

The World Social Forum: Social Forums as Resistance Relays

Peter N. Funke
University of Pennsylvania

Abstract *This article examines the World Social Forum and the global social forum process it has spurred by encouraging the creation of autonomous social forums on various levels, from the local to the global. The article argues that social forums, these “open spaces” for groups, movements, and networks opposed to neoliberalism, start to function as “resistance relays.” On the basis of their common opposition to capitalism, social forums provide a catalytic context for generating exchanges, linkages, convergences and mobilizations. As such, they are strategic instruments of alter-globalization movements. While social forums seek to forge novel practices and visions over social change that point to a novel logic of social movement based resistance, they are riddled with tensions and challenges.*

When the first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in January 2001, participants were uncertain about what to expect about the size and shape of such an event. This unprecedented global meeting of social movements, networks, NGOs and other civil society organizations opposed to neoliberal capitalism took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil as a counter-event to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. Activists were unsure of how it would unfold. As Francisco Whitaker, a co-founder of the first WSF, wrote in 2000, the initial plan was

[t]o arrange another kind of meeting on a world scale—the World Social Forum—directed to social concerns. To give a symbolic dimension to the start of this new period, the meeting would take place on the same dates as the powerful of the world were to meet in Davos.¹

Other activists and organizers were more specific in their hopes for the WSF: they wanted to move beyond the more re-active demonstrations and mass

I am indebted and would like to thank Todd Wolfson very much for ongoing and invaluable comments and suggestions on drafts at all stages and I am grateful to Michael Janson for suggestions and precious help. I would also like to thank the editor, Joseph Peschek very much for his thoughtful and productive comments as well as the helpful criticisms of the anonymous reviewers. Thanks are also due to all activists that generously allowed me to spend time with them and their causes. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, as well as at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association. I would like to thank the discussants, panel participants and audiences very much for their comments and critiques on earlier drafts of this article. Any errors are, of course, my own.

¹Francisco Whitaker, “World Social Forum: Origins and Aims,” June 22, 2002, available online at: <www.tni-archives.org/detail_page.phtml?page=socforum-docs_origins>.

protests that had surfaced since the anti-World Trade Organization (WTO) protests in Seattle in 1999 and move towards offering proposals and initiatives in order to start building alliances for “another world.”² Frustrated with the less coherent focus of the North American movements and the Seattle protest, Christophe Aquiton of ATTAC³ who helped to organize the first WSF captured the sentiment of many, stating

[t]he failure of Seattle was the inability to come up with a common agenda, a global alliance at the world level to fight against globalization.⁴

The attendance at the first 2001 World Social Forum was much larger than the organizers had expected, expressing the activist community’s desire for innovative strategies to consolidate and forge alliances. For many alter-globalization activists⁵ the social forum idea promised to be a novel approach for synergies, cooperation and convergences amongst the diverse emancipatory groups and movements. A Berlin based social forum activist expressed this viewpoint, stressing that

[t]he hope was that the social forum idea was a novel attempt to bring together diverse political and social groupings.⁶

For many, the WSF symbolized the beginning of elaborating and working on alternatives to globalizing neoliberal capitalism across the diversity of movements and groups—forging a globalization from below by the allegedly powerless. If Seattle was the coming-out party of resistance movements, according to Soren Ambrose, policy analyst with 50 Years is Enough, “Porto Alegre is the coming-out party for the existence of serious thinking about alternatives.”⁷

Since 2001, the annual World Social Forums have grown to almost unmanageable scales, increasing nearly eight-fold from 20,000 participants and roughly 500 events to 155,000 participants and almost 7,000 events.⁸ In the wake of

² Teivo Taivainen, “The World Social Forum: What Should it Be When it Grows Up?” September 23, 2003, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=bal_teivo_ing>.

³ ATTAC (Association pour la taxation des transactions pour l’aide aux citoyens [Association for the taxation of financial transactions for the aid of citizens]) is an activist organization that started out to establish a tax on foreign exchange transactions. Today, ATTAC works on a wide range of issues related to globalization and has autonomous associations in more than 40 countries.

⁴ Cited in Naomi Klein, “A Fete for the End of the End of History,” *The Nation*, March 1, 2001, available online at: <<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20010319/klein/single>>.

⁵ I use the term alter-globalization to indicate that the vast majority of movements and groups I refer to are not against global integration but against the neoliberal form of globalization.

⁶ Cited in Evelyn Bahn and Marius Haberland, “Projektbericht: Initiative für ein Berliner Sozial Forum,” *Projektkurs Soziale Bewegungen und außerinstitutionelle Initiativen in Berlin*, Freie Universität Berlin, Otto Suhr Institut, Sommersemester, 2003, p. 31. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁷ Cited in Klein, *op. cit.*

⁸ In 2006 the WSF gathering in Bamako (Mali) is estimated to having been attended by 11,000 participants while 80,000 people participated in Caracas. The 2007 WSF in Nairobi attracted less participants, “official” numbers putting participants at 60,000. Estimates come from the Forum’s webpage available online at: <<http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br>> and are considered quite conservative by other observers.

the First World Social Forum in 2001 and on the basis of the “WSF Charter of Principles,” countless autonomous regional, national, local, and thematic social forums have sprung up, generating a “global social forum process.” The social forum idea, this “first step, but an entirely new step,” according to Chico Whitaker, was increasingly, “finding an echo the whole world over” and, so the Brazilian WSF co-founder hoped, would “secure the beginning of a new period in the struggle against human submission to the interest of capital.”⁹

