
North American Alliance for Fair Employment

STRATEGY WORKING PAPER #5

The Future of the Social Forum Process

How do we bring the fragments together? That was the question posed by a NAFPE working paper on organizing structured networks. Since 2001, the annual gathering of global civil society actors in the form of the World Social Forum has been another answer. In this paper, NAFPE staff and a member of the network reflect on the growing social forum movement and argue for modest reforms to the social forum process. The paper builds on lessons learned from organizing the Boston Social Forum and staff's participation in both World Social Forum and the European Social Forum. Many NAFPE members have participated in the social forum to link up with other contingent work organizations and activists. The social forum is a venue to address all the related questions including, corporate globalization, privatization, structural adjustment, migration, gender and racial domination, and the restructuring of work and agriculture.

The Future of the World Social Forum Process: Modest Reforms Needed

by Kim Foltz, Suren Moodliar and Jason Pramas*

Porto Alegre—With the fifth edition of the World Social Forum, a certain maturation and even “graying” has occurred. For some, the Forum is now passé, awaiting its demise before an ascendant and inevitable new “new.” For others, the Forum has become an annual reunion, a time to swap stories and reconnect with old friends. Over time, however, a serious, multifold critique has developed and needs to be addressed if the forum process is to remain useful. This is particularly urgent because the problems identified as compromising the WSF’s moral authority and political efficacy continue to grow. Yet as serious people consider the challenges, many solutions are proffered that may alter the fundamental character of the social forum. In this note, we suggest that modest reforms are necessary and that these will enhance rather than detract from the forum as a beacon of emancipatory and counter-hegemonic thinking and practice.¹

There are six widely-held critiques of the WSF and the forum process: (i) it is too large, incoherent, and more of a carnival, than a space for serious engagement in ideas, strategizing and mobilizing; (ii) there are too many fora, and too little time in between for action; (iii) the forum’s governance and accountability structures are weak and largely undemocratic, and the emergence of local fora is undervalued by the leaders of these structures; (iv) the forum is too inclusive of forces that themselves are products of the neo-liberal project (e.g. large establishment-oriented NGOs, big foundations, and inter-governmental bodies); (v) little is done to include dynamic social-movement actors that do not yet have or eschew traditional organization; (vi) the forum is not suited to some national contexts; in particular, the United States lacks the social movements and organizations necessary to become a true part of the social forum process. In addition to these six internal critiques, a practical concern questions the very relevance of the Forum.

These critiques are not new and have been in wide circulation since at least the third WSF (January, 2003). Indeed, many of the questions are now being repeated across fora in time, without new answers being offered, causing the “graying” of the WSF. Admittedly, not everyone is overly concerned about these critiques; some even embrace many of the things that generate the sharpest criticisms. Where some find incoherence, others find a jazz-like improvisation. Where some feel that it is too inclusive of forces from the world we must make impossible, others laud the forum’s diversity. Moreover, the criticisms are not fatal: Whatever the problems of the WSF and broader social forum process, the genie is out of the box. Nobody can call it off. If the current WSF organizers decide not to hold another social forum, others will organize one in their stead.

Nonetheless, the questions and criticism stand, as many of the greatest proponents of the social forum process acknowledge. Outside the forum process, too, stand several sets of actors concerned about perceived double standards on the part of forum organizers. Unanswered questions include the WSF’s inconsistent exclusion of political parties/politicians, and its rejection of groups engaged in armed struggles that many believe to be legitimate. While this note takes no position on these concerns, they are important to understanding the relevance of the forum in a time of a frenzied renewal of the US Government’s (USG’s) imperialist project—witness the ouster of a democratically-elected government in Haiti, the attempted overthrow of

another elected government in Venezuela, and the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. It is in this context of unrelenting neoliberalism and militarism that we must consider the relevance and efficacy of the WSF.

The Practical Critique: Has the world passed the forum by?

In February 2003, the world woke to the potential of the forum as a catalyst of *transnational* social movements, when more than 15 million people around the world rejected US Government (USG) aggression against Iraq.² Nonetheless other *older* and more traditional forces appear to be decisive in challenging USG hegemony. In Iraq, it is a fusion of nationalist and religious actors, with their own sovereign national state projects that has frustrated the USG agenda. Similarly, it is the quasi-socialist and nationalist movement of Bolivarians, appealing to 19th century intellectual traditions, that constitutes the most salient challenge to USG plans in Latin America. In both these cases, the focal point of resistance is not the vision of some other world that was nurtured in the many workshops and seminars of this or that social forum. Nor are these forces the popular civic movements and factory occupations that set the WSF abuzz. Instead, these resistance movements draw on deeply familiar, *this-world* repertoires and thinking. On quiet days, while forumistas strain to hear Arundhati Roy's "other world breathing," improvised explosive devices loudly lay the USG to siege...as if atavistic empire must find its corollary in older forms of resistance.³

On another front, the international labor movement has yet to successfully use the social forum to advance its agenda. The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions met in Japan and advanced its thesis that the forum is one place where it can develop a working relationship with the civil society forces that reject corporate globalization. This might seem like a meaningful step forward; yet this decision wasn't taken until December 2004, i.e., after 4 whole productions of the WSF, a fact that raises questions about the significance of the WSF for important social actors. This is not to suggest that the international labor movement does not take the forum process seriously. After all, the European trades unions are deeply involved in the process, sending a high-level delegation to even the relatively small Boston Social Forum.⁴ However the failure of the international labor movement to make widespread, effective use of the forum process indicates a noteworthy weakness.

