

New Politics Emerging at the U.S. Social Forum¹

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Changes in the organization of the global economic system have contributed to the fragmentation of local communities and the depoliticization of citizens. Transformations in the workplace and in the organization of politics have expanded the distance between citizens and governments.² In the workforce, increased competition and the deindustrialization of western economies have meant reduced wages, declining unionization, and greater job insecurity. Workers often work longer hours or multiple jobs simply to maintain their income levels, thereby reducing the amount of time and energy they have to devote to their roles as citizens. This has undermined traditional social institutions, as people spend less time working to build community and articulate and advance common aims.³ In government, more decisions are framed in technical rather than political terms, thereby justifying rule by experts rather than by the more democratic processes of public deliberation by informed citizens. The depoliticization of citizens enables powerful corporate actors to advance their interests in economic globalization at the expense of other social goals.

Norris argues that transformations in how political parties organize have contributed to declining rates of political participation in many western democracies.⁴ As parties rely more on the mass media to promote candidates, they spend less time cultivating local constituents and more time raising large contributions to pay for media advertising. At the same time, however, she observes that social movements and protest politics have been helping to “reinvent” democratic participation at a time when public confidence in established representative democracies is waning. Social movement actors—including organizations, informal networks, and individual leaders—help make democracies dynamic by educating the public and creating opportunities for political engagement where formal policymaking institutions are lacking. Markoff illustrates how social movements have shaped the evolution of democracy since the 18th century, arguing that they continue to be vital players in ongoing struggles to defend democracy against the constant threats from anti-democratic forces.⁵

The World Social Forum process represents an important innovation in political practice that can help democratize national and global politics. The potential and promise of the Social Forum Process lies in its ability to mobilize people into global politics--counteracting the depoliticizing tendencies of neoliberalism--and in its role as a laboratory for experimentation in new forms of political identity and practice.⁶ The social forums emerged from a widespread notion that economic globalization has made existing forms of representative democracy increasingly irrelevant to people's needs.

The Social Forum Charter of Principles explicitly frames it as a multi-level process for creating “open spaces” where participants can “introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new

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² Brunelle 2007.

³ Wuthnow 1998.

⁴ Norris 2002.

⁵ Markoff 1999.

⁶ See Whitaker 2003.

world in solidarity.”⁷ Not surprisingly, then, many activists in the social forums discuss their efforts as contributing to new forms of politics.⁸ Organizers frequently use the phrase “World Social Forum process” to signify that they are not simply organizing episodic meetings, but that they are developing conversations and organizing strategies across the various times and places of WSF-inspired gatherings. Regional, national, and local social forums and global “days of action,” are important mechanisms through which the WSF process has both diffused around the world and evolved as an “experiment in global democracy.”

The interconnected and long-term nature of the process allows participants to develop political identities and relationships to the process over time. This process-orientation is important to helping the WSFs re-engage a depoliticized public. The WSF is thus both a model and an incubator for a *new form of politics*, one that counters depoliticization by providing global open space for discussion, deliberation and planning; by bringing *new people* into dialogue and action around a range of political issues, by facilitating the development of *new political identities* that transcend national polities; and by enabling and encouraging experimentation with *new political practices* that are relevant to a multi-level political arena. As expanding and inclusive political space, the WSF creates opportunities for individuals to cultivate their “political imaginations”⁹ as well as skills in global citizenship.

There are no elections for global public officials, and few international policies are subjected to public debate, particularly transnational debate. The foreign-policy-making processes in most countries severely constrain possibilities for public deliberation on international policies. The WSF fills this vacuum by providing a politicized arena where people can learn about and articulate positions on global issues. They do so as part of a dialogue with diverse groups of people, fostering appreciation for the needs and perspectives of others while cultivating skills in political negotiation and compromise.

Using participant observation methods to examine how different groups mobilized at the USSF, we consider whether and how this new politics was evident in the first United States Social Forum (USSF). Hausmann attended preparatory meetings of activists traveling to the USSF from Chicago, and he rode the bus with the group and observed sessions organized and attended by one of the lead groups in that coalition. Kutz-Flamenbaum examined the feminist presence at the Forum. And Smith engaged the USSF process to try to develop new strategies for peace and justice organizing. We reflect on what our experiences tell us about the Social Forums’ ability to contribute to the evolution of new forms of political participation.

