author Subcomandante Marcos, whose writings have helped inspire many activists in the WSF process.²

Ana Velitchkova: Creative Tensions at the Belém WSF

Is the Forum a Space or an Actor?

When I talk to people, both activists and academics, about the social forum process, they always ask me: What comes out of it? This question has been on my mind as well. It reflects our tendency to think in terms of ends rather than means. I believe the Forum was created primarily to challenge this type of thinking. While focusing on the means – i.e., by creating an open space – it also appears to be taking seriously questions about what is to be done. The one place where a single participant can have a glimpse at the overall meaning and outcomes of a forum involving thousands of people and thousands of activities is its closing event, which this year was called the “Assembly of Assemblies.” (Regrettably, I missed the “People’s Movement Assembly” at the end of the 2007 U.S. Social Forum, the only other big forum I had attended, and this time, I was committed to staying until the end).

Assemblies of social movements have converged and issued calls to action since the first World Social Forum in 2001. While the WSF Charter

²) Khasnabish 2008.

prevents anyone from having authority to deliberate or make decisions on behalf of the Forum, the WSF process has facilitated and served as a platform for participants to deliberate and take action on their own behalf. In fact, over time, the assembly of social movements has evolved and become integrated into the Forum's basic structure. This organizational innovation allows the WSF to remain an "open space" for dialogue and exchange but it also offers the possibility for the participating movements to emerge as a plural but unified actor.

So, on the last day of the Belém forum, social movements had the chance to converge again and answer the question "now what?". Reflecting organizers' advanced thinking about the role of the Assembly of social movements in the overall process, the name of the assembly was changed to the "Assembly of Assemblies," making obvious the great diversity of actors and networks and showing a more systematic effort to aggregate proposals discussed at the Forum than the original form and name implied. In the morning of February 1, I attended the assembly on labor in the global crisis. Twenty-one other assemblies were scheduled to take place at the same time around the major themes of the Forum, including climate justice in Copenhagen, struggle against corruption and impunity, human rights, collective rights of peoples, globalising the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, "Negros in the 2009 WSE," women, a world without debt, alternatives to security-based migration policies, a global response to the financial crisis, the civilizational crisis, facing the crisis by developing the Social Forum as a permanent process, sciences and democracy, inter-communication and good experiences, culture and education for transformation, World Forum of Education, justice for the Amazon, the protection of the Amazonian ecosystems, Pan-Amazonian issues, and war, military bases, militarism and nuclear weapons.³ At the assembly I attended, and I suppose at the other assemblies, participants reported on the issues and outcomes of the sessions and discussions that had taken place throughout the week and drafted a common declaration based on these reports. In the afternoon, all declarations were presented at the Assembly of Assemblies.

The commonalities between the declarations of the assemblies were extraordinary. They are another manifestation of the idea that the Forum

³) <http://www.fsm2009amazonia.org.br/programme/alliance-day/assemblies-of-the-assemblies-close-the-program-of-the-2009-wsf/>

serves as the foundation of the “movement of movements.” Each movement would talk not only about its own “issue” but would link its particular issue to many others and recognize their interconnectedness and the necessity for all movements to work together. The human rights language generally provided the common ground for such convergence. Belém participants, however, focused not on political and civil rights, which are usually emphasized by political powers, but on social and economic rights.

An overarching theme at this Forum was the current crisis. It was argued that the crisis we are experiencing throughout the globe is not only a financial, an environmental, a food, or an energy crisis but a systemic crisis of the capitalist global system. Therefore, it was argued, the solution must be systemic and must address the root causes of the crisis. The assembly declarations called for democratization of the institutions of global governance and democratic control of financial transactions as well as for the establishment of a new solidarity-based economy.

True to its objective of helping the WSF lead to concrete, collective actions, the Assembly produced a call to action that outlines common strategies of action during the year. These include a Global Week of Action against Capitalism and War (March 28–April 4); mobilization around internationally recognized days: March 8, International Women Day; April 17, International Day for Food Sovereignty; May 1, International Workers’ Day; October 12, Global Mobilization of Struggle for Mother Earth, against colonization and commoditization of life; as well as acts of resistance against the G8 Summit in Sardinia, the Climate Summit in Copenhagen, and the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago. The call was immediately spread through hundreds of Internet websites.