Perhaps driven by these concerns, the fifth WSF (January 2005) has undergone several changes: forum organizers provided a space for a "Wall of Proposals" and one International Council member went about actively urging forum-goers to propose and support the Assembly of Social Movements' endorsement of a particular campaign. Further, very influential individuals in the WSF process, including *Le Monde diplomatique's* Ignacio Ramonet, invited and welcomed a sitting head of state, Hugo Chavez, to speak at the largest indoor program of the Social Forum.⁵

In the event, it seems unreasonable to damn the World Social Forum process to irrelevance merely because certain nationalist and religious forces are putting up the best fights that they can against global capital. Or to consider social fora inconsequential because certain social forces—like labor unions—have not yet made the best use of the process. If anything, such efforts highlight the need for an expansion of the process. Without a visionary, strategically-organized, global progressive movement, neither nationalists, nor religious militants, nor labor unions have

the ability to stop the drive of transnational corporations and neo-liberal ideologues to destroy the planet. This imperative informs the assessment of critiques that follows.

Less Talk, More Action?

Recent interventions by Forum “heavyweights” have expressed frustration with the apparent lack of progress and the failure to take meaningful action. Throughout the note that follows, we argue from the following proposition: the Social Forum should not be seen as *the* answer to the challenges of our time; it should be seen as a valuable part of the answer(s) with a very distinctive contribution. Other sites for action, for campaigning, for taking decisions are necessary for the global progressive movement; the Social Forum is an important space for incubating these; those who want action (the authors included) should get on with it and organize those actions, making as best use of the Forum as possible!

Critique 1: “Giganticism” & Incoherence

With well over 150,000 participants attending thousands of workshops over 4-5 days, often working with 3 or 4 official languages, the WSF is a bewildering experience, even to veterans of previous editions. The program booklets and supplementary documents run to Sunday-newspaper lengths, the deciphering of which is a half-day task for an individual. Add to this mix the challenges of finding venues, presentation equipment and materials in unfamiliar locations filled with throngs of people always moving in different directions, and the Forum can become a formidable, if not overwhelming, ordeal. Here we have a city-sized mass of activists, all with agendas that they wish to promote, often via loud and colorful demonstrations, all ironically fulfilling the Forum’s promise of an open *space* by promptly negating it in the most literal way. As the physical space is exhausted and conversations become cacophony, the Forum as a *place* where people meet to talk, reflect, strategize and take action is no longer a conceptual space, but rather a very finite, this-world experience. Attendees who travel long distances, often at great expense, cannot even find their designated meeting areas!

This has prompted many to complain about the “unmanageability” or “giganticism” that seems (to outsiders, at least) to drive organizers as a measure of success. More fundamentally, people question whether such large numbers and the related logistical challenges allow one to have coherent conversations about the other world that we must bring into being.⁶

A meaningful conversation requires that participants establish each others’ assumptions and premises, move to offer their analyses and debate them, reach some measure of consensus, thereafter share information about goals and related prescriptions and, in turn, debate these and reach some consensus on goals. Subsequently, they can then begin to debate meaningful and measurable objectives that are applicable to diverse and dynamic political, social and cultural contexts. Because large crowds cannot effectively engage in this conversation, the Forum cannot be seen as an *event* to conduct this conversation, but rather part of an ongoing iterative *process*. While this modest re-framing, from annual *event* to *iterative process*, offers a modicum of relief, it alone is not sufficient to answer the “giganticism” critique and the logistical challenges that the forum presents.⁷

Based on our experiences at the Forum and in organizing the Boston Social Forum, we believe that the large scale and number of events are *not* a problem, but an important opportunity for the Left to engage in reality testing and social learning.⁸ If the social forum is too large, what then is the other world that we wish to midwife? The forum mirrors, albeit in concentrated form, the majority of society that must be won over to a progressive, social-change agenda. Learning to negotiate and prioritize amongst the many agendas at the forum is an exercise in building a future social-change majority. Those who can successfully frame their ideas and win over or establish a working relationship with other would-be competitors are likely to be those who can most successfully negotiate the real-world challenges of coalition building. More profoundly however, new hegemonic ideas may yet be born in the hyper-charged political context.⁹

When organizers try to attract an audience for their events, they are forced to frame their messages and advertising in ways that appeal to a crowd of activists, all with their own agendas. This also forces them to develop repertoires that appeal to more than just their own constituency. It fosters cooperation between potentially rival bodies, cross-promotion, etc. Groups may be encouraged to combine their efforts so that different workshops and seminars can conduct different pieces of the complex conversation identified above. The more reflective amongst us may go beyond framing and re-examine their ideas and theories.