Hausmann: Stories and Strategies for Public Housing

The Coalition to Protect Public Housing (CPPH) is a network of public housing residents based at the Cabrini-Green housing development. It was created in 1996 to protect the rights of public housing residents and defend access to public housing in the face of repeated incursions by the Chicago Housing Authority and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The CPPH had much more experience with Social Forums than other Chicago-based groups. The group distinguished itself at the 2006 Chicago Social Forum by reporting on their experiences at the 2005 WSF in Caracas. It was one of the few groups make connections between a seemingly local battle and global institutions. This international work of CPPH, in conjunction with Poor Peoples’ Economic Human Rights Campaign (PPEHRC), attracted the attention of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, who declared Chicago’s public housing a violation of residents’ human rights. Their work in Caracas and with the PPEHRC put

⁷ World Social Forum 2007.

⁸ See Sen and Saini 2004.

⁹ Khasnabish, 2004.

the CPPH in a position not only to lead discussions of housing at the USSF, but also to help bring groups working on other issues into the Social Forum process.

When I began observing the Chicago groups preparing for the USSF, I immediately recognized Marcus, a young CPPH organizer whom I had met at the Chicago Social Forum. Marcus and other CPPH leaders played a central role in raising funds--though small grants and local fundraisers--for the trip to Atlanta. Unlike most other organizers I met there, Marcus had a very clear sense of what he expected to accomplish at the USSF: "Three things: build relationships with other groups, build a broader movement, and integrate a human rights framework into the struggle for housing."

The CPPH facilitated three workshops at the USSF. The first two workshops set the substantive and emotional stage for the third, which occurred on Saturday afternoon, the day USSF planners had designated for discussing strategy. The CPPH hoped to use this panel to mobilize around House Joint Resolution 32, a Constitutional Amendment, sponsored by House Representative which would recognize adequate housing as a human right.

The room was packed. I estimated about one hundred twenty people in a room that was perhaps twenty five by thirty feet. As the nine speakers from various regions shared their experiences with public housing, each infused a new perspective, but they consistently identified the Department of Housing and Urban Development as the key target of mobilization. Perhaps the most compelling panelist was an activist who recounted the "manmade disaster" of Hurricane Katrina. The multiplicity of stories generated a palpable sense of excitement. Indeed, the challenge of the workshop seemed to be translating the excitement of the conversation into concrete objectives. One panelist appealed to the group, "We have to take all this energy, all this knowledge here, but we have to do something with it."

The facilitators played a critical role in creating space to discuss future steps for collaboration. They invited participants to help shape the goals, and when speakers veered off into lengthy personal stories, they related those stories back to the key topic: "Okay." "What I want to know is: What goal do you have?" "What is it you would like to happen?"

Groups from New Orleans and Miami focused upon the connection between New Orleans and a building national movement. A panelist from New Orleans outlined how activists planned to hold a Peoples' Tribunal on the second anniversary of Katrina. "There will be no peace in the French Quarter. There will be no peace anywhere until we have housing!" He added, "Whatever this national movement does, we're in." "As New Orleans go, the rest of us go," another person reaffirmed. "Capitalists are focusing on New Orleans, and we need to focus on New Orleans, too." As the conversation oscillated between New Orleans and a broader housing movement, other groups voiced their perspective. A disability rights group organizer urged others to collaborate in advocating for accessible housing. One of the panelists agreed and emphasized that adequate housing meant adequate housing *for all*.

Marcus, who stood beside me throughout the last twenty minutes of the workshop, obviously valued these contributions. "There are specific groups that have to get a chance to speak. They have to have a voice, to be part of the process here." As a young man stood up and spoke, he explained, "He's from a national organization that represents rural and small towns. That's huge. They've got people in every county in the nation." After another, "He's a good organizer. He represents a lot of people." As the meeting came to a close, an organizer from Miami announced that the coalescing movement had an immediate opportunity to act: housing groups from Atlanta were going to converge upon the city hall abruptly after the USSF. I turned toward Marcus to see his reaction, "I guess we're not leaving until tomorrow afternoon!" he said excitedly.

At a follow-up meeting in Chicago, numerous leaders reported that they had developed new collaborative projects which were now under way. For its part, the CPPH circulated a newsletter that described their collaborative protest with the Atlanta housing groups. It had also begun a national collaboration with other public housing groups. As one CPPH activist said,

“The difference between the USSF and other meetings is that at the USSF you saw commitment. We met, and we’re moving forward.”

