The World Social Forum and the Emergence of Global Grassroots Politics

written by John L. Hammond | January 20, 2010

[This is an expanded and documented version of an article that appeared in *New Politics*, no. 42.][1]

Since 2001, the worldwide movement of opposition to neoliberal corporate globalization has met annually at the World Social Forum. The Forum brings together tens of thousands of people from the world's social movements and nongovernmental organizations, pursuing many agendas. The movement, in Naomi Klein's phrase, is a movement of "one no and many yeses" (2001: 89). This phrase captures the pluralism, multiplicity, and diversity of the movement at the same time that it makes clear that there is a core of unity about what it opposes. It also shows why it is almost impossible to characterize the movement in a single article.

It is united in opposition to the neoliberal globalization promoted by international financial institutions and transnational corporations. The IFIs condition loans to third-world governments on austerity programs which require those governments to limit spending on their people's needs; the corporations invest in manufacturing plants for export, driving down wages as they threaten to move their investments in search of the lowest costs. In the eyes of their critics, the IFIs and the transnational corporations perpetuate poverty in the third world and increase the gap between it and the steadily growing riches of the first world. As the Forum's *Charter of Principles* says, the WSF is "opposed to neoliberalism and to the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism. . . . The alternatives proposed at the World Social Forum stand in opposition to a process of globalization commanded by the large multinational corporations and by the governments and international institutions at the service of those corporations' interests, with the complicity of national governments" (WSF Charter).[2]

The Forum has met six times, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, 2002, 2003, and 2005; in Mumbai, India, in 2004; and in a "polycentric" meeting, notionally a single meeting, in Bamako, Mali; Caracas, Venezuela; and Karachi, Pakistan in 2006. It has been a heady experience for all who have participated. Imagine a gathering with tens of thousands of people (155,000 in 2005) managing to communicate across barriers of language, political orientation, and issue emphasis. The scene bursts with energy as people who work on particular causes at home–for women, the environment, indigenous peoples, economic justice, human rights, AIDS and other health causes, education (formal and informal), cooperatives, and many others–compare notes and strategies. Musicians and other performers entertain in the open air during the breaks, and dozens of organizations and publishers promote their projects and publications. All the forum's meetings have been highly disorganized, probably inevitably with such large crowds (always bigger than expected) and the short time for planning and holding the meetings, but despite the frustrations, the disorganization intensifies the feeling of spontaneity and dynamism.

For some the main issue is to defend the public sector and protect social benefits against the demand for government downsizing and privatizing. They protest the creeping privatization of higher education in many countries as public funding for public universities shrinks while academically weak but profitable private universities arise to fill the growing demand and all universities, public and private, are increasingly beholden to corporate funds.

Many are working to develop a "solidary economy," small-scale informal-sector businesses

organized as cooperatives to provide jobs to the growing ranks of unemployed workers and basic services to local communities. They believe that cooperative self-reliance may save poor working people from being squeezed between a shrinking public sector and growing economic inequality. Small cooperatives also embody a defiant challenge to the giant corporations that dominate underdeveloped economies with no commitment to the well-being of their people.

They join in opposition to the proliferation of trade agreements. Misnamed "free trade" has become the slogan under which advanced economies have cemented their international advantages. In the Porto Alegre meetings, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA, also known by the Portuguese and Spanish acronym ALCA) was the chief target. The United States ha sought to impose the FTAA on the countries of Latin America. Like other free trade agreements, it would give corporations from any signatory state free rein to operate in other states, with a potentially great competitive advantage against domestic producers. It would also force all states to open their markets to U.S. products while imposing protective tariffs on their potential exports to the United States, such as steel and agricultural products. More than subjecting underdeveloped economies to unfair economic competition, many fear that the trade agreement would cement US political control over the region and threaten national autonomy.

Capitalist control of water resources is a growing issue in the many countries where governments license private companies to develop these resources and charge prices that poor people cannot afford. Especially in 2004 and 2005, environmentalists called for universal access to clean water, demanded that water resources not be monopolized by profit-making corporations, and protested the proliferating commercial sale of bottled water. As the privatization of water proceeds apace around the world, activists cry out that "water is life" and demand that the life-giving fluid be preserved as a public heritage.

At the 2005 forum, activists prepared a platform and strategized for the triennial meeting of the World Water Forum in Mexico in 2006. The WWF is a UN-sponsored conclave which first met in 1997; it has been dominated by the World Bank and transnational water corporations which would like to promote private water utilities and "public-private partnerships" as the preferred solution. But since the 2000 meeting, activists have taken part and challenged the corporate model. At Porto Alegre they laid plans to offer a stronger challenge at the Mexico meeting.

Impoverished young people have even had a tent city to camp out. In 2003, though it was inundated by torrential rains on two days, it sheltered some 25,000 people. The youth put on their own loosely organized–somewhat anarchic, in fact–program of activities, though the campers also participate in the main events. Here is the center of activity for anarchists who have promoted the large antiglobalization demonstrations at major international summits during the past several years.

Cross-cutting the specific issues is a commitment to the public good. These movements are dedicated to the proposition that the world's poor can only improve their condition through collective effort, not individually. At the Forum they discuss strategies and programs for collective action. Against the belief in the free market prevailing in much of the world (especially in official circles) today, they seek to formulate a new discourse that will help them recover the ideological offensive. They reject Margaret Thatcher's oft-repeated injunction that "there is no alternative" to transnational capitalism, insisting, in the forum's slogan, that "another world is possible." They also seek the attention of the media to show how widespread are their demands and how broad is the range of forms of opposition to neoliberalism.

Participatory ideology and practice are a shared goal. Advocates argue that in a democracy, people should deliberate collectively and determine government decisions, to the extent possible, directly, rather than through elected representatives. This means participation at all levels of

government and in unofficial civil-society-based structures.

Diversity itself is also a point of unity among the participants. They celebrate the fact that the Forum brings together so many people and groups, they proclaim their respect for the varying opinions expressed and for the many cultures visibly present, and they defend the right of all to differ with each other (Santos, 2003).

The WSF is self- limiting; its charter, adopted at the first forum in Porto Alegre, explicitly excludes political parties and forswears taking political positions or proposing actions that might bind all the members: "The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. . . . The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body . . . that would commit all, or the majority, of them" (WSF Charter, 23). As its founders like to say, it is a space, not an actor: it opens its agenda to all the forces wanting to discuss the issues relevant to the struggle for another world. Yet, as we will see, this limitation has been a point of ongoing contention.

Along with hundreds of meetings of like-minded activists in small rooms, thousands of listeners have gathered in plenary sessions to hear the stars of the international antiglobalization movement such as Samir Amin, Noam Chomsky, and Arundhati Roy. The attention they receive causes some grumbling among those who believe that a democratic movement should not give so much space to celebrities, but against this, the WSF weighs the need to attract the international media and to some extent tailors the event to the media's demands.

These events bear fruit afterward. After meeting so many fellow activists from so many different places, people return home actually believing that another world is possible–in part because they feel they have experienced it. But it has concrete results as well. The Social Forum has inspired many replications at the regional, national, and local levels, and in special interest groups organized around particular themes. Organizing at the 2003 forum contributed to the massive demonstrations opposing the US invasion of Iraq on February 15, 2003, in which a reported fifteen million people demonstrated in a hundred cities around the world.

Two Currents Converge

The WSF was originally conceived as a counterweight to the World Economic Forum, the conclave of the international capitalist class, which has met annually since 1970, usually in Davos, Switzerland. (WSF meetings are timed to coincide with those of the WEF.) The WSF has brought together two main currents of activity: the direct action movement against globalization that has called massive demonstrations against international summit meetings, and the emergent worldwide civil society, embodied mainly in the nongovernmental organizations that have mushroomed throughout the world since the 1980s. These forces have been dubbed the "antiglobalization movement" by much of the press, but they generally reject the label, preferring to think of themselves as the global justice movement or alternative globalization (in romance languages, *altermundializaciòn* or equivalents) movement. They favor a unified world, but one unified around common human values and respect for diversity rather than trade.

