HANDBOOK ON
WORLD SOCIAL FORUM
ACTIVISM

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7. We are marking "violence" to indicate its complex and contested meaning. For some in the context of the 2001 demonstrations, violence was implied in any form of defiance of police, resisting arrest, or property destruction. For others, notably those advocating diversity of tactics, it was more narrowly understood to mean harm to persons. See Conway (2003) for more extended discussion.

8. Talking about a "generational divide" does not mean that all young activists shared the same point of view but rather that among the activists who share a different conception, most of them are young.


10. The earliest Social Forum initiative in Quebec was the Forum Social Régional de Québec/Chaudière Appalaches in September 2002, which produced a permanent network. By 2007, however, this network was very small and was only weakly present in the regionally based mobilizing toward the QSF (Canet 2007b).


14. Martin Rodrigue and Valérie Eme (founders of the Quebec youth camp and members of the General Secretary of the QSF in 2006). Interview, Montreal, June 2007; Raphaël Canet, "Permanent of the General Secretary, QSF." Interview, Montreal, June 2007; Louis Roy (Confédération des Syndicats Nationaux representative to the QSF), Interview, Montreal, June 2007.

15. Ibid.


18. Ibid.

19. Denise Gagnon (Director of International Solidarity, FTQ), meeting, Montreal, October 2007.

20. General Assemblies of the QSF. Transcription of audio recording. Available upon request.

21. Ibid.


23. Ibid.

24. See note 20 above.


26. See note 11 above.

27. See note 22 above.

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**Chapter 15**

**IN THE BELLY OF EMPIRE:**

**THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM PROCESS**

Jeffrey S. Juris and Jackie Smith with the USSF Research Collective

In 2007, an estimated 15,000 people came together in Atlanta for the first United States Social Forum (USSF). The meeting was arguably one of the largest and most diverse political gatherings in U.S. history, as a significant majority of participants were people of color, low income, Indigenous, disabled, and/or gender nonconforming. More importantly, it was part of a much larger, truly global World Social Forum (WSF) movement that since 2001 has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people from over 130 countries. This report draws from our collaborative ethnographic research at the U.S. Social Forum to describe and analyze

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the USSF as a national instance of the WSF process. The political and economic dominance of the United States, as well as its belligerence and insurrection in global affairs, makes counterhegemonic mobilization here particularly important for efforts to improve social and ecological conditions around the world. It is also more difficult. Thus, to the WSF slogan, “Another World is Possible,” U.S. organizers added that “Another U.S. is necessary.”

We approach this work not only as scholars, but also as activists and citizens. Our interest in the WSF grows in part from our sympathies with its goals of enhancing global social and economic justice and democracy. We do not simply celebrate the Forum, or affirm what we see as the critical accomplishments and potential of the WSF process. Our main concern here is to examine how place matters. How does the World Social Forum manifest itself in a social and political space that many activists consider the “belly of the (global capitalist) beast”? And what does this mean for the larger global struggle?

The location of Social Forums impacts their form and content. The USSF reflected distinctive positions regarding the core tensions and debates of the WSF process with respect to other national, regional, and global Forums (cf. Smith, Karides, et al. 2007). The differences in how U.S. activists responded to questions about whether the Forum should remain an open space or develop a more formal political platform, who can participate, what sorts of changes are sought, and whether action should focus on local, national, or global levels reflected the specific political cultures and institutional contexts of the United States.

As an iteration of the WSF, the USSF should be seen as one attempt to respond to earlier movement experiences and to move the process closer to an ideal of inclusive, participatory democracy that effectively challenges global militarism, social exclusion, and neoliberalism. The USSF organizers adapted the Forum to their national context as they interacted with global-level Forum organizing. The World Social Forum organizers were paying close attention to the USSF, and many noted its importance for both strengthening U.S. citizens’ participation in and contributing to the momentum of the WSF process. Prior to the USSF, organizers put forward 2010 as the date of the second Forum, providing a focal point for long-term national strategizing and planning at the Forum. Many participants have used local Forums to expand on the work they began at the USSF. The USSF thus interfaces with the wider WSF, integrating local, national, and regional experiences into a transnational process of experimentation with ideas, strategies, and methods for practicing global democracy.