Indeed, the WSF echo was quickly taken up. Berlin based activists, for instance, came back from the first European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence in 2002 with the ambition to create something similar in Berlin and to thus transfer or adapt their ESF experiences to the local Berlin setting. As one of the activists pointed out

[t]here was a general sentiment of take off: Florence was decisive for the creation of the Social Forum in Berlin ... In Florence, we realized that the globalization-critical Left only has a chance if we come together.¹⁰

Another activist of the BSF argued similarly that

[t]he experiences of the past social forums were central. We have to move out of our “small-small.” If left politics should have impact, we have to stop working against one another. No social actor is able to do something against the neoliberal onslaught by himself. Not the churches, not the unions, not ATTAC—no one alone.¹¹

This statement expressed activists’ beliefs in coming and working together without forgoing diversity, to forge alliances on various intersecting levels, and to do so in new ways has been the hope placed in the social forum idea.

This article analyzes these social forum based attempts to aggregate and inter-link the diverse alter-globalization movements. The article has two aims and contributions. First, the broader theoretical aim is to bring renewed attention to the structuring power of the underlying capitalist material conditions of existence when trying to understand the alter-globalization movement and the global social forum process. I suggest that it is in fact capital and class relations, which render possible the commonality and affinity of the alter-globalization movements in general and the social forum convergences in particular. Second, the article examines social forums as strategic instruments of the alter-globalization movement by analyzing them as “resistance relays.” As such and on the basis of their common opposition to capitalism, social forums as relays provide the context and act as catalysts for generating linkages, mobilizations, and convergences of this multicentered “movement of movements.”

Despite arguable success in producing awareness, connections, and mobilization around the global, the social forum relay and its logic is also riddled with tensions and challenges. While a thorough discussion of challenges and contradictions facing the social forum process is beyond the scope of this article, I shall highlight some of the core tensions that the social forum process is facing throughout this article.

⁹ Whitaker, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Cited in Bahn and Haberland, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The remainder is structured as follows. The first part situates social movement based resistance within the broader shifts of globalizing capitalism, briefly relating it to the literature on social movements. I suggest an alternative approach for understanding contemporary movements in general and the social forum process in particular. The second and main part of this article examines core dimensions of social forums as resistance relays, including its organizational context, the production of linkages as well as its visions and practices over social change.

Neoliberalism, Social Movements and the World Social Forum

The social forum phenomena emerged in the wake of the transformation of the Fordist “compromise” of embedded liberalism¹² and the ascendancy of what has been referred to as neoliberalism. In the words of David Harvey, neoliberalism can be characterized as the project of

[d]eregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision [in order] to achieve the restoration of class power.¹³

While economic elites succeeded in negotiating and eventually co-opting trade unions into fairly stable “industrial relations” after World War Two, this Fordist “compromise” started to unravel in the mid-1960s.¹⁴ Of pivotal importance was the attack on the “social management” by the movements in the 1960s and 1970s—from women, students, minority and immigrant communities, rebelling against their allotted role in society, against the “standardization of life.”¹⁵

The transformation of Fordism and the surfacing of these new social movements have led many scholars to argue that society is shifting away from material to post-material values and concerns aimed at self-actualization.¹⁶

¹² John G. Ruggie, “International Regimes, Transactions, and Change: Embedded Liberalism in the Postwar Economic Order,” *International Organization* 36:2 (1982).

¹³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005/2007), p. 3.

¹⁴ But see, Michael A. Janson, *A Christian Century: Liberal Protestantism, The New Deal and the Origins of Post-War American Politics*, PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2007, for a thorough account of the roots of this unraveling in the case of the US. Janson argues persuasively that the New Deal actually started to unravel as early as the 1930s, much earlier than commonly thought.

¹⁵ A well-known example is the establishment of the “Sociological Department” by Henry Ford in order to socially manage the workers. The Sociological Department initially had 200 investigators (later it was reduced to 50) who investigated workers to determine whether they qualified for the so-called “profit-sharing arrangement,” which in fact was merely a form of increased wage not linked to the rate of profit. In order to qualify and in addition to being a satisfactory worker it included: “as thrifty; having a home that was worthy of a Ford worker; not letting out rooms in one’s house to boarders; not having an outside business of any kind; not associating or allowing one’s children to associate with the wrong people; not occupying or intruding upon sleeping rooms while others are asleep; cleanliness; ‘good manhood’; good citizenship; demonstrating proof of marriage; not drinking or smoking excessively; prohibiting one’s wife (in the case of a male worker) from working outside the home; demonstrating progress in learning English; etc.” John Bellamy Foster, “The Fetish of Fordism—Henry Ford’s Economic Ideas,” *Monthly Review*, 39:10 (March 1988), pp. 14–23.

¹⁶ Ronald Inglehart, *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Growing out of the broader tradition of Western Marxism, many social movement scholars are focussing on studying questions of identity and culture¹⁷ and they contend that social movements are now predominately concerned with "life politics" as opposed to "emancipatory politics."¹⁸ Capital and class relations are no longer privileged¹⁹ and class-based social movements are fading away²⁰ in the wake of the emerging "Post-Industrial Society," "Information" and/or "Networked Society."²¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, for instance, regard capital and class relations as one amongst many discursively constructed identities. Amongst the various struggles (class, gender, race, etc.), Laclau and Mouffe argue, no single one has any priority nor does there exist any necessary relationship between them.²² The corollary of this trend is that there appears to be a splintering of resistance and its diffusion into a "creative cacophony"²³ of manifold groups and movements all apparently parochially concerned with their particular struggles.