Since returning from the USSF, the Chicago-region network of USSF participants is transitioning from identifying with one another based upon their shared experiences at the USSF toward a more general understanding of their common purpose. The network is currently organizing what social forum activists have called “report backs,” or gatherings at which people who attended a social forum share their experiences and observations with members of their local community. Report backs reflect the process orientation of the Social Forums, helping mobilize new actors and foster new ways of thinking and relating. As one participant put it, “We need to think about who we are, what we can offer. Are we a group of people who went to this fabulous event in Atlanta, or are we a group that’s found something in common, a group that’s committed toward working together in the future?”

Kutz-Flamenbaum: (Re)Building A Global Women’s Movement

The women’s movement in the U.S. is a diverse and disparate entity. In preparation for the USSF, the feminist activists I interviewed highlighted the importance of building a women’s movement in the U.S. and globally; suggesting that while there are many influential women’s organizations there is no coordinated *movement*. For many of these activists, the USSF was meant to be part of the solution to this dilemma as an opportunity to work on “movement building.”

Within this context, “movement building” was at the forefront of my concerns at the USSF. I attended the “Rebuilding Women’s Movements Across All Borders” workshop, intrigued by the idea in the title of “Rebuilding.” I thought: These were people who believed that women’s organizations already worked together to promote gender equality. They are quick to acknowledge that work, but they also believe that there was more work to be done and that the USSF was one place to begin doing it. With this optimistic assessment, I entered the workshop room and saw that many were similarly attracted. The room (which held about fifty people) was mostly full as the session began and people continued to enter. While most of the people in the room were women, the room was much more diverse according to age and ethnicity than I am often used to seeing in forums dedicated to the “women’s movement.” Probably half of the attendees were people of color. As people began to speak, I heard the voices of many non-native English speakers mixed in with dialects from across the U.S.

The workshop began with introductions and a brainstorming session in which the participants were asked to suggest overall trends they thought were critical to understanding the current political environment. These were grouped into the categories of “state,” “market,” and “civil society” and written on large pads of paper. Even though this was a workshop on “women’s movements,” the workshop began by trying to sketch the overall political and social reality for all people. In fact, only four explicitly “women’s issues” were mentioned in the twenty-five or so issues that were raised. This is significant for several reasons. First, this orientation toward broad politics implies that women’s rights are *human* rights and that a successful women’s movement is concerned about women’s rights in the broadest and most inclusive sense. Second, this orientation served an important point in establishing norms and priorities for “(re)building” the women’s movement. The non-gender specific orientation encouraged participants to think broadly and legitimized the perspectives of those participants who emphasized interconnections among issues. This broad orientation helps nurture more expansive and inclusive collective identities within the women’s movement.

After the brainstorming session, the facilitator transitioned into explaining that this workshop was organized by a network called “Women’s Transformation Watch/ Observatorio de Transgresión Feminista.” The origins of the campaign, she explained, was a meeting of Central American and Mexican women leaders and feminist activists at a meeting on “Imagining and Rebuilding Feminist Movements for the Future” held in Panama in August 2006 and

organized by Just Associates. They developed this campaign to provide international pressure in locations where women's rights were threatened. While applying this political pressure through monitoring and information sharing is an important component of the Women's Transformation Watch, the facilitator also explained that meetings like this were a fundamental part of their work because it provides an opportunity to create new connections and engage in "movement building." She stated that the fundamental orientation of Women's Transformation Watch is that social, political and economic forces have "destroyed the social fabric" and the key goal of a new women's movement is to build a new social fabric.

The mood in the room was very supportive and positive about the projects of Women's Transformation Watch and the overall implicit commitment to working together as a group to build a women's movement. There was one interesting moment that could have led to fracture though: hanging from the table at the front of the room was a campaign banner that read "Observatorio de la Transgresion Feminista/Women's Transformation Watch." One of the audience members pointed out that a direct translation would make "feminista" into "feminist" and that the organization could be called "Feminist Transformation Watch." There were many murmurs of agreement that "feminist" is more powerful and important for a women's movement than "women." The facilitator said that this issue was a major source of debate among the founding members and that they ultimately decided that "women" was better in English speaking countries due to a sense that "feminist" makes English speaking people—specifically women in the U.S.—uncomfortable. This emphasis on feminist versus women underscored that the women's movement in the U.S. is often in a defensive position to a degree that is not true in other countries in the Americas. Thus, women's groups have much to learn and gain from working with their counterparts in other countries.