The direct action movement was behind the 1999 protest of the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle, the most contentious antiglobalization protest. It set the image of the movement in the public mind: a union of "teamsters and turtles," that is, trade unionists in traditional sectors and defenders of the environment. Tens of thousands of demonstrators blockaded the WTO meeting, but the media paid most attention to the handful of self-styled anarchists who smashed store windows in downtown Seattle. Thousands turned out for similar demonstrations at other global summits: the G-8 Summit in Genoa in 2001, the FTAA negotiating sessions in Quebec in 2001, Miami

in 2003, and Mar del Plata, Argentina in 2005; and later WTO summits in Cancún, Mexico, in 2003 and Hong Kong in 2005. At Genoa, a police riot killed one demonstrator.

These large demonstrations aim to blockade the summits and shut them down. Though the term "antiglobalization movement" is often applied to this group rather than the larger movement, I will call it the direct action current to highlight its differences with the second current. Most of the demonstrators are from the developed countries–turnout from the third world was usually light, even though the demonstrations were called to protest the IFIs' exploitation of these countries.

The second current consists of nongovernmental organizations. NGOs became important in the 1980s as the protest movements against dictatorships, especially in Latin America and eastern Europe, came to think of themselves as "civil society" and sought to institutionalize their unofficial influence on public affairs (Anheier et al., 2004 and 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Salamon and Anheier, 1997). The term NGO covers a broad range of organizations, from small, local single-issue organizations to the large, international voluntary donor agencies.

Before the World Social Forum, the NGO movement had been energized by the series of international conferences sponsored by the United Nations: on human rights in Vienna and on the environment in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, on population and development in Cairo in 1994, on social development in Copenhagen and on women in Beijing in 1995, on habitat in Ankara in 1996, and on racism in Durban in 2001. While these were official conferences among governments, each was accompanied by an unofficial conference outside the walls where NGOs working on the conference theme from around the world met, networked, plotted common action, and pressured the official delegates to adopt resolutions and programs to favor their causes (Clark et al., 1998).

Unlike the protest movements from which they emerged, NGOs aspire to being stable organizations. This means that they seek funding to support a full-time staff. Some former activists became professional NGO officials while others faded from the activist scene. The NGOs have been criticized for losing their movement character and becoming detached from their base, even as they claimed a space for themselves as civil society. Seeking funding, moreover, forces them to cultivate an image of respectability, as do their efforts to influence the governments of their home states.

Many NGOs work to achieve an autonomous path to development for their underdeveloped countries. Like the direct action movement, they are also "antiglobalization," and in the same sense: they oppose the same IFIs that are the targets of major demonstrations. They call for a popular globalization. They had an early and unexpected victory in the battle against the Multilateral Agreement on Investments in 1998. The MAI would have granted freedom for global corporations to operate outside their home countries and prohibit host countries from imposing any social or environmental conditions. A loose international network of NGOs coalesced, mainly via the Internet, to oppose the MAI because they thought it threatened to worsen the living conditions of the world's poor. MAI negotiations collapsed under NGO pressure (but governments have incorporated many of the same provisions into later free trade agreements; Ayres, 2002).

There is no clear line between the two wings of the movement, divided more by style than by substance. As they eye each other warily, a sort of symbiotic conflict occurs between them. Antiglobalization demonstrators, many of whom call themselves anarchists, take pride in flouting convention, while the more staid NGOs don the trappings of respectability. The two, moreover, have different views of the current state of world politics. The direct action arm aims its demonstrations at international institutions because many believe that the nation state has ceded most of its power to these institutions. NGOs, on the whole (though more heterogeneous than the direct action wing), attempt to work through the nation state and use the traditional channels of political pressure. (Desai and Said offer a view of the movement's organizational diversity and its overlapping and

sometimes contradictory objectives; 2001: 64-75).

Origins of the Forum

Though these were the two main organizational sources, the movement is even more diverse–and dispersed. The idea of a world conclave seemed quixotic, but Francisco (Chico) Whitaker of the Justice and Peace Service, an arm of the Brazilian Catholic Church, and Oded Grajew, a Brazilian industrialist and children's rights advocate, who were close to (but did not represent) the Workers' Party (PT), met in Paris in February, 2000 with Bernard Cassen, a member of the editorial collective of the monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* and a leader of the Association for the Tobin Tax to Aid Citizens (ATTAC, later renamed Action for the Taxation of International Financial Transactions to Aid Citizens), an international movement based in France to promote the Tobin tax, a proposed tax on international capital movements that would make southern countries less vulnerable to capital flight. Together they came up with the idea to bring together all the forces opposed to neoliberal globalization around the world (Cassen, 2004; Whitaker, 2002).

If the World Economic Forum found its home in a luxury ski resort in the Swiss Alps, the WSF's organizers chose Porto Alegre as their site. Porto Alegre had the most longstanding PT municipal government in Brazil (1990-2004) and was a showcase for the PT's brand of participatory democracy, especially its participatory budget. In open community assemblies, citizens debate priorities for each year's investment budget. Delegates to the citywide budget council then deliberate to allocate the money fairly among districts and budget areas (education, health, streets, etc.). The process of deliberation is also a process of education, through which participants really learn to take one another's point of view and put the interests of the whole above their own parochial interests.

The PT and the city government spared no effort in showing off the budgeting process to WSF delegates. They provided major financial and logistical support for the Forum in the first years, as did Rio Grande do Sul, the state of which Porto Alegre is the capital, under its PT governor. (When the PT lost the gubernatorial election in 2002, the state withdrew some resources in 2003, and the PT's loss of the mayoralty in 2004 hurt the 2005 meeting even more, although all city officials appreciate the forum's value to the city's hotels and restaurants during the dead summer season.)

Having announced the forum, the founders called on representatives of several Brazilian organizations to set up an Organizing Committee. Its members represented six leading Brazilian NGOs as well as the PT- affiliated labor federation Central Unica de Trabalhadores (CUT) and the Landless Farmworkers Movement (MST). The NGOs are all progressive, but nevertheless part of the establishment of Brazilian and international civil society; the CUT hews closely to the moderate majority line in the PT; only the MST is distinctly on the left within Brazilian politics. This composition puts the Organizing Committee (now called the Secretariat) on the center-left. It has tried to channel the political enthusiasm of the forum in a moderate direction. It later created an International Council of leading activists and intellectuals, mostly to the left of the Secretariat. The two bodies have not always agreed. Members of the Secretariat have generally held to the idea of the forum as a "space," a meeting place for activists of diverse orientations, while some on the International Council have been in the forefront of efforts to make it an actor in its own right.

The first forum convened in Porto Alegre from January 25 to 30, 2001, gathering 20,000 participants from 117 countries. In its most dramatic incident, the MST and José Bové, the French peasant leader and anti-McDonald's protester, led an occupation of a farm owned by the Monsanto Company near Porto Alegre where the company was allegedly developing genetically modified seeds. The takeover made some of the Brazilian NGOs on the Organizing Committee fear that they might have unleashed a monster that they could not control. They strove to moderate the tone of the

second forum in 2002 so that incidents like the Monsanto occupation would not be repeated. Bové spoke at the Forum in 2003, but not at a plenary.

That same year, Venezuelan president Hugo Chàvez was not given a platform. With little advance notice, he flew to Porto Alegre hoping to address the forum, but the organizers said that it was not open to heads of state. Instead he addressed a hastily arranged outside meeting.

But a highlight of the third forum was the address at a huge outdoor rally by the newly elected Brazilian president, the PT's Luiz Inàcio Lula da Silva, welcomed despite the prohibition on Chàvez. The charismatic former factory worker, while speaking of his "Zero Hunger" program to guarantee every Brazilian three meals a day, also responded to criticism of his announcement, a few days before, that he would proceed to the World Economic Forum in Davos. While many in the audience shouted "Stay here!" he replied that those who regarded such a trip as selling out were asking him to give up the chance to have any influence. Lula promised to say in Davos "exactly what I would say to anybody here: that it is impossible to continue an economic order where a few can eat five times a day and many go five days without eating" (Hammond, 2003: 6- 7).