Individual organizations or groups, navigating the forum by producing specialized agendas and program guides, help bring order in a way that no central organizers can. In this sense, the gigantism and the logistical challenges that the social forum presents both to the uninitiated and to the organizing secretariat, should undergo an evaluative reversal—it should be seen as a *school* educating the left in the ways of the real world that it seeks to change.

Certainly modest technical and logistical changes can and should be made to improve the navigability of the forum. The creation of effective program databases that are both searchable and use dictionaries of synonyms (especially important given the multi-lingual context) to make data sorts more effective, and building in bells and whistles that allow the database to output customized schedules and programs for individuals will help make the program more manageable. Creating a multi-stage programming process, with different cut-offs for proposals, will encourage collaboration—and help ensure that each forum’s schedule is finished well in advance of the event itself. This innovation would go a long way toward helping forum attendees to prepare their own schedules in advance, and remove much of the confusion that tends to reign when attendees first arrive at a forum.

Establishing virtual and physical convergence areas by theme, identity and interests, with bulletin boards will facilitate networking and reduce the size of crowds to recognizable formations. Establishing an online attendee register where individuals can choose to make public their contact information and even their schedule while at the forum will also go a long way to helping people make the connections they need to make. A simple introduction or orientation to the forum as part of the official program, aimed at educating uninitiated individuals can overcome many of the problems identified and adjust expectations allowing forum goers to take appropriate courses of action.

In summary, we can take advantage of the large scale of the forum by very modest tweaks to the organizing of the forum.

Critique 2: One, Two...Hundreds of Fora

As the World Social Forum has captured the imagination of the 21st century left, the sheer number of fora has begun to grow. An Italian forumista once lamented that in the course of one year, he could attend any of a number of local fora, an Italian forum, a Mediterranean Forum, a Tri-continental Forum, a European Forum and finally a World Social Forum. As local, national and regional fora proliferate, this Italian's experience will be unexceptional. This poses at least three problems: (i) how to sustain coherent discussions across multiple venues with different participants; (ii) few people have the resources to attend and organize at so many fora; (iii) with so much forum-related activity, less time is available for the activism and organizing directed at changing the world. Another fourth related issue—and possibly one of profound importance—is how to integrate the products and outputs of local discussions into the wider geographical scale of the social fora without losing the focus on the global dynamics that unite the left.

Here, again, the problems identified mimic the larger social challenges. A majoritarian left will have to overcome these in the real world, not just at social fora, if it is to change the world. In this sense, confronting the problem of articulating the different local and national agendas and priorities is training for the real world. Therefore, the spontaneous, *ad hoc*, temporary, and improvised solutions and adjustments that people invent may lead to real-world advances.

The problem of balancing investment in the forum with actual social change work can be solved by encouraging the WSF's International Council to hold the Forum less frequently, perhaps every 3 to 5 years. Similar timing restrictions should be placed on the major regional and thematic fora. This would allow many popular grassroots organizations, to focus more on the necessary work of directly confronting the challenges that have called them into being in the first place. This also addresses the resource concern for individuals and organizations participating in the forum.

Any perceived need for more frequent global gatherings can be dealt with by other non-forum convocations. For many mainstream NGOs, the forum is a positive and preferable alternative to the giant protests at meetings of intergovernmental bodies (e.g. the WTO, IMF, World Bank, G8, NATO, etc.). Perhaps, other Seattle-like gatherings ought to be encouraged, many NGOs may wish for more of their international resources to be spent on the tasks of protest, politics and declarations. Too frequent forums detract from these.¹⁰

Less frequent WSFs will allow much of the movement to return its energies to the kind of oppositional activities that continue to make sense in light of the continuing world order and international collusion with the USG's hegemonic agenda.

In addition, since international institutions, both those which we want oppose and those that we wish to reform, work on multi-year budget cycles, the most important agenda-setting meetings do not occur on an annual basis. Longer gaps between WSF also make sense in terms of the short-term economic cycles (5 to 10 years) and the strategic issues posed by international

economic expansion and contraction.¹¹ This will provide more substantial empirical material for forum goers.

Another more interesting element relating to the forum, particularly the sub-national and trans-border fora, pertains to defining the geographic reach of the forum. One writer cautions that cross-border fora at the “local” level may have the effect of turning social movements away from focusing their energies on the local and national state apparatuses that they can impact. This view is premised on the fact that modern social movements evolved as entities placing demands of authoritative structures that could redress or impact the grievances of the social movements. In our estimation, this view has a great deal of merit. Cross-border fora, however, have value because many of the institutions and processes governing the local—be they regional transportation administrations, water supply networks, electrical and power grid authorities—cross borders. Similarly, many environmental issues at the local and sub-national regional level are oblivious to borders. In fact, the emergence of cross-border social movements at the local level may increase the power of those movements’ national portions by leveraging gains in one state for the benefit of another, and the resulting coordination will weaken the ability of corporations to play one state off against the other. In this sense, cross-border regionalism at the local level can be profoundly subversive of existing state structures and point the way forward to that other possible world less fettered by national chauvinism.