Social forums, which aspire to a maximum of openness and breadth and seek to function as "agora" for the wide array of alter-globalization movements, seem to fit nicely the above characterization. The WSF Charter explicitly states that the WSF is "opposed to all totalitarian and reductionist views on economy, development and history" (Principle 10) and that it is "a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context" (Principle 8). In sum, a characteristic of the consolidation attempts through social forums is the eschewing of homogeneity that eliminates the particularisms of individual movements and groups.

However, the puzzling affinity amongst the diversity of movements and groups that makes observers talk about "The Global Justice Movement"²⁴ or the "alter-globalization movement," as well as amongst those that come together at social forums, challenges us to research the linkages between the multiple groups and movements and to theorize the connections between the various structures of

¹⁷ Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1976), p. 75.

¹⁸ "Life politics [are concerned with] issues which flow from processes of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts" (Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 214) as opposed to "emancipatory politics," which address the politics of inequality; see also Jürgen Habermas, "New Social Movements," *Telos* 49 (1981), pp. 33–37.

¹⁹ Alain Touraine, *The Post-Industrial Society: Tomorrow's Social History: Classes, Conflicts and Culture in the Programmed Society* (New York: Random House, 1971); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Alberto Melucchi, "A Strange Kind of Newness: What's 'New' in New Social Movements?" in Enrique Larana, Hank Johnston and Joseph R. Gusfield (eds), *New Social Movements: From Ideology to Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, "Toward an Integrated Perspective on Social Movements and Revolution," in Marc Irving Lichbach and A. S. Zuckerman (eds), *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

²⁰ See for instance Melucchi, *op. cit.*

²¹ Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Manuel Castells, *End of Millennium, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. III (Cambridge and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1998); McAdam *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

²² Laclau and Mouffe, *op. cit.*

²³ Castells, *op. cit.*

²⁴ See for instance Donatella della Porta (ed.), *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-National and Transnational Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007); Andrew Opel and Donnalyn Pompper (eds), *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience, and the Global Justice Movement* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

oppression, which require “a working hypothesis of equivalency.”²⁵ While I can only begin to sketch this line of thought in this article, I suggest that we should place renewed interest in the relevance of the structuring matrix of capital and class relations in order to better understand contemporary social movement based resistance and opposition.

The distortion of much of the history of the 1960s movements as being merely concerned with “identity politics” instead of its aspiration to equality, targeting capitalism and imperialism through a “union of intellectual contestation with workers’ struggle” as Kristin Ross argues compellingly, should make us wary of sidestepping the foundational capitalist conditions.²⁶ Similarly, today’s resistance movements are not merely a dissonance of unrelated voices. I suggest their underlying commonality has to be seen in the fact that all other structures of oppression (patriarchy, racism, etc.) stand in relation to capital and class relations. The various groups and movements that make up the broader alter-globalization movement, as well as those that participate in social forums, operate under the capitalist mode of production in that it establishes the respective material conditions of possibility.²⁷ The existence of the various forms of oppression is shaped by the capitalist mode of production and is situated in the context of capitalist forces and relations that produce it.²⁸ Immigrant, women’s or racial oppression are to a certain degree restricted to their respective particular ascriptive hierarchies. Class relations, on the other hand, are common to all capitalist social formations and social groups, running through, for instance, women or immigrants and thus providing a common structure of oppression beneath the particular one of, for instance, patriarchy and racism. This would then allow us to identify capital and class relations as a transversal axis, which provides a unifying experience for other structures of domination. As Dyer-Witthford argues, capitalism is distinguishable from other forms of domination such as racism or patriarchy in that only it has succeeded in

knitting the planet together into an integrated coordinated system of interdependencies with the aid of new technologies [globally mapping] the availability of female labor, migration flows, human gene pools, and entire animal and plant species onto its coordinates of value [thus] subsuming every other form of oppression to its logic. Indeed, it is possible now to see much better than Marx in his day could how the capitalist international division of labour often incorporates, and largely depends on discrimination by gender or ethnicity to establish hierarchies of control.²⁹

²⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, “On West and Fenstermaker’s ‘Doing Difference,’” in Mary Roth Walsh (ed.), *Women, Men and Gender: Ongoing Debates* (New Haven: Yale University Press), p. 74, cited in Martha E. Gimenez, “Marxism and Class, Gender and Race: Rethinking the Trilogy,” *Race, Gender & Class* 8:2 (2001), pp. 23–33, available online at: <<http://www.colorado.edu/Sociology/gimenez/work/cgr.html>>.

²⁶ Kristin Ross, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 11.

²⁷ Martha E. Gimenez, “Capitalism and the Oppression of Women: Marx Revisited,” *Science and Society* 69:1 (January 2005), p. 20.

²⁸ Gimenez, *ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁹ Nick Dyer-Witthford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 15.

