Windows on the Ninth World Social Forum in Belém

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Abstract
This essay provides three windows on the Ninth World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. We show the multiple ways in which the World Social Forum’s plurality and reflexivity challenge traditional dichotomies to build the foundation for a new politics. We argue that the social forum process has developed mechanisms for remaining an open space while simultaneously creating opportunities for unified collective action. We show that the Forum produces complex analyses and comes up with strategies that correspond to these analyses. We provide some evidence for how the social forum process is trying to overcome organizational challenges related to resource distribution and specialization by capitalizing on the network structure of its participants. Finally, we argue that the social forum process is also working on addressing spatial and temporal challenges by trying organizational innovations.

Keywords
World Social Forum (WSF), alter-globalization movement, response to the global economic crisis, anti-slavery campaign, Belém expanded

[The Forum is [...] continuously being formed and renewed, like an anthill. I suggest that we may today be witness to the construction of what is possibly going to be one of the great pieces of architecture in history – but as architecture redefined. It is something that one can only watch in awe and wonder. Just as in the case of all great conventional architecture, the ontological meaning and role of the Forum is to allow us to comprehend the larger world we are a part of, and through this experience to relate to it in new ways. (Sen 2007: 514)]

Since 2001, the World Social Forum has developed as a process for bringing together what has become known as the “movement of movements” working to advance more humane, just, and sustainable alternatives to
globalized capitalism. The WSF “process” extends over time and space, and it has mobilized millions of people in countless local, national, regional and global gatherings around the world around the slogan, “Another world is possible.” Given its scope and breadth as well as its focus on some of the most urgent conflicts of our day, the WSF is arguably the most important social and political development of our time. It therefore merits far more attention than it gets from social scientists (particularly those in the United States) and the mainstream media.

This essay provides readers several windows on the most recent World Social Forum. As three observers, we can only scratch the surface in describing what took place over five days in Belém, Brazil, since the meeting itself involved over 2,000 simultaneous sessions organized by more than 5,000 different organizations and movements. Moreover, interpreting actions in Belém requires some familiarity with the Forum process itself as well as with its history and the histories of the groups involved. We bring to our observations of the Forum some of this background knowledge, but we admit to many limitations in our understandings of this very complex and dynamic process.

In the text that follows, we each describe what we “saw” of the 2009 WSF. Two of us – Austin and Ana – were in Belém, while Jackie remained in snowy South Bend, observing what could be seen of the Forum from outside of it. Because an important innovation of this year’s Forum was its attempt to make it easier for people to participate in local events that were tied to the WSF, we believe this particular “window” is essential to having a full appreciation for the WSF process and its wider implications. To help us learn from the WSF process over time and to consider whether and how the process is evolving, we use the theme of the Forum’s “creative tensions” to guide our three different accounts of the Belém WSF.

The ninth World Social Forum drew over 130,000 people from more than 140 countries, and its location in the Brazilian Amazon aimed to highlight the urgency of today’s environmental crises. Similar to other forums, the vast majority of participants came from the region where the meeting took place. But sizeable contingents also came from Africa and Europe. What was noteworthy about this version of the WSF was the comparatively large presence of indigenous people, the global financial crisis which was both confirming the analyses of forum-goers while also making their work more urgent, and the large number of heads of state (5) who attended events surrounding the Forum.

1) E.g., Smith and Karides et al. 2008.