"WE ARE THE ONES WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR": THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM IN CONTEXT[*]

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The first United States Social Forum (USSF) took place in Atlanta in the summer of 2007.To report and analyze this intense five-day event, we employ an innovative method, which we refer to as "distributed ethnography." This involves a large, multidisciplinary team of researchers who all contribute to our observational data and participate collaboratively in the writing and editing process. We consider how the U.S. political context shaped the character of this particular iteration of the World Social Forum. In particular, we analyze how the USSF reflected several ongoing debates within the larger World Social Forum (WSF) process: (1) whether the WSF should remain an open space or a political actor; (2) how to be more inclusive of the poorest and most marginalized social groups; (3) whether to pursue radical or reformist agenda; and (4) whether to target local, national, or global political arenas. A significant outcome of the USSF is that it challenged existing notions of open space by engaging in deliberate efforts to bring the most marginalized groups to the table. The U.S. political culture helped to mute overtly ideological debates, as many workshops and discussions instead focused on concrete projects, initiatives, and reforms. At the same time, many USSF organizers and presenters articulated a radical vision of revolutionary social change led by those who are most directly oppressed by prevailing systems of social, economic, and racial domination. Despite the many factors inhibiting radical politics in the United States, the USSF marks an important step in the process of bringing the larger struggle against global neoliberalism into U.S. politics. It also shapes the WSF process itself.

It was the late afternoon on Sunday, July 27, 2007. Hundreds of activists from diverse U.S. peace and justice movements were assembled on the lawn outside the Atlanta Civic Center for the opening ceremony of the first ever U.S. Social Forum (USSF). Earlier in the day, ten thousand activists braved the heat and humidity to march through the streets of Atlanta. After a circle of drummers called everyone to attention, a Native American activist welcomed the crowd, "I want to acknowledge the work that was done by just walking, chanting, and being at one with one another this afternoon in the heat of the day. You've done well! I want to welcome all of you to this land, this is Cherokee land you are now walking and sitting upon. I welcome you here." Organizers of color would assume prominent roles throughout the USSF, and a particular effort was made to highlight the presence of indigenous people. At the same time, there was also an emphasis on unity and the need for a radical vision of social change. As a local civil rights leader exclaimed,

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[*] The first part of our title, which many U.S. Social Forum participants mentioned, is from Alice Walker's book (2006). Walker herself notes that the phrase comes from a poem by June Jordan, and that it inspired other movement-relevant creativity such as a song by Sweet Honey and the Rock.

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> The world has to change or it will explode. . . . If they could take on the issue of racism, we can change the country at the level of the economic system. . . . The American middle class is becoming poor and the poor are becoming impoverished. . . . When the labor unions can no longer organize because of the politics of this country, then we know another U.S. is necessary!

Over the course of the next five days, thousands of activists representing the full spectrum of grassroots organizing in the U.S., including peace, labor, anti-poverty, environmental justice, housing, anti-racist, and global justice movements, would come together to share ideas, discuss alternatives, and plan common actions to make that other U.S. a reality. Beyond the hundreds of workshops on a wide array of themes, some of the most significant activities at the USSF were the countless informal interactions among activists from so many diverse communities and walks of life in the lobbies, hallways, corridors, and streets of downtown Atlanta. For a brief moment, the colorful banners, outfits, and faces transformed the city into the teeming center of a reinvigorated U.S. Left. The large evening sessions, in particular, reinforced the powerful feelings of affective solidarity (Juris 2008a). Observing the crowd during the Immigrant Rights Plenary, a panelist pointed out, "This is beautiful, the kind of world we want to live in. We need a new paradigm of change to build a world where all people fit: no racism, sexism, homophobia, or poor people!" He went on to lead an enthusiastic chant:

> Stop the war on migrants… Si se puede! (Yes we can!)
> Stop the war on Katrina survivors… Si se puede!
> Stop the war on First Nations… Si se puede!
> Stop the war of racism… Si se puede!
> Stop the war on working people… Si se puede!

An estimated 12,000-15,000 people came together in Atlanta for the first USSF. The meeting was arguably one of the largest and most diverse political gatherings in U.S. history, as a significant majority of participants were people of color, low-income, indigenous, disabled, and/or gender-nonconforming. More importantly, it was part of a much larger, truly global World Social Forum (WSF) movement that since 2001 has mobilized hundreds of thousands of people from over 130 countries (see Smith and Karides et al. 2008). Given the size and the diversity of global WSF gatherings, which have attracted as many as 150,000 attendees, it is surprising that so few U.S. social movement scholars have followed the WSF or its local and national iterations.[1] The theoretical traditions of contemporary social movement scholarship arose out of critiques of existing social theory during the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and they were developed by many researchers who were active in these movements. Then, and perhaps now, emergent social movements can help us adapt and improve the theories and methods of social research. This article aims to familiarize scholars with the USSF and its relationship to the larger WSF process. We employ an innovative method we refer to as "distributed ethnography"—which involves a large, multidisciplinary team of researchers, each contributing observation data and participating collaboratively in the writing and editing process—to describe what took place during this intense five-day event.[2]

The USSF is also significant in that it represents an effort by activists to connect U.S. struggles to a global movement, and to integrate U.S. activists into the wider WSF process. Forum organizers understand their experiences in a global economic and political context, and their work helps nurture new transnational identities and attachments that can forge unity across geographic, political, and cultural divides. At the same time, organizers have to operate within local political and institutional contexts. Our analysis also seeks to "ground globalization" (Burawoy et al. 2000) by examining how global processes impact upon and are shaped by movement actors in various places and over time.

This report describes and analyzes the USSF as a national instance of the WSF process. Owing to the political and economic dominance of the U.S., as well as its belligerence and

intransigence in global affairs, counterhegemonic mobilization here is particularly important for efforts to improve social and ecological conditions around the world. It is also more difficult. Thus, to the WSF slogan, "Another world is possible," U.S. organizers added that "Another U.S. is necessary."

This report opens an admittedly narrow window on the forum, which was far too large and dispersed for our 21-member observer team to capture in full. Team members summarized their observations with respect to several themes that have emerged through ongoing dialogues and debates among WSF activists and scholars. We build on recent approaches to transnational social movements that emphasize the importance of place (cf., Conway 2004, 2008; Escobar 2001; Routledge 2003; Tarrow 2005). To understand the dynamics of the USSF and its relation to the global forum process, it is critical to understand the context and conditions that are specific to the U.S. We believe our account can help expand awareness of this important global phenomenon while fostering critical reflection on our theories and methods of studying global movements. We hope this report will generate interest in the forum process, new questions, and an empirical basis for further studies of contemporary coalition-building and local/global organizing.