These meetings grew spectacularly. Attendance has always exceeded expectations, roughly doubling from the first to the second, and again from the second to the third. The forum has struck a responsive chord in a broad array of movements from around the world. Though the huge numbers create logistical and organizational problems, the meetings throb with the energy of dialogue and celebration.

The annual meetings have evolved in theme as well. There was an overwhelming issue at the third forum, in 2003, but it was not originally on the agenda: the looming war in Iraq. Vehement opposition to the war became the theme of featured speakers at the large plenaries, smaller workshops, and a massive protest march.

The fourth forum moved to Mumbai, symbolically staking in Asia the claim to be a genuine *world* forum. About 80,000 people attended, making it smaller than the previous meeting at Porto Alegre, but larger than the first two, and laying to rest the fears of some that it would not be possible to attract similar numbers from the many cultures and the greater poverty of Asia.

In contrast to the Porto Alegre meetings, where the city was very attentive to Forum events, Mumbai paid little heed–and the meeting place was on the far outskirts of the city. Even so, foreigners could not avoid being aware of the depths of Indian poverty, visible on the streets–and in the forum itself. (In contrast, Porto Alegre is one of the more prosperous Brazilian cities and poverty does not strike the observer in the face either downtown or on the forum grounds.) NGOs may be more widespread and more broadly based in India than anywhere else in the world; there were more poor people than at any of the Porto Alegre meetings, most of them representatives of organized poor people's movements, especially the dalits (former untouchables) and adivasi (tribal peoples). Their rural poverty, and especially the living conditions of the tribal peoples, imposed issues in which economic survival and environmental sustainability were fused: their subsistence depends on protecting their right to land, forests, and water against the destruction wrought by megadevelopment projects, resource extraction, and corporate control of nature. Their situation also challenges the assumptions prevailing in much of the antiglobalization movement which, while opposing corporate domination, nevertheless takes for granted the beneficial effects of modernization and development (Albert, 2004; Conway, 2004; Vanaik, 2004).

The atmosphere was festive, following an Asian tradition of incorporating musical and dramatic performing groups into political events. Political parties were no longer excluded, in recognition of the greater number and competitiveness of left parties in India than in Brazil.

The same issues discussed at Porto Alegre were prominent, along with some new ones responding to the Asian context: casteism, racism (not prominently addressed in Brazil and not very prominent in Brazil's left politics even though half the country's people are of African descent), work- and descent- based exclusions and discriminations, religious fanaticism, and sectarian violence. There was also a counterforum, Mumbai Resistance, sponsored by two Indian Maoist parties, protesting the establishment orientation of the forum. This meeting followed the US invasion of Iraq, and the war gained a lot of attention. At the closing rally, Arundhati Roy proposed a worldwide boycott of companies supporting the US occupation.

In 2005 the forum returned to Porto Alegre, but it was different from all previous forums, and so was Porto Alegre. The PT had lost the mayoralty a few months earlier. The new mayor, José Fogaça, had previously criticized the forum as an "ideological Disneyland," but now he welcomed it (presumably in recognition of its contribution to the tourist trade during the off season; Engler, 2004).

The event was even bigger than its predecessors, attracting 155,000 people, according to the organizers. In response to previous criticisms, the forum's organizers did not sponsor major events and invite speakers but instead turned the agenda over to participating groups to organize their own events. The event was divided into eleven "thematic terrains," each dedicated to a specific topic such as diversity, autonomous thought, art, social struggles, peace and demilitarization, human rights and dignity, and sovereign economies.

The physical layout was different: no longer at the Catholic University, the forum occupied a single contiguous strip stretching for almost three miles along the bank of the Guaiba River. The terrains were laid out one after the other, and in each one there were tents or barracks of varying sizes where all the events related to the theme were held. People pursuing a single issue could stick to one terrain and have more opportunity for interaction among themselves, but it was harder to experience the forum as a whole or to sample sessions on different issues. In addition, as at all previous forums, some sessions were not properly listed in the program and others that were listed did not occur. Interspersed among the terrains were stands selling food, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia, and roughly in the middle was, once again, the large youth camp with its own set of programs.

The event was bookended by appearances by Lula on the first day and Hugo Chàvez on the last, both speaking in the stadium. While Lula was booed by some in the audience for his continuing embrace of the neoliberal program, Chàvez was roundly cheered for his condemnation of US imperialism.

The organizers made some changes in response to earlier criticisms. There was a "wall of proposals," where any group could post a call for discussion or action to the scrutiny of all. Both at Mumbai and at Porto Alegre the next year, the debate between advocates of the forum as a space and as an actor were aired vociferously, leading to the "Call of the Social Movements" in 2004 and the inaptly named "Porto Alegre Consensus" in 2005 (both discussed below). The organizers ended the 2005 Forum by announcing a further measure intended to respond to criticisms of the forum's size and centralization: instead of a single worldwide event in 2006, there would be separate meetings on three continents.

The first meeting in 2005, in Bamako, Mali, was smaller than other sessions–fifteen to twenty thousand participants, according to the organizers; Africa's poverty and underdeveloped infrastructure made attendance difficult. Women, 70% of the participants, were more prominently present (Geloo, 2006; Zulu, 2006). The forum itself was overshadowed by the Bamako Appeal, which emerged from a rump session, a seminar of a group of European and African intellectuals the day

before the Forum officially opened to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary in 2005 of the Bandung Conference of Nonaligned Nations. They called on the World Social Forum to adapt a concrete and unified political program (MRZine, 2006) and, in the eyes of their detractors, attempted to appear to the world as representing the official position of the World Social Forum.

An estimated 80,000 participants attended the Caracas forum (fewer than the last two Porto Alegre meetings). The program featured over 2,000 events–panels, workshops, performances. As in past years, the crowds were huge and the scene was hectic and exciting. The Chàvez government subsidized the Caracas forum heavily, offering meeting space, sound equipment, and even free subway fare to participants displaying their forum badges, and used the event to show off its progressive measures (Hammond, 2006).

Formal sessions were sometimes less crowded than outdoor spaces where people milled around and stood in long lines to register or receive free tote bags with the forum's logo. Chatting with strangers while waiting, they forged networks of common interest. This is one of the Social Forum's great strengths: people interact with others from faraway places who share the same concerns. Many groups have organized across borders and now use the forum as an annual meeting place.

A Caracas park was given over to the camp where young people could sleep in tents and hold their own activities somewhat separate from those listed in the forum's program. An Alternative Social Forum, much smaller than the main event, was organized by anarchist groups critical of the Chàvez government and of the forum's reliance on its financial support.

Once again, the size created logistical strains. Events were scattered over ten widely separated sites, some of them hard to reach and even hard to find. A participant who ventured to one of the more distant sites might well find that a meeting had been canceled, or moved to an obscurely marked new location. Disorganization had been a common complaint at all previous forums, but it appeared to reach new heights in Caracas. After four meetings Porto Alegre had learned to run things more smoothly.

But the intensely political atmosphere of any World Social Forum was heightened by meeting in the home of Chàvez's Bolivarian Revolution and by the recent election of leftist presidents of varying stripes in Bolivia and Chile, joining those already in office in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Venezuela. Because the Caracas meeting was but one polycentric branch (and was simultaneously the second Social Forum of the Americas, following the first which had met in Quito in 2004), it was focused on the prospects for political change in the western hemisphere. Some forum participants argue that this cluster of progressive governments offers a new conjuncture and a new opportunity for political action, and that they should take advantage of the forum's size and dynamism to intervene by supporting these governments and pushing them further to the left. Others disagree. Others disagreed, wanting to maintain the forum's nonpartisan and open posture. The conjuncture fed into the debate over the forum as a political actor which had intensified in the previous years (Hammond, 2006).