How should the Forum Engage with Traditional Politics?

Another thorny question among activists that has turned into a creative tension for the social forum process is the relationship between the Forum and traditional politics. While the Forum continues to see itself as a corrective to traditional politics and as a space where politics is critically examined and alternatives are developed, Forum participants do not shy away from interacting with politicians, as Austin illustrates below, despite concerns for possible cooptation coming from the more radical branch of the movement of movements.

A second example are the more than 10,000 (and many more who could not get in) Forum participants who waited for hours to attend the meeting

of five leftist Latin-American heads of state who spoke in Belém, in conjunction with but not as an official part of the Forum. For the left leaning politicians, this was an opportunity to capitalize on the large presence of civil society and claim that they represent it. While Forum participants, at least everybody I talked to, remained critical of international politics and of the participating leaders, they recognized that some social movement issues can be addressed at this level, especially as newly elected regimes in Latin America are trending towards the left.⁴

A third example of this creative tension is the relationship between the Forum and UN politics. Promoters of global democracy have urged for more interaction between the alter-globalization movement and global institutions but such interactions have proven to be difficult if not impossible.⁵ One such difficult but nevertheless ongoing relationship is exemplified by the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP). Since its inception in 2005, GCAP has worked closely with the United Nation's Millennium Campaign. One of the GCAP's panelists this year, Minar Pimple, was a representative of the Millennium Campaign. Mr. Pimple introduced himself as a former grassroots activist working on human rights and anti-poverty issues in India. Some members of the campaign as well as outside critics have argued that GCAP's close relationships with global political powers signal its co-optation and inefficacy.⁶ But GCAP continues to work with the UN Millennium Campaign as well as at other levels, from the grassroots to the national. Every year since 2005, millions of people from around the world, primarily from Asia (73 million in 2008), Africa (24 million in 2008) and the Arab region (18 million in 2008),⁷ "Stand Up" and take actions against poverty at various grassroots events organized around the International Day for Eradication of Poverty under the GCAP and the Millennium Campaign umbrella. Although these actions may have generated limited and, according to many, ineffective policy responses, they do help mobilize and engage citizens around claims that authorities must recognize basic human rights to survival. By bringing people into the global debate about poverty, GCAP helps inform citizens about the UN and other global institutions and provides a means for them to take action.

⁴ Ponniah 2009; it is also worth noting that Forum participants see the election of Barack Obama as another important opportunity for advancing major changes to the global order.

⁵ E.g. Smith 2008.

⁶ Payne 2007.

⁷ Stand Up Against Poverty: <http://www.standagainstopoverty.org>.

This participation can help radicalize local activists in ways that support sustained and innovative actions to address poverty and inequality.

Who participates in the Forum... And Who's not here?

Global inequalities between the North and South have been a major target of WSF protest. Thus, the world forums are always held in the global South, and participants emphasize the perspectives and knowledge/solutions from the global South.⁸ Although a positive characteristic, in the sense that it has allowed important critiques and alternatives to emerge, it has had the unintended consequence of marginalizing political and social realities in the North.⁹ One workshop I attended was a gathering of North Americans who felt that they had not had a chance to develop strategies that reflect “their reality” and that they need a space to do so. The workshop generated a proposal to organize a North American Social Forum to fill this perceived gap. Participants saw the different organizing conditions in the global North as a major challenge to organizing around the WSF process. In my experience, while radical ideas appear to be fairly well accepted in the South, this is generally not the case in North America, specifically in the United States. Not surprisingly, Northerners would be hesitant to give up their privileged position (as manifested in the hesitancy of U.S. and European trade union involvement, for instance). Simply put, even among Forum participants from the North, who would want to give up their food and transportation budgets? What such discussions reveal is the persistence of a North-South gap, even among activists, and a necessity to openly address it in order to build a truly global solidarity. The fact that such discussions are happening at the Forum, however, is a positive sign; the Forum is showing reflexivity, particularly when tackling difficult issues.