We approach this work not only as scholars, but also as activists and citizens. Our interest in the WSF grows in part from our sympathies with its goals of enhancing global social and economic justice and democracy. We do not simply celebrate the forum, but rather affirm what we see as the critical accomplishments and potential of the WSF process. However, our main concern here is to examine how place matters. That is, we ask how the forum manifested itself in a social and political space many activists consider the "the belly of the (global capitalist) beast," and what this means for the larger, global struggle. We also situate our observations in historical context. Many USSF organizers had taken part in past forums, and built on the knowledge forged through those experiences. Moreover, the lessons from the USSF are likely to shape subsequent forums in the U.S. and around the globe. Thus, we make both explicit and implicit comparisons across social forums while understanding the USSF as an instance of counterhegemonic mobilization within a globally hegemonic state.

Our analysis emphasizes how the location of the forums impacts their form and content. The USSF, in contrast to other national, regional, and global forums, reflected distinct positions regarding the core tensions and debates that have characterized the WSF process (cf., Smith and Karides et al. 2008). The differences in how U.S. activists responded to questions about whether the forum should remain an open space or develop a more formal political platform, who can participate, what sorts of changes are sought, and whether action should focus on local, national, or global levels reflected the specific political cultures and institutional contexts of the United States. Furthermore, discussions of these core tensions were shaped by individual leaders. It was clear that those with more experience in the forums helped link global and local discourses and experiences, advance learning, and channel conflicts in productive ways (Smith et al. 2008; cf., Nepstad and Bob 2006). This highlights the role of the WSF as a pedagogical space that fosters political socialization within a global political arena (Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Santos 2006).

As an iteration of the WSF, the USSF should be seen as one attempt to respond to earlier experiences and to move the process closer to an ideal of inclusive, participatory democracy, which also poses an affective challenge to militarism, social exclusion, and global neoliberalism. USSF organizers adapted the forum to their national context as they interacted with global-level forum organizing. Thus, we consider the multiple spaces that are simultaneously engaged through the USSF. In addition to this spatial complexity, the USSF has a time dimension. It builds on eight years of WSF organizing, and will shape subsequent events. WSF organizers were paying close attention to the USSF, and many noted its importance for both strengthening U.S. citizens' participation in and contributing to the momentum of the WSF process. Prior to the USSF, organizers put forward 2010 as the date of the second forum, which provided a focal point for long-term national strategizing and

planning at the forum. And many participants have used local forums to expand on the work they began at the USSF. The USSF thus interfaces with the wider WSF, integrating local, national, and regional experiences into a transnational process of experimentation with ideas, strategies, and methods for practicing global democracy.

DATA AND METHODS

Our methodology is rather unorthodox, and in many ways reflects the norms and values of the forum itself, including participation, decentralization, collaboration, and collective ownership. Other methods provide breadth, demographic context, and comparative perspective, but collaborative qualitative research is uniquely capable of capturing the size and complexity of social forum events. An observer's sense of the forum is shaped by the sessions s/he attends and the perspective s/he brings to the research. Our varying levels of embeddedness within activist networks, experience with social movements, and familiarity with the forums provide greater (although by no means comprehensive) leverage to analyze the political processes that took place at the USSF. Our method of distributive ethnography parallels innovations in anthropology where the cooperative insights of researchers and "subjects" working together have been used to help construct accounts of complex social and political processes (Lassiter 2005). Although each member of our research team was associated with the academy in some way, many were also embedded in activist networks, granting access to different perspectives and types of knowledge.

To provide a richer analysis of this multilocation event, we assembled a team of students and scholars from several universities. As well as being multigenerational, our research team was gender-balanced, composed of eleven women and ten men. Although almost all North American and mostly white, our research team included a South Asian-American, a Japanese-American, a Chinese-American, a Japanese-Native American, one Latina, and one Bulgarian. Smith drafted an observation protocol based on prior research at the 2004 European Social Forum (see Smith et al. 2004) and then circulated it to the group for feedback. Participants then selected any combination of workshops they wished to attend. We met in Atlanta prior to the opening of the forum to introduce ourselves to each other and review our research plan. Team members indicated which sessions they intended to observe, allowing us to maximize our coverage of the major themes and minimize redundancy. We then went out and recorded our observations of USSF workshops, plenary sessions, marches, and other events, as well as more informal interactions in the hallways, lobbies, restaurants, bars, and streets of downtown Atlanta. Finally, we met again after the USSF to debrief, share preliminary observations, compare what we observed, and provide guidance for team members on how to prepare their reports.

Smith and Juris later collected and reviewed the field notes, aided by Smith's research assistant and research team member, Ana Velitchkova.[3] They prepared a draft text that they circulated to those members of the team who had prior experience at other social forums. After Smith integrated feedback from this first group, we circulated the document to the rest of the observer team. This third group was mainly composed of students attending their first social forum. Their input was important not only in writing and revising the document, but also in providing a fresh set of eyes, thus allowing our research team to incorporate the perspectives of activists who may be in similar circumstances as rookie forum-goers.

Our team observed a total of 118 workshops (about 12% of the total), as well as all of the evening plenary sessions and numerous cultural events. The thematic distribution of workshops attended by our team corresponded closely with those of the overall USSF program.[4] About two-thirds of the workshops we observed attracted 15 to 40 participants. Roughly a fifth drew more than 60 participants. People of color—including sizable numbers of African Americans and Latinos as well as slightly fewer Asians/Asian-Americans—had a

significant presence in most of the sessions, and sixteen of the sessions we observed had a majority of African Americans, Latinos, or indigenous people. About a third of the sessions were attended by a majority of women, and in another third, women were in the minority, with the remaining third were roughly gender-balanced. The estimated age of attendees in the sessions we observed was between 15 and 60, and most participants were between 25 and 40 years of age.