A renewed emphasis on capital and class relations is not to argue that gender or race based oppression can be reduced to the former nor does it imply that structures of domination should not be resisted where they occur. However, it does suggest that oppositional and resistance movements that fight and struggle for women's rights or racial equality reach limits without engaging capitalism. Without also engaging the underlying capital and class relations, these groups would at best become well functioning and integrated subjects of capitalism. What I begin to suggest is that the diverse struggles should not be seen, as many social movement theorists do, as being unrelated. It is the revolving of these hierarchies, of for instance gender or race, around the principles of commodification and profit that gives capital and class relations its pivotal stance.³⁰

My understanding of the relationship of contemporary opposition and capital relations is close to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conception of the "multitude."³¹ Hardt and Negri argue that the multitude are "all those that work under the rule of capital and thus potentially as the class of those who refuse the rule of capital."³² Multitude, the authors claim, is a "class concept."³³ The multitude is characterized by the rise of "immaterial labor" (labor that creates immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response) which "has become *hegemonic in qualitative terms* and has imposed a tendency on other forms of labor and society itself."³⁴

But how are those that produce immaterial labor different from workers in Marx's sense? Marx conceived of the "working class" not by way of what they produced but by their position in the relations of production.³⁵ Their privileging of "immaterial labor" seems unnecessarily limiting.³⁶ Immaterial labor is certainly vital for our understanding of contemporary oppositional politics and Hardt and Negri theorize it in terms of imposing a tendency in qualitative terms rather than quantitative. Nevertheless, it can easily be misleading in that it veils the continued importance of the great majority of those engaged in material work (ranging from cocoa farmers and sweatshop workers to janitors, taxi drivers, and security

³⁰ Dyer-Witheford, for instance, argues that earlier resistance was within and against a particular type of capitalism (Fordism) and convergence attempts as struggles over class formation predominately took on the form of the creation of a particular organizational form (party) with specific structures (hierarchical, vanguards) and on the basis of an identifiable historical subject (industrial proletariat). *Ibid.*

³¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004).

³² *Ibid.*, p. 106.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109, italics in original.

³⁵ Alex Callinicos, "Toni Negri in Perspective," < <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj92/callinicos.htm> >.

³⁶ A further limitation that this article is not able to address is the view by Hardt and Negri on the role of the state. They see the state as predominately being a problem to which the multitude might be an alternative. I suggest that the state is a central site of contestation and does offer social movements points of attack. The struggles in Bolivia and Venezuela, for instance, are examples of this. For an even stronger repudiation of the state see: John Holloway, *Changing the World Without Taking Power* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

guards, in addition to the global torso of the industrial workforce).³⁷ The immaterial workforce might also not be as “revolutionary” as Hardt and Negri hope. The gulf between the immaterial laborers and the material, low-skilled labor force is wide. The former often see themselves as upwardly mobile, not in the same structural position as the latter, and it is thus difficult to see them taking on some kind of “vanguard role.” Mario Candeias, for instance, points out with respect to the immaterial labor force, which he labels the “cybercariat,”³⁸ that they

take off the old working class habitus, they are skeptical towards unionisms or refuse it [cybercariat and precariat] occupy very different positions in the production process ... The borders between the spheres for example between a cleaning woman and a computer programmer within the same enterprise, are so fierce, that the different activities are no longer perceived as cooperative relations ... communication between them hardly takes place.³⁹

As such, it might be misleading to privilege a particular class fraction, here immaterial labor. Instead we should take the implications of the absence of one historical agent serious: there is no privileged group. All are equally important and it depends on the particular material context in which relations happen and which—if any—form is “hegemonic in quality.” It then ceases being about an idea and becomes a matter of practice.⁴⁰ Lastly, the conceptualization of the multitude as being (qualitatively) led by immaterial labor also displays a lurking Eurocentrism. While the industrial workers and farmers are declining in the Global North,⁴¹ they still dominate in the Global South. The hegemony of immaterial labor seems even less convincing when employing a global perspective. Dyer-Witherford nicely sums this up, stating that

³⁷ Žižek, for instance, pointed out that the US has not become a post-industrial society but that the industrial working class of the US is in China. Slavoj Žižek, “Why We All Love to Hate Haider,” *New Left Review* 2 (March–April 2000), p. 40. Moreover, farmers and peasant networks such as Via Campesina play a leading role in the alter-globalization movement and in social forums. To be fair, Hardt and Negri do acknowledge the ambiguous role of the peasantry.

³⁸ “Cybercariat” in relation to “precariat” denotes a “group of highly qualified, flexible individuals, working in short-term projects” whereas the precariat denotes the increasing group “under the pressure of growing unemployment a sub-proletariat in insecure labour relations and with low income”; see Mario Candeias, “Double precarisation of labour and reproduction—perspectives of expanded (re)appropriation,” available online at: <www.wem-gehoert-die-welt.de>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Rodrigo Nunes, “Nothing is What Democracy Looks Like: Openness, Horizontality and the Movements of Movements,” in David Harvie, Keir Milburn, Ben Trott and David Watts (eds), *Shut them Down! The G8, Gleneagles 2005 and the Movement of Movements* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2006), Ch. 30, pp. 299–319. That said, immaterial labor and new communication and information technologies are nevertheless of increasing importance as strategic instruments of resistance in that they, for instance, greatly enhance the possibility of forging alliances. For a persuasive account of indymedia and its role in the forging of what Wolfson calls the “Cyber-Left” see: Todd Wolfson, *The Cyber Left: Indymedia and the Making of 21st Century Struggle*, PhD Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, expected 2008.

⁴¹ It should be pointed out that in the Global North “material work” is not exchanged for “immaterial work” but rather for low-paid, low-skilled mostly material service sector work.