Overview

Participants at the USSF came to Atlanta from all 50 states and Puerto Rico, and delegates from 68 countries participated as panel speakers and observers (see www.ussf2007.org). During the 5-day meeting held June 26–July 1, 2007, there were over 950 self-organized workshops and 6 plenary sessions addressing each of the Forum’s themes (1) war, militarism, and the prison industrial complex; (2) immigrant rights; (3) workers in a globalized economy; (4) women and queer liberation; (5) Indigenous sovereignty and environmental justice; and (6) the rights of survivors of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The USSF raised the bar for other Forums with respect to its diversity in terms of participation by marginalized groups—racial and sexual minorities, Indigenous peoples, and the physically challenged (Ponniah 2008a).

As an open space designed to foster democratic, grassroots participation, the USSF built upon organizing models used in other Forums to encourage organizations to submit proposals for workshops and panels. Self-organized activities composed the core of the Forum’s activities, and participants were asked to organize their sessions according to daily themes of consciousness raising, visions of social change, and strategy. The final day consisted of a People’s Movement Assembly, where workshop leaders were invited to report to the larger assembly the analyses and action plans developed. When participants were not attending workshop or plenary sessions, they could pursue literature, view films, purchase fair trade goods and handicrafts, and meet with organizers in tents dedicated to themes such as solidarity economies, water, immigrant rights, Indigenous peoples, women, and peace and justice. There were also designated “open spaces” where groups could meet to continue conversations begun in workshops or otherwise network and relate Forum activities to their ongoing work. A wide array of culture: events, receptions, and parties provided countless opportunities for activists to interact and develop new friendships while they recharged their batteries and exposed themselves to new perspectives and ideas.

Social Forums are situated in and reflect particular geographies of space and time. In this sense, the USSF was shaped by the particular histories and political cultures of the United States, as well as by the
Social Forum in the United States, as the collapse of the Northwest Social Forum attests (Center for Communication and Civic Engagement 2007; cf. Hadden and Tarrow 2007b). The USSF organizers also confronted regional identities and inequalities by deciding to hold the Forum in the U.S. South. Finally, the USSF occurred just as a thaw was underway in the chilly climate facing U.S. activists after 9/11. The events of 9/11 and its aftermath clearly dampened public dissent, even as global justice protests continued to flourish elsewhere (Podobnik 2005; Hadden and Tarrow 2007b). The Forum also occurred in the midst of a war, a heated congressional battle over immigrant rights, state-level battles over same-sex marriage, a historic split in the U.S. labor movement, and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, as the USSF host city, Atlanta’s rich history of civil rights activism, as well as its status as the headquarters of major global corporations such as the Coca-Cola Company and CNN, helped shape the perspectives and discourses of USSF participants.

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

A core tension within the WSF process—perhaps the main tension—is the question of what the Forum is or should be. Some take the position that it has served its role well as a space for convening diverse movements and organizations from around the world to develop shared analyses and action plans, but that it is time for participants in the “movement of movements” to become more unified (Bello 2007). They argue that the WSF process should work to consolidate the power of its diverse constituencies and mobilize them around a shared political platform. In other words, they want the WSF to become a global political actor, uniting its diverse forces to leverage its power against a formidable adversary. Others, including WSF co-founder Chico Whitaker (2005), believe that “the Social Forums are not this power but only spaces—open spaces—that facilitate the building of this power.”

The USSF process deliberately sought to incorporate the notion of open space, and the self-organization of workshops as well as the provision of meeting spaces for more spontaneous encounters reflected this ideal. Even as it was committed to creating open space, however, the USSF planning committee explicitly urged attention to strategy and action by defining thematic emphases for each day of workshops. The first two days of the USSF helped set the stage for the third, which focused on the articulation of strategies for achieving collective goals. The conceptual
schema behind this framework emerged in part from Project South, a leading member of Grassroots Global Justice, a coalition of community-based social justice groups in the United States that serves as a liaison between U.S. movements and the WSF.

Within other regional and global Social Forums, those seeking to use the WSF to build a unified movement have organized Social Movements Assemblies where participants can issue global calls to action (Reitan 2007). These have generated “final documents” and programmatic statements variously seen as either closing or opening space within the Forums. Following this model, the People’s Movement Assembly (PMA) was intended by USSF organizers to provide a locus for coordinated political action. The specific name was adopted to enhance the assembly’s resonance within U.S. civil society. Each morning of the USSF, a program was distributed that described and publicized the PMA, which was to convene at the end of the Forum to discuss action plans aimed at sustaining the USSF process. During the PMA delegates from organizations and regional assemblies presented the action proposals they had developed.