We refer to our overall method as "distributed ethnography," a process of collaborative observation, analysis, and the subsequent writing up and editing of the material generated by an interdisciplinary team of spatially dispersed researchers. This approach is uniquely suited not only to grasping an event as large, plural, and diverse as the forum, but also for approximating the new modes of collaborative knowledge production and distribution facilitated by the social forums. However, this is a new, experimental method and we are still learning how to more effectively move from collaborative observation to collective analysis. We believe our approach provides an innovative methodological tool for developing a richly textured thick description of a large transnational "mega-event" (Little 1995), as well as placing that description in a wider analytic context. However, this is meant as a complement to and facilitator of, not a substitute for, the more finely tuned theoretically informed analyses generated by single and/or smaller, more tightly knit groups of researchers and authors. A more in-depth discussion of the specific practices, benefits, weaknesses, and challenges associated with distributed ethnography is beyond the scope of this article, but we intend to someday elaborate on this theme.

Our research also draws from ethnographic methods developed by anthropologists and sociologists to advance understandings of how individuals and groups are influenced by larger global structures, processes, and trends. We thus adopted an ethnographic approach to gain a first-hand, "worm's eye" perspective on numerous events and processes at the forum, which we then scaled up through a wider national, regional, and global analysis to provide a "bird's-eye" overview of the USSF and U.S. global justice movement more generally.[5] Moving forward, we hope this model can be combined with ongoing "multi-sited" ethnography (Marcus 1995) to examine not only single forum events, but also the sustained forum process in various regions around the world. Indeed, distributed ethnography reflects the horizontal networking logics characteristic of contemporary social movements (Juris 2008b), while also embodying the open, collaborative spirit of the social forum process itself.

OVERVIEW OF THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM

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

As an open space designed to foster democratic, grassroots participation, the USSF built upon organizing models used in other forums to encourage organizations to submit proposals for workshops and panels. Self-organized activities comprised the core of the forum's activities, and participants were asked to organize their sessions according to daily themes of consciousness raising, visions of social change, and strategy. The final day consisted of a "People's Movement Assembly," where workshop leaders were invited to report to the larger assembly the analyses and action plans developed. When participants were not attending

workshop or plenary sessions, they could peruse literature, view films, purchase fair-trade goods and handicrafts, and meet with organizers in tents dedicated to themes such as solidarity economies, water, immigrant rights, indigenous peoples, women, and peace and justice. There were also designated "open spaces" where groups could meet to continue conversations begun in workshops or otherwise network and relate forum activities to their ongoing work. A wide array of cultural events, receptions, and parties provided countless opportunities for activists to interact and develop new friendships while they recharged their batteries and exposed themselves to new perspectives and ideas.

As is true for all social movements, social forums reflect their local context, that is, they are situated in particular geographies of space and time. Janet Conway (2004: 35) has argued that "narrating the place(s) of movements is central to representing any particular movement and to discerning the processes of identity formation and knowledge production that constitute them." Places are not static; they are socially constructed and dynamic, and are continually constituted by forces beyond the local (Escobar 2001; Massey 1997; Routledge 2003). In this sense, the USSF was shaped by the particular histories and political cultures of the U.S. as well as by the more local context and activist history of the U.S. South and the city of Atlanta.

Although U.S. citizens are increasingly aware of how they are affected by global capitalism, dominant media and popular discourses downplay global interdependencies and perpetuate widespread ignorance of the global effects of U.S. policies. Many, but not all, participants at the forum understood the implication of the U.S.'s political-economic nexus to the rest of the world, and indeed the WSF process itself aims to help activists better understand these connections.[6]

Particularly salient in the U.S. is the absence of the strong socialist and communist parties and unions found elsewhere. This is a result of direct repression of radicals and communists during the Cold War and national legislation that institutionalized a pro-business model of union organizing (Clawson 2003; Fletcher and Gapasin 2008). Coupled with this is the fact that, as the world's sole superpower and a driving force behind neoliberal globalization, the U.S. exhibits a more extreme version of the depoliticization that has characterized the spread of neoliberal ideology (Brunelle 2007; Teivainen 2007). In addition, the narrowness of the U.S. two-party system, together with greater openness in terms of institutional access, has served to submerge ideological debates while encouraging a more pragmatic, depoliticized approach to political activism than is typical in countries with multiparty parliamentary systems.

In the 1990s, class-based politics in the U.S. remained underdeveloped as neoliberal policies put labor organizers on the defensive and many movement groups set out to address forms of discrimination and social exclusion based on culture and identity. Neoliberal policies such as deregulation and financial liberalization caused major declines in the labor movement in the U.S. and worldwide. As its traditional base declined, identity-based movements helped strengthen the U.S. Left by expanding participation from groups such as women of color, Chicano/as, African Americans, Asian Americans, and queer activists. These groups fostered a greater awareness within the U.S. Left of the diversity of experiences within U.S. society and economy (Tait 2005). While this has laid a foundation for dialogue that can enhance collaborative politics and coalition building, it also presents significant organizing challenges.

Negotiating the tricky shoals of identity politics was a key factor in the USSF. In the past, differences have proven an obstacle to hosting a social forum in the U.S., as the collapse of the Northwest Social Forum attests (Center for Communication and Civic Engagement 2007; see also Hadden and Tarrow 2007). USSF organizers also confronted regional identities and inequalities that were reflected in their decision to hold the forum in the U.S. South. Finally, the USSF occurred just as a thaw was underway in the chilly climate facing U.S. activists after 9/11. The events of 9/11 and its aftermath clearly dampened public dissent, even as global justice protests continued to flourish elsewhere (Podobnik 2005; Hadden and Tarrow 2007). The forum also occurred in the midst of a war, a heated congressional battle over

immigrant rights, state-level battles over same-sex marriage, a historic split in the U.S. labor movement, and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Moreover, as the USSF host city, Atlanta's rich history of civil rights activism, as well as its status as the headquarters of major global corporations the Coca-Cola Company and CNN, helped shape the perspectives and discourses of USSF participants.[7]

WHAT IS THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM? OPEN SPACE OR ACTOR

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

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

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

Regional and national forums are not required to abide by a particular organizational structure but they *are* guided by the precedents of previous forums and the WSF Charter of Principles (see http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br). USSF organizers aimed to move the U.S. forum process towards more concrete steps for political action. The USSF thus reflected organizers' desire to foster sustained and united action through the forum process, and was consistent with recent efforts to move the WSF beyond an "open space." For instance, at the latest WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, a fourth day was added to consolidate platforms for action around the themes of the event.