The Karachi session of the 2006 forum was held from March 24 to March 29, postponed because the Pakistani NGOs were too busy providing relief for the victims of the Kashmir earthquake in October to organize it by January. The political environment is difficult for Pakistan's progressive forces, jostled between a government allied with the Bush administration, a burgeoning Islamic fundamentalism, and nuclear-armed anti-Indian nationalism. Yet they found the forum exhilarating. Even if it was subject to the same disorganization as every session of the forum, it was unprecedented for Pakistan, and the excitement it generated showed that the forum model is not exhausted. It attracted 35,000 people from 59 countries, though most were Pakistanis.

Focusing more on Asian issues, and, as at Mumbai, with a lesser presence of intellectuals and a greater presence of grassroots organizations, Karachi was free of the debate about "space" vs. "movement" featured at the Bamako and Caracas sessions. India-Pakistan conflict and the aftereffects of the 2004 tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, as well as the business of international aid in response to those disasters, were highlighted themes (Chan, 2006; Ebrahim, 2006; Sangraula, 2006).[3]

Each forum has attracted parallel events. The World Education Forum, the World Trade Union Forum, the World Judges' Forum, the World Parliamentary Forum, and Via Campesina (a worldwide confederation of national peasants' organizations fighting for land reform) have all met concurrently with one or another annual world forum. Some of these existed independently and have also met apart from the WSF; others came into existence to take advantage of the WSF meeting as a venue.

Social Forums Around the World

In addition to concurrent parallel events, the WSF has spawned forums around the world at regional (Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas), national, and local levels. Their political program has been the same– rejection of war and neoliberal globalization–but each has responded to the specific needs of its locality at the same time that all have been influenced by the conjuncture and the actions of the increasingly imperial US government. A counter-meeting opposed to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa in 2001 called itself the Durban Social Forum (Glasius et al., 2004).

Four European social forums have been highly publicized: in Florence in November, 2002; in Paris in November, 2003; in London in October, 2004; and in Athens in May, 2006. Half a million people turned out for the Florence forum's protest march despite the attempt of the Berlusconi government to demonize the event and discourage them from coming. The forum made the historic call for a massive demonstration across Europe (which turned into a worldwide demonstration) on the following February 15 against the expected US invasion of Iraq. At the 2004 ESF in London, autonomists, who reject collaboration with elected governments, disrupted the meeting because London mayor Ken Livingstone was invited to speak.

There have been many social forums in the western hemisphere, where the idea was born. Multinational forums have included the Social Forum of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador, in 2004; the Pan-Amazonian forum in Belem, Brazil, in 2002 and 2003 and in Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela, in 2004; and the Mesoamerican Peoples' Forum, which has met six times in Mexico and Central America since 2001.

There have been several national social forums. The main themes at the Colombian forum in Cartagena, on June 16-20, 2003–"illicit cultivation and alternative initiatives," human rights, and "war, terrorisms, resistances, and peace"–laid bare the reality of a country torn by war and the drug traffic. The Chilean Social Forum in November, 2004, was timed to coincide with the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit and featured a massive protest march by a reported 60,000 people against the just re-elected President George W. Bush. The first Brazilian Social Forum was held in Belo Horizonte in November 2003; at almost a year after Lula's inauguration. it featured heated debates about his accommodation to the IMF and failure to promote development and alleviate poverty.

Local social forums have proliferated in Argentina, where the economic crisis of 2000-2001 turned the country, once considered the showcase of neoliberalism, into its basket case. Massive protest forced out one elected president and several provisional presidents in rapid succession. In response to the crisis, social forums have addressed the crisis of the neoliberal model and challenges

for the global movement in 2002 and social rights in 2003 in Buenos Aires; "catastrophes and neoliberal models" in Santa Fé in 2004; education in Còrdoba in 2004; and land and food in Rosario in 2004.

Similar meetings have even been held in the United States. The Boston Social Forum coincided with the Democratic National Convention in July, 2004. The New York City Social Forum has met twice, in January 2003 and October 2004. A United States Social Forum is being planned for June, 2007.

All these events were small compared to the WSF meetings, and most of them were riven by internal political factionalism. But they nevertheless provided an important platform for the social movements of a city or region to come together and communicate as well as an expression of their common repudiation of the institutions of neoliberalism. They attracted attention in local media and gave publicity to their causes. As at the world forums, delegates found the opportunity to dialogue and debate with others engaged in similar projects or pursuing similar goals, and drew energy from the shared experience.

Media, New and Old

It is impossible to imagine an event like the World Social Forum without the Internet. Electronic communication has opened possibilities of organizing on a global scale that have never existed before. All who have access can communicate with each other instantly, and any one person can send a message to any number of others simultaneously. New information, debates, and decisions can be widely shared and large-scale events can be coordinated. In principle anyone, anywhere, can enter into dialogue with others. For those who have it, the ease of communication is liberating.

The Internet appears as a democratizing force. It takes the flow of information out of the control of national and international media monopolies, and puts it into the hands of civil society. It can also democratize relations within organizations, because its technical features facilitate nonhierarchical organizations and multilateral communication (Bennett, 2003: 147-50). In the optimistic words of Naomi Klein (2002), written after the first WSF,

> The communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. Thanks to the Net, mobilizations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy; forced consensus and laboured manifestos are fading into the background, replaced instead by a culture of constant, loosely structured and sometimes compulsive information- swapping.

Yet many movement activists, enjoying the cornucopia of riches that the Internet offers, do not seem to recognize that it creates at least three problems: the reliance on low-cost activism, the problem of information overload, and the inequality of access among the movement's worldwide constituency. It may foster "McActivism": protesting by e-mail can create an illusion of efficacy and provide an excuse to avoid further effort. The ease of transmission creates information overload: processing all the information that arrives may become so time-consuming that it detracts from more important activities.

Most important, though, use of the Internet introduces a class bias in political activism, or, rather, reinforces the existing class bias due to unequal material resources and cultivated skills (Tilly, 2004: 98). Not everyone has access; despite the proliferation of free Hotmail accounts and Internet cafés in the cities of the world, many local activists still do not have physical access–they lack computers, phone lines, and even electricity. Many are illiterate, and others, though literate, do

not have the skills needed to go on line. Nearly all forms of organizing put a premium on literacy and written communication. That premium is perhaps necessarily greater for global organizing. It is certainly greater for organizing in cyberspace.

So the use of the Internet creates a divide between players in the antiglobalization movement and threatens to replicate the very class divisions the movement is trying to overcome. Because the privileged assume that electronic communication has allowed them to wrest power from the big media monopolies, it is hard for them to recognize the inequality it creates within the movement. The solution is surely not to give up on the Internet but rather to recognize and compensate for the fact that electronic communication privileges some groups over others.

The antiglobalization movement does not rely on the Internet alone. It aims to reach the wider public, which requires the attention of the commercial media, especially the broadcast media. But relying on commercial media creates its own problems for movements–of competition among themselves and frustration with their media treatment. The relation of social movements to the media is highly asymmetric: movements need the media much more than the media need them (Hammond, 2004: 65-67). This puts them at a disadvantage when they struggle for media attention. They angle for coverage ambivalently even as they condemn the capitalist press as a servant of bourgeois hegemony whose coverage cannot be trusted.

The logic of media coverage is in many ways opposed to the logic of democratic organization to which the antiglobalization movement aspires. The media simply approach protest from a different angle than do protesters: they are far less concerned with the justice and legitimacy of the cause than with "good copy." To get attention, therefore, protesters are forced to distort their message.

News reports are centered on events and individuals, and rarely present the background or structural causes of problems. Journalists often seek out colorful and articulate individuals, thereby distorting the movement's message in at least three ways: they may make the movement appear smaller than it is, involving only a few people; the more articulate or colorful activists–"media stars"–may not be representative of the constituency the movement claims to mobilize; and an account concentrating on individuals is not likely to address a problem's systemic causes (Ryan, 1991: 98-105).