Like other dichotomies, however, the North-South dichotomy is less clear-cut than it first appears. There are North-South differences not only among states but also within states (as in old Marxism but more complex) and even among organizations, such as the differences between NGOs and grassroots groups. These differences, though, represent not a dichotomy but a spectrum. Within state differences get exacerbated by migrational flows, proletarianization of labor, feminization of service work, clearly, the

⁸ Santos 2006.

⁹ Here, I need to specify my standpoint to avoid misunderstanding. I feel neither as part of the North nor as part of the South. I come from the former Soviet Bloc, from Bulgaria, but currently, I am a graduate student in the United States.

current economic crisis, and some argue, by the very nature of the capitalist world system. In several instances throughout the Forum, participants expressed a hope that the crisis could at least provide an opportunity for building North-South solidarity.

As an open space, the Forum allows for participation from anybody. Still, given the expenses related to international travel, it is primarily groups and individuals with access to resources who can attend.¹⁰ Therefore, concerns have been raised that the Forum is primarily an arena for NGOs (or professionalized and formal organizations). As a response to this concern, the first U.S. Social Forum chose to bring in Southern voices from within the global North and created “intentional spaces”¹¹ specifically targeting grassroots participation. Similarly, at this Forum, some organizations, like the U.S.-based Grassroots Global Justice, were represented by activists working at the grassroots level. Yet, each of these two forms of organizing has limits with regard to the joined aims of representing marginalized constituencies in formal policy arenas while also helping engage and empower people to be active agents in politics. Many Forum-goers appreciate the need for both forms of organizing in order to achieve the large-scale social transformations envisioned by the Forum’s slogan, “Another World is Possible.” Therefore, the relationship between policy-oriented work and grassroots work should be seen not as oppositional but as complementary and dynamic. Via Campesina, for instance, is an example of an organization that integrates both policy and more confrontational and grassroots work. The network structures that many of the groups involved in the WSF process adopt facilitates this cooperative strategy.

Lastly, one of the most important features of the Belém World Social Forum was the more extensive participation of indigenous peoples. For the first time in the history of World Social Forum, indigenous peoples were part of the International Council, the organizing body of the Forum. The selection of the Amazonian city of Belém also suggests the commitment of the Forum organizers to focus on indigenous and on environmental issues. Anthropologists have long argued for the importance of considering indigenous peoples’ models of social organization as key to identifying alternatives to economic globalization. The major contributions of indigenous

¹⁰ This is also one of the reasons why the vast majority of Forum participants come from the host country and shows the importance of switching Forum locations.

¹¹ Juris 2008.

peoples to this Forum that I could identify included their critique of the state-centric system, their concern of preserving nature as life-giving, and their community-focused understanding of how society should work. While many WSF participants espouse these ideals, conflicts remained as indigenous people worked to find their place in the alleged “open space” of the Forum. Some complained that indigenous representatives were being used as tokens, that there was inadequate space allocation to indigenous issues, and that the WSF process hasn’t fully accounted for indigenous concerns and modes of communication and association. Nevertheless, the participation of indigenous peoples in the Forum and the sometimes contentious discussions it produced should be seen as a positive step in the evolution of the WSF process.

These observations demonstrate that the Forum and its participants continue to ask the important questions of who isn’t there, and what the consequences of these absent voices are. Certainly, there are groups of people who were absent or less present than they should be at the World Social Forum. Many hold that the WSF process is a work in progress – an ongoing experiment in global democratization and transformation – that we all need to contribute to.

Austin Choi-Fitzpatrick: Anti-Slavery Campaigning in Belém

Like most scholars of the World Social Forum, I approached the recent Forum in Belém with the intention of tracing a handful of groups. My work centers on organizations and networks working to end slavery and trafficking. To date, most state-sponsored efforts to address this issue have been piecemeal raids and rescues that overlook the more structural issues emphasized by political economists, human rights advocates and development specialists. Efforts to challenge this dominant “law and enforcement” approach tend to emphasize international economic entities; labor organizing among sex workers; corruption, poverty and globalization; and the embeddedness of “human trafficking” in the larger historical issue of *slavery*. While these efforts have contributed significantly to our understanding of what the problem is, little serious work has been done on what solutions might look like, and even less has been done on those networks of actors championing solutions from within this alternate paradigm.