However, most USSF participants seemed unaware of the wider debates surrounding the WSF and its purpose, despite the fact that organizers provided background on these debates in the USSF program and website.[8] This was most participant's first forum and they relished the chance to expand and strengthen their national networks, learn from other groups, and compare notes regarding what tactics have worked and how other groups have struggled

against similar injustices. Yet, it was clear to our observer team that participants did not want to merely talk, and many specific actions were proposed and developed. Indeed, most attendees had done extensive fundraising to secure the bus, train, and plane fares to come to Atlanta. Some workshops generated sustained efforts to build cross-issue coalitions, but there were no efforts to build a more formal, broader structure within which to organize. While some sessions failed to live up to their promise of generating concrete strategies, overall, we saw what could be characterized as a pragmatic use of the open spaces created by the USSF to coordinate, disseminate, and build solidarity around shared actions or campaigns. Most importantly, activists and groups that work explicitly on a single issue were unavoidably exposed to other analyses and methods of struggle.

U.S. organizers tended to focus on the task of movement building as a response to the open-space-versus-political-actor question. In a sense, the USSF straddled both tendencies, as it recognized the need to cultivate collective identities, analyses, and networks while maintaining a focus on movement and action. The National Planning Committee (NPC) asserted—and the fact sheet handed out before the PMA clearly stated—that the forum is an open space and that the PMA is a separate, yet related process. Even so, the voices calling for the USSF to take collective action, to be more than an open space, and to build a united movement, were particularly strong, as had been the case during social movement assemblies at other forums. In some ways, the USSF was a hybrid that fused the culture of the broader WSF process with movement dynamics in the U.S., particularly that of the base-building organizations that led the organizing process.

WHO PARTICIPATES? IDENTITY AND ISSUES AT THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM

Movement building requires the creation of collective identities (Gamson 1991; Lichterman 1995; Polletta and Jasper 2001). A major challenge for proponents of open space is to ensure wide participation from groups typically excluded from institutionalized politics. Open space thus emphasizes inclusion as a core objective. In practice, however, the notion of open space neglects the ways that power and privilege amplify certain voices over others, while deep-seated structures of inequality generate unintended exclusions (cf. Teivainen 2007). In this way, informal rules of presentation and social interaction marginalize some groups. For example, poor people lack the resources required to travel and take part in the social forums. As a result, participants at prior WSF meetings in Brazil and other regional forums have been predominantly white and middle-class (Alvarez et al. forthcoming).[9]

A major achievement of the USSF was the high level of diversity, not only among participants, but also in terms of who organized the event. A strategic decision had been taken in 2002 to delay the start of the U.S. process until there was sufficient awareness of the forum at the grassroots level. The Grassroots Global Justice coalition, which was founded in 2002 to help community-based organizations travel to the WSF, agreed at the November 2003 meeting of the WSF coordinating body, the International Council (IC), to help promote a U.S. Social Forum. By the first USSF, the NPC involved thirty-five organizations, the majority of which were grassroots, member-based, people-of-color-led organizations,[10] which reflected a deliberate outreach strategy.

The USSF succeeded more than any other forum, save possibly Mumbai, in bringing together participants from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of privilege (Guerrero 2008; Ponniah 2008). Our observers had differing interpretations of the USSF with respect to inclusivity and equity. Some (e.g., Karides 2008), viewed the USSF organizing strategy in the context of the experiences and situated knowledge of an NPC made up primarily of women of color. Others saw the highly intentional organizing process, which was implemented to ensure inclusion of and leadership by working-class, people-of-color organizations, as existing in tension with the forum's commitment to openness (see Juris, this issue). In either case, it is

important to recognize that open spaces always generate formal, structural, or cultural exclusions (cf., Yä-Antilla 2005), and efforts to address one kind of exclusion may exacerbate others.

Although, on the whole, the USSF was extremely diverse, specific workshops were often less integrated. For example, issues such as housing attracted predominantly African Americans, while other, more abstract issues, such as models of economic democracy, attracted mainly white male audiences. Counterculture hip-hop workshops, on the other hand, had a largely African-American male audience. Workshops addressing gender issues were mostly attended by women. Some sessions, such as those on indigenous people's issues and those specifically aiming to bridge identities, attracted more mixed audiences. The segregation of workshops resulted in part from a legitimate fear of cooptation of small/grassroots/black groups by big/wealthy/white groups. It also corresponded to class, racial, and other inequalities. Several workshops and most plenary sessions generated explicit discussion of the tendencies of more privileged individuals to displace the voices of the less powerful. At the same time, many workshops intentionally sought to create solidarities across such divides, including those fostering black/brown dialogues, labor and social movement bridges, cross-racial alliances among women of color, transnational labor coalitions, and cross-class peace and justice organizing. But it is clear that no single event could overcome the many structural barriers to solidarity building.[11]

Perhaps because of the great diversity of people attending and the levels of gender, racial, and other forms of exclusion in U.S. politics, identity was a salient theme in the forum's plenary sessions and workshops. Each plenary session was purposefully organized to include speakers of diverse and less privileged backgrounds, including African Americans; immigrants; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals (GLBTI); and indigenous people. Relatively few whites presented.[12] Participants also exhibited an unusual sensitivity to how their relative privilege affected their views and actions. In addition, many workshops were organized around specific social identities, such as those focusing on issues affecting women, workers, immigrants, GLBTI communities, indigenous peoples, and black and brown communities.

The notion of the South as a generalized site of social exclusion was also prominent in USSF discourse. The USSF sought to draw a parallel between marginalized peoples in the U.S. South and those of the global South, where the WSF is based (cf. Pichon-Battle 2007). Another salient theme stressed was the fact that USSF organizers and a majority of participants were from grassroots or base-building organizations and progressive trade unions rather than larger, well-funded mainstream nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or more informal direct action, radical ecology, and anarchist collectives, which tend to be more white and middle-class. Many if not most groups active in organizing the USSF represented working-class people of color.[13]

Given the salience of issues of identity, marginalization, and inclusion, our observer team noted considerable self-reflexivity on the part of participants. In plenary sessions, workshops, and informal conversations, participants frequently referred to the diversity of the "we." At the same time, attendees also consistently asked how to involve those who were absent. At a session entitled the "peace caucus," which explored how peace organizers could better integrate social justice issues and diversify their ranks, one speaker urged his colleagues to expand their visions of peace work to go beyond the "freeze-dried hippies" of his generation. In addition, labor activists frequently reflected critically on the history of trade unionism, urging greater attention to workers excluded from the ranks of organized labor, such as immigrants and those in the domestic and service sectors. GLBTI activists were also well represented, forcing the question of sexual identity to the fore. Native American activists accomplished the same for indigenous rights. Meanwhile, the visible translation of speakers' voices into American Sign Language helped raise consciousness of the rights of the deaf and other people with physical disabilities.