When the media cover protest, they look for the bizarre, spectacular event. Sometimes, massive numbers are enough; more often, the most far-out activists are likely to get most of the attention, to the frustration of those who regard themselves as the responsible activists. The Seattle demonstrators learned this lesson when nightly newscasts showed a few of them smashing windows, almost drowning out the grievances against the WTO in most media reports. As Todd Gitlin said about the US New Left, this presents activists with

> an inescapable dilemma[:] . . . marginality and political irrelevance [or, if they play] by conventional political rules in order to acquire an image of credibility, . . . their oppositional edge is blunted (Gitlin, 1980: 291).

Marginality and political irrelevance can take two forms: the media may trivialize a movement by emphasizing its deviant character or they may ignore it entirely. This sort of attention leaves activists frustrated at what they regard as the distortion of their message. They seek media attention to generate sympathy for their cause, but it can turn against them if coverage of the marginal participants produces hostility rather than sympathy.

Like other movements, the WSF plays to the media, and it finds itself weak and dependent,

because it covets the attention of the world, secured through the media, while the media pay no attention unless a movement fits the prevailing media frame or provides new and provocative events to cover. At the beginning, the WSF was new and exciting; with each repetition it becomes less so (even if it continues to grow). To the extent that it plays to the media because that is the best way to get its message out, it is vulnerable to a cyclical decline of attention.

Contradictions of Global Politics

The Social Forum is an inherently political event, but each year's forum is political in a somewhat different way. While heady and exciting, the Forum's meetings have been contentious and taken criticisms from those who are disappointed that it has neither practiced full democracy not effectively waged global struggle. In the first years, up to 2003, the two streams of its origin–NGOs and direct action–contended over internal democracy in the governing of the forum. In later years, factions within the forum itself have tried to preserve it as a space or convert it into an actor. As we will see, however, neither of these debates has affected the great majority of participants, who use the forum to pursue their own goals of networking and planning within issue-oriented sectors or who come just to soak up the atmosphere.

Critics of the first meetings argued that the WSF had not lived up to its promise to serve as a model of democratic practice for the organization of movements and, eventually, for the exercise of power (Adamovsky and George, 2003; Albert, 2003; Klein, 2003; Waterman, 2003). But the Social Forum faces an organizational problem. It seeks both to represent the entire planet and be a model of democracy, but many problems stem from the event's sheer size. A global movement has to be big, but the Social Forum bursts at the seams. It is a challenge for tens of thousands of people to come together in the same space for a short time and accomplish anything. The coordinators accept virtually every panel proposal that they receive, producing thousands of small meetings. Not all the proposers show up and some panels do not occur. Others are not listed in the official program.

The problem is not only logistical, however; it is political. Size and format conspire against democracy. When plenaries were held in a stadium that seats 15,000 people, they only allowed one-way communication. Even the smaller workshops held in classrooms or tents are often impersonal. Some presenters use popular education methods, taking advantage of the small size and classroom atmosphere to encourage participation, but most follow the hierarchical model: a panel faces an audience, gives prepared talks, and leaves little time at the end for the audience to respond. Naomi Klein complained in 2003 that the forum had grown so big that it recalled the discredited traditions of the old left that relied on "centralized state solutions to solve almost every problem" (Klein, 2003).

The Secretariat and the International Council took the heat for these shortcomings. They were accused of being self-selected and of conducting their business in secret without consulting the majority of the participants. Some critics even questioned whether such an event is really worth the expense in money, time, and energy to so many coming from such great distances; some have proposed to scale the forum back, holding it at most every two years.

It would be difficult to organize such an event with full consultation of all potential participants, or to make it function in an open manner, to allow for deliberation, or–even more–to give such a huge constituency a say in advance planning. Critics from the direct action movement, such as David Graeber of People's Global Action, however, insist that anarchists have adopted consensus mechanisms derived from third world communities and grassroots organizations that, even in their massive demonstrations, work to give representation and create unity among a large number of small affinity groups. "Organizational creativity in the anarchist movement comes from the global South," according to Graeber (interview, October 2005). These mechanisms, he says, provide the model for democratic deliberation in large assemblies. But they have rarely been applied except in

very short-term actions.

Leading up to the 2005 WSF, the Secretariat did respond to the accusations of political insensitivity and monopolizing the event by announcing that it would not sponsor any sessions; rather, all the space would be turned over to other groups, organizations, and movements to present sessions around the themes and with the speakers that they chose. The wall of proposals and the decision to meet on three continents in 2006 were also meant to widen participation. Over time the debate about internal democracy has been sidelined, partly because the forum has to some degree reformed and decentralized its structure, partly because many of the more vigorous advocates of participatory democracy have stopped attending. (Some who had appeared at previous social forums spoke at the anarchist-inspired Alternative Social Forum in Caracas.)

Debate about whether the forum can take concerted political action as a body, on the other hand, has become more intense. Some important political actions have emerged from the Social Forum–most notably the worldwide antiwar demonstrations before the US invasion of Iraq. The issue is not whether the forum's constituents should act, but whether the Social Forum itself should cease to be just a debating society open to all comers and instead adopt a coherent platform of action–move from being a mere space to becoming an actor in its own right. Though joint action was ruled out by the Charter adopted in 2001, many participants, including many on the International Council, reject that limitation and want the Forum to propose and undertake worldwide political action (Teivainen, 2003: 126).

The moderate majority of the Secretariat values the Forum as an opportunity for international networking and exchange of ideas, as do representatives of other national and international NGOs. They do not want the forum to go beyond that–it should be a talking shop for civil society and should steer clear of political intervention (Reyes and Bouteldija, 2004). The direct action movement agrees, but for a different reason. Its activists believe in confrontational politics but fear that any action coming out of the Social Forum would be marked by the same rigid, top-down organization that they see in the Forum itself, stifling the creativity of the worldwide antiglobalization movement. To both groups, proposals for united political action smack of vanguardism; they are wary of a movement directed by an elite that threatens to lose touch with its base.

Some on the International Council, however, see it as a waste for such an event merely to offer the like-minded a chance to talk among themselves. "The big weakness," warns François Houtart, director of the Tricontinental Center in Louvain, Belgium, and a member of the forum's International Council, "is the constant risk of a collapse into enjoyable anarchy" (Houtart, 2003). The size and energy of the meeting are resources to be taken advantage of in a more coordinated challenge to international capital. It is a sign of the forum's success that it has grown so big; its size gives it a huge organizing potential, but if the movement sticks to loose networks and local initiatives, it will have no way of confronting the international institutions. Excluding such figures as José Bové and Hugo Chàvez is tantamount to giving up on confrontational struggle.

The NGO-network model, according to Emir Sader, a Brazilian sociologist on the International Council, has "abandoned strategic programmes for the construction of a new type of society" (2004: 259). "They talk about thinking globally and acting locally, but the most they can do is resist," said Sader in a 2003 interview. Instead, he called on the Forum to frame "global alternatives to the big problems of the world" and present a hegemonic challenge.

This debate has arisen at almost every session of the forum. Those who favor concerted action have been the ones to raise the issue. At Mumbai, Porto Alegre in 2005, Bamako, and Caracas, subgroups have staged well-attended sessions and issued declarations that claimed to synthesize the views of the forum as a whole and make muted calls for some kind of further action, but their

proposals have been tantalizingly vague. The advocates of the forum-as-space have more to gain by keeping silent, because they want to maintain the status quo as ratified in the charter. In their view the calls to action are power plays attempting to give the impression of speaking for the forum as a whole and confirming suspicions that they are motivated by an illegitimate vanguardism.

In 2002 a "Social Movements' Manifesto" issued by some of the major social movements participating in the forum called for demonstrations around the world on May Day, International Women's Day, and other major commemorations and at several meetings of world leaders and international institutions scheduled for 2002 (Fisher and Ponniah, 2003, 346-53).