Regional and national Forums are not required to abide by a particular organizational structure, but they are guided by the precedents of previous Forums and the WSF Charter of Principles (see http://www.forumglobal.org). Within this framework, USSF organizers aimed to move the U.S. Forum process toward more concrete steps for political action. The USSF thus reflected organizers’ desire to foster sustained and united action through the Forum process, and was consistent with recent efforts to move the WSF beyond an “open space.” For instance, at the 2007 WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, a fourth day was added to consolidate platforms for action around the themes of the event. Overall, we saw a pragmatic use of the open spaces created by the USSF to coordinate, disseminate, and build solidarity around shared actions or campaigns. Most importantly, activists and groups that worked explicitly on a single issue were unavoidably exposed to other analyses and methods of struggle.

The United States Social Forum organizers tended to focus on the task of movement building as a response to the open space versus political actor question. In a sense, the USSF straddles both tendencies, as it recognizes the need to cultivate collective identities, analyses, and networks while maintaining a focus on movement and action. The National Planning Committee (NPC) maintained, and the fact sheet handed out before the PMA clearly stated, that the Forum is an open space and that the PMA is a separate, yet related process. Even so, the voices calling for the USSF to take collective action, to be more than an open space, and to build a united movement, were particularly strong, as has been the case during social movement assemblies at other Forums. The USSF fused the culture of the WSF process with movement dynamics in the United States, particularly those of the grassroots, base-building organizations that led the organizing process.

**Who Participates? Identity and Issues at the U.S. Social Forum**

A major challenge for proponents of open space is to ensure wide participation from groups typically excluded from institutionalized politics. Open space thus emphasizes inclusion as a core objective. In practice, however, the notion of open space neglects the ways power and privilege amplify certain voices over others, while deep-seated structures of inequality generate unintended exclusions (Teivainen 2007). Both institutionalized and informal rules of presentation and social interaction serve to marginalize less privileged groups. For example, poor people lack the resources required to travel and take part in the Social Forums. As a result, participants at prior WSF meetings in Brazil and other regional Forums have been predominantly white and middle class (Alvarez et al., 2008).

The United States Social Forum organizers were explicit in their aim of reversing past exclusions and integrating some of the most marginalized groups into the organizing process. As a result, a major achievement of the USSF was its high level of diversity among both participants and organizers. This reflects what Juris (2008) calls the “intentionality” of the USSF organizing process, which prioritized leadership by people of color, Indigenous people, poor people, and nongender-conforming activists. This delayed the USSF by several years, while organizers worked to raise awareness of the WSF process and its global analysis at the grassroots level. The Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, founded in 2002 to help connect community-based organizations with the WSF, agreed at the November 2003 meeting of the WSF coordinating body, the International Council (IC), to help promote a U.S. Social Forum. By the first USSF, the NPC involved 35 organizations, the majority of which were grassroots, member-based, people-of-color-led organizations, which reflected a deliberate outreach strategy.

The USSF succeeded more than any other Forum, save possibly the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, in bringing together participants from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of privilege (Guerrero 2008; Porcini...
Perhaps because of the great diversity of people attending and the levels of gender, racial, and other forms of exclusion in U.S. politics, identity was a salient theme in the Forum's plenary sessions and workshops. Each plenary session was purposefully organized to include speakers of diverse and less privileged backgrounds, including African Americans; immigrants; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals; and Indigenous people. Few whites appeared on plenaries. Participants also exhibited an unusual sensitivity to how their relative privilege affected their views and actions. In addition, many workshops were organized around specific social identities, such as those focusing on issues affecting women, workers, immigrants, LGBT communities, Indigenous peoples, and black and brown communities.

Given the salience of issues of identity, marginalization, and inclusion, our observer team noted considerable self-reflexivity on the part of participants. In plenary sessions, workshops, and informal conversations, participants frequently referred to the diversity of the “we.” At the same time, attendees also consistently asked how to involve those who were not able to attend the USSF. At a session entitled the “Peace Caucus,” which explored how peace organizers could better integrate social justice issues and diversify their ranks, one speaker urged his colleagues to expand their visions of peace work, get out of their “comfort zones,” and move beyond the “freeze-dried hippies” of his generation. In addition, labor activists frequently reflected critically on the history of trade unionism, urging greater attention to workers excluded from the ranks of organized labor, such as international migrants and those in the domestic and service sectors. Also LGBT activists were well represented, bringing to the fore concerns about sexual-identity-based discrimination. Native American activists also succeeded in raising the salience of Indigenous rights concerns in the U.S. Left. Meanwhile, the visible translation of speakers’ voices into American sign language helped raise consciousness of the rights of the deaf and other people with physical disabilities.