At the same time, the emphasis on identity gave observers a sense that the diversity of this movement seemed to trump its unity. One team member noted, "events were marked by many people clamoring to present their views and be heard sooner than they were ready to listen." Other observers noted that many workshops seemed more oriented towards fostering discussions about particular issues than generating dialogues or alliances across issues or movements. Nevertheless, our team witnessed many occasions where activists were able to make connections with diverse workshop participants after the formal sessions.

What also becomes clear from our observations is that activists' experience working in social movements more generally and in the WSF process in particular influenced how much a workshop advanced the forum's transformative goals. In particular, the goals of building unity while respecting diversity, bridging ideological differences, and cultivating analyses of neoliberalism that helped attendees see connections among issues tended to be advanced by participants with longer histories of movement or social forum participation. Organizers on the NPC demonstrated highly effective leadership qualities when they confronted conflicts that erupted in the course of the forum. For instance, Steve Williams, of People Organized to Win Employment Rights (POWER), began the plenary session on the second day of the forum by apologizing for the planning committee's selection of a non-Palestinian speaker to address the issue of Palestine and the Middle-East conflict. His statement highlighted values that are part of the WSF political culture, including the notion that nobody may speak for another, and that those most affected by problems must be included in deliberations about what needs to be done. Similarly, one of the emcees during the PMA on the final day of the USSF offered an emotional apology for having grabbed the microphone from an indigenous speaker from Ecuador after he and his colleague went over their allotted two minutes. The apology was offered after a group of Native Americans took the stage to denounce the silencing of indigenous voices and enacted a public healing ceremony (see Juris, this volume). What began as a divisive incident became an opportunity for learning and building solidarity. Skills related to deliberation and listening to diverse voices are critical to building effective democracy (Baiocchi 2003; Polletta 2002). In this sense, the forum contributes to the democratization of politics locally, nationally, and globally.

Forum spaces also allowed individual participants to find ways of addressing potential conflicts stemming from their distinct subjectivities. Indeed, della Porta (2005) argues that the forum process contributes to the development of "flexible identities and multiple belongings," based on a tolerance of difference, a will to listen, and mutual respect (see also, Kaldor 2003). A telling example of conflict resolution and identity building took place on one of the buses taking activists home from Atlanta. During the bus ride, a young white woman expressed her displeasure at a movie that was being shown, which depicted stereotypes of African Americans. Her comment provoked outrage among the African Americans on the bus, who perceived it as another way of silencing African Americans. The white woman went to talk individually to the most vocal African-American woman and the two spent more than an hour discussing their viewpoints. For the rest of the trip, the bus aisle provided a platform for African Americans and whites to take turns at the microphone to express their frustrations and opinions.

In sum, the question of "who is at the table" was probably the defining feature of the U.S. Social Forum. The articulation of diverse identities and issues at the USSF was both a step forward with respect to the WSF process as well as a reflection of the political culture and context of the U.S. In terms of the global WSF process, the USSF challenged existing notions of open space by engaging in deliberate efforts to bring the most marginalized groups to the table. In an effort to broaden the base of the U.S. Left, the NPC focused most of its energy on mobilizing oppressed nationalities, migrants, low-income communities, and queer people. While major trade unions were part of the NPC,[14] there was little effort to mobilize the rank and file of the labor movement around the USSF.[15] Indeed, the participation of working-class whites especially was noticeably limited.[16] Middle-class and white activist groups were not

targeted by the NPC, although many attended the forum and can be expected to play a larger role in future programs (Karides 2008).

Some of our observers thought this organizing strategy may have had a dampening effect not only on the middle class, but also on white working-class participation in the USSF. Given the historic weakness of the labor movement and working-class parties in the U.S., as well as the racialized structure of class formation and social inequalities, these issues take on a particular salience for the prospects of building the broad race- and class-based alliances necessary to confront growing economic disparities and uncertainties. In this sense, some of our team found discussions of economic redistribution wanting, while others stressed that delegates from grassroots workers' centers and even the AFL-CIO ultimately played a critical role in the NPC. Moreover, the links between race, class, immigration, and labor were discussed during several workshops and plenaries. But there was general agreement on our team that white workers were not well represented. In the future it will be important to take advantage of the open space of the USSF to build bridges between groups with distinct racial and class identities. Organizing across such lines is a significant challenge, but also a major source of potential power.

REVOLUTION, REFORM, OR A NEW POLITICS ALTOGETHER?

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

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

Debates over radical or reformist tactics are common in social movements, but here we emphasize that the current context of neoliberal globalization bears on this debate in important ways. As Brunelle (2007) suggests, neoliberalism relies on deliberate efforts by elites to depoliticize citizens via conventional politics and parties, giving professional economists and other technocrats privileged roles in national and global policy making at the expense of citizens (see Coleman and Porter 2000; McMichael 2003). The WSF counters this tendency by challenging the relationship between knowledge and power (Santos 2006).

A key manner in which the tension between radical and reformist politics was articulated at the USSF involved discussions on the "nonprofit industrial complex," an issue popularized through the circulation of a book by Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex* (2007). The nonprofit-industrial complex, many activists argued, has diverted political work away from popular organizing and towards elite lobbying efforts and other professional political strategies.

Professionalized organizations, often lumped under the term "NGOs," are seen as mirroring the hierarchies and inequities of the political system that excludes so many disadvantaged groups. They therefore are unlikely to seek fundamental changes in the structures that afford them a relatively privileged role. Directors and staff of NGOs are also dependent on wealthy donors and private foundations, which constrains their goals, tactics, and activities. Such reflections resemble discussions in the wider WSF process, where skepticism of NGOs and an emphasis on more participatory forms of grassroots organizing is prominent, even if many USSF organizers are themselves paid organizers.

