The Meaning of the US Social Forum:
A Reply to Whitaker and Bello’s Debate on the Open Space

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The achievements of the US Social Forum (USSF) contribute a great deal to debates concerning the future of the overall Social Forum process. In a recent exchange Walden Bello and Chico Whitaker, both representatives on the International Council of the World Social Forum (WSF), disagreed on the future of the Forum. Bello, the executive director of Focus on the Global South, argued that the Forum was now at a crossroads.¹ While acknowledging that the WSF had contributed a great deal to the struggle for global justice, Bello suggested that the Forum's open space methodology, which on principle, refuses to take a collective stand on any issues even on such evident concerns as the war on Iraq and the WTO, was now inhibiting decisive political agency. He argued that there was merit to the charge that the Forum was becoming a mechanism that was disengaged from actual struggle and thus more of a carnival than an organizational event. The article provocatively concluded by asking “is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?”²

Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF, replied to Bello, arguing that crossroads do not have to close roads.³ He noted that while the

¹) Bello 2006.
²) Ibid.
Forum’s Charter of Principles precluded the International Council from making statements representing the overall World Social Forum, the open space methodology left possible the opportunity for movements to independently build global coalitions that produced common manifestos. Therefore, for Whitaker the WSF’s crossroads were in fact two paths that could co-exist, not as mutual hindrance, but as reciprocal sources of inspiration. The open space could continue to allow movements to express themselves while proposing new social projects without needing to speak on behalf of all participants at the World Social Forum.

In order to thoughtfully assess the different positions, that is, to recognize the plurality of goods that are being put into dialogue, we need to reflect on the process’ actual achievements. No edition in recent memory has better expressed the substance of its operation than the 2007 United States Social Forum (USSF). The USSF demonstrated the accuracy of both Bello and Whitaker’s arguments, affirming the importance of continuing the Social Forum process but on more truculent conceptual ground. The US forum, held from June 27 to July 2, in Atlanta, Georgia, the birthplace of Martin Luther King J.R., attracted over 10 000 participants. The slogan of the Forum was “Another World is Possible. Another U.S. is Necessary.” Mirroring yet amplifying the worldwide process this national forum made key contributions to the US struggle and by extension, in light of its geopolitical significance, to the planetary movement for global justice.

The Identity of Difference

The first achievement of the Forum concerned its articulation of an identity of difference. The US Social Forum created an open space that allowed multiple people’s movements to come together from around the United States. For the first time, a variety of activists from around the country were able to collectively interact in a non-hierarchical, horizontal manner that emphasized mutual recognition. If the space had been dominated by one ideology, for example anarchism, or if it had been dominated by one strategy, for example, statism, then it would not have attracted such a diversity of actors. The open space, as Whitaker has always contended, allowed for a multitude of identities, ideologies, and strategies to be represented at the Social Forum. The space not only facilitated dissimilar groups from across the US to express themselves but also to connect on novel, experimental terms.