The goals of building unity while respecting diversity, bridging ideological differences, and cultivating analyses of neoliberalism that helped attendees see connections among issues tended to be advanced by participants with longer histories of movement or Social Forum participation and experience with cross-sector coalitions. Organizers on the NPC demonstrated highly effective leadership qualities when they confronted conflicts that erupted in the course of the Forum. For instance, one of the emcees during the PMA on the final day of the

USSF offered an emotional apology for having grabbed the microphone from an Indigenous speaker after he and his colleague exceeded their allotted time. The apology came after a group of Native activists took the stage to denounce the silencing of Indigenous voices and enacted a public healing ceremony. What began as a divisive incident became an opportunity for learning and building solidarity. Skills in listening to diverse voices, understanding, and empathy are critical to effective deliberation and democracy (Baiochi 2003; Polletta 2002). This example thus demonstrates how the Forum contributes to the democratization of politics locally, nationally, and globally.

In sum, the question of “who is at the table” was probably the defining feature of the U.S. Social Forum. The commitment of USSF organizers to reaching out to groups traditionally excluded from both mainstream and movement politics generated a model of organizing—intentionality—that challenges WSF practices while helping to address one of its glaring contradictions. If it is to address the real needs of those most harmed by the effects of global neoliberalism, the WSF must find ways to involve the poor and other marginalized groups. The articulation of diverse identities and issues at the USSF was thus both a step forward for the WSF process and a reflection of the deep class and racial divides in the political culture and context of the United States (Juris 2008).

The USSF’s intentionality challenged existing notions of open space by engaging in deliberate efforts to bring the most marginalized groups to the table, particularly working-class people of color. In an effort to broaden the base of the U.S. Left, the NPC focused most of its energy on mobilizing oppressed groups such as migrants, low-income communities, and queer people within formal organizations dedicated to grassroots base building. While major trade unions were part of the NPC, there was rather little effort to mobilize the rank and file of the labor movement around the USSF. Indeed, the presence of working-class whites was noticeably limited. Larger nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and more informal direct action and anarchist-oriented collectives also had minimal visibility. More generally, perceived middle-class and white activist formations were neither targeted nor highlighted by the NPC, although such groups can be expected to play a larger role in future USSF organizing (Karides 2008). In this sense, the NPC’s intentionality was widely perceived as necessary and legitimate for overcoming past structural exclusions, but more formal openness within the organizing process might facilitate greater movement building across sectors (Juris 2008).
Revolution, Reform, or a New Politics Altogether?

A perennial source of tension in social movements relates to whether social change can happen through reform or whether more radical transformation is required. Divisions between radicals and reformists have caused irreparable rifts within movements, and they have played an important role in the WSF process and the wider global justice movement. Our observer team found that the U.S. context shaped this discussion in key ways. To a large extent, the legacy of the Cold War polemics has limited the appeal of socialism in the United States, producing a qualitatively different slant on debates about the role of the state and the best route to power for marginalized groups (cf. Fletcher and Gapasin 2008; Waterman and Timms 2004).

In resisting hierarchy of all kinds and challenging the depoliticization that is inherent to neoliberal policies, the WSF, and particularly the USSF process, has encouraged organizers to speak less about the radical-reformist divisions and more about how to foster new politics that can avoid the strategic pitfalls of the past. This new politics responds to the exclusion and hierarchy associated with traditional politics. It places emphasis on nontraditional political actors, new political identities, and new political practices that might overcome historic obstacles to social transformation. It aims to move discussion outside of the polarizing radical-reformist discourses towards potentially more unifying and productive efforts at envisioning alternatives.

A key manner in which the tension between radical and reformist politics was articulated at the USSF involved discussions on the “nonprofit industrial complex,” an issue popularized through the circulation of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence’s (2007) book The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex. This complex, many activists argued, has diverted political work away from popular organizing and toward elite lobbying efforts and other professional political strategies. Professionalized organizations, often lumped under the term NGOs, are seen as mirroring the hierarchies and inequities of the political system that excludes so many disadvantaged groups. They therefore are unlikely to seek fundamental changes in the structures that afford them a relatively privileged role. Directors and staff of NGOs also depend on wealthy donors and private foundations, which can limit their goals, tactics, and activities.