Members of the NPC remained highly skeptical of private foundations as a primary source of funding for either the social forums or for social activism more generally.[17] This reflects previous critiques of the WSF in both Mumbai and Porto Alegre for relying on international NGOs and corporate funding from companies such as the Brazilian oil company, Petrobras. At the USSF, groups like Project South and Grassroots Global Justice encouraged financial self-reliance and more selective reliance on foundation and government funding. This tension was also visible in workshops not specifically addressing the issue. For instance, in a workshop on welfare rights, one of the session leaders discussed the need for grassroots welfare rights organizations to build their own alliances rather than depend on larger non-profit organizations to do this work. They claimed that such larger organizations, and their funders, were not as committed to the cause over the long haul as those directly affected by the issues, and they cited a recent move away from welfare rights issues by the Community Change Coalition as one example of this shift.

Although the critique of professional and conventional politics was pervasive, it is difficult to characterize the overall tendency of USSF participants with respect to the radical-reformist divide. Many participants in the USSF seemed to adopt a flexible, pragmatic approach to strategy, although a large majority of participants stressed popular education and participatory democracy. Such flexibility may be a calculated response to the realities of the U.S. electoral system and the broader political culture. In contrast to other polities, ideological debates in the U.S. are often less explicit and tend to be muted in favor of "pragmatic" concerns, promoting the avoidance of conflict over core principles and values. This is partly the result of an historical process of depoliticization tied to the weak U.S. labor movement, anti-communism, the effects of the two-party system, and the corporate-led media and cultural environment. Although USSF organizers had a highly developed ideological discourse with respect to the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, including those based on race, class, and gender, participants tended to focus on everyday issues or on the specific goals and initiatives of particular campaigns.

Given that the USSF took place as the mainstream media was beginning its intensive focus on the presidential primaries, there was surprisingly little evidence of formal electoral politics at the USSF.[18] One panelist lamented that "there's not one voice in Congress" willing to help workers against the power of corporations. A woman at a workshop organized by Solidarity exclaimed, "In no way will I lift a finger to help the Democratic Party." This tendency contrasts with experiences in other parts of the world, such as Europe and South America, where political parties have actively engaged with and responded to the forum process (Baiocchi 2004; cf. della Porta et al. 2006). In the U.S. there is scant danger of USSF cooptation by parties, as mainstream parties and candidates have little to do with most progressive social movements. This provides activists with more freedom to work outside party influence, but it also limits the ability of movements to shape policy debates.

Although electoral politics were secondary to, if not absent from, the USSF's agenda, activists engaged in considerable discussion about the role of conventional political strategies such as electoral campaigning; collecting petitions; working with all levels of government (but mostly the local); and using the court system. This seemed particularly true for sessions on international trade and environmental justice, where labor organizers in particular came under fire for emphasizing lobbying over grassroots education and mobilization. Participants

also discussed the need for greater and more principled unity between labor and immigrant rights movements around immigration policies, criticizing the compromises the AFL-CIO and other groups made to pass the recently defeated immigration reform bill.

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

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

The idea that the WSF process is cultivating a new form of politics is an attempt to move beyond traditional reformist/radical cleavages. Since ideological polarization in the U.S. is much less pronounced, we saw less emphasis on the notion of a new politics at the USSF than at other forums. Yet, for the U.S., a national meeting of movements and organizations not initiated and organized by funders, a political party, or a major union is undoubtedly a novelty. In subsequent events, such as the Left Forum, it was acknowledged by several grassroots organizers—some of whom did not attend the USSF—that the way their organizations practice politics has changed since the USSF, illustrating a variation of the "transnational resonance" (Khasnabish 2005) of ideas that circulate within global justice movements. U.S. political culture may constrain the speed at which ideas spread, but not their ability to flow across borders.

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

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

As the first national social forum in the United States, the USSF confronted challenges with respect to the scale of action. The U.S. position as the sole global superpower contributes to a particularly unilateralist, jingoistic, and even racist public discourse that mirrors those of earlier empires. The absence of political leadership in the U.S. Congress to constructively address problems arising from global interdependence means that movements promoting multilateral policies face an uphill struggle. At the very least, such movements must do a significant amount of educational work, and may even be criticized as unpatriotic (Maney, Wohrle, and Coy 2005). These factors, along with the comparatively weak position of the U.S. global justice movement in the post 9/11 period (cf. Hadden and Tarrow 2007), help account for the late entry of the U.S. into the WSF process.

Our observer team reported that a majority of workshops focused on local-level actions. This is due, in part, to the constituencies that USSF organizers sought to attract, but it may also reflect the domestic orientation of many U.S. movements (Hadden and Tarrow 2007). The emphasis on mobilizing grassroots, less well-resourced groups ensured that participants at the USSF would be able to bring local issues and contexts into social forum debates and that ideas from the USSF would be translated into local-level actions. Many local issues from other cities and regions around the U.S., such as Katrina relief, housing crises, and the deportations and other attacks on immigrants, seemed as relevant at the USSF as Atlanta-based issues or national concerns. In the context of the USSF, local organizers were challenged to expand their political landscapes. By comparing notes, local groups gained important insights into how national and global forces create similar problems in different communities. They also saw how variations in local contexts shape the effectiveness of different tactics. A particularly powerful example of this was a workshop on immigration where more than fifty people from around the U.S. gave testimonials about what was being done in their communities, and urged others to take their ideas back home. On the bus home from Atlanta, a group of Latino/a activists from Chicago talked excitedly about encountering Brooklyn youths who had found a unique way of combating police harassment: as officers walk their beat, several monitors follow them with digital video cameras. As a young woman said, "We realized the police were doing the same thing to us as they were to them [in Brooklyn], and we've invited the New Yorkers to come to Chicago to teach us how to do this."