This fact was further emphasized by two other speakers who were part of Women's Transformation Watch. They observed that by sharing stories, activists can collect ideas about various forms of resistance, renew the "social fabric", and help (re)build an identity as a global women's movement without losing appreciation for the local struggles of women around the world.

The first speaker, Viola, represented a sewing collective called *Fuerza Unida*, which emerged from a campaign targeting Levi-Strauss. Viola told her story of a being laid off without warning or severance package in 1990 from a Levi-Strauss factory in San Antonio, Texas. She said that since they "no longer had anything to lose" she and some other Mexican-American women began organizing a campaign called "The Thread of Justice" to force Levi-Strauss to give better severance packages in future layoffs. Viola described herself as a shy woman, who had trouble speaking English and anxiety about her immigration status, but who ultimately led a campaign of women just like her to bring a picket line outside the Levi-Strauss headquarters in California. She recounted the victory of forcing Levi-Strauss to make better provisions for future workers as equally important to the fact that she and her colleagues learned to speak out and become self-sufficient through their sewing cooperative.

The second speaker was Maria of FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavor), who described her group's mission as "listening to women's stories, looking through women's eyes, and connecting with one another." She explained that these precepts were important to organization and movement building because they helped to "build the social fabric" and to meet the goal of "amplifying women's voices worldwide" through a "strategy of multiplication." Maria relayed the story of the founding of FIRE which began as a short wave radio in Costa Rica in 1991. She emphasized that the group has thrived by "doing what women do best; which is finding solutions with what we have at hand." They began broadcasting over the internet before it was popular after they were evicted from their broadcasting studio. While traveling to Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, many journalists had their technology confiscated at customs when entering China. But the customs officials couldn't imagine how

FIRE could use their microphone without a transceiver to do any real reporting, so they were allowed through. They called their stories in through a phone line.

The emphasis on personal stories and sharing experiences continued after the two speakers completed their presentations. As the floor opened to the audience, participants shared their own stories of work they've done, congratulated the speakers on their work, and asked questions about the strategies the speakers used including inquiries into alliances and requests for technical technological advice. The already inviting and inclusive feeling in the room transformed into a shared space which reverberated with a commitment to the overarching goal of building a global women's movement. The issue of "feminism" was not raised or debated, no organizations or movements were criticized, and instead it seemed that everyone in the room was interested in moving forward and working to create a new movement that wasn't riddled with the familiar critiques and fractures. The session exemplified a new kind of politics, built around inclusive identities and a global analysis that linked local struggles to a larger movement and drew upon the collected wisdom and experience of a wide range of campaigns and individuals. Della Porta and her colleagues refer to these as "flexible identities and multiple belongings."¹⁰

Women's Transformation Watch and Just Associates organized just one session. But several of the themes that emerged in this session were repeated in others throughout the USSF. These sessions consistently reflected the ideas that we need to (re)build a women's movement that makes connections with other movements, prioritizes the telling of women's stories in forging those connections, prioritizes relationship-building between individuals from diverse locations and backgrounds, thinks broadly about "women's rights," and that is committed to making a "global women's movement."

Smith: Uniting for Peace at the USSF

Despite the fact that the February 2003 global day of action against the Iraq War grew directly from the World Social Forum process, very few U.S. peace activists have been very active in global justice and WSF activism. I have long thought that U.S. peace activists tended to frame their struggles in rather parochial terms, often reacting against the unilateralist policies of the U.S. government rather than promoting ideas for making the U.S. a more responsible part of a global polity. Peace activists from other countries have been involved in the global justice movement and the World Social Forums (WSFs), but major U.S. peace and antiwar groups have had limited involvement in the process (United for Peace and Justice leaders did attend the WSF beginning in 2005, partly in response to an initiative of Italian peace groups).

I therefore hoped to encourage more U.S. peace activists to participate in the USSF by organizing a "Peace Caucus" as part of the workshop program. The Peace Caucus was a series of three workshops during which participants discussed the challenges of building coalitions to do peace and justice work, considered ideas being put forward by diverse groups, and developed consensus on strategies for helping renew and strengthen social movements working to end war and its underlying causes.

While I had hoped the Peace Caucus would draw a diverse array of groups, participants were mostly white, middle class, and working largely within the traditional mainstream of the peace movement such as United for Peace and Justice, American Friends Service Committee, and groups working to reform the United Nations. Nevertheless, several activists of color and people working in low-income communities attended, providing valuable insights into how to transcend racial and class divides. A key theme that emerged from the session is that peace organizers are constantly faced with the urgent need to stop particular wars while also wanting to address the underlying causes of war. In the context of ongoing

¹⁰ Della Porta, Andretta, Mosca, and Reiter. 2006.

wars, those discussing long-term strategies for preventing future wars can look callous if not misguided. Several participants stressed the urgency of ending mass violence quickly and were reluctant to shift attention from this goal. Participants also observed that the structure of the U.S. electoral and policy process leads groups to adopt narrow, single-issue frames such as those advocating an end to a particular war or military intervention or against a particular weapons system, rather than advancing more complex proposals to address the structural causes of violence and militarism.

The second Peace Caucus session presented several "visions" of how those concerned with peace and justice might focus their energies, and I invited speakers from groups that I felt were promoting particularly innovative approaches for addressing the problem of war and violence, such as the proposal for a global Marshall Plan and for a U.S. Department of Peace. Comments from participants, however, identified important limitations of these proposals, particularly their failure to adequately address inequalities in the distribution of economic and political power in national and global societies. In other words although there were valuable new ideas in these proposals, they were still too much like the old forms of politics to galvanize this group.

Nevertheless, ideas about a collective vision began to emerge from these first two Peace Caucus sessions, and as facilitator I sought to keep these common threads at the forefront of our consciousness as the discussions proceeded. For instance, it was clear that for those focusing on the urgency of ending current wars as well as for those concerned with economic justice, the aim of securing human rights and dignity was paramount. Several participants spoke about the need to affect broader cultural change to shift people's thinking and attitudes away from violence and militarism and towards notions of human rights, peace, and solidarity. These common goals formed the basis for building consensus in our third and final meeting of the USSF Peace Caucus around an action statement that we would put forward at the Peoples Movement Assembly on the final day of the USSF.

To ensure that we would have a fruitful third session, I invited people to participate in a planning session the following morning. We would meet in one of the "open spaces" provided by USSF organizers to allow groups to engage in coalition-building work during the forum. Half a dozen Peace Caucus participants helped develop a set of questions and structure for the third session. They agreed to do the preparatory work for the session, which included revising the draft "Citizen's Peace Plan," which I had put forward as a discussion draft for the group, preparing to report to the group on the United Nations' "culture of peace" initiative, and attending several workshops that also sought to build coalitions between peace groups and other movements.

We decided to devote the first hour of the session to reaching consensus on a one-page, 7-point "Citizen's Peace Plan for Iraq," which was developed from consultations among many peace activists and stated in strong but general enough terms to encourage many groups to adopt it. We wanted to make a strong statement from the USSF that could help many groups advance calls to end the ongoing devastation in Iraq and avert even greater escalation of conflicts in the Middle East. The second hour would be used to develop consensus upon specific actions that people present at the Peace Caucus (and hopefully others) agree to take upon their return to their home communities.

The third and final Peace Caucus session required discipline to ensure that we accomplished our work in the time allotted, and participants were both cooperative and critically engaged. A key part of the session was discussion of other USSF sessions where people discussed how to strengthen coalitions across class and racial divides. Not surprisingly, perhaps, we heard that "peace" work in communities of color tended to focus on ending gun violence in neighborhoods, fighting the "prison industrial complex," and combating military recruitment. In this context, however, we could move beyond mere observations about these

different priorities to discuss ways of forging unified struggles against militarism and violence. Activists working in diverse communities discussed openly how the different cultures of organizing and speaking present in middle-class and low-income communities hinder efforts at effective communication and trust-building between groups.

We reached consensus on a final resolution to put forward at the USSF's closing "People's Movement Assembly" (see <http://www.earthaction.org/en/ussocforum.html>). What was interesting and a bit surprising to me was that the actions we agreed upon did not include any calls to join a campaign or even to work towards a particular policy goal. The call to action emphasizes relationship-building. Participants agreed to move outside their comfort zones to attend meetings and events sponsored by groups different from their own. They also agreed to support civil society more generally by contributing to the World Social Forum process and by remaining vigilant to the need to support each others' work for peace. Instead of calls for "no war" or for specific institutional changes, the Peace Caucus is calling for efforts to foster a "culture of peace, human rights and justice." This requires a shift from the familiar campaigning strategy towards more conscious efforts to link the means we use to promote peace with the ends we hope to achieve. Ironically, even though we were meeting in a space remote from most of our home communities, and despite the fact that we were urging a global understanding of peace movement work, the call to action reinforced the need for new forms of action in local contexts.

Following the USSF, participants promised to bring the Peace Caucus Declaration home to their own organizations, using their organizational newsletters, websites, and "report back" sessions to spread the word about the Citizen Peace Plan and our ideas for strengthening the peace movement's diversity and its attention to economic justice issues. For my part, I posted our declaration on the USSF web page "blog" space,¹¹ organized numerous report backs in my community, and wrote pieces for newsletters. I also emailed our declaration to those who were part of the Peace Caucus, encouraging them to help publicize it and to otherwise carry out the commitments we made to each other in Atlanta. While we are not certain what policy impact all this will have, we can say that the process is providing people with new and concrete steps they can take to strengthen peace work in this country and world.

Conclusion: New Politics at the USSF

In all three cases we observed, the level of intensity and commitment exhibited by participants showed most clearly how truly important the WSF process is. People spent considerable time and money to travel to Atlanta for five days where they crammed into crowded rooms, raised their hands to wait long periods of time to speak, and attended early morning and late evening meetings in addition to full workshop schedules--all because they believed that participation in these discussions and workshops really mattered. In observing and participating in the USSF from various perspectives, we realized that preparing for and attending the forum provides some of the few opportunities for disenfranchised citizens to engage in political struggles that link their local concerns with global politics.

We argued that the key features of the new politics advanced by the WSF process are that they mobilize *new people* into global political arenas, they nurture *new identities* and understandings of problems, and they contribute to the introduction of *new political practices*. We saw each of these aspects at work in Atlanta. By all accounts, the forum mobilized a majority of participants from among those groups least represented among the voting public in this country. People of color, indigenous peoples, youth, former prisoners, poor people, and immigrants were all prominent among the USSF attendees. Such groups are not only excluded from participation in the global political processes that affect them, but they lack an effective voice in local and national politics.

¹¹ <https://www.ussf2007.org/en/node/17828>

We saw evidence of new understandings and identities in the cases we studied when organizers helped participants make connections between their local problems and global level policies. The articulation of claims in terms of human rights—which was seen in all three cases—reflects a shared discourse and framing within this broader movement that may be an important conceptual mechanism for developing “unity in diversity.” Also, the shared experience of participating in a social forum contributes to the articulation of new, “flexible identities and multiple belongings” that link individuals across geographic and sectoral divides.

The three cases we explored also provide evidence of new sets of practices that help constitute the new politics of the WSF. We each witnessed particular types of story-telling as political action. Activists used stories to compare experiences of globalization, to share accounts of effective strategies for countering opponents, and to report back to local communities about the USSF and its meanings. Each of these cases also showed that the forum helps focus activists’ attention on relationship-building over campaigning and ideological work. While they seemed no less concerned about achieving radical social change, participants in the USSF seemed open to the ambiguities of coalition-building. They were often explicit in recognizing a need to come together across the multiple boundaries that divide people in order to move beyond the failures of past movements. This seems to entail more attention to the work of movement building than to debates about ideology and ultimate objectives.

One other observation about how new politics is advanced in the WSF process is that leaders are crucial to making this happen. In each of our cases, leadership roles were played by individuals and groups that had experience in the WSF process and transnational organizing. These leaders organized sessions to help more people learn how the process works. They helped link the experiences in Atlanta with the global WSF process, and demonstrated for others the skills in effective use of the open space created by the process. Effective leaders in this context are process-oriented and maintain flexibility in defining their agendas and projects. They skillfully manage that tension between allowing people ample space to participate while also guiding the discussion in productive ways.

Our account of the USSF, in short, provides glimpses of an emerging new politics, a process of revitalizing political involvement of actors marginalized by neoliberal globalization and power politics. We showed how Social Forums offer concrete, sequential opportunities for actors to develop new relationships and learn to “talk across difference.”¹² By challenging people to understand their issues and even their identities in new, global ways, we argued that Social Forums facilitate communication about effective social change strategies. They create encounters in which activists can “make the path by walking;” they help bridge what is with what could be. By exploring the opportunities the USSF created for activists to try out new ways of thinking about and acting in the world, we hope to have contributed to understandings about how political practices develop in response to global transformations.

¹² Waterman, 2005.

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