Members of the NPC were highly skeptical of private foundations as a primary source of funding for either the Social Forums or for social activism more generally, even as they continued to cultivate and rely on such sources for much of the operating budget. This reflects previous critiques of the WSF in both Mumbai and Porto Alegre for relying on international NGOs and corporate funding. Groups like Project South and Grassroots Global Justice encouraged financial self-reliance and more selective reliance on foundation and government funding. This tension was also visible in workshops not specifically addressing this issue. For instance, in a workshop on welfare rights, one of the session leaders discussed the need for grassroots welfare rights organizations to build their own alliances rather than depend on larger nonprofit organizations to do this work. They claimed that such larger organizations, and their funders, were not as committed to the cause over the long haul as those directly affected by welfare rights issues, and they cited a recent move away from these issues by the Community Change Coalition as one example of this shift.

Although the critique of professional and conventional politics was pervasive, it is difficult to characterize the overall tendency of USSF participants with respect to the radical-reformist divide. Many participants in the USSF seemed to adopt a flexible, pragmatic approach to strategy, although a large majority of participants stressed popular education and participatory democracy. While organizers had a highly developed ideological discourse with respect to the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, including those based on race, class, and gender, participants tended to focus on everyday issues or on the specific goals and initiatives of particular campaigns.

Given that the USSF took place as the mainstream media was beginning to focus intensively on the presidential primaries, there was surprisingly little evidence of formal electoral politics at the USSF. One panelist lamented that, “There’s not one voice in Congress” willing to help workers against the power of corporations, and a woman at a workshop exclaimed, “In no way will I lift a finger to help the Democratic Party.” This contrasts with experiences in other parts of the world, such as Europe and South America, where political parties have actively engaged with and responded to the Forum process (Baiocchi 2004; cf. della Porta et al. 2006).

Although electoral politics were largely absent from the USSF’s agenda, activists engaged in considerable discussion about the role of conventional political strategies, such as electoral campaigning, collecting petitions, working with all levels of government (but mostly the local),
and using the court system. This seemed particularly true for sessions on international trade and environmental justice, where labor organizers in particular came under fire for emphasizing lobbying over grassroots education and mobilization. Participants also discussed the need for greater and more principled unity between labor and immigrant rights movements around immigration policies, criticizing the compromises the AFL-CIO and other groups made to pass the recently defeated immigration reform bill.

Workshops focusing on labor issues also provided evidence that a new kind of politics, often called social movement unionism, was underway within the U.S. labor movement (Taylor and Mathers 2002; Waterman 2005; Turner et al. 2001). Many of these workshops featured community-based organizations alongside representatives of national unions. They emphasized the importance of grassroots participation by workers, labor-community alliances, and the use of nontraditional tactics and alternative media. They also called for the expansion of innovative labor organizations such as worker centers and labor solidarity networks with students and faith-based groups. Closer ties between immigrant worker centers and traditional unions were being forged through the AFL-CIO’s National Day Labor Organizing Network.

The political culture of the United States makes it difficult to organize in explicit opposition to capitalism. Although many U.S. citizens would find no objection to the WSF goals of advancing human rights, environmental sustainability, and economic justice, and most would also agree that consumerism is a destructive force today, few would readily join a campaign explicitly rejecting globalized capitalism. Recognizing this reluctance, one participant at a socialist workshop warned against using the term “socialism” when talking to U.S. workers about their rights. Even so, socialists were highly visible within many workshops and at literature tables. In addition, other anticapitalist workshops emphasized nonstate-centered, bottom-up efforts, including anarchism, autonomy, and direct action, although such panels were fewer in number than might be expected given the influence of these perspectives, particularly among younger, U.S.-based, global justice activists. Indeed, autonomous spaces and other radical, self-managed projects were less visible at the USSF than at other regional Forums and the WSF where they have had a particularly strong presence at the youth camps (Juris 2005). This is partly due to the fact that such informal modes of activism are often associated with white and middle-class activists (cf. Polletta 2005).