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

At the national level, numerous workshops built on the presence of organizers and activists with a large-scale vision. Some workshops aimed at developing new national coalitions to address major economic grievances. The Alliance of Domestic Workers, the Right to the City Alliance, Solidarity Network, the national coalition on public housing, the participatory budgeting campaign, and the Hip-Hop Caucus are examples of such efforts. Also, networks emerged to expand national campaigns working for immigrant rights, for victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and health care. A panel on Trade and Migration organized by the National Network on Immigrant Rights explored the relationship between free trade and

immigration, with a particular focus on NAFTA, and then provided a space for networking and building national level alliances to organize around these issues. A workshop aimed at furthering "blue-green" alliances (cooperation between the labor and environmental movements) generated a suggestion for national level coordination and expanding cooperation between the AFL-CIO and environmental groups. The USSF meeting also provided a rare opportunity for members of organizations affiliated with the Poor People's Economic Human Rights Campaign—an initiative that frames the problem of poverty in terms of international human rights—to meet each other, exchange ideas and experiences, and coordinate future actions.[19]

In the U.S., the absence of leftist parties and of any serious critique of global markets by party elites leaves U.S. organizers at a discursive and strategic disadvantage when compared with their counterparts elsewhere. For instance, as noted earlier, della Porta and her colleagues (2006) show how leftist parties in Europe integrated critiques raised by activists in the European Social Forums into their party agendas. And while labor remains a significant player in the USSF process, it is comparatively weaker here than in other parts of the globe, and more strategically divided. Most crippling for any movement offering a critique of global capitalism is the enduring legacy of anti-communism. While these factors do not preclude national-level organizing in the U.S., they do prevent radical movements from having readily identifiable targets or allies at the national level. Also important is the size of the U.S., which makes national-level organizing more difficult than it is in smaller countries. While electoral politics were not a major focus at the USSF, more energy was devoted to building the national forum process and the movements comprising it. USSF organizers created opportunities for regional clusters to discuss how they would carry the social forum process forward, and the forum program and plenary sessions helped focus people's attention on the need for long-term and multilevel actions.

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

By bringing organizers from different countries together, the WSF process encourages activists to develop their analyses of global problems and to identify the links between global and local processes. Testimonials by representatives from international movements were common. For example, in a session called International Perspectives on the WSF, activists from Kenya, Canada, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. shared their experiences, achievements, and obstacles in organizing forums at local, regional, and global scales. An AFL-CIO-organized session on Justice in the Global Economy brought U.S. activists together with their counterparts from Brazil, France, and Italy. Given the international structure of the unions in the USSF, it is not surprising that the most internationalist perspectives emerged from sessions where unions took part. Many women's sessions featured international comparisons as well, which was facilitated by transnational networks such as the World March for Women (Dufour and Giraud 2007). Moreover, plenary sessions included at least one international delegate, reflecting the USSF aim of enhancing understandings of global interdependence and the need for solidarity.

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

THE U.S. SOCIAL FORUM AND THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUMS

The geopolitical importance of the U.S. made the USSF a particularly significant event in the life of the WSF process. For instance, a social forum organizer from Quito, Ecuador, Magdalena León, noted at a workshop on "International Perspectives on the WSF" that, for many Latin Americans, the USSF was crucial for the advancement of the overall WSF process. She said that the USSF represented "the door to a new phase" of the WSF process, making the movement truly hemispheric. But while WSF activists were watching the USSF, it did not seem that most participants in the USSF had much awareness or connection with the WSF, reflecting a relatively weak "internalization" of the global forum process (Hadden and Tarrow 2007). Our team found few explicit references to the WSF during workshops.[20] That being said, plenary sessions were used to help frame national and local concerns within a global context, and the WSF process *was* mentioned in each of the six plenaries and in the opening session each day. Larger public events provided an opportunity to raise awareness about the forums, while smaller workshops often dealt with specific issues and concerns. Also, the values apparent in the USSF events were consistent with those of the WSF.

In part, the relative lack of awareness of the WSF process stems from the "American exceptionalism" characterizing U.S. political culture. But it is also due to the fact that this was the first USSF, and few local or regional forums have taken place in the United States. Indeed, U.S. residents have had little exposure to the WSF process, in large part due to virtually nonexistent media coverage. Also, the global justice movement has been comparatively weak in the U.S. due to various factors including the intolerance for dissent in the post-9/11 period, the intensity of policing and repression (cf. Fernandez 2008), a political context dominated by themes of war and terrorism, the ambivalence and ignorance of U.S. citizens regarding the global justice movement, the preponderant domestic focus of social justice movements in the U.S., and the tendency of foreign-policy-oriented movements to address single issues or promote aid rather than offer a comprehensive critique of U.S. policy (see, for example, Hadden and Tarrow 2007). The USSF nevertheless served to introduce U.S. residents to the WSF, and organizers attempted to ensure that participants would understand the meeting's larger context. In this sense, it represented the beginnings of a more intensive process of internalization of the social forum process in the U.S.

Not only does the USSF create a context that can sustain and develop U.S. participation in the forums, but the USSF also contributes to the evolution of the WSF itself. We noted earlier how the USSF has set new standards and suggested new organizing methodologies to enhance the inclusiveness and diversity of the forums. It also seems to be contributing to the evolving discussion of how to address the creative tensions we reviewed above. In this sense, the USSF is an articulation of the WSF process that has simultaneously set in motion new networks across the U.S. and a deepening of existing transnational networks. A planned second USSF in 2010 will help sustain these networks, encouraging them to expand and adapt along with the forum. Future research should explore the extent to which U.S. activists'

engagement in the WSF process is enhanced by participation in the USSF, and whether the next USSF connects to the WSF more extensively.

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

Regarding the global WSF process, we argue that the USSF marks an important step in the process of bringing the WSF process into U.S. politics, but it also influences the WSF process itself. Our team analyzed how the USSF played out with respect to the core tensions that have characterized the forum process. In terms of the space-versus-actor dynamic, we found that although the USSF did provide open spaces for interaction and exchange among diverse movements and networks, many organizers and presenters emphasized the movement-building role of the forum. In many ways the USSF was a hybrid, combining elements of a space and an actor. The USSF was perhaps most noteworthy among major social forums for how it addressed the question of who participates in the forums. Organizers made a highly conscious and deliberate effort to ensure that historically marginalized groups, including many working-class people of color, not only participated in, but were also at the forefront of the process. Indeed, the USSF was among the most diverse forums in race and class terms. At the same time, our team noted some important limitations of the USSF in terms of participation by white working-class people, the emergence of durable bridges across different communities, and creating a truly open and democratic space.