At the Mumbai forum in 2004, the Assembly of Social Movements–created to take the very political stands that the forum as a whole foreswore–resolved to organize political actions with its "Call of Social Movements and Mass Organizations." A ringing declaration of principles on many fronts, it invoked Chiapas, Seattle, Genoa, and Cancún, and issued a call to "all people," "all citizens of the world," and "everybody" to join mobilizations against the war in Iraq and to support other causes promoted at the Mumbai forum (Assembly of the Social Movements, 2004).

Chico Whitaker, cofounder of the forum, accused the authors of a "coup," seizing the microphone at the closing plenary, attempting to "reduc[e] the whole richness and diversity of the forum to a single proposition," and presenting the assembly to the media as if it were authorized to speak for the forum as a whole. He tried to get the International Council to declare that the call did not represent the whole World Social Forum, but the council took no such stand (Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004, 148-49). Whitaker, probably the most vocal advocate for keeping the forum an open space, insists that it has never adopted and should not adopt a final document at any session to avoid the freezing of positions or the appearance of obligating participants to any specific follow-up action (Whitaker, 2002; interview, March 9, 2006).

In Porto Alegre in 2005, several well-known participants signed a document they called the "Porto Alegre Consensus" and launched it at a press conference held off the grounds of the forum. They laid out a series of positions that they evidently hoped would be endorsed by the participants. Most of the planks of their platform, like those of the Mumbai call, were hardly controversial at the forum–in the economy, they demanded cancellation of the public debt of developing countries, full employment, fair trade, food sovereignty, and no privatization of water; in politics, they called for full democratization of international organizations; the dismantling of foreign military bases; and an end to destruction of the environment, especially action to prevent climate change.

Most of the nineteen signers were members of the International Council, and all but one were men. They included Nobel laureates José Saramago from Portugal and Adolfo Pérez Esquivel from Argentina; writers Tariq Ali, Eduardo Galeano, François Houtart, and Armand Mattelart; Bernard Cassen and Ignacio Ramonet of *Le Monde Diplomatique*; retired Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia of Chiapas, Mexico; and the Brazilian priest and political commentator Frei Betto.

The "consensus" turned out to be anything but. Many resented that a self-designated group should declare a consensus on the next-to-last day of the forum when it had not been discussed in any session, and resisted the implicit call for political action (Group of Nineteen, 2005; Terra Viva, 2005).

The debate continued in 2006. Even before the forum met, Ignacio Ramonet argued that a move to coordinated political action was necessary to maintain momentum:

> One could see [in Porto Alegre in 2005] a sort of exhaustion of the initial formula:

> because of the number of participants, the forum couldn't go on being just a space of meeting and debate which didn't give rise to action. [If it does not create the conditions to move on to political action,] it runs the risk of depoliticization and turning into folklore (Ramonet, 2006).

The debate flared at the Bamako and Caracas sessions. The Bamako Appeal was issued by a small group meeting the day before the forum opened, who sought to have it adopted by the forum, but without success. Like the Porto Alegre "Consensus," its principles were unassailable and its proposals for action somewhat vague, but it was regarded by its opponents as a heavy-handed attempt at usurpation (MRZine, 2006).

The Caracas session overlapped with the Bamako session. Some organizers, wary of Chàvez's populist rhetoric and military background, had been reluctant to hold the meeting there. But his supporters presented his welfare-oriented social programs and anti-imperialism as a model for the policies they wanted to promote in other countries (Hammond, 2006).

The debate over the future of the forum was laid out in a major session where Cândido Grzybowski, a member of the Secretariat and the director of the Brazilian Institute for Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), a leading NGO, faced off against Jacobo Torres, chair of the Venezuelan facilitating committee for the Caracas meeting and international coordinator of the Bolivarian Labor Force, the pro-Chàvez trade union federation. Grzybowski argued that the forum should not try to exert authority centrally over the actions of its participants, while Torres said that social movements pursuing the offensive against neoliberalism, war, and militarization must consolidate their successes and link up with the processes on the ground that are producing progressive governments.

The Assembly of Social Movements sponsored several sessions in Caracas and laid out a program of struggle for 2006, calling for an international day of protest against the Iraq war in March and major demonstrations at the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg in August and the September annual meeting of the World Bank and IMF in Washington (Call from the Social Movements Assembly, 2006). Because the assembly held a well-attended session to adopt the program on Sunday morning, the last day of the Caracas meeting, it could have been taken as the closing plenary and the adoption of a final declaration by the forum as a whole.

The Underlying Issues

These issues of strategy and tactics have been hotly debated in the Forum itself and in discussion papers circulated electronically between meetings. They arise even though participants in general have similar views on most of the issues before the forum (although the vague wording of some statements of political position may obscure some divisions).

Debates are framed in terms of practical programs, but do not clearly address underlying theoretical differences. The forum and its participants have not generally examined their practice in the light of either the traditional theories of left politics or new theories that might attempt to go beyond them (Santos, forthcoming). There appear to be three important underlying differences of principle, based on contradictory assumptions about how and how much globalization has changed the world. They are over the nature of civil society, the relevance of the state in a globalized world, and the social classes or groups seen as key political actors. These issues raise strategic questions for social movements within and outside of the social forum.

For some, the social forum represents the apex of global civil society; the foremost virtue of civil

society is its autonomy from state structures. Progressives around the world rediscovered civil society organizations in the late twentieth century when they were prominent in struggles to confront and overthrow dictatorial regimes in Latin America and the former Soviet bloc. Many advocates view civil society as the terrain in which citizens can debate and deliberate, free of the constraints imposed by the struggle for power.

Civil society is plural, open to all. It is embodied in nongovernmental organizations that deliberately maintain their distance from the governments of their states. The target of their action has not mainly been states but the international financial institutions and trade agreements. Political action would necessarily entangle them with the state and would violate the principles of free discourse that should prevail. Even after the dictatorships have fallen, civil society actors remain wary that their organizations (including the NGOs that are the most active participants and promoters of the WSF) will be coopted by too close identification with any government, however progressive. They believe that their movement should be independent of the state–if not antagonistic.

The second difference is over the relevance of the state. Some argue that globalization has steadily eroded its power. In this view, the state, having lost power to international financial institutions and multinational corporations, is on the verge of becoming obsolete. Some who hold this view conclude that international institutions exercise so much power that they must become the real target of attack; others, that struggle should shift out of the political sphere to cultural contestation. But the common premise of these different strategic implications is that political attack targeted on the state is increasingly irrelevant. Rejecting the state as a target of action also reinforces the emphasis on the voluntaristic, decentralized organizations of civil society, rather than the coordinated, top-down structure of political parties which mirrors the organization of the state and seems to be required to confront it.

The third covert issue is the composition of the forum's constituency. What actors, what social category or categories are to be part of the worldwide coalition struggling for global justice? The social actors are many and diverse, defined by gender, race, culture, and nationality. The forum recognizes the validity of each group's identity and proposes that all of them should be expressed, not suppressed, by common political action. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004) refer to this broad coalition as the "multitude," but one need not agree with their analysis to say that a world movement must rest on a broad base and that unity must not negate difference. But how is such a diverse coalition to achieve unity in action? Traditional leftists continue to attribute hegemony in this coalition to a working class as the basis for common interests. Advocates of diversity, on the other hand, point to the danger that calls for unity could overtake the commitment to diversity.

For those who embrace civil society, dismiss the state, and appeal to a multiplicity of actors, the logical conclusion is that the forum should not attempt to unite in political action. But their critics not only challenge both the autonomy of civil society and the demise of the state; in their view advocates of civil society offer no clear strategic alternative, and ignore the fact that many NGOs (including some that are active in the social forum) are thoroughly entangled with the state, whether as lobbyists, channels for state-funded social programs, or antagonists. Perhaps more important, organizations claiming the civil society label are also claiming to be legitimate representatives of the population as a whole–in the rhetoric of some, their claim is superior to that of the state. But it seems to be based on little more than self-appointment (Anderson and Rieff, 2004: 29-30).