Another criticism of the proliferation of the social forum process is that local social forums are essentially an oxymoron. Some argue that the World Social Forum is a response to globalization and neoliberalism, i.e. forces that have weakened the nation state and that require a specifically *global* response. Local forums, almost by definition, it is argued, cannot be of sufficient scale.

In addressing this criticism, it is worth noting that it is precisely the weakening of the central state and the closely related fact that the global dictates much of what happens locally that makes local forums necessary. As local government comes to intermingle with the forces of globalization, whether it is responding to capital flows (either in or out) or to the movement of peoples (migration), local social fora become a necessity. After all, the global finds places and these places must become sites of resistance *and* imagining other possible places.

Critique 3: Who Decides?

Despite publicly available materials, via the WSF website, that clearly state who comprises both the secretariat of the WSF (a quasi-executive body, carrying out the work of organizing the Forum) and the International Council and its Commissions (a quasi-legislative assembly of unions, NGOs, think tanks and publications), there are complaints about the absence of transparent and accountable structures of governance of the WSF. These become quite widespread when discontent about “giganticism” or various logistical failures occurs. People want to know, “Who is in charge?” and, “Who is to blame?”

There is certainly good reason to regularly revisit the organization and composition of WSF Secretariat and International Council. It would make particular sense to expand the International Council to include a broader array of organizations, and (duly acknowledging the authors’ own interests) more attention should be given to the input of organizers of the growing number of

local social fora—perhaps in a new Assembly of Local Social Fora if not in the International Council.

However, in defense of the Secretariat, much of the Forum must be seen as a veritable “process-without-a-subject.” That is, most of what we see and experience at the social forum is the result of a process that allows thousands of individual “subjects” (organizations and individuals) an opportunity to make decisions about the manner, content and form of their contributions to the forum. The net result lacks a single author. These decisions are much like the “invisible hand” of the theoretical marketplace: the market’s growth, efficiency and diversity is not the product of a sole actor but the result of many dispersed decisions.¹²

Furthermore, the methodology of the social forum, to reject any final declarative statement on behalf of all participants—and its decision to be an open space, not a zone of power—means there is no need, on democratic grounds, to require that the logistical decisions of the forum be subject to politicization.

To be sure, logistics and politics cannot easily be separated. Nonetheless, *at the risk of bending the stick the other way*, there is an irreducible core of logistical tasks that must be completed to make any forum a success: registration, scheduling, site management, traffic flow, presentation equipment and media, housing, and transportation.¹³ These tasks certainly impact the politics and visa versa; however, thoughtful deliberation on the part of a “board-of-trustees”-like structure (which the International Council approximates) could provide overall guidance to the Secretariat on these matters.

To be sure there are also substantial gray areas between logistics and the exercise of power. These lie in media messages, communications technologies, cultural events and convocations aimed at the entire forum.¹⁴ These require considerably more sensitivity to ensure an inclusive but suitably oppositional tone for the entire forum. The propensity for pomp, ceremony and cultural events (i.e. elements that are presented as neutral forum-wide activities) to expand at the WSF should be seen as a danger sign that the forum is developing a new totalisation and grand narrative that is clearly ripe for politicization by any faction that might come to dominate the logistical leadership of the forum.¹⁵

Similarly, important resource questions remain: with the proliferation of fora (discussed above), how do we prevent the fora from cannibalizing each others’ resources? Again this points to a realm of power, over which some deliberative body ought to make decisions. Here again, though, thoughtful inclusive decision making involving affected parties combined with fewer fora will help.

In our direct experience as a quasi-secretariat called the “administrative team” organizing the Boston Social Forum (BSF) and reporting back to a quasi-legislative “planning committee,” we found that the latter was frustrated by having to make the “small decisions” such as reviewing registration plans, childcare provision, translation and interpretation plans, relations with the police, website design and communications plans, and fundraising. When polled to identify what kinds of decisions they wanted to make, most planning committee members were interested in the major political decisions “that must be made.” Asked to provide examples, they wanted to

know who was being invited to speak, how we would develop a program, whether we would impact city-wide organizing for tenants rights and so on.

While we agreed that these were important questions in need of answers, they were not matters for the planners and organizers to address in their capacity as planners and organizers. Instead, these important questions should be asked and answered by the programming generated by the participating organizations at the forum and not in the name of the whole forum. These are matters of substance that the forum process opens up for discussion and provides a framework for addressing—without prejudicing the outcome.