With respect to alternative forms of politics, our team noted that overtly ideological debates were often muted and/or left implicit and that many workshops and discussions focused on concrete projects, initiatives, and reforms rather than overarching ideological themes. At the same time, many USSF organizers and presenters articulated a radical vision of revolutionary social change led by those who are most directly oppressed by prevailing systems of social, economic, and racial domination. Finally, in terms of scale, we found a strong emphasis on local communities and campaigns, reflecting the grassroots politics of the USSF. At the same time, despite the difficulties of organizing on a wider national scale in the U.S., the forum did facilitate the work of coalition building, including the founding of several new national alliances and initiatives. The global level was included less in these discussions relative to other forums, but several workshops—particularly those focusing on trade, immigration, and women's issues—did reflect a global perspective. Among the most important challenges for USSF organizers moving forward, then, will be to continue strengthening alliances across race, class, and sector, while helping to link the U.S. forum process with other forums at local, regional, and global scales.

Our collaborative method of distributed ethnography allowed us to generate a more thorough description of the USSF than would have been possible by a single observer. Some of us are deeply embedded in the networks that have planned prior forums, and these experiences enriched the group's understanding of how the USSF fits into broader patterns of transnational mobilization around the WSF. Seeming contradictions in our collective account reflect not only differences in our social and political experiences, and respective positions relating to the USSF, but also the impossibility of developing a truly comprehensive depiction of the social forums.

Despite the breadth of insights that our collective field research provided us, this account is still partial. A more complete understanding of the WSF process and its significance requires a longer-term effort to trace participation of particular groups over time—through the pre-, mid-, and post-forum stages. Still, our descriptions provide insight into the promises and challenges of organizing a local process within an important global movement. They also reflect the complexities that global convergence introduces to the study of social movements, and suggests a need for new theoretical and methodological tools. We hope this research will encourage future teams of collaborative researchers to follow the global forum process (not just the events) in a distributed manner, and continue breaking down the divides between activism, citizenship, and research. Indeed, the forums are notable for their reflexivity, and distributed ethnography can play an important role in reflecting on and prefiguring their goals, practices, and alternatives.

NOTES

[1] For instance, aside from members of this research team, no other scholars submitted papers on the World or U.S. Social Forums to the 2007 or 2008 American Sociological Association (ASA) annual meetings. This was also true—and more surprising—at the 2007 ASA Section on Collective Behavior and Social Movements workshop prior to the ASA convention.

[2] For other accounts of the U.S. Social Forum, see Blau and Karides, eds. (2008), Katz-Fishman and Karides (forthcoming), Katz-Fishman and Scott (2008).

[3] Velitchkova also provided extra research assistance in assembling summary data on our observations.

[4] We sampled one of the three time periods for each of the three days of the USSF program to determine which issues each workshop addressed. This list was compared with the distribution of issues of workshops observed by our team. Our group attended proportionally more events related to labor, immigrant rights, and disabled rights, but similar proportions of sessions on other major themes.

[5] Thanks to Eileen Otis for suggesting this framing of the project.

[6] Our observers noted that such workshops as "Introduction to Neoliberal Globalization" (conducted by the Center for Popular Economics), "Local Living Economies," and sessions on participatory budgeting were particularly effective in this regard.

[7] Atlanta's location made it accessible to refugees from Hurricane Katrina, whose plights were highlighted on the USSF agenda. Participants organized a protest at the headquarters of the Coca-Cola Company, which has been involved in a number of human rights controversies, including the alleged violent repression of a labor organizing effort among Colombian workers in 2008. Media activists were also highly cognizant of the irony of hosting the Forum at the doorstep of CNN (the global media conglomerate did not report on the USSF).

[8] This is also true at the WSF and ESF, though the group of activists who may be aware of these issues is probably larger at the global and European scale.

[9] Another important dimension of exclusion debated by WSF participants involved whether participation requires a rejection of neoliberal globalization, as is stated in the Charter of Principles. While a reasonable case is made by WSF founders that opponents of neoliberalism need space to gather outside of the influences of neoliberal ideology, many organizers recognize that potential supporters of their movements may not have the knowledge needed to take such a position. In practice, people who do not explicitly reject neoliberalism are not excluded from social forums, but they may be prevented from offering workshops.

[10] See www.ussf2007.org/nationalplanningcommittee for a list of NPC member organizations.

[11] We expect that participants' sense of collective identity or solidarity with the others at the USSF is related to the intensity of their involvement in the forum, the extent to which they engaged with groups outside their focal issues, and the extensiveness of their prior experience in cross-movement activism. The USSF may have been a first experience of cross-movement work for many activists, and the long-term impacts on collective-identity processes cannot be observed through the methods we use here.

[12] In order to be as inclusive as possible, the NPC continually increased the numbers of panels and the number of speakers so that in the end less time was available for dialogue. Organizers were conscious of this trade-off between providing opportunities for neglected voices to be heard and allowing open discussion.

[13]The term *grassroots* served as a code to highlight important identity concerns. It is generally used to imply that grassroots groups are more local, participatory, and less well-funded than NGOs. There is also an implication that these groups are more accountable to a membership base than to external funders, even if they receive foundation funds. By extension, this implies that grassroots groups are more radical than the more formal and well-funded (and usually more white) NGOs. This oversimplifies, however, a highly complex voluntary sector and masks differences across national contexts.

[14] Labor representation on the NPC included AFL-CIO's Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC), SEIU, and UNITE-HERE (Midwest region). Also, Jobs with Justice, a network-organization supported in part by AFL-CIO and other trade unions participated on the NPC and had a significant organizational presence at the USSF.

[15] Communication from Walda Katz-Fishman (June 2008).

[16] Clawson (2003: 123) argues that residential segregation by race and class may make it harder to organize working-class whites than other racial groups around social justice initiatives.

[17] USSF organizers received no money from any local, state or national government, and limited contributions from progressive foundations came late in the process. Most support was from grassroots fundraising, registration fees, and in-kind donations (that is, staff people) from participating organizations (Katz-Fishman 2008).

[18] The only presidential campaign that was visible in the vicinity of USSF activities was that of Dennis Kucinich, while the only prominent effort to draw attention to the electoral arena was the "backbone campaign," which staged a shadow cabinet meeting of progressive leaders on the eve of the USSF and hosted a literature table where it distributed, among other materials, "spineless citation" postcards that could be issued to politicians who fail to uphold campaign promises. Participants in various workshops and the People's Movement Assembly also encouraged others to take action during the upcoming Republican and Democratic National Conventions.

[19] Not all issues were readily framed in broader terms, however. For instance, one observer noted that environmental groups working on very local problems often found it difficult to forge trans-local networks.

[20] Observations at the European Social Forum in 2004 noted a parallel phenomenon of the workshops focusing more on European than world-level organizing.

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