[t]he new circuits of capital ... look a lot less “immaterial” and “intellectual” to the female and Southern workers.⁴²

The suggestion that capital and class relations are the “elephant in the room” can also be indicated empirically. With respect to the social forum, we can first point to the findings of many ethnographic accounts on Latin American social movements, which is not by accident the birthplace of the WSF. These accounts have been challenging the notion that capital and class-based relations are fading away. Charles Hale, for instance, summarizes that

this polarized debate—between postmodern theoretical innovation and materialist reassertion—has grown steadily less important ... Most of the interesting, forward-looking research already has its sights squarely beyond this divide.⁴³

Similarly, the World Social Forum Charter of Principles underlines the anti-capitalist orientation, stating in its First Principle that the participants in forums have to be “opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.”⁴⁴ The Charter, which defines the nature of social forums, thus expresses belief in the underlying importance of the capitalist matrix.

Finally, social forum activists themselves stress an anti-capitalist outlook, while also bridging the line to other struggles and structures of domination. Corinna Genschel exemplifies this view, pointing out that

the Berlin Social Forum acts anti-capitalist without calling it that ... There is no priority in the sense that we say class is more important than race or gender but as a feminist it is quite clear to me that the capitalist value logic is the key. This hollow anti-neoliberal discourse without referencing capitalism is really getting on my nerves. Neoliberalism is capitalism and that is the key.⁴⁵

Genschel’s statement shows both the realization that capitalism is “the key” and the difficult balance to strike between the capitalist structure and the diverse struggles.⁴⁶ On the other side of the globe, Luis,⁴⁷ a social forum activist from Buenos Aires (Argentina), argued similarly that

we do not want to streamline all these groups and movements at the WSF but for me and for many ... almost all people I talk to, the root of evil is capitalism. We are fighting for indigenous rights but I know we have to fight capitalism.⁴⁸

⁴² Dyer-Witheford, *op. cit.*, p. 504.

⁴³ Charles Hale, “Cultural Politics of Identity in Latin America,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997), p. 570, cited in Wolfson, *op. cit.*, Intro.

⁴⁴ Principle 1 of the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2>.

⁴⁵ Interview with Corinna Genschel (Berliner Social Forum/Kontaktstelle Soziale Bewegungen), Berlin, September 8, 2007. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁴⁶ This also supports Kandal’s argument that the “ideological and political struggles against ‘class reductionism’ have succeeded too well [...] resulting in what amounts to gender and race/ethnic reductionism.” See Terry Kandal, “Gender, Race & Ethnicity: Let’s not Forget Class,” *Race, Gender & Class* 2:2 (1995), p. 143, cited in Gimenez, “Marxism and Class, Gender and Race,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Luis is a pseudonym since s/he asked that s/he remain anonymous.

⁴⁸ Interview “Luis,” Buenos Aires (Argentina), November 5, 2006. (Translation from original Spanish.)

In sum, treating capitalism as exogenous to the analysis or merely as one amongst many structures of domination when looking at contemporary social movements seems to generate a flawed image of them as it renders the actors as having no class interests. Society has certainly not achieved classlessness and therefore it is deceiving to examine social movements as if classes as real social cleavages have ceased to exist.

Consequently, many contemporary social movement approaches are not able to examine the linkages amongst contemporary social movements, their particular struggles, and neoliberal capitalism, seeing merely a “creative cacophony.” What these approaches are unable to capture is that the often apparently particularist demands and assertions of identity are, in fact, a response to neoliberal capitalism threatening or denying their existence. These linkages and the emerging “plural unity,” as one observer stated aptly, are

based on the link between local, national and global struggles, conducted by social movements and non-governmental organizations united by the belief [in] a society liberated from the forms of exclusion, exploitation, oppression, discrimination and environmental destruction that by and large characterize capitalism and which neoliberal globalization has helped to aggravate.⁴⁹

While the emerging formations and instantiations are not yet clear we can identify three principles of the emerging logic of social movement based resistance: first, there is no central actor or political protagonist in 21st century struggles—indigenous, environmental, feminist or labor movements are all essential; consequently, second, no social actor is able to contest the contemporary form of globalization alone and thus movements and groups have to overcome their isolation and to create a “plural unity” of multiple constituencies through novel organizational structures and operational strategies, based in part on new media and communication technologies; and third, what these autonomous movements fundamentally share is their common resistance to neoliberal capitalism.

In line with Hardt and Negri, the key question facing emancipatory groups and movements is thus the production of manifold relations amongst them to discover what they call “the common” in order to “communicate and act together.”⁵⁰ The above section suggested that the commonality of the multitude or what I am calling the “plural unity” is grounded in the underlying capital and class relations that link their diverse struggles. The remainder of this article analyzes a core strategic instrument of the alter-globalization movement in these attempts: social forums.

Social Forums as Resistance Relays

Presently, many movements seek linkages and alliances to overcome fragmentation and to define lines of collective struggles. Alliances are related to questions of productive property but invariably address issues of culture and politics as well. Social forums are core sites in these struggles over alliances, linkages and convergences. Many social forum activists regard the forging of linkages as crucial

⁴⁹ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The Rise of the Global Left: The World Social Forum and Beyond* (London: Zed Books, 2006), p. x.