Interestingly, the one BSF working group that virtually all planning committee member-NGOs wanted to participate heavily in was the “Program Working Group,” the central task of which was to encourage programming by outreach to diverse community groups. The actual content of the programming was left up to the individual organizations or assorted combinations thereof. In this sense, the organizing of the BSF program was fundamentally depoliticized—and therefore diversified to the very boundaries of left politics. By separating the logistical from the political as much as possible, we believe we were able to fulfill the open-space function of the social forum process—building a logistical framework into which every voice of the left could plug in their particular worldview.

Ruling classes have been successful at depoliticizing aspects of social life.¹⁶ The progressive movement often and rightly sees re-politicizing these aspects as its mission. Lost in this dialectic is the need for us to depoliticize, within careful limits, certain of our own institutions, so that we can get on with the task of engaging the ruling class.¹⁷

Critique 4: With Friends Like These...

As the Forum has gained in prestige, more and more mainstream actors, including major foundations, large service-oriented NGOs, quasi-governmental bodies, political party formations and even the World Bank have sought to involve themselves in the proceedings of the Forum. Already more innocuous-seeming intergovernmental organizations, like the ILO and UNESCO, are physically present at the Forum. Certain NGOs with deep financial pockets have an overwhelming physical presence at the Forum, commanding entire avenues of stalls and exhibit spaces. At the level of imagining the other world, well-funded NGOs and upper middle-class sects (religious or otherwise) also help define the content of the programming. In creating an open space that invites and facilitates the participation of under classes, outcastes and the casteless, the doors were also opened to their social opposites, entities and formations whose stance toward the neo-liberal order and task of overturning it are neutral at best.

One social movement leader from the Balkans has likened the issue of the World Bank sympathizers and corporate-like NGOs to problem of free speech in general: “All of us have the right to free speech, but does it change when some of us get megaphones? Of course it does!”

This also shapes the dialogues and debates; even where we concede that the discursive poles are found on multi-dimensional planes, the strength and organizational presence of large, mostly centrist formations pulls debate back to the political center. Occasionally, the Forum may benefit

politically from the participation of the neo-liberal order's loyal opposition, such the inclusion of Joseph Stiglitz in the Mumbai WSF (2004). The problem remains however that the centrists—the well organized, wealthy NGOs, and foundations--have the power (resources, staff people, time) to promote their events and perspectives both inside and outside the forum.

True, the WSF Charter of Principles, and related statements like the Boston Social Forum Organizational Document, make it generally clear that social fora are events, first and foremost, for the political left worldwide. But which social actors are “left” is very much an open question. And without an easy mechanism to determine who gets to participate in the open space of a forum, and who does not, inevitably some institutions and organizations which many participants would find to be enemies of the left will insinuate themselves into the proceedings.

There are no immediately obvious solutions to this problem. Anything that restricts the access of the aforementioned groups will invariably impinge on the rights of existing and other potential participants. The forum's open and inclusive character will be compromised.

Some very modest reforms may include restricting the total number of events an organization may sponsor or number of stalls that they may fund. Size limitations on event advertising at the forum, while difficult to implement, may also be helpful.

The solutions for the problem of “giganticism” may also be useful here: just as we argue that the forum should be seen as a space for organizing and social learning, it should be seen as a space to challenge and hold accountable the large NGOs and centrist formations. Over time, formal and informal networks of progressive NGOs may develop codes of conduct with which to challenge the others and to support progressive individuals who may work for and wish to transform these other institutions.

Critique 5: What about Us?

The flipside of the too inclusive forum is the forum that fails to include counter-hegemonic social movements, particularly those from the Global South that are not active in capital cities or that have not caught the roving eyes of the major foundations...or those of an excited academic. The creation of regional public trusts—perhaps on the model of the US Grassroots Global Justice movement, which recruits and brings organizers and activists from social movement organizations from across the United States to the Forum—might be a useful corrective. This helps redress the imbalance in which the majority of the attendees from the United States are drawn from white, middle-class organizations and institutions.

These regional public trusts can administer solidarity funds, which may enable the meaningful participation of individuals from the Global South and Third World communities within the developed countries.¹⁸ Countries as diverse as India, South Africa and even the United States have experience with affirmative action programs to encourage the participation of hitherto discriminated-against populations.¹⁹ These traditions may be helpful in crafting programs to ensure broader and more inclusive social fora.

Another debate around inclusiveness concerns the alleged absence of participation of the “grassroots.” Many activists complain that the intellectual atmosphere of the forum alienates the “ordinary people.” This issue seems quite intractable in part because it speaks to radically different visions of the social forum’s objectives. It also lends itself to easy demagoguery and populist rhetoric. That caution notwithstanding, it leads to the question: “What is the role for the grassroots in envisioning the other possible world?” This issue is of extreme importance to local fora because they do not have the excuse that excessive distances and travel costs militate against grassroots’ participation. Instead the obstacles have to do with the nature of the planned events themselves. It also raises questions about the relationship between local, regional and international fora.