The notion that the WSF process cultivates new forms of politics is an attempt to move beyond traditional reformist-radical cleavages. Since ideological polarization in the United States is much less pronounced, we saw less emphasis on the notion of a new politics at the USSF than at other Forums. Yet, for the United States, a national meeting of movements and organizations not initiated and organized by funders, a political party, or a major union is undoubtedly a novelty. In subsequent events, such as the Left Forum, it was acknowledged by several grassroots organizers—some of whom did not attend the USSF—that the way they practice politics has changed as a result of the USSF. The political culture of the United States may constrain the speed at which ideas spread, but not their ability to flow across borders.

WHERE IS THE ACTION? LOCAL, NATIONAL, OR GLOBAL?

One of the most significant aspects of the Social Forums is their ability to help connect local social and political processes with global ones. Indeed, the Forum’s continuity across time and space helps distinguish it from other social movement campaigns and makes it a key element of contemporary efforts to counter global capital. As a process, it develops the connective tissues that link local and global action over time. As a space that brings together diverse groups to exchange ideas and insights, it encourages the articulation and dissemination of new tactics and strategies for confronting global adversaries. But the development of new repertoires of action is not something that happens easily, and Forum organizers frequently complain about the tensions between organizing globally and locally.

The first national Social Forum in the United States confronted particular challenges in this regard. The U.S. global superpower role contributes to a particularly unilateralist, jingoistic, and racist public discourse that mirrors those of earlier empires. The absence of political leadership in the U.S. Congress to constructively address problems arising from global interdependence means that movements promoting multilateral policies face an uphill struggle. At the very least, such movements must do a significant amount of educational work, and may even be criticized as unpatriotic (Maney et al. 2005). These factors, along with the comparatively weak position of the U.S. global justice movement in the post-9/11 period (cf. Hadden and Tarrow 2007b), help account for the late entry of the United States into the WSF process.
Our observer team reported that a majority of workshops focused on local-level actions. This is due in part to the grassroots constituencies mobilized at the USSF, but it also reflects the domestic orientation of many U.S. movements (Hadden and Tarrow 2007b). Many local issues from cities and regions around the United States, such as post-Katrina relief, housing crises, deportations, and other attacks on immigrants, seemed as relevant at the USSF as Atlanta-based issues or national concerns. But in the context of the USSF, local organizers were challenged to expand their political visions. By comparing notes, local groups learned about how national and global forces create similar problems in different local communities. They also saw how local contexts shape the effectiveness of different tactics. A particularly powerful example of this was a workshop on immigration where more than 50 people from around the United States gave testimonials about what was being done in their communities, and urged others to take their ideas back home. On the bus home from Atlanta, a group of Latino/a activists from Chicago talked excitedly about encountering Brooklyn youths who had found a unique way of combating police harassment.

At a workshop called “Another Politics Is Possible,” local grassroots collective communities from cities such as New York and Los Angeles shared their experiences, successes, and obstacles in trying to build and implement organizational models and practices based on horizontal and direct democracy. Another session on anarchism provided a similar Forum for sharing and exchange among local anarchist communities around the country. In addition, a workshop about the rights of domestic workers included representatives from various grassroots groups across the country, each aiming to provide support and encouragement to its counterparts. By thinking of their actions not as isolated efforts, but as part of a larger set of local confrontations against a similar adversary, participants could expand their political imaginations beyond their local contexts to identify the root causes and possible solutions to local problems. At a follow-up meeting, a young person from Chicago who was working on youth employment opportunities explained, “It was like meeting a mirror image of myself. People doing the same work as me ... and without going to Atlanta, I never would’ve known.”

At the national level, numerous workshops built on the insights of organizers and activists with a larger-scale vision. They were used to launch new national coalitions on major economic grievances. The Alliance of Domestic Workers, the Right to the City Alliance, the Solidarity Economy Network, and the Hip-Hop Caucus are examples of such efforts. Networks also emerged to expand existing campaigns working for immigrant rights, victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and health care. A panel on trade and migration organized by the National Network on Immigrant Rights explored the relationship between NAFTA and immigration, and then provided a space for networking and alliance building around these issues. A workshop aimed at furthering “blue-green” alliances (cooperation between the labor and environmental movements) generated suggestions for better national-level coordination between the AFL-CIO and environmental groups. The USSF meeting also provided a rare opportunity for members of organizations affiliated with the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign—an initiative that frames the problem of poverty in terms of international human rights—to meet each other, exchange ideas and experiences, and coordinate future actions.