Anti-slavery networks tend to emphasize issues similar to those raised by scholars: neoliberal economic policies; the retreat of the state; economic

inequality; gender inequality; land struggles; and communal, sectarian and state-sponsored violence, conflict and war, to name a few.

It should come as no surprise that I came to the WSF with an eye toward tracing the Pastoral Land Commission's (CPT) activities and involvement. The CPT is one of the founding members of the WSF, as well as a leader in the anti-slavery movement in Brazil. While I had been in contact with both the CPT and U.S.-based Free the Slaves prior to my arrival, a quick flip through the final program surprised me. Many of the groups relevant to my study were in some way represented in Belém: the CPT, Free the Slaves, Anti-Slavery International, Reporter Brazil, and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. In fact, three separate sets of panels were being sponsored by three distinct "streams" from within the "anti-trafficking movement": those engaged in more mainstream discourse, groups emphasizing sex worker organizing and rights, and those focusing on modern slavery in the global economy (broadly represented by the groups listed above). The activities I traced – including a significant presence in the opening march, and a well-attended series of panels¹² – were organized by the Pastoral Land Commission.

During the march an enthusiastic group carried the large, ILO-sponsored banner of chained hands. T-shirts read *Trabalho escravo vamos ablor de vez essa vergonha* ("abolishing the shame of slave labor once and for all"). The banner was later placed behind the panelists in the general session, which included representatives from US, UK and Brazil-based NGOs, as well as various sectors of the Brazilian government.

The inclusion of these governmental entities bears noting, as they have been involved since the first slavery-related panel was organized in 2003. It was in Porto Alegre that a working group, comprised of the CPT and other members of civil society, proposed a "national plan to combat slave labor" for consideration by the newly-elected Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The final draft of the plan was presented in a session at Porto Alegre in 2003, hard on the heels of Lula's election. To the surprise of those present, a Lula representative made a declaration that the plan would be accepted as it stood. It was this plan, first introduced at the World Social Forum, which went on to become law the next year.

The national plan was unprecedented and remains unparalleled. Where other countries limit their focus to trafficking for sexual exploitation, Brazil's policy addresses trafficking for labor exploitation, and sets out penalties

¹²⁾ 200+ participants.

which, in theory, impact landholders and corporations. Penalties for violations increased (for example, land could be expropriated for violations, and this expropriated land was slated for distribution to the landless), the number of special Mobile Inspection Groups was nearly doubled and they were linked with “mobile courts” that could impose fines, freeze bank accounts, and seize assets. Corporations, businesses and individuals found in violation of this new legislation would be added to a “dirty list”, and fined for “crimes against society”.

Many of the same actors were present in CPT-organized sessions in 2009. The Brazilian minister Vannuchi Paulo (Special Secretarial for Human Rights), members of the federal prosecutorial team, and members of the mobile investigation teams joined the previously-mentioned NGOs in discussing the challenges and opportunities of their work. The minister stayed long after the event to answer questions from members of the independent media.

This historical precedent, and the ongoing involvement of governmental representatives in these Forum sessions, provide an opportunity to explore three long-standing tensions within the World Social Forums: whether it is a space or an actor, whether it facilitates reformist or radical change, and whether the action is at the global or local level. This first tension – space or actor – is illustrated by the anti-slavery network as civil society and civil servants have taken advantage of the Forum as they lobby one another. This engagement over time suggests a move beyond the space/actor dichotomy. While “space” can almost be read to suggest value neutrality, the notion of actor has been invoked to describe declarations and calls for collective action emanating from the Forum. In the case highlighted above, both movement and government actors used the space strategically as they directed political messages and/or challenges toward one another. It is probable that organizations use this strategy in order to increase both organizational legitimacy and the likelihood that governmental representatives would participate in future events, as indeed happened in Belém. This suggests that the mere idea of a sustained, ongoing forum process exerts a sort of political pressure in the space itself, rendering the space/actor division an inaccurate dichotomy. The debate over whether the Forum should be an “actor” centers on the question of “getting involved in politics” when, in fact, NGOs use the space for politics all the time.¹³ This is desirable, and possible, because the *idea of the* Forum is fundamentally political, and this is recognized by all actors involved.