⁵⁰ Hardt and Negri, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

and as one of the central aims of social forums. As one of the core organizers of the Social Forum in Germany, Heiko Lietz emphasized:

the interlinking is a necessary condition to work on and for fundamental social change and for this process the social forum matrix is ideal.⁵¹

Similarly, Lothar Wentzel from the Industrial Union of Metalworkers (IG-Metall) pointed out that

social forums are necessary to become more active in generating coalitions [and] to find new forms to be able to structurally oppose capital.⁵²

Not only are both activists quite explicit about the anti-capitalist aims of interlinking at social forums, calling for “fundamental social change” and “forms to structurally oppose capital,” but they also point to the nature or *raison d’être* of social forums. Social forums are not a new movement or substitute movement but have to be understood as a strategic instrument of the alter-globalization movements.

The strategic functions that social forums, the “social forum matrix” in Heiko Lietz’s words, aspire to fulfill can be analytically understood as providing transmitter or relay functions.⁵³ Like a relay, social forums try to “open” circuits that are stronger than the social forum’s own current and thus hope to function as a sort of catalyst or amplifier for convergences. Moreover, social forums, like relays, also seek to function as detectors and isolators of “mistakes.” In this sense, mistakes here would be barriers to the realization of commonality and increasing cooperation for a politics of solidarity and towards the formation of a plural unity between movements and groups.

Ohlemacher’s conceptualization of a social relay on the basis of his study of protest groups against low-flying military jets in West Germany in the 1980s is an alternative description of what is called within network studies “brokers.”⁵⁴ For Ohlemacher, social relays are

⁵¹ Interview with Heiko Lietz (Kirche von Unten [Church from below], co-organizer of the Social Forum in Germany), Schwerin, June 24, 2005. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁵² Interview with Lothar Wentzel (Industrie Gewerkschaft Metall, WSF participant and workshop organizer), telephone interview, September 6, 2006. (Author’s translation from German.) IG Metall is the major metalworkers’ union in Germany, representing blue and white collar workers.

⁵³ Generally speaking a relay is an electrical switch that opens a higher-voltage circuit with a lower-voltage signal. Since relays control higher-voltage circuits with a lower input signal they can be regarded as a form of amplifier. With respect to radios, relays are used as devices that receive a signal from a low-power or distant transmitter and retransmit it in order to increase the coverage area. Finally, relays are also used to detect and isolate mistakes on the transmission and distribution line.

⁵⁴ Ohlemacher’s conception relies on Jeremy Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulation and Coalitions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974). Boissevain argues that a relay functions by “receiving, decoding, selecting, a new channel, recording and transmitting to the next link in the path who acted similarly” (p. 152).

protest-proliferating contexts of networks . . . in the process of protest mobilization [and] act as the fertile ground where seeds of protest can germinate and then as a catalyst for mobilization efforts to flourish beyond the networks.⁵⁵

I am adapting and extending Ohlemacher's original conception of social relay—or what I am, in the context of the social forums, calling “resistance relay”—to more adequately understand the—potential—relay function of social forums.⁵⁶ In line with his conceptualization, social forums provide the organizational context of the diverse groups and movements, function to connect networks and groups, and seek to spread the mobilization outside the immediate social forum realm. Whereas he provides a neutral understanding of a social relay, “resistance relay” denotes the direction of its generative function. Resistance relays are defined by the three principles that make up the emerging new logic identified above: no central actor, need for interlinkages, opposition to neoliberal capitalism. These elements are deeply ingrained in its design and define its relay character.

Moreover, we can point to an additional dimension, absent from Ohlemacher's conception. Resistance relays function as practices and visions over social change. This dimension of a relay emphasizes social forums as a medium for (self-) reflexivity of groups and movements in order to work on and overcome barriers to cooperation and convergences and to the (self-) identification of commonalities so that groups and movements are able to identify their common antagonistic interests. Here, the relay functions pre-figuratively and on the basis of a horizontal and radical participatory understanding of democracy.

As such, social forums are testing grounds and amplifiers for novel and innovative practices and visions over social change. Many activists and participants believe that it is precisely the way groups and movements engage, learn from, and transform each other that foreshadow how the politics and the world beyond neoliberal capitalism could look. As members of the direct action group “Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army” put it

[a] politics that sees no separation between means and ends. To paraphrase Gandhi, we want to be the change we want to see in the world.⁵⁷

The following discusses the four dimensions of social forum relays.

⁵⁵ Thomas Ohlemacher, “Bridging People and Protest: Social Relays of Protest Groups against Low-Flying Military Jets in West Germany,” *Social Problems* 43:2 (May 1996), p. 201.

⁵⁶ Ohlemacher identifies institutions, organizations, or associations such as churches, universities, parties, sport clubs, groups (e.g., women's groups, lobbying organizations) as potential relays and argues that a social relay is characterized by three core elements or dimensions. First, social relays are important organizational environments or contexts and “institutional grounding of several face-to-face networks.” Second, social relays connect formerly unconnected groups, movements, or networks by functioning as a transmitter or switchboard between them. As such they generate new networks, activities, and cooperation and convergences or “charge” pre-existing contacts also in new ways. Third, social relays tend to “spread the mobilization of networks outside themselves” (Ohlemacher, *op. cit.*, p. 201).

⁵⁷ Colonel Klepto and Major Up Evil, “The Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army Goes To Scotland Via a Few Other Places,” in Harvie *et al.*, *op. cit.*, Ch. 21, p. 247.