The critics also challenge the alleged obsolescence of the state. Global processes have indeed weakened the power of states, but some argue that the state is still the locus for the major policy decisions. In particular, the world's sole superpower is a state exercising dominance over other states– sometimes precisely through the global institutions which, far from demonstrating the

eclipse of the state, are its instruments. As the United States' push for world domination is increasingly undisguised and increasingly unilateral, it must be confronted as a state, by other states (though not only by other states).

Social movements must also pressure their own governments to defend their national sovereignty against US- dominated globalization, and in doing so, must define national sovereignty in accord with the interests of their people. Furthermore, the state is potentially more responsive to the pressure of popular movements than are the international institutions, and struggle must therefore be waged on the terrain of state power. Just as locally- and nationally-based social movements must target the state, so the global social movement represented at the forum must take common action against the states of its constituents.

Differences over the composition of the forum's constituency are less profound, because those who privilege class nevertheless recognize the importance of incorporating the new constituencies with previously unrecognized identities, especially women and ethnic minorities; even the old institutions representing the working class–parties and trade unions–have taken steps in many countries to incorporate them. But there is an important aspect of social relations inside the social forum which neither side is able to countenance: the forum is pervaded by class differences. Though the elites within the movement place themselves in solidarity with the oppressed, the forum reproduces the hierarchy that it fights against on a world scale. The divide is in part mapped geographically between North and South. The cost of attendance introduces an obvious bias–only some can afford a plane ticket. There is also a striking gender imbalance at the forum's sessions– not in participants but in–mostly male–featured speakers.

The logistics of the conference are informed by these distinctions, marked in 2003 by name tags clearly labeling people in bold capital letters as "invitees," "delegates" (those who had registered in the name of an organization), or "participants." For the invitees, there was a VIP lounge, while mere participants were excluded from some sessions. Most of the leadership and the prominent speakers are from the white, northern (mainly European) left elite, and the debates and cleavages mostly reflect their issues.

If differences of ethnicity, culture, and gender are held to be legitimate bases for diversity of orientation and interest, class differences are not. It is paradoxical, of course, that class-based divisions should be so stark within a broad global movement dedicated to equality and to a better life for the planet's poor majority. And the affluent northerners who claim to side with the poor regard themselves as oppressed, beleaguered, and lacking the economic resources they need to carry out their work. But they are clearly privileged relative to those in whose name they wish to act. With better access to the media and to funding, they can more easily promote their views and define the meaning and political direction of the forum.

The advocates of the forum-as-space offer a practical rejoinder to the proposal to convert the forum into an actor. The forum cannot become the instrument for concerted action, they argue, because it has no authority to give orders to its constituents. It is heterogeneous and determinedly pluralistic; all those who agree with the principles of the Charter are entitled to participate without taking on any further obligations. Chico Whitaker has often proclaimed that the forum's great virtue is that it issues no final, binding document.

Another practical objection to converting the forum into a unified political instrument is that different national contexts require different strategies and different forms of action. Advocates of common political action have not offered a clear strategy or shown how the international instrument–to be forged– should act when it confronts state governments of different political leanings. As I have shown, the major calls for political action issuing from the sessions of the forum

(such as the Mumbai call, the Porto Alegre Consensus, and the Bamako Appeal), beyond calling for internationally coordinated antiwar protests, do not spell out how they want the international political force to act.

Yet even some who are uncomfortable with the calls to militant action are palpably dissatisfied with the present limits. They want to go beyond being a space. Hilary Wainwright, editor of the British left journal *Red Pepper*, noted "a profound political frustration" after the 2005 forum and asked, "How could the strength of moral arguments and the movements behind these arguments be turned into effective sources of transformative power?" (Wainwright, 2005). World-system sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein affirms the desire to maintain the open space, but "provided that it is supplemented by the WSF becoming an arena that is the institutional meeting-group of multiple alliance-groups of political activities" (2004: 637). Others who resist some of the more radical proposals for political action are nevertheless also clearly not satisfied that the forum should merely be a space (Patomäki and Teivainen, 2004: 151; Gautney, 2006). The challenge is to find ways to struggle collectively while preserving individual groups' autonomy.

So there is a tension that François Houtart has semiseriously characterized as between "an activists' Woodstock" and the "fifth international" (Houtart, 2003). But no one wants to destroy what the forum has become. The debate will probably go on, without any resolution except compromise and indecision. It would be difficult to combine the heady, open-ended experience of the forum with concerted political action. The loosely structured but invigorating experience has inspired the enthusiasm of many who have attended, whereas firm political stands might disaffect many of them and undercut the openness and pluralism that have been the forum's hallmark.

The procedure adopted in recent forums attempts to satisfy all parties: the Assembly of Social Movements, functioning inside the forum, issues calls for action, and the forum serves as a central place for political debate and organizing. Meanwhile the advocates of civil society deny that the Assembly represents the forum as a whole, allowing the forum to maintain its pluralist character and avoid formally taking stands that might alienate some participants.

It may not really matter, in any case, because many who draw so much inspiration from participating do not have to pay attention to this debate that goes on at the summit. The debate mainly engages participants from the North, or others who are in close contact with them through international NGO network connections. Despite high-profile encounters in some forum sessions, it is mostly waged in print and on the Internet before and afterward, and does not much affect the thousands of participants who come from smaller grassroots organizations or who simply show up on their own.

Those who come moved by a single issue can give their presentations, compare notes with others from other countries who share their concerns, and be satisfied. What goes on in the small workshops (and in the corridors) is far more important to them than the decisions made ahead of time or the disputes in the large plenaries. And those with no organizational affiliation, of whom there are many, come primarily as consumers of information (and atmosphere). They have no opportunity to deliberate or influence decisions, but neither do they have an ongoing organizational commitment which would give them a stake in the forum as an expression of global civil society.

Neither group has much need to take sides, and ambiguity is probably the best way for the forum to retain their loyalties. Accordingly, there will be sessions to discuss political action but the forum will maintain its neutrality and welcome all who endorse a few basic principles. That way, all participants can continue to rejoice in the forum's heady experience of interaction, learning, and networking, charge their batteries and return home to continue to fight their many battles independently. They are happy to live the exhilarating experience of global solidarity, tangible in

their interaction with others from around the world. They get energized to continue spreading the message and fighting against war and for social justice and popular sovereignty in their communities and in their countries.

What Results?

But is this enough? The Forum aspires to be more than a talking shop. It seeks to have a real impact on the international institutions and practices dominating the globalized world, and it should be judged for its effectiveness on that score.

There are no controlled experiments in history, so it is impossible to say how the antiglobalization struggle would have proceeded in the last six years if there had been no World Social Forum. There is evidence both for and against its effect. On the one hand, it may do no more than make the participants feel good; after meeting with so many like-minded fellow activists from all over the world, talking, and networking, they may go home with a conviction of efficacy that is more illusory than real.

But the antiglobalization movement has made some progress during this period, for which the forum process can take at least partial credit. Popular pressure on government policy is by its nature diffuse; especially when it is directed across national boundaries and directed at many target governments, successful efforts must mobilize many diverse sources. The existence of a global organizational forum may help to mobilize pressure. The Forum is not the sole force opposing the institutions of capitalist globalization, perhaps not even the most important. But the concentration of forces it affords has multiplied the efforts of the constituents.

The antiglobalization movement has been more successful in the first half-decade of the twenty-first century than in comparable previous periods, so the existence of the Forum may have made some difference. First, the creation of a new world trade regime has clearly been impeded. WTO negotiations to expand the reach of so-called free trade have been stalled against the demands of the south, led largely by Brazil, that trade be truly free and that northern governments cut subsidies to agriculture to allow southern agricultural products to compete freely in northern markets. The FTAA is also stalled, and some progress has been made in activating and expanding Mercosur as a counterweight. At the same time, the World Bank and some of the other multilateral lenders have become at least somewhat more open to the concerns of popular movements.