¹³ Santos 2006.

The past and present engagement between these actors makes answering the second question easy: were these interactions calling for reformist or radical change? While the speakers may have been guided by radical social and political commitments, the nature of the session, and the composition of the panels, lent themselves almost entirely to discussions of past and future reforms.¹⁴ Land reforms represent the fairly radical restructuring of social power. Here again we see the dichotomies challenged. Groups must often navigate the boundaries between conventional and alternative politics as they seek to make another world possible. Most radical groups that want to have an impact try to engage the state where they are able. The crucial difference, however, is whether one's focus is on relations to power (means), or on the goal of social change (ends).

Finally, two things can be said with regard to our final question – is this action at the global or local level? As with each of the answers above, the answer is “yes” and “yes”. Each organization in the network is positioned at the nexus of macro and micro policy debates, cultural trends, public relation campaigns, community organizing efforts and fundraising drives. One leading U.S.-based NGO, Free the Slaves, sent their West Africa programs coordinator to the Forum, rather than a representative from the global north. This provided an opportunity for an international NGO to be represented by a more grassroots' perspective. Much of the conversation on each panel focused on the Brazilian context, which was not surprising considering the majority of the panelists were Brazilians working locally on the issue. The cross-pollenization, however, established new and deepened existing relationships between civil society actors. After the Forum I was interested to see organizations talking amongst themselves about the possibility of conducting simultaneous anti-slavery events at the 2010 forums in Brazil, the United States and Africa. Ongoing research will be necessary to explore whether these relationships result in practical strategies for linking grassroots and local struggles across the social forums, but the potential for such a development is clear.

Jackie Smith: The View from Abroad

Since its inception, the WSF process has continuously sought to expand the space in which ordinary people can participate in global politics. Very

¹⁴) Much talk centered on land reform. I consider this issue to be a matter of reform since this is a central issue in Brazilian politics, and indeed a key issue in Lula's bid for office.

early on, and without central coordination, activists began organizing local gatherings that they dubbed “social forums” and which they explicitly linked to the larger debates and organizing practices of the World Social Forum process.¹⁵ To date there have been many hundreds of local social forums with varying degrees of connection to the networks and discourses of the World Social Forums. Although many of them tend to focus on issues that are largely local in scope, and while many take the form of cultural events or direct actions targeting a single issue, policy, or actor, collectively they reflect the WSF process and its aim to make another world possible by connecting global visions of a more just world with local actions designed to help realize such a world.

My decision not to go to Belém was shaped in part by my desire to remain focused on some of the local organizing work I had been doing as part of the “Michiana Social Forum,” which is taking shape on the border of Northwest Indiana and Southwest Michigan. The “MSF” had just brought together a diverse collection of local residents and activists to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and organizers were both enjoying the success of our anniversary party while also discussing how to proceed with our effort to sustain and strengthen our local social forum.

The MSF was formed as part of the 2008 World Social Forum, and we organized in response to WSF organizers’ call for a decentralized world forum. Our experiences and discussions since the first gathering in January of 2008 have led us to focus on the aim of making the cities in our region “human rights cities,” based on a model advanced by a group that has long been active in the WSF process, the People’s Movement for Human Rights Education (www.pdhre.org). To begin building a foundation for our human rights city project, we hosted our celebration of the UDHR anniversary at a local labor hall and printed thousands of pocket-sized copies of the UDHR to distribute in the community and at area campuses. Some of our members wrote op-eds to the local paper highlighting our local human rights challenges, such as immigrant rights, economic rights, and the establishment of legislation to prevent discrimination based on one’s sexual orientation. Although progress has been slower than we’d like, we’re finding that in just a year, we have made some headway in building trust across different organizations and encouraging residents in our area think about their struggles in larger terms. The aim of the human rights agenda we’ve set out is to foster notions of solidarity in a local context that prevents

¹⁵ Glasius and Timms 2006.

engaged conversation and cooperation across different groups and that frequently encourages divisions.