1. Social Forums as Organizational Context

Social forums make up the immediate organizational context of participating groups, movements and networks during the days of the actual social forum event. While obviously only a fraction of them are able to attend, for instance, the World Social Forum, many of them come together at regional, national, or local forums. In contrast to the multiday social forum events, social forums at the local level often meet regularly in "open space plenums." The Berlin Social Forum (BSF) in Germany, for instance, meets on a monthly basis. Its activists, participants and sympathizers and their respective groups are relying on email and the Internet in-between these meetings for disseminating information or announcements. As such, the BSF provides an organizational context for various groups and movements active in the Berlin area.

The organizational context of social forums is laid out in the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum,⁵⁸ which was drafted after the first WSF by the eight groups that made up the organizational committee.⁵⁹ It is based on a politics of open-space and inclusiveness, conducive to the production of dialogues and discussions, tolerance and openness amongst participating movements and groups.⁶⁰ The only precondition for participation is to abide by the deliberatively vague principles set out in the Charter, which defines a social forum as an

open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism.⁶¹

The Charter also constitutes the WSF as not being a representative body (Principle 5) and as such the WSF does not regard itself as a "locus of power to be disputed" (Principle 6). Social forums seek to generate contacts and linkages amongst the diversity of movements and actors at "levels from the local to the international to build another world" (Principle 8).

Today, social forums around the globe explicitly state that they rely on the WSF Charter of Principles and thus self-identify with the broader social forum process. The Berlin Social Forum for instance states that

[d]rawing on central elements of the "Charter of Principles" of the WSF of Porto Alegre we formulate the following guidelines as the basis of our political cooperation.⁶²

⁵⁸ Charter of the World Social Forum, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2>.

⁵⁹ Abong, ATTAC, CBJP, Cives, CUT, Ibase, MST, Social Network for Justice and Human Rights. They also established an International Council (IC) of the WSF by "invitation."

⁶⁰ For a similar argument, see Geoffrey Pleyers, "The Social Forums as an Ideal Model of Convergence," *International Social Science Journal* 56 (December 2004), pp. 507–517.

⁶¹ Principle 1 of the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2>.

⁶² Available online at: <<http://www.sozialforum-berlin.de>>. (Author's translation from German.)

The five guidelines ("Create a Network," "Relate to Each Other," "Learn from Each Other," "Realize Solidarity Practically," and "Against Rightwing Critique of Globalization: For Social Equality and Security, same Rights for all People in their Diversity, Solidarity"), express with more direct relation to the local specificities of the metropolitan area of Berlin as well as Germany, the Principles of the Charter of Porto Alegre. The BSF stresses the positive experiences from non-hierarchical cooperation and the self-understanding of the BSF as public and open political space, which seeks to provide coordination and support for the various initiatives of the groups as well as to draw in more and more groups and individuals.

In sum, the organizational context is based on a "thin" articulation of a common ground embodied in the Charter. The key element is the social forum's "open space method,"⁶³ which is aimed at allowing for discussions "as a productive process,"⁶⁴ at creating convergences for action through democratic and radically participatory means, and strengthening and producing national and international links amongst groups and movements (Principle 13). Finally, it calls on groups and movements to "situate their actions, from the local level to the national level and seeking participation in international contexts" (Principle 14).

2. Social Forums as Connecting, Charging, and Spreading

Bringing groups and movements together that might not even have been aware of each other, generating linkages, facilitating networks to grow, and spreading mobilization outside the immediate social forum space is arguably social forums' true(st) *raison d'être*. The WSF Charter emphasizes the social forum's role as a "place for [...] interlinking for effective action by groups and movements" (Principle 1), capturing the function of social forums as relay. This short two-page document frequently uses terms such as "interrelating," "interlinkages," "creating links," "exchange," "meeting," "circulation," and "bring together."⁶⁵

The relay nature is enabled through the non-decision-making character of social forums. Principle 6 of the Charter states that social forum meetings

do not deliberate on behalf of the WSF as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body.⁶⁶

The Charter does, however, call on the participating organizations and groups to

deliberate on declarations or actions [and that the WSF] undertakes to circulate such decisions widely by the means at its disposal, without directing, hierarchizing, censuring or restricting them, but as deliberations of the organizations or groups of organizations that made the decisions.⁶⁷

⁶³ WSF International Council, document, 2003, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2>.

⁶⁴ See <<http://www.sozialforum-berlin.de>>.

⁶⁵ World Social Forum Charter of Principles, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Principle 6 of *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Principle 7 of *Ibid.*

The aim of the non-decision-making character of social forums is to uphold the open nature of forums and to encourage frank debates. The hope is also that the multitude of movements and groups will congregate without fear for their own autonomy, preventing closure and the reproduction of past experiences. The novelty and strength of the non-decision-making character of the social forum model, lies in the possibility to

say we first talk and discuss with each other without being constantly under pressure to be in complete agreement afterwards. But we distill out where the commonalities are and we do that in an honest way.⁶⁸

On the basis of the non-decision-taking character, social forums aim to connect networks and groups mainly through two dynamics. Firstly, through connecting and deepening networks, movements and groups at particular social forums and, secondly, through widening of the social forum idea by increasing the number of social forums on various levels around the globe. Both dynamics also facilitate and aim to spread awareness, mobilizations, and connections beyond the immediate social forum realm.