The international dimension of organizing was also critical to the discussions in Atlanta. Yet, we found that international perspectives were largely confined to sessions dealing with labor, women, international migration, trade, and the WSF process itself. This does not mean that the global or international context was irrelevant to sessions on other topics, but that it did not occupy a significant amount of most participants’ attention. However, some workshop organizers did link local issues to larger global forces. For example, in a workshop organized by the Right to the City Alliance, urban gentrification was linked to global economic restructuring and the international spread of neoliberalism. A number of sessions about food sovereignty were also explicit in connecting global policy processes to their analyses of local experiences. Plenary sessions were particularly useful in explaining how the global economy affected the core issues on the USSF agenda. For instance, speakers emphasized how corporate power and influence in politics, international trade agreements, and an aggressive U.S. foreign policy affect local communities in the United States and around the world.

In sum, we found that although most of the energy at the USSF focused on local-level actions, by engaging the USSF organizers were expanding their political horizons and developing deeper analyses of the causes and solutions to local problems. National-level action in formal institutional settings was somewhat constrained by the political culture of the United States, especially its two-party system that limits the movement’s access to influential allies. There were also a good number
of sessions that enabled exchanges fostering transnational campaigns. The number of such sessions should be expected to increase as U.S. citizens gain experience in the Forum process, expand their ties with activists from other countries, and come to identify with the Forum's global imagined community.

CONCLUSION

We have drawn on our collective observations, perspectives, and insights to describe what we felt were some of the critical themes and dynamics at the U.S. Social Forum, and how these related to both the broader global Forum process, and the national and historical context in the United States. In this sense, we have attempted to ground a global process of movement building and convergence within the contours of a specific place and time.

The USSF can only be understood in light of several unique historical, structural, and institutional factors that shape the terrain and horizon for oppositional politics in the United States. These include: the lack of strong working-class parties and labor unions that are found in other parts of the world; the historical effects of racism and anticomunism; the role of the United States as the world's sole remaining superpower and major purveyor of neoliberal ideology and practices; the narrow and rigid two-party political system combined with relatively open channels for institutional access; the lack of a substantial critique of global corporate-led capitalism among U.S. political elites; a corporate-dominated mainstream media and culture; the relative isolation of U.S. civil society from others around the globe; the relative weakness of the U.S. global justice movement compared to other regions of the world; and the strength of identity-based movements and politics in the United States.

These factors provide significant challenges and important opportunities for grassroots social movements. For example, while it is much more difficult to mobilize in the United States around a broader class-based politics and anticapitalist critique, movements are generally free from party influence and have more space to develop innovative discourses and practices. Indeed, the weakness of the institutional Left in the United States has allowed grassroots community-based organizations to fill the void and begin forming broader national movements for radical social change. The U.S. movement context is, however, frequently parochial in its outlook and tends to be organized around particular identities and localities. Strategically it tends to emphasize single-issue organizing and to focus on concrete actions and campaigns rather than long-term, cross-sectoral movement building. This presents significant challenges for a WSF process that aims to build links across racial, class, and ethnic differences; develop connections between local, national, and global scales; and build strong ideologies and identities that can sustain movements over time. The USSF attempted to address these weaknesses, but ultimately reflected them as well.

POSTSCRIPT: USSF 2010

As we go to press, the second U.S. Social Forum is fresh in our memories. The Social Forum process has lived up to its name, and we observed shifts with respect to many of the core tensions we identified in the first USSF. While the USSF has not settled the tension between open space and action, it has upped the ante by expanding the People's Movement Assemblies (PMAs) substantially and by bringing them more directly into the main spaces of the Forum (see Smith and Doerr, Chapter 18). Organizers invited groups to hold PMAs prior to, during, and after the USSF, in addition to the national PMA held on the last day of the Forum. Facilitator trainings were held daily during the Forum, and participants could view resolutions and ideas emerging from assemblies held throughout the week. While there were glitches and confusion, when skilled organizers led the PMAs, effective deliberation and decision making resulted. This may be one of the most important outcomes of the second USSF.