Second, the worldwide antiwar demonstrations of 2003 were significant. They did not prevent the war. But they represented an unprecedented global action on a shared political issue. The WSF and regional gatherings were important in laying the groundwork for these demonstrations, and protest against the war on the popular and diplomatic levels, assisted by the Bush administration's sheer incompetence, hubris, and failure to anticipate the easily foreseeable consequences of its actions, have turned the US invasion of Iraq into a massive debacle.

Finally, the activation of local protest is also important and the forum's effect on participants' consciousness cannot be discounted. Important alliances have been made at regional levels and on specific issues, and these have been coordinated in ways that would not have been possible if there had been no worldwide conclave.

Even if no specific outcomes can be clearly attributed to the World Social Forum, the global movement is stronger and more genuinely global than it could have been without it.

References

Adamovsky, Ezequiel, and Susan George. 2003. "What is the point of Porto Alegre? Activists from two generations in dialogue." ZNet, January 21.

Albert, Michael. 2003. "WSF: Where To Now?" ZNet, February 03, 2003

Anheier, Helmut, et al. 2004. *Global Civil Society 2004/5*, London: Sage Publications.

Anheier, Helmut, et al. 2006. *Global Civil Society 2006/7*, London: Sage Publications.

Anderson, Kenneth, and David Rieff. 2004. "'Global Civil Society': A Sceptical View." In *Global Civil Society 2004/5*, ed. Helmut Anheier et al. London: Sage Publications, 26-39.

Assembly of the Social Movements, "Call of Social Movements and Mass Organisations." Mumbai, India, January 2004.

Ayres, Jeffrey M. 2002. "Transnational Political Processes and Contention against the Global Political Economy." In *Globalization and Resistance; Transnational Dimensions of Social Movements*, edited by Jackie Smith and Hank Johnston, 191-205. Latham: Rowman and Littlefield.

Bennett, W. Lance. 2003. "Communicating Global Activism: Strengths and vulnerabilities of networked politics." *Information, Communication and Society*, 6, No. 2, 143-68.

Call from the Social Movements Assembly, January 29, 2006.

Cassen, Bernard. 2004. "Inventing ATTAC." In *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* Ed. Tom Mertes, 152-74. London: Verso.

Chan, Stanislaus Jude. 2006. "After the Big Party: How About Some Action?" Terra Viva, March 29.

Clark, Ann Marie, Elisabeth J. Friedman, and Kathryn Hochstetler. 1998. "The Sovereign Limits of Global Civil Society: A Comparison of NGO Participation in UN World Conferences on the Environment, Human Rights, and Women." *World Politics* 51, No. 1, 1-35.

Desai, Meghnad, and Yahia Said. 2001. "The New Anti-Capitalist Movement: Money and Global Civil Society." In *Global Civil Society 2001*, edited by Helmut Anheier, Marlies Glasius, and Mary Kaldor. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ebrahim, Zofeen T. 2006. "WSF Karachi Ends: 'The First Step Has Been Made'." Terra Viva, March 29.

Engler, Mark. 2005. "The Last Porto Alegre– Discerning the State of the World Social Forum After Five Years." FPIF Discussion Paper. Silver City, NM and Washington: Foreign Policy in Focus.

Fisher, William F. and Thomas Ponniah, eds., *Another World is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum* (London: Zed Books, 2003), 346- 53.

Gautney, Heather. 2006. "WSF?" Left Forum Discussion. Left Forum, New York, March 10.

Geloo, Zarina. 2006. "World Social Forum: Satisfaction with an 'Afrocentric' Meeting." Terra Viva, January 25.

Gitlin, Todd. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Glasius, Marlies, Helmut Anheier, and Mary Kaldor. 2004. "Global civil society: the politics of a new world?"

Group of Nineteen. 2005. "Porto Alegre Manifesto: Twelve Proposals for Another Possible World."

Hammond, John L. 2003. "Another World Is Possible: Report from Porto Alegre." *Latin American Perspectives*, 30, No. 3 (May), 3-11.

Hammond, John L. 2004. "The MST and the Media: Competing Images of the Brazilian Landless Farmworkers' Movement." *Latin American Politics and Society*, 46, No. 4 (Winter), 61-90.

Hammond, John L. 2006. "The Possible World and the Actual State: The World Social Forum in Caracas." *Latin American Perspectives*. 33, No. 3 (May), 122-131.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2000. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. 2004. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Press.

Houtart, François. 2003. "Changed Landscape of the Campaign for Social Justice." *Le Monde Diplomatique* (November).

Keck, Margaret E., and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Klein, Naomi. 2001. "Reclaiming the Commons." *New Left Review* 9 (May- June), 81-89.

Klein, Naomi. 2002. "Farewell to 'the End of History': Organization and Vision in Anti- Corporate Movements." In *Socialist Register 2002: A World of Contradictions*, ed. Leo Panitch & Colin Leys. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1-14.

Klein, Naomi. 2003. The Hijacking of the WSF." January 30.

MRZine. 2006. "The Bamako Appeal. February 13, 2006."

Patomäki, Heikki, and Teivo Teivainen. 2004. "The World Social Forum: An Open Space or a Movement of Movements?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, No. 6, 145- 54.

Ramonet, Ignacio. 2006. "Caracas." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January.

Reyes, Oscar, and Naima Bouteldija. 2004. "Networking Activities within the Social Forum Process." In *World Social Forum: A Debate on the Challenges for Its Future*. Transform! Europe: European Network for Alternative Thinking and Political Dialogue. Newsletter No. 1, March 125-27.

Ryan, Charlotte. 1991. *Prime Time Activism: Media Strategies for Grassroots Organizing*. Boston: South End Press.

Sader, Emir. 2004. *Beyond Civil Society: The Left After Porto Alegre. In A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* Ed. by Tom Mertes. 248-61. London: Verso.

Salamon, Lester M., and Helmut K. Anheier. 1997. "The Civil Society Sector." *Society* 34, No. 2 (January-February), 60-65.

Sangraula, Bikash. 2006. "Tsunami-hit Countries: Disaster as Business." Terra Viva, March 28, 2006.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2003. "The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter- Hegemonic Globalization ."

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. Forthcoming, 2007. *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond*. London: Zed Books.

Teivainen, Teivo. 2003. " The WSF: Arena or Actor?" in *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, ed. Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, and Peter Waterman, 122-29. New Delhi: Viveka.

Tilly, Charles. 2004. *Social Movements, 1768-2004.* Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Vanaik, Achin. 2004. "Rendezvous at Mumbai." *New Left Review* 26, March- April 2004.

Wainwright, Hilary. 2005. "World Social Forum on Trial." *Red Pepper* (March).

Wallerstein, Immanuel. 2004. "The dilemmas of open space: the future of the WSF." *International Social Science Journal* 56, No. 182 (December), 629-37.

Waterman, Peter. 2003. "Reflections on The 3rd World Social Forum: From 'Comrades' Agreements' to the Reinvention of Social Emancipation on a World Scale." ZNet, February 05, 2003.

Whitaker, Francisco. 2002. " World Social Forum: origins and aims."

World Social Forum. Charter of Principles.

Zulu, Brenda. 2006. "ICTs a need for women's movements." January 23.

Footnotes

1. An earlier version of this paper appeared in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, March 2005. I thank Ralph Della Cava, Silvia Federici, Sérgio Haddad, Shareen Hertel, George Martin, Mike Menser, Karsten Struhl, Chuck Tilly, and the members of the International Committee of my union, the Professional Staff Congress, for helpful comments.
2. The Charter also rules out the participation of organizations that advocate violence, and the most notable exclusion on this ground has been the denial of participation to representatives of the Chiapas-based Zapatista movement, despite the historical affinity between the Zapatistas and the direct action current that has been actively present at the forum.
3. The worldwide meeting of January, 2007 will take place in Nairobi, Kenya.