So my observations of Belém were made mostly via my computer, but the larger WSF process provided a network of people from whom I could learn and with whom I could share my observations about what I saw happening there. Moreover, the MSF process constitutes a local space where my colleagues who went to Belém and I can apply some of the lessons we took from the Belém WSF. We organized sessions to report back on the Belém Forum and encouraged participants in our MSF network to pay attention to an event about which they otherwise would not have known. The frequent response we hear from people learning about the WSF process for the first time is surprise that there are so many people out there who share similar problems and concerns and who are coming together to try to change their world. The connection to a global process inspires them and gives them hope. Since the next U.S. Social Forum will take place in Detroit, our MSF network has a particularly good opportunity which we will use to help people in our wider region understand and participate in the WSF process.

Belém Expanded

An important innovation at the 2009 forum was called “Belém Expanded,” which was an effort to link local activities to the Belém Social Forum through text and audio chats, Skype and other Internet connections, video conferences and telephone connections. The WSF space provided special rooms that workshop organizers could reserve that contained the technology to allow connections with local gatherings outside Belém. A website was organized (openfsm.net/projects/club-Belemexpanded/) to encourage organizers to create local events that could be directly connected to the WSF in Belém or that would help bring the WSF message and open space to local communities. More than 400 activities and 700 organizations were formally registered through this initial experiment in decentralizing the WSF process. This expanded possibilities for incorporating into the process a more diverse range of voices and ideas.

What is exciting about Belém Expanded is not its success in mobilizing local actions. Indeed, the numbers are quite small when compared with the participation at the WSF itself and considering the potential pool of possible spaces where local events might have been organized. Rather, it is Belém Expanded’s illustration of the capacity of the WSF process to evolve,

and of the participants in it to learn from past practices to constantly strive to address the persistent tensions between the ideal of inclusion and universality and the reality that most of the world's people cannot partake in the WSF process.

Looking at the WSF history, Belém Expanded builds upon at least three other innovations in the WSF process that sought to expand local participation in WSF debates and processes and to foster solidarity around the WSF ideals. First, the development early on of local "Social Forums" reflected a desire of many working in local settings to connect their struggles to those taking place in other parts of the world. Once a community begins to imagine itself as part of a larger network of activists and activities, the local processes often take on lives of their own and lead activists in numerous directions. The WSF's International Council saw the potential of these local forums and wisely encouraged their growth and expansion.

A second innovation of the WSF process that helped connect local and global spaces was the decision at the 2005 WSF to expand the space for self-organized workshops at the World Social Forums, creating a web-based process for groups to submit proposals and to try to combine and coordinate proposed events. Again, while the first experiment in this regard did not necessarily achieve its aim in a decisive way, it started a process of learning how to work with technology in order to enhance the inclusiveness and open-ness of the Forums.

A third notable innovation in the WSF process was the decision to move from annual to bi-annual world forums and to encourage a decentralization of "World" Social Forum activities. The 2008 WSF was the first such attempt at this decentralization, and again it built upon a web-based platform to help encourage local mobilizations and to inform activists about the larger movement. This format will be replicated in the future, as decentralized forums will alternate with World Forums each year. This will help local social forum organizers better relate their local activities to the WSF and to anticipate the organizing ahead.

Belém Expanded offers a platform for helping encourage ongoing and sustained WSF activism at the local level. Coupled with the decentralized forum, it can help sustain discussions at local levels that engage with themes that are global. Belém Expanded demonstrates how the WSF provides space for individual activists to introduce new ideas for building on the WSF process and introducing new technologies for organizing and connecting people. It thus reflects the WSF's possibilities for generating constructive responses to the creative tensions we highlight above.

Conclusion

In this piece, we have tried to show the multiple ways in which the World Social Forum's plurality and reflexivity challenge traditional dichotomies to build the foundation for a new politics. We argue that the social forum process has developed mechanisms for remaining an open space while simultaneously creating opportunities for unified collective action. We show that the Forum produces complex analyses and comes up with strategies that correspond to these analyses. We provide some evidence for how the social forum process is trying to overcome organizational challenges related to resource distribution and specialization by capitalizing on the network structure of its participants. Finally, we argue that the social forum process is also working on addressing spatial and temporal challenges by trying organizational innovations.

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