The participation of the grassroots in the social forum is a substantive question that needs to be addressed in the same way as other such questions: it must be left up to groups concerned about the issue. The pressure on the secretariats is to be responsive to such groups. At the BSF, the administrative team encouraged organizations raising these questions to propose events and do relevant promotion for the grassroots. The logistical side of this was to do significant publicity and direct outreach to key underrepresented communities in advance of the event, and to provide free transportation for community-based organizations to bring their members and interested individuals from these communities.

In the end, no matter how we address the challenge of grassroots and community-based participation, a fundamental, possibly disturbing, question remains and needs to be addressed with the hard-headed realism of the best organizers: Are those who are *most impacted* by neo-liberalism and its associated evils, the same as those who are *most able* to change it? And, if the answer recognizes a disjunction between the two, how does one find the moral and strategic balance?

An additional thorny question is “who exactly is the grassroots?” Are only the most oppressed people worthy of that status? Or is everyone who is not a master of capital, particularly the vast middle class in industrialized nations, also eligible for the title? And can activists and organizers ever be considered grassroots themselves? Or is it the case that once a person or group assumes a political role, they no longer worthy of consideration by critics of the forum’s supposed elitism? If that is so, then why would one consider the cadres of peasant movements to be grassroots, but not members of a comparably-sized, U.S. middle-class peace movement? Perhaps these are topics for discussion another day, but they lead nicely into addressing the final critique (below) of the WSF process.

Critique 6: American Exceptionalism

As the social forum process spreads to new geographical frontiers, from Luso-America and Southern Europe to South Asia and to Africa...and probably eventually to Central Asia and other parts of the world, one glaring absence is noted: North America and specifically, the heart of empire, the United States. Ironically, as noted above, many organizers of the Forum were inspired by the events in Seattle (1999’s “Protest of the Century”).

One principled argument has been advanced to explain—and argue for the maintenance of—this new form of American exceptionalism. Its outlines broadly parallel descriptions of the earlier exceptionalism: the American working classes, people of color, immigrant forces, women’s movements, and youth milieu are not as organized as their Europe or Latin America analogues. This weakness, it is further argued, makes it difficult or impossible for a meaningful dialogue to occur between these social forces, either internally or with their global counterparts. And it makes it extremely unlikely that North Americans are even capable of imagining another world at all.

The underlying assumptions are similar to those of Roberto Michels’ Iron Law of Oligarchy (for democracy to exist, it must be organized, but organization means control by a few...). Of course, Michels took his logic forward to its logical conclusion: he became a supporter of Mussolini who organized social groups into corporatist structures necessary for “dialogue”!

We hardly expect that exponents of the new American exceptionalism will want to take their arguments forward in this direction. This mechanical thinking, which links *a priori* social constructs (e.g. “people of color”) first to actual social class, race and gender formations then to organizations that in turn construct a dialogue, is what the social forum seems to have subverted.²⁰ The other extreme is a danger (i.e. that there is no connection between concepts, actual social groups and organizations, and dialogue is neither possible nor necessary); but this is not the direction that organizers of social fora need to take.²¹

An extension of this argument is that if a forum is organized in the US, it will be dominated by (mostly white) middle-class led organizations that represent very few people. Hence, many principled organizers are hesitant to move toward any national forum in the US. This, however, is more of a strategic decision depending on one’s reading of the political moment. Our fundamental rejection of this argument is to note that social fora, if one accepts without contest the claim the US social forces are not as well organized, can help strengthen the organization of the forces. Social fora provide an opportunity for actors and organizations to try to speak for their “constituencies.” The First Workingman’s International after all was largely constituted by defeated radicals, socialists, anarchists and nationalists, which in Europe represented still nascent social forces (the urban working classes were hardly a majority, let alone “organized,” in any of the countries then).

But we want to go further: the reading of social forces is fundamentally incorrect: Americans *are* “organized” or more precisely *networked* in a variety of associational, informal, religious, and communal forms. These are often submerged or latent networks, the nodes of which may be formal institutions (churches, stamp clubs, poker pools, etc.) or apparently random individuals. It has been postulated that one of the reasons the US never developed a vast working class movement was due to the early preponderance of voluntary associations and missionary religious institutions. Americans also spend a great deal of energy on building lifestyle communities or their virtual equivalent, which makes organizing strong cultural components to US fora particularly necessary. These people constitute the large majority of society and may never *ever* be affiliated with the formal organizations that will be asked to enter into dialogue on their behalf.

The Boston Social Forum drew at least a fifth of its 5,000+ attendees from a predominantly young, people of color, hip hop community by deliberate outreach to the relevant networks. At the same time, it recognized the strategic necessity of involving the white middle classes without whom it will be impossible to build a majoritarian progressive movement. It reached them through the peace movement and communicating with the informal internet communities concerned about a variety of salient issues like the outsourcing of white-collar jobs.