The USSF continues to be unique among global Social Forums and within the U.S. political landscape for its diversity and its inclusion of so many politically marginalized groups. Poor people, people of color, LGBT activists, and Indigenous peoples made up the core of the National Planning Committee leadership again. Although there was some reflection about whether and how to expand organizing efforts beyond these marginalized communities in order to expand dialogue and solidarity across levels of privilege, the intentional organizing strategy remained intact, including a strong commitment to ensuring that the poor and marginalized lead the USSF process. In practice this meant that although diverse movement sectors participated in the Forum, organizers from oppressed groups and grassroots base-building organizations in particular
continued to assume the most visible roles at the Forum and within the USSF organizing process.

Given the serious social, economic, and environmental crises facing the country, and the widely perceived inadequate response on the part of elected officials, including the Obama administration, a large number of workshops and plenaries emphasized grassroots strategies beyond the institutional political sphere. This focus on the need for new politics, which was present in Atlanta, was perhaps even more urgent in Detroit. Our observers also noted that more workshops reflected greater levels of skill and experience in coalition work, and our general impressions are that many facilitators had greater familiarity with the U.S. and World Social Forums than was apparent in 2007. More of the workshops made better use of the space for networking and strategizing as opposed to offering one-way information sharing. At a time and in a place (Detroit) when the limitations and outright failures of existing political institutions are striking, activists seemed more prepared to think in new ways.

Finally, the global context of the above-mentioned crises made it easier for activists at the 2010 USSF to see the connections between global forces and local contexts. Also, expanding global activist networks and the interest the first USSF had triggered in other regions brought greater numbers of international activists to Detroit. Thus, the 2010 USSF revealed a more global consciousness and flavor than its predecessor had. This, together with the emphasis on moving from “Detroit to Dakar” for the next World Social Forum, will certainly contribute to the process of expanding U.S. activists’ global imaginations and networks.

At the same time, the Detroit USSF should be remembered for its contribution to efforts to engage local initiatives, organizations, and political struggles in Social Forum host cities. While other Social Forums had attempted to do this, the Detroit USSF prioritized the goal of contributing to the host city and shining a light on its stories and struggles. “Detroit Highlighted” workshops were held on the first and last days of the Forum to profile local groups and leaders. Work campaigns and solidarity actions supported practical efforts to expand housing, food, education, and environmental justice, and to support organizing work in Detroit. Also, an entire plenary session was devoted to the host city. The World Social Forum process affects the places where it sets foot, and U.S. organizers wanted to remind their colleagues that local efforts and support for locally based organizations are essential to overall struggles to make another world possible.

Appendix: U.S. Social Forum: What We Believe

We, the organizers of the first United States Social Forum:

- Believe that there is a strategic need to unite the struggles of oppressed communities and peoples within the United States (particularly Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous communities) to the struggles of oppressed nations in the Third World.
- Believe the USSF should place the highest priority on groups that are actually doing grassroots organizing with working-class people of color, who are training organizers, building long-term structures of resistance, and who can work well with other groups, seeing their participation in USSF as building the whole, not just their part of it.
- Believe the USSF must be a place where the voices of those who are most marginalized and oppressed from Indigenous communities can be heard—a place that will recognize Indigenous peoples, their issues and struggles.
- Believe the USSF must create space for the full and equal participation of undocumented migrants and their communities.
- Believe the USSF should link U.S.-based youth organizers, activists, and cultural workers to the struggles of their brothers and sisters abroad, drawing common connections and exploring the deeper meanings of solidarity.
- Believe the USSF is important because we must have a clear and unified approach at dealing with social justice issues, and meaningful positions on global issues.
- Believe that a USSF sends a message to other people’s movements around the world that there is an active movement in the United States opposing U.S. policies at home and abroad.
- Believe that the USSF will help build national networks that will be better able to collaborate with international networks and movements.
- Believe the USSF is more than an event. It is an ongoing process to contribute to strengthening the entire movement, bringing together the various sectors and issues that work for global justice.

(Source: www.ussf2007.org/en/we_believe)
RELATED LINKS

Grassroots Global Justice: http://www.ggalliance.org/
People's Movement Assemblies: www.pma2010.org

NOTES

1. For details on this methodology, see the longer version of this report, published in Mobilization 13 (2008): 373-384.
2. For a statement of the U.S. Social Forum's core beliefs, see Appendix.
3. This likely reflects the relative absence of developed political ideologies in the U.S., which results from electoral rules that limit competition to two major parties.
4. USSF organizers are engaged in a process of dialogue with foundations aligned with the Funders Network on Trade and Globalization to explore these tensions and to educate funders about the WSF process.

PART IV

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS