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Chapter 18

Democratic Innovation in the U.S. and European Social Forums

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Democratization is an ongoing, conflict-ridden process, resulting from contestation between social movements and political elites (Markoff 1996; Tilly 1984). The struggle to make elites more accountable to a larger public has produced the democratic institutions with which we are familiar, and it continues to shape and reconfigure these institutions. It also transforms the individuals and organizations involved in social change, generating social movement cultures, norms and practices that evolve over time.

In this chapter, we conceptualize the World Social Forum (WSF) process as part of a larger historical struggle over people’s right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. As other contributions to this volume have shown, the WSF has emerged from and brings together a diverse array of social movements, and has become a focal point for contemporary movements struggling against the anti-democratic character of neoliberal globalization. Neoliberalism’s threats to democratic governance result from its expansion of the political and economic authority of international financial institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization; its hollowing out of national states through privatization, the international debt regime, and international trade policies; its privileging of

expert and technocratic knowledge over all other sources of knowledge; and its depoliticization of economic policymaking (Brunelle 2007; Harvey 2005; Markoff 1999; McMichael 2006).

This chapter identifies innovations in participatory democratic practice that activist organizers in the WSF process developed in response to these anti-democratic tendencies of global neoliberalism. We explore in particular how the WSF process in the United States and Europe has contributed distinctive models of democratic practice. We find that the particularities of place shape both the content of democratic innovations as well as the prospects for the spread of new forms of action across time and space. At the same time, regardless of place we find that individual activists play important brokering roles, connecting marginalized groups with the WSF process and linking Social Forum events across time and place. The WSF process provides a structure within which activists can develop, refine and adapt democratic innovations advancing a global challenge to neoliberal globalization.

Social Movements and Participatory Democracy

Modern political institutions are based on the notion that public authority stems from the consent of the people. Thus, elites must make claims to legitimate authority based on popular mandates which remain open to constant challenge by mobilized publics (Markoff 2009). Over the course of history, contention between movements and authorities has expanded the franchise to include groups historically marginalized because of gender, race, or landlessness and made democratic institutions more responsive and fair in their representation of the will of the people. They have done so, for instance, by creating novel forms of participation such as petitions, referendums, people's assemblies and tribunals and by challenging legal restrictions on voting and on public expression (Markoff 2004; Tilly 2004; 1995; McCarthy and McPhail 2006).

Polletta's work on the history of participatory democracy in social movements documents how activists have developed strategies aimed at both changing existing political arrangements and cultivating practices that reflect activists' values (2002). Many movements have faced serious tensions or splits over whether to prioritize participation or political expediency and policy impact. Nevertheless, activists' deep commitment to participatory democracy is reflected in the persistence of practices and values that are "prefigurative" of the society activists envision, and they have tended to generate organizational structures with a minimal division of labor, rotating tasks, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos (Polletta 2002). Participatory democracy, according to Polletta, contributes to the "collective self-development" of popular groups, making the dichotomy between participation and political impact a false one.

The emphasis of many (though certainly not all) Social Forum activists on the *process*—rather than on events or particular movement outcomes—seems a deliberate response to the supposed tension between efficacy and participation. Indeed, Social Forum activists are quite explicit in their references to historical rifts in their movements and are perhaps unusually self-reflexive in their effort to develop a process that accounts for the mistakes of the past and builds upon the insights and experiences of earlier movements. Their actions signal a commitment to long-term collective engagement around shared principles, but with an end point that remains ambiguous. As many activists like to say, "We're making a path as we walk." Thus, in the WSF what becomes central are the activities of engagement, strengthening relationships, cultivating skills and leadership, building consensus around core values, and inspiring creativity and new associational forms.

Thus, the WSF process should be seen as an outcome of earlier movements from places around the world. As a result of engagement with this global networked process WSF activists

are increasingly informed about lessons and practices of movements in other parts of the world. Thus activists can reflect more deliberately and comparatively on how different national structures and cultural factors affect organizing possibilities, and on what organizational practices and norms are most effective at bridging the many differences within the WSF.

Polletta's research identified three major relational bases for social movements advancing participatory democracy in the United States: religious fellowship, tutelage, and friendship (2002:16). She argues that these basic relational structures affect the forms of participatory democracy enacted by movements and shape the possibilities for activists to manage conflict and change. Elsewhere, Polletta and Doerr (2010) have developed a notion of democracy in the ESF and the WSF as operating on the base of a relationship of *translation*, a relationship that is different from those motivating earlier instances of participatory democracy and which has strengths and weaknesses. Here we explore two norms of participatory democracy we have observed in the WSF process, which we see as helping constitute the relationship of translation, namely "solidarity" and "intentionality." We argue that the World Social Forums contribute to the development of new associational norms that are more explicit in their recognition of the need for cross-sectoral and cross-national alliances.

By solidarity and intentionality we refer to Social Forum organizers' deep commitment to the *WSF process* and its guiding *Charter of Principles* (see Rucht, chapter 1). What we've witnessed in the course of several years of participant observation research is an expanding level of *trust in the process* that animates the World Social Forums. This trust motivates activists and keeps them connected to the WSF process despite the high cost of participation and the frustrations that often accompany transnational activism. It typically emerges from activists' greater appreciation of global interdependence and the need for strong transnational and cross-

sectoral alliances. It guides activists as they work simultaneously to redress inequalities within their movements as well as in the larger society.

History has shown, however, that these types of alliances will not develop through top-down processes and superficial or paternalistic forms of solidarity, but rather through mutual understanding and empathy and commitment to a shared struggle, or what Waterman calls “complex solidarity” (Waterman 2001:235-6).¹ The WSF helps guide activists as they learn to work together through particular Social Forum activities. Social Forum organizers have been criticized for failing to fully democratize their decision making processes. Indeed, we share some of these critiques. Nevertheless, the practical work of organizing particular Forum events requires some delegation of authority, even where a mechanism for such delegation is absent. Intentionality is a norm that can aid the work of reconciling the democratic values of the WSF process with the practicalities of organizing large-scale public events. The “intentionality” of the Social Forum is evident in its reflexivity—in the level of deep discussion among organizers about how to make the process more participatory and inclusive of marginalized groups (see, e.g., Juris 2008). It is also reflected in a commitment to what Doerr calls “careful listening,” which aims to “change those culturally specific ‘hearing habits’ that work against traditionally marginalised groups” (2009:i).

What is also interesting to note here is that, while Polletta’s past research focused only on U.S. cases, the emergence of the WSF process and the cross-national parallels we have seen in the practice of participatory democracy reveal similarities in how movements develop in different parts of the world. Such similarities in norms, practices, and values allowed the WSF to emerge and sustain transnational cooperative efforts over more than a decade. These pre-existing commonalities that transcend national boundaries also help activists overcome resource

and other constraints to unite across such diversity. While particular national histories are important and while differences remain in the nature of movement association and understanding of democratic practice, a common cultural foundation is emerging to facilitate transnational organizing in the spaces of the WSFs. Activists express this common foundation as “unity in diversity,” or in the language of the Zapatistas, they seek “one world with room for many worlds.” Diversity is thus often put forth by Social Forum organizers as a value and strength of this “movement of movements” rather than an obstacle.

The WSF Process as Global Democratization

The World Social Forum process must be seen as a response to the loss of legitimacy of representative democratic institutions, which have become increasingly ineffective at representing and responding to popular interests under neoliberalism (Brunelle 2007; Markoff 1999; 2003). Framed largely as a challenge to the global financial elite who gather annually at the World Economic Forum, the WSF is explicit in its demands for both an expanded global agenda that privileges social and ecological concerns over financial ones and for greater representation and inclusiveness in politics. It challenges dominant, Western traditions that adopt scientific and technical approaches to decisions that are fundamentally about core social values (Santos 2006). Since its first gathering in 2001, the WSF process has continually encouraged activists to find ways to ‘translate’ global principles and values into local political contexts, leading to a proliferation of Social Forums at local, national, and regional levels. This process of encouraging new understandings and practices that enhance connections between the global and the local, makes the WSF a profoundly important force in contemporary global politics.

The WSF slogan “another world is possible” highlights this effort to encourage new modes of thinking and acting as a means of advancing global change. By linking popular movements across time and place, the WSF process helps expand activists’ political imaginations, encouraging thinking that transcends the conventional notions of state and citizenship and the issue-segregation encouraged by institutionalized politics. Unlike in most national social movements, activists in the World Social Forum interrogate the state as a form of social organization. There is frequent acknowledgement that the state is essential to advancing movement interests, but that it needs to be fundamentally altered if it is to address popular needs over those of capital. By emphasizing the Forum’s “open space” character over particular strategies and priorities, WSF organizers have continually expanded popular engagement with a process whose end and identity remains fluid. By refusing to privilege any particular organizational model or political strategy, open space increases possibilities for new democratic forms to emerge. By facilitating workshops and sessions that bring groups together, it generates dialogues across differences, including sensitive listening that can help break down long-standing power structures that maintain existing lines of power and privilege.

The WSF emphasizes creating “open space” where people can gather to articulate ideas about what sort of world they desire. There is an extensive literature on the importance of such “free spaces” for the development of social movements (see, e.g., Polletta 1999 for a review and critique). Spaces freed from the physical and cultural constraints of dominant institutions and social relations enable free and creative deliberation that allows new collective identities, visions, and strategies to emerge. As the WSF has matured, it has consistently produced new efforts to expand spaces for local level participation. It has done so by encouraging more localized manifestations of the Social Forums, fostering decentralized organizing and planning in the

Forums themselves, modifying practices that reinforced existing patterns of inequality and privilege, and by developing new decision making and communications technologies that facilitate popular participation in the WSF process. The WSF process also establishes routines of regular communication across diverse networks that focus activists' energies on the shared project of organizing Social Forums and enhancing the Forum's inclusivity and representativeness—in other words strengthening participatory democracy from local to global levels.² This process has been uneven and contentious, and progress in advancing solidarity and intentionality depends upon what we refer to as “grassroots democracy brokers” to help bridge diverse constituencies and address contradictions between ideals and practice in the Forums.

But while the major organizational work of the WSF is to create open spaces, and while organizers have resisted formal structures and hierarchies, the process has necessarily generated *transnational* and *transmovement* associational structures that have enabled it to evolve and learn over time. This strengthens activists' shared sense of “who we are” and what sort of world “we” want and think is possible. Building upon pre-existing network ties, activists in the WSF process have worked very deliberately to expand associational ties across sectoral, class, and national boundaries—i.e., to be intentional in their enactment of the WSF process. This has often meant developing new organizational models and practices such as thematic Forums and the People's Movement Assemblies discussed below. By creating spaces where networks can expand and intersect, the WSF process provides new opportunities for increasing popular democratic mobilization around the world. As Polletta observed:

[P]re-existing network ties militate against the formation of mobilizing identities [... One dynamic through which such constraints are surmounted] is the *network intersections* that

provide an aggrieved population new access not only to physical, financial, and communicative resources, but also to people whose only weak ties and consequent social distance and status enable them to challenge existing relations of deference (Polletta 1999: 26, emphasis original).

The WSF process, we argue, encourages a constant expansion of such *network intersections*. Norms of solidarity and intentionality that undergird the process nurture skills and reinforce innovations that advance cross-cutting network ties. Below we discuss prominent examples of new practices, in particular by the “grassroots brokers” who help bridge local and translocal movement spaces and socialize activists in norms that aid coalition work. Such brokers include linguistic and communications technology activists whose expertise enhances their influence as promoters of new norms. We then examine a novel form of democratic practice, the Social Movement and later People’s Movement Assemblies (PMAs), which were introduced as part of the European and second U.S. Social Forum. These assemblies helped to resolve a core division among activists about whether the Forum should remain an open space for debate or whether participants should develop and ratify unified positions or actions against neoliberal globalization.

Grassroots Brokers in the United States and European Social Forums

The European Social Forum (ESF) was created by European global justice activists in 2002 during a period of relative movement growth (della Porta et al. 2006). Unlike previous

mobilizations (Rucht 2002), the ESF attracted a high number of participants from small local groups and/or resource-poor organizations meeting in regular European preparatory assemblies, the so called “EPAs” (Doerr 2009b). Decision-making during the ESF’s early development saw many difficulties stemming from national and organizational as well as ideological differences (see, e.g. Agrikoliansky and Sommier 2005). Over time, however, ESF organizers developed norms of deliberation in which *differences* of political identity and ideology were recognized as a resource of reciprocal learning —drawing on place-specific experiences of cross-ideological cooperation in the Social Forums (della Porta 2005, della Porta and Mosca 2007).

The ESF has grown into a transnational and transmovement-alliance that has contributed to several successful European-wide political campaigns that included both “radical” global justice activists and more “moderate” leftist and green party members of the European Parliament and the European Trade Union Federation. In particular, the EPAs developed a reflexive culture of consensus that differed from decision-making practices in national contexts in its stronger openness to disagreement and confrontation (Doerr 2009a). This innovation was introduced and implemented by a new group of actors: grassroots brokers including multilingual translators who worked together with Social Forum leaders to facilitate preparatory meetings at the European level.

Grassroots brokers came from voluntary translators, migrant rights groups,³ anarchist and feminist organizations, and media networks which worked to institutionalize inclusive linguistic translation and rules of gender equality, transparency, and responsive consensus. A comparative study shows that the EPAs, unlike the National Preparatory Assemblies, institutionalized transparent and inclusionary decision-making through the efforts made by grassroots brokers to create an effective space for networking beyond place-specific cleavages

of identity and ideology (Doerr 2009a). Indeed, ESF leaders--themselves professional activists from unions, political parties and large movement organizations-- operated as facilitators in an unfamiliar transnational setting. They routinely made concessions to grassroots brokers, whom they relied upon as skilled translators in meetings. Movement leaders gradually learned and changed their leadership style to respond more respectfully to differences of class, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status. For instance, facilitators in the EPAs implemented a gender equity rule in plenary discussions—an idea grassroots brokers had not been able to implement in the NPAs. They did so by incorporating new practices and solidarity funding to advance gender equity (Doerr 2007).

In contrast to the ESF process, which was initiated and led early on by largely middle class activists, the U.S. Social Forum process has been led from the start by leaders of organizations that mobilize low-income groups and people of color, making it rather atypical in the entire WSF process. The U.S. Social Forum's National Planning Committee (NPC) is intentionally comprised mainly of representatives of organizations that mobilize those most marginalized by economic globalization. U.S. leaders have done the most to help implement the idea of *intentionality* as a basis for coalition. While intentionality emerges from and complements the principles of the WSF, particularly its impetus for emphasizing the voices of the global South, this norm focuses activist attention on the role of power and privilege in coalition work. It encourages specific action to remedy inequities and exclusions. It acknowledges that recognizing power asymmetries is not enough, and creating “open space” is not sufficient to counteract exclusions resulting from the realities of power and material and social inequality (Juris 2008; Teivainen, chapter 3).

Intentionality as articulated by USSF leaders has meant that privileged groups such as middle class, male, and white activists are asked to “step back,” allowing those without privilege to lead. Those groups accustomed to being in the shadows, in turn, are being called upon to “step up,” to lead, and to articulate their needs in ways that can support collaboration. The task of sustaining a commitment to intentionality while also advancing the Social Forum process has not been easy; and it has led USSF leaders to move more slowly than some members of the WSF community would have liked. But after two U.S. Social Forums an intentional culture of networking gained strength and transformed marginalized groups into leaders in national and transnational movements, thus extending the developmental and solidarity benefits of participatory democracy.

The U.S. Social Forum process emerged around the goal of intentionality in response to class and racial divisions within and among U.S. social movements. Middle-class and generally white activists tend to be more engaged in formal organizations that operate nationally or transnationally. In contrast, those engaged in the struggles of the poor, led by people of color, or addressing the needs of those most excluded by dominant institutions, such as LGBT and disabled people, tend to be involved in more local organizations (see, e.g. Polletta 2002; Lichterman 1996). Over the 1980s and 90s, there were national efforts to expand networks among these grassroots or mass-based organizations, generating, for instance, alliances around environmental justice (Faber 2005) and worker issues (Tait 2005). Some members of these grassroots alliances had begun attending the World Social Forums, and helped form the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance, whose aim was to expand the WSF process among grassroots and poor people’s organizations in the United States.

Thus, the USSF process was born out of an explicit struggle to alter class and race relations and leadership in national movements and to re-prioritize movement agendas. The fact that the WSF International Council designated the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance to lead the U.S. Social Forum process gave the network legitimacy and enabled its leaders to ensure that inequalities would not be reproduced in the USSF process. Organizers worked to involve grassroots leaders especially from marginalized groups, and tried to build a movement out of geographically scattered and issue-specific networks, community organizations and social justice workers across the United States (Karides 2010). This meant prioritizing inclusivity over mobilizing the largest numbers for the USSFs. The articulation of intentionality fostered greater participation by people of color, linguistic minorities, migrants, women and disadvantaged groups than other Social Forums had realized (Juris 2008; Juris et al., chapter 15; Karides et al. 2008; Katz-Fishman and Scott 2008; Reese et al., chapter 4).

Thus, to a much larger extent than in the ESF, migrants, women organizers and LGBT activists became leaders in organizing and decision-making for the USSFs. For instance, queer and LGBT activists reported feeling marginalized by the homophobic culture of discourse in the more inclusionary EPAs and the ESFs (Doerr 2007), but were facilitators, staff, and lead organizers in the USSF. Also, while migrant rights organizations were formally invited but informally marginalized in the EPA organizing process (see, e.g., Boéri and Hodkinson 2004), they served as anchor organizations in the 2010 USSF and have held leadership positions on the NPC since its inception. These groups worked as bilingual leaders to raise activists' awareness of the perspectives and needs of migrant communities and to build a U.S. movement of excluded workers, migrant rights, and rights to the city.

Bringing in their own networks and experiences with consensus-based decision making processes, grassroots leaders and Indigenous groups used the USSF process to mobilize large numbers of people of color and other less privileged groups to expand cross-sectoral networking and trans-movement coalitions (Karides et al. 2010). While considerable work remains to address the many dimensions of oppression manifested in the forms of marginalization and social exclusion the WSF process challenges, the USSF has the potential to transform both the U.S. social movement sector as well as the WSF process itself.

The experiences of the ESF and USSF both demonstrate the democratizing tendencies in social movements. While the USSF experience makes the ESF process look comparatively elitist and top-down, the process of organizing Social Forums has led the ESF down a path towards enhanced participation and leadership from more marginalized and grassroots organizations. The USSF demonstrates a more dramatic innovation through its introduction of the principle of intentionality at the very start. But both processes have generated a very distinct group of actors: Grassroots brokers. These are activists whose actions and political intention, in different place-specific settings, served to improve the inclusivity and equality of deliberation and extend the network of involved groups.

Grassroots brokers build bridges between socially and geographically distanced people and organizations. In the WSF process they exhibit keen listening and effective and subtle communications skills. They help socialize other activists to listen carefully and in new ways. They are leaders who speak in ways that value diversity and that run counter to Western cultural norms of speed, action and efficiency. In other words, they sensitize activists in the submerged traditions and practices that may be key to realizing “another world.” They transform the more passive notion of listening into an active task of emphasizing reflection

over talk. They often slow down discussions about logistics and planning to allow time for crucial dialogue and mutual understanding to take place (see Doerr 2009a; chapter 17).⁴

In the ESF, grassroots brokers were neither leaders of political parties, nor part of the established movement leadership. Their ambiguous organizational positions enabled them to encourage relationships of trust among adversaries (Polletta and Doerr 2010). For example, grassroots activists in Europe created a network called “Babels” composed of volunteer translators who exchange their services for attendance at the EPAs. Babels made it possible to conduct meetings with groups in which more than ten languages were represented (Boéri and Hodkinson 2004). The multilingual practice of young translators in the ESF and the intentional leadership of women of color in the United States encouraged older participants, in particular women, to speak comfortably in their preferred “language,” which was liberating for those who had experienced the stigmatization of their way of speaking, race, or gender. In both the transnational and domestic arenas of the Social Forums, grassroots brokers were thus able to extend the institutionalized conventions and the impact of participatory democracy by turning their own culturally distinct experiences of marginalization into a positive and innovative struggle for democratizing the Forums (migrants providing translation, feminists monitoring inclusive consensus processes, LGBTQ activists becoming facilitators in meetings).

U.S. information and communications technology (ICT) activists found themselves in a similar role of brokers as were translators in the European context, and they also faced similar obstacles of having to challenge their treatment as service providers rather than activists in their own right. Many ICT activists see communications technology as a key to radical social change. They understand the internet as providing space that is at least partially and potentially much freer from the incursions of globalized capital. They join movements to experience a

more collaborative work environment than they find in their professional lives, bringing their skills and hopes for achieving the democratic potential of technology to the work of movement-building. In this way, they enact norms of solidarity and intentionality, deliberately putting their skills at the service of movement-building, but also seeking ways to do this on their own terms.

In doing the “technical” work, ICT volunteers tend to “step back” from the political work of developing content. They go into the “shadows,” to do work that facilitates participation and inclusion (see Smith and Smythe 2009). Their work is particularly crucial to transnational activism, which requires regular long-distance communication among geographically dispersed activists who frequently lack relevant skills and resources. Developing technological solutions to the challenges of distance and communications costs is what motivates many ICT activists. But developing effective tools requires ongoing interactions and sometimes very contentious negotiations between ICT and other activists. Too often the radical commitments of ICT activists are not appreciated, as most activists’ engagement with them is limited to requests for technical support or complaints about the website. Or ICT activists’ commitment to using only free and open source software is compromised in the course of organizing work aimed at reaching populations not already engaged in social movement networks.⁵ Different communications cultures and styles, which can be exacerbated by differences in age, race, and gender, can complicate efforts to address these conflicts.

In the USSF case, these differences caused major tension during the 2007 USSF and contributed to the widely perceived failures of the People’s Media Center. In 2010, more conscious effort was made to alter the ICT strategy within the NPC, and from the earliest NPC meetings organizers were encouraged to attend training sessions in using the website and online

organizing features ICT activists had built. ICT organizers also brought some important innovations aimed at facilitating long-distance organizing by the NPC.⁶ This did not prevent a major blowup of tensions late in the process when many remained frustrated with online registration and other glitches, but grassroots brokers both from the ICT network as well as from the NPC leadership mediated a discussion that advanced mutual understanding as well as strategic thinking about the role of ICT and ICT activists in the movement. As was true with the translators in the ESF, ICT activists' indispensable skill and knowledge gave them leverage to address their grievances while also socializing other activists to appreciate the importance of their work in advancing open spaces for participatory democracy.⁷

Thus, grassroots brokers in contemporary global justice activism play key roles linking marginalized communities to social movement networks and building new movement technologies that help foster inter-group linkages and communications. Many organizers on the NPC, for instance are grassroots leaders who are helping link their constituencies with the USSF process. This often means extensive work helping constituents understand and appreciate the potential of the USSF process as well as educating NPC members about the particular needs and challenges of their constituencies. For instance, Indigenous people's delegates to the NPC repeatedly and patiently explained to NPC organizers the resource limitations and other challenges they have in mobilizing Indigenous participation in the USSF. Poor people's, disability rights, and feminist groups reminded organizers of the challenges poor people have in attending Social Forums, and encouraged the provision of services to meet health and child care needs during the Forum.

Thus, grassroots brokers expand people's understandings of what solidarity means while facilitating the practice of intentionality. They bring cultural and technical skills that are

usually seen as non-political into politics. They are generally not understood as leaders in the traditional sense, but their leadership has been and continues to be essential to the WSF process. Moreover, through structures like the Babels and the ICT Working Group, these forms of leadership are becoming institutionalized in the WSF process, along with new understandings of what it means to do “political” work towards another possible world.

With respect to the innovatory and developmental potential of participatory democracy (Polletta 2002: 12-14), this comparison shows that in European and U.S. contexts, in national or transnational settings, in periods of movement growth or decline, diversity was a key value used to enhance the impact of the Forum. Through the intentional practice of deliberation, grassroots brokers in the EPAs and in the USSF NPC were able to challenge the gender, race, and class biases that contribute to participatory democracies’ frequent crises. This shows the potential of WSF as a multi-scalar participatory experiment that makes diversity a key value and practice in support of solidarity networks that link local, national and transnational social movement spaces.

From Social Movement Assemblies to the PMAs

One of the central questions debated since the creation of the WSF is the relationship between action and deliberation. Some WSF organizers want it to take joint decisions as an instrument for movement action, while others prefer its “open space” character, which fosters dialogue between different groups and individuals (Sen 2004). European and U.S. activists have addressed this tension in different ways.

During the first WSF in Porto Alegre (2001), a group of Europeans who would later organize the ESF held a “European Social Movement Assembly,” the first of many such

assemblies at ESF events (Bolini 2002). The Assemblies aimed to create a more action-oriented space to build a Europe-wide grassroots movement. Discussions in these spaces focused activist attention on collective action (Aguiton and Cardon 2005). Assemblies invited all people to deliberate and resist a culture of unaccountable and non-transparent decision-making in the WSF's International Council (Haeringer et al. 2009). In 2010, U.S. activists expanded on the notion of social movement assemblies and organized "People's Movement Assemblies" (PMAs) alongside the entire five days of the second USSF. This innovation not only helped move past the debate over whether the WSF should privilege open space or action –a debate never as entrenched in the U.S. as elsewhere-- to offer a model for expanding public deliberation, decision making and action on issues that matter in people's lives.⁸ The PMA "process," as activists call it, resembles the WSF in that it can be organized at multiple scales and that different assemblies aim to speak to one-another and to the larger USSF process. They create opportunities for popular participation around activities and goals that contribute to movement convergence.

In the place specific context of the ESF, the Social Movement Assemblies are a controversial mechanism of decision-making within the Forum space. The Porto Alegre Charter of Principles makes clear that the WSF is not supposed to be a movement actor, and WSF organizers also warn that no group of experts or intellectuals shall speak or decide on behalf of the WSF (Whitaker 2004). And yet, Social Forum organizers must take decisions on the location, structures, themes, and finances of large Forum events and days of transnational collective action (Teivainen 2004). This inherent organizational paradox is often confronted in preparatory meetings for Social Forums at regional and global levels. Bringing together a hundred or a few hundred organizers each, the U.S. NPC meetings and the European EPAs constitute a perhaps

less visible but all the more important “backstage” (Rucht 2008) for political agenda setting work and networking in the global justice movement.

In the regional ESF and the global WSF, grassroots and often resource-poor activists criticized preparatory assemblies *outside* Forum events for their exclusivity and lack of transparency (Kavada 2007; Maeckelbergh 2009). Many activists and analysts blamed the democratic deficit, in particular, of the International Council (IC) of the WSF. The IC involves only a select number of about 160 delegates and observing organizations,⁹ yet it makes crucial decisions in regard to the location, political content and finances of the WSF (Teivainen 2002). To improve openness of their own regional preparatory assemblies for the ESF, Europeans used the EPAs to strengthen resistance against neoliberal politics of the European Union and build a European-wide social movement for democracy that would include “moderate” unionists and party activists and “radical” grassroots global justice activists, Central Eastern Europeans and migrants (della Porta 2009; Andretta and Reiter 2009; Doerr 2007).

ESF founders therefore created regular “*European Social Movement Assemblies*” *within* each of their EPAs allowing them to issue timely calls for action or declarations on more proximate European protest campaigns, transnational days of solidarity, and EU-wide protests. Calls for action are publicized over e-mail lists and documented on the ESF’s homepage.¹⁰ European Social Movement Assemblies also enable mutual information and decision making on issue-specific political campaigns through “network meetings,” held the day before each EPA. Network meetings as well as Social Movement Assemblies work as informal mechanisms of open-ended, deliberative agreement that excludes voting. The distinct culture of consensus in the EPA means that facilitators invite all participants to voice disagreement and respond to them until a common position emerges. This practice does not require strict consensus on all issues

and by all actors/participants, but it makes the support of single proposals by a larger transmovement assembly possible (Doerr 2009a).

The open-ended deliberative style that made European Social Movement Assemblies so effective for informal networking and long-term development of a diverse movement, however, complicated attempts at immediate decision-making. At the ESF in Paris (2003), grassroots activists rebelled against the decision on the location of the subsequent ESF, which was made by an exclusive group of professional activists working for local majors and social movement organizers for political parties, unions and transnational movement organizations. During the contentious preparations for the ESF in London (2004), European Social Movements Assemblies turned into an arena for reciprocal accusations in which British “horizontal” groups demanded more accountability by leftist party leaders and politicians, without much success (Maeckelbergh 2009). To reform their increasingly exclusive European Assemblies during the following ESFs in Greece (2006) and Scandinavia (2008), ESF organizers, inspired by the WSF, introduced consultation rounds to facilitate a more bottom-up methodology (Fuster Morell 2010; Pleyers 2010). In other words, organizers introduced online platforms as a tool that provided more horizontality, transparency and wider grassroots-access to the decision-making on the program for the forum (Fuster Morell 2010). Thus, the Social Movement Assemblies were a mechanism that allowed for solidarity declarations among issue-specific networks and pluralist national organizations, but they increasingly failed to include the dispersed local level of participants into the continuous work of organizing.

Addressing these same concerns, the USSF developed the practice of People’s Movements Assemblies (PMAs), particularly in advance of the second Forum in 2010. PMAs were introduced on the USSF website and other movement literature as a way for local groups

and larger coalitions or campaigns to get involved in the USSF process in their locales. The purpose is to facilitate deliberation around particular issues or key concerns in particular locales, and to help overcome the difficulties people—especially those low-income communities of color and other marginalized groups at the center of the USSF process—have in traveling to national Social Forums. Thus, this innovation results directly from the particularities of U.S. geography and the intentionality of the USSF process.

Activists were encouraged to organize PMAs before, during, and/or after the USSF to catalyze action. PMAs were organized, for instance, in Detroit in advance of the USSF to generate popular input into decisions about what protest actions to ask USSF participants to support and suggestions about how to make the USSF most helpful to local organizing efforts. In addition, about 50 PMAs were held during the USSF itself, in designated spaces.¹¹ Each day of the Forum, training was offered for PMA facilitators, who were invited to report the results of their PMA in the PMA space, which was open throughout the entire USSF. The “National People’s Movement Assembly” took place on the last day of the USSF as a plenary session (with no concurrent sessions scheduled). For each of the 13 themes of the USSF, PMA organizers distilled the PMA deliberations into a list of core principles and calls to action designed to build unity and forge collective action in the weeks and months following the USSF. All participants were invited to vote (with colored paper slips) on whether they or their organization agreed to be in solidarity or to consider taking action on particular proposals.¹² As the vote did not eschew one option, but instead, allowed for multiple options it symbolized and demonstrated for participants the novel relationship of solidarity in the WSF, which encourages collective action by heterogeneous groups. Organizers of the PMAs see them as helping build a community between the issue-specific and widely dispersed grassroots movements involved in the USSF and

as a mechanism for generating collective action without violating the WSF commitment to being an open space.¹³

PMA facilitators encouraged both the building of personal networks between grassroots activists and larger group discussions and united the people whom they included using chants, small group discussions, “fish bowl” exercises, and joint marches. Despite these attempts, not all small group discussions were successful. Some PMA organizers emphasized joint resolutions over dialogue and participatory deliberation, and in many of those cases frames were proposed by academic speakers or movement professionals promoting particular goals and proposals. Observers reported that some PMAs were chaotic and poorly facilitated or that decision making was not inclusive or transparent. And while more emotionally charged PMAs may have energized participants, they did not necessarily generate effective decisions. A key point here is that, like the WSF process itself, the PMAs provide templates for action that are used in more- or less-effective ways by activists. Indeed, PMAs varied enormously in how inclusive and participatory they were, and facilitators were not always well versed in the novel PMA methodology or aims of the process. Participants who did not attend PMAs or review the program or online descriptions of the PMA process were often confused by the closing PMA. Clearly having more experience organizing within the WSF process is helpful, and we can expect that the efforts to train PMA facilitators and to support the mobilization of more PMAs in the United States (such as through the use of PMA organizing kits) may enhance their effectiveness. The process both requires, and will likely aid the development of, new grassroots brokers, as it emphasizes the very skills that are necessary for these types of movement leaders to emerge.

A striking difference Doerr observed between the PMAs, and their European counterparts was that PMAs were full of energy resounding enthusiasm, and the emotional “pleasures of conversation” (Jasper 2010: 13) shared among all participants. There was a desire to foster conversation aimed at generating solidarity. The emphasis on facilitator training and on encouraging participation from people with little prior experience clearly responded to a need in the U.S. polity. Given the limited political repertoire in contemporary representative democracies, many –particularly those with limited education and/or skills in public speaking feel frustrated and alienated from politics. The point of the PMAs is to foster a process that can bring them into political dialogues and allow them to experience participatory democracy. The PMAs might thus become “rituals that re-create group solidarity” (Polletta 2002:79). Successful rituals of “deliberative talk” foster group solidarity through attention to emotions of participants, fostering the mutual recognition and trust that aids in the development of new ideas about collective action aimed at fostering societal change. In contrast, the European Social Movement Assemblies, tended to lack such attention to emotional work.

What makes PMAs distinct from the more established model of the Social Movement Assemblies is their more continuous, grassroots-oriented, ad-hoc decision-making style. Unlike the IC or the EPAs, the PMAs are grounded, often local, meetings, explicitly designed as a tool for grassroots activists. They are linked to the USSF (and by extension the WSF) process but allow organizers greater autonomy in defining their timing and locations. Like the European Social Movement Assemblies, PMAs can be supported by a common webpage (www.pma2010.org). Unlike the ESF webpage with its periodic updates from the coordinators of the EPAs and the ESF networks, the PMA webpage is widely accessible to use as a participatory tool for local activists to share documents, reports, and calls for transmovement building and

collective action. Online and face-to-face meetings organized within a larger, national process that is continuous rather than focused on specific issue campaigns or events can foster relationship building at local levels, sensitizing local activists to the larger political environment and nurture extra-local ties. Polletta identifies the importance of these functions for participatory democracy:

The challenge for participatory democracy movement groups is to coordinate actions and programs across decentralized units. [...] Absent such coordination, not only is regional or national action hampered; so too is local action.

Connections among units provide mechanisms for comparing results and trading information. When groups are isolated, the experimental, innovatory functions of participatory decision making suffer (Polletta 2002:228).

Although they currently reflect more potential than actual achievement of participatory democracy, the emergence of the European Social Movement Assemblies and the PMAs demonstrates how the World Social Forum process can contribute to innovations in participatory democracy. By creating open spaces for people to gather, build relationships, and develop ideas for confronting the challenges facing communities at local, national, regional and global levels, the WSF is an incubator for new experiments in global democracy. Thus, while the WSF still refuses to take action *as* the World Social Forum, it nevertheless advances collective action for radical democracy.

Conclusion

The World Social Forum process has contributed to the development of deliberative norms of solidarity and intentionality that help guide social movement relations. These norms emerge from past movement experience and help advance new democratizing projects as part of the contemporary global justice movement. A particular type of movement leader, what we call “grassroots brokers,” has emerged within the context of the Social Forums to help communicate and socialize activists in these norms. Their actions and leadership thus helps build solidarity among diverse groups and facilitates greater inclusion of marginalized groups. Both of these norms—solidarity and inclusion-- help animate a global social movement process that encourages activists to confront inequalities while also developing mutual respect, trust, and commitment to the larger WSF process.

As it cultivates leaders skilled in ways that aid multi-sectoral and transnational organizing, the WSF’s open space also fosters the emergence of new participatory democratic projects, such as the Social Movement Assemblies of the European Social Forums and the much newer People’s Movement Assemblies in the United States. Such projects are typically initiated by grassroots brokers, and they expand opportunities for people to engage in dialogues about social problems and to take steps towards possible solutions. Operating within the larger framework of the WSFs, these assemblies help develop citizens’ skills in democratic practice while also cultivating global awareness and solidarity and deepening social movement networks.

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Notes

¹ “Complex Solidarity” according to Waterman emphasizes “equality, liberty, peace, tolerance, and emancipatory/ life-protective ideals.” It stresses relationships among peoples and is “an active process of negotiating differences, or creating [rather than assuming] identity.” It avoids binary ways of thinking; and encompasses values such as complementarity, reciprocity, and restitution.

² One important example of this is the “Expanded” project, started at the Belem WSF in 2009, which connects local sites around the world with WSF sessions via internet.

³ We use the term “migrant” rather than immigrant to reflect preferences expressed by migrant rights groups at the U.S. Social Forum. The term emphasizes solidarity by highlighting the fact “we are all migrants,” moving for economic and other reasons, whether crossing national borders or not.

⁴ We saw this happening on numerous occasions at USSF NPC and EPA meetings.

⁵ For instance, the USSF National Planning Committee decided against the preferences of ICT leaders to allow links to commercial social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter from its website.

⁶ These improvements to the USSF website included more interactive and online organizing components, a wiki site designed to be used by working groups and other organizers, and the introduction of new technologies for online note-taking and conference calls. Many, but not all activists are familiar with these technologies. Some feel too pressed for time to learn new technologies—especially when their own constituencies lack access to the internet or even computers.

⁷ Smith fieldnotes, USSF NPC meeting, March 28, 2010.

⁸ The absence in the U.S. of an effective multi-party electoral system may help explain why activists in that country have not engaged this debate as extensively.

⁹ This composition of the International Council, depending on specific periods, includes a varying number of seven to ten observing organizations. See “Composition of the International Council”, March 3, 2008 and updated “Composition of the International Council”, accessed at 11.8.2010, http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=WSF_IC_Reports%26Updates.

¹⁰ www.fse-esf.org; accessed at 21.7.2009.

¹¹ PMAs were regional or thematic, covering issues like excluded workers, Indigenous peoples’ rights, gender justice, and migrant rights.

¹² Participants could vote as individuals and/or as delegates of organizations. If acting in the latter capacity, they generally would be committing to discuss the proposal within their organization.

¹³ Details on the PMAs at <http://organize.ussf2010.org/pma-list> and at <http://pma2010.org/> and from the authors’ field notes from NPC meetings, a Detroit PMA in May of 2010, and the USSF June 22-26, 2010 as well as from interviews with lead PMA organizers.