Our read of the social forum process dictated that all progressive social actors needed to be invited to the table, not just constituencies that are most obviously oppressed by the rise of corporate globalization. Vanishingly few people are even partially immune from the negative effects of corporate globalization, and the defeat of the lavishly funded and politically powerful neoliberal project will demand winning over super-majorities of the world's population to a progressive worldview. Given these facts, the task of the social forum must remain bringing together all the communities that struggle for the rise of a progressive democratic globalization to regularly network and strategize—united in the belief that “another world is possible.”

The new American exceptionalism is not a problem of the social forum, nor is it of the absence of organizations, but of antiquated understanding of otherwise creative social theories. Ironically it has affinities with old-fashioned, corporatist (Durkheim) or fascist (Michels) thinking. The forum can force Americans to live up to their responsibility to bring together their submerged networks to more effectively challenge the USG.

Concluding Remarks: The WSF Builds Social Movements

The debate about the future of social fora will continue, often in discrete units and discursive communities that are unconnected. A specialist conference is needed to bring together organizers of social forums with social movement theorists and leading activists. The foregoing suggests that many of the problems of the social forum process can be readily addressed by minor reforms, by adjusting expectations about social forum objectives, by educating participants about how they can maximize the “returns” on their social forum “investment,” and finally by recognizing that the WSF and the forum process is *only one set of interactions* and mobilizations needed to midwife the other possible world.

Other international projects—such as movements for a deliberative, world parliament, a global structure of participatory politics, a workers’ international, or a radical democracy—are offered by many as institutions into which the forum ought to evolve. However worthy these prescriptions may be as ends, they are very different from the social forum and even if they were to come into being, the world will still need an open space for civic actors to network, debate, plan or to simply speculate. That space will be the social forum.

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Barbara Salvaterra, Merrie Najimy, Chuck Turner, Daniela Broitman, Joe Gerson, and Elizabeth Leonard. Of course, they are not responsible for the final formulations.

¹ Note on terminology and sources: The “forum process,” “the process” and “the forum” refer to the global events and spaces that use the *methodology* of the social forum. It also refers to the activities in between fora that pertain the assessment of previous fora and the preparation of succeeding ones. These therefore include the WSF, itself, regional, national, local and thematic fora. The emphasis on the methodology of the forum is of two-fold value, (i) it distinguishes the fora from other events and conferences that choose to call themselves social forums and (ii) it points to the underlying unity of the very diverse events spread out across geography, subject matter and scale. “The Forum” refers to the WSF itself. For a note on the methodology, see the WSF’s website or visit FAQ section at www.bostonsocialforum.org.

Briefly, we take the following to be the defining methodological aspects of forum: (i) the forum is an open space for all civil society forces opposed to militarism and corporate globalization; (ii) the social, intellectual and political content of the forum is largely determined by self-organized participants; (iii) no individual, platform, or declaration can speak on behalf of the forum nor make political decisions binding on all participants.

This note draws from a wide variety of sources, mostly pertinent, it is based of first-hand observations of the European Social Fora of 2003 & 2004, the WSF of 2003, 2004, and 2005 and our experiences in organizing the Boston Social Forum (from November 2002 through July 2004). One of us also attended an organizing meeting of WSF-Brazil & India, regional SFs and thematic SFs secretariats in Paris, during November 2003. Occasional references are made to well-known authors and works, for this reason, we have not found it necessary provide traditional reference and bibliographic information. Further, the criticisms of the SF process are now widely known and shared across many different perspectives, leaving us comfortable to synthesize and reformulate them without attribution.

² Transnational as opposed to international; the former cuts across borders while the latter within the confines of more than one individual state.

³ In another time, one would be tempted to paraphrase a different writer: the world seems to have moved from the weapon of criticism to criticism with weapons.

Also, our use of “empire” with a lower case “e” represents our attempt to reclaim the terms value as an emotive tool and moral condemnation rather than a commitment to any ambitious analytic agenda or grand theorizing.

Further to this point, another process that is worthy of further investigation is the continent-wide rejection of the Washington Consensus via traditional electoral politics: Uruguay, Ecuador, Chile, Argentina and, not the least, Brazil have elected reformist governments. This nascent social democracy of the South is yet to demonstrate its viability and indeed, the Forum (in 2005), may have been a zone of contention between these reformists on the one hand, and Chavez (soon to be joined by Evo Morales?) on the other. In this light, further investigation of the debates at the most recent edition of the Forum is warranted.

⁴ The Boston Social Forum was the first in the United States to use the distinctive methodology of the World Social Forum, see www.bostonsocialforum.org.