2.1. Connecting formerly unconnected and charging existing groups at social forums

At and through social forums, linkages and exchanges are forged and generated between groups and movements that were not aware of each other. One participant at the European Social Forum in Athens in 2006 pointed out that social forums encourage you to “go to events that you normally don’t go to”⁶⁹—events that are offered by and draw attention to issues that are not necessarily and readily connected to a particular movements’ or groups’ immediate concerns. Various new and innovative connections and possibilities thus open up. For instance, Lothar Wentzel, a union activist and long-time World Social Forum participant explained that

if I offer an event, on for instance educational work of union members, at the World Social Forum then people come together in Porto Alegre, which I would otherwise never get at one table, people I don’t know. A unionist from Nigeria comes, and one from Thailand and another from Indonesia with which you would not have any contacts through the official channel ... this possibility to create networks we do not have otherwise.⁷⁰

The necessity for creating linkages beyond former boundaries is emphasized by virtually all social forum participants and activists. However, as Wentzel’s interventions show, it is still much easier to create contacts along issue or organizational lines—in his case labor unions. While this does provide for new contacts it is limiting the transversal interactions. A participant at the WSF in 2005, for instance, emphasized the need for cross-sector networking, saying that the

⁶⁸ Interview with Philip Hersel (Blue 21), Berlin, August 25, 2006. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁶⁹ Interviewee asked to remain anonymous, Athens (Greece), May 5, 2006. (Author’s translation.)

⁷⁰ Wentzel, *op. cit.*

[q]uestion of international networking is of such immense practical importance that I think these social forums have a chance to be an instrument for a long time; in particular since there is nothing better on the horizon. Well, concerning issue-areas there are networks but this all-encompassingness that which goes beyond the individual interests, that bundles and links certain questions—the practical necessity is there.⁷¹

While still limited along sectorial lines, Achim Neumann's experience from the European Social Forum (ESF) in Athens in 2006 is illuminating the practical necessity of connecting "similar" but formerly unconnected groups. Neumann is a shop steward with Ver.di focusing on work precariousness.⁷² Not long before my interview with Neumann, Ver.di put out the *The Black Book on Lidl in Europe: Schwarz Retail Company—Selling Cheap at the Employees' Expense* in various languages.⁷³ Achim Neumann recalled:

[W]e had an information stand in the big entrance hall of the conference center where everyone was. Hundreds, thousands of people passed our stand and acknowledged us and many came to us and asked what is going on? In particular people from Turkey but who I have never met before and would not have known of, who heard about the "Black Book on Lidl" and have then looked into German companies who are operating in Turkey—the German "Metro Group"⁷⁴ is in Turkey—and they found out that the conditions are not different from Lidl, who are not in Turkey, yet. These were very interesting encounters with people who said we definitely want to keep on being informed about what is happening because we are sure that in the near future, Lidl will also come to Turkey and then we want to be ready for them. So, I think what is happening already is great; they act before they have to react once the joint is there and normally they open with 15, 20 or 25 branches at the same time.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Interview, Porto Alegre, Brazil, January 29, 2005. (Author's translation from French.)

⁷² Ver.di is the abbreviation for Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft, [United Services Union]. Ver.di is one of the largest individual trade unions in the world with roughly 2.4 million members. Ver.di organizes employees in over 1,000 different trades and professions; see <http://international.verdi.de/ver.di_fremdsprachig/was_ist_ver.di_-_eine_einfuehrung_auf_englisch>.

⁷³ Andreas Hamann and Gudrun Giese, *The Black Book on Lidl in Europe: Schwarz Retail Company—Selling Cheap at the Employees' Expense* (Ver.di, 2006). Lidl is Germany's biggest discount supermarket chain based in Germany. Lidl has circa 74,000 stores in 23 European countries and generated a profit of Euro 40 billion in 2005. As the *Black Book's* foreword points out, "Globalization means one thing to Lidl: high profits at low costs" and as such, the book documents how Lidl places its workers under great pressure, forcing its workforce to work overtime and uses every possible tool to prevent workers organization. The most publicized scandal involving Lidl has been the media reported Lidl policies in the Czech Republic where women workers had to wear special headbands during their monthly periods, to be able to visit the toilet during working hours. Without this means of identification, they were confined to their cash registers or other work stations just like everyone else, until the next scheduled break. Lidl denies that this has ever happened. See <http://www.union-network.org/UNISITE/Sectors/Commerce/Multinationals/Lidl_Black_Book_in_English.htm>.

⁷⁴ The Metro AG or Metro Group is a trade- and retail-company and the second largest retailer in Europe after Carrefour. It has roughly 290,000 employees at 24,000 outlets in 31 countries in Europe, Africa and Asia; see <http://www.metrogroup.de/servlet/PB/menu/-1_I2_ePRJ-METRODE-TOPLEVEL/index.html>.

⁷⁵ Interview with Achim Neumann (Ver.di; ESF participant and workshop organizer), Berlin, June 27, 2006. (Author's translation from German.)

As Neumann's experience and interpretation shows, social forums provide the infrastructure for extended communications between formerly unconnected groups. In this case the ESF functioned as a relay, transmitting the struggle and experience of the German anti-Lidl-Campaigners to activists in Turkey. As the experience of Achim Neumann shows, the relations he and Ver.di were starting to build due to their encounters at the ESF might usher into new networks and spread in the context of Turkey to networks outside themselves.

Philip Hersel stressed another central element of how social forums as relays can charge pre-existing networks. Hersel works on third world debt relief and he describes how there are many differences between the various groups working