⁵ Ramonet lauded Chavez as “*un gran libertador*,” when welcoming the Venezuelan president to *Gigantinho* (a sports stadium) filled with tens of thousands of forumistas on the last day of workshops and events. The Chavez event was a *de facto* closing ceremony for the forum. A further reason for his welcome may have been to tweak Lula’s nose. The latter was presented in a large number of workshops as a great disappointment. The problem with the unparalleled prominence for Chavez, who informed his cheering audience that Fidel Castro was watching and very interested in the presentation, is that it colors the entire forum. Whatever the Bolivarian’s achievements, and they appear considerable, many forum goers do not wish to have a visionary event so closely identified with one political experience and one particular response to corporate globalization. It is not respectful to other forum goers to eclipse their events with a mega event during the forum, nor does it make strategic sense: as Chavez and the Bolivarian road go, so goes the forum.

⁶ It is worth noting that the forum process has reached these large numbers by deepening the involvement of people in the limited number of core countries (mostly Western Europe, India and Latin America) touched by the original Forums. Even with the expansion of the Forum to India, vast areas of Middle East, East, Central and North Asia are yet to be included. Africa, most parts of Eastern Europe and the FSU are still to be integrated. If anything, these absences suggest that future forums have the potential to be radically larger! Horizontal expansion (across geography) coupled with the ever deepening local and sub-national forum process, i.e. downward vertical expansion, hold out the promise, not only of the aforementioned scale increase, but also the posing of newer challenges around inclusion and deliberation (see below for more on this issue). The continued absence of a meaningful Chinese presence (itself a topic for another paper), especially without near-term promise of reversal, is disappointing.

⁷ For the forum process to contribute to the iterative conversation, would-be partners will have to see the forum as one of many venues for discussion, with other venues being other fora, smaller-scale preparatory meetings, internet fora and conference calls, etc.

⁸ The Boston Social Forum involved a little over 550 events over 2½ days. A searchable database of the events is still available online.

⁹ Those who complain about the lack of outcomes, decisions and actions at the Forum are, in this light, essentially complaining about *their own failure* to convince others of the utility of their preferred course of action or plans. This is a valuable frustration that might spark innovation and greater reflection.

¹⁰ Seattle in November-December 1999 was the great inspiration for the WSF, beginning, as it did, with hundreds of teach-ins and workshops before the WTO attempted to convene. It prefigured the diversity of the WSF, although held in the United States, thousands of activists took the streets from hundreds of constituencies; included in the process were Japanese farmers, indigenous migrant workers, American-born steelworkers, New Age sages, deep ecologists and old-fashioned turtle-imitating environmentalists. It also sparked a major paper entitled by the question, “Where were the people of color in Seattle?” Of course, the many of people of color in the events and streets—one of this note’s authors included—were there, just ignored by the media and those asking the rhetorical question. The same question informs our sixth critique, American Exceptionalism.

¹¹ This is to suggest that the most important processes that concern forum goers, have longer development cycles and will play themselves out more slowly than annual forum cycle. Regular annual forums are no more valuable than a second hand on a clock is for predicting the time.

¹² We, of course, reject the neoliberal celebration of unfettered markets. *Pace* Elson and network theorists, we recognize the value of dispersed decision making.

¹³ This list is not exhaustive. Further, it is constructed with full awareness that few technologies and logistical issues are race, gender, or class neutral. This recognition, however, does not negate the irreducible, socially-neutral essences of particular activities, however much they may be overlaid with a variety of biases.

¹⁴ Of course, the biggest logistical decision, the Forum’s venue, must be subordinated to important political, strategic and moral considerations. Here again, a sufficiently diverse Board of Trustees-like structure, influenced, but relatively autonomous from the forum participants, may be better at taking these into consideration than any deliberative structure. On the other hand, a jury-like structure, chosen by lot from affiliating civil-society actors, with strict rules governing deliberation, may also be useful.

¹⁵ The many empty statements and banal phrases that characterize many of the speeches and cultural events may not be a product of the shallowness of this or that artist, but the need to produce bland, overriding remarks that do not offend any particular tendency participating in the social forum.

¹⁶ The rights to health, housing, and even security have are subject to depoliticized “market” outcomes not subject to public debate and influence in the most successful neo-liberal environments (e.g. Chile and the United States).

“Successful” refers to the neo-liberals’ ability to get their policies implemented and not to the outcomes of those policies.

¹⁷ Of course, this can and has been taken advantage of by many a US non-profit, rejecting as some have unions and internal democracy in the guise of pursuing campaign goals.

¹⁸ “Meaningful participation” includes ensuring that the heretofore excluded are involved in the earliest stages of planning and brainstorming.

¹⁹ By no means does this suggest that any of the 3 countries have ideal affirmative action programs that are equal to combating both historical legacies and continuing racism.

²⁰ In any case, the historical experience is that the growth of social movements is never a linear process guided or managed by formal organizations. Any aspiration to do so, limits social movement formation by stealing initiative and innovation away from those grassroots forces that may intentionally or unintentionally invent repertoires and frames that capture the collective imagination. Furthermore, social movements (to some degree representing “underlying” social forces) ebb and flow. Waiting for some miraculous moment where relevant social forces find adequate representation in social movement organizations seems naive.

²¹ Of course we reject out of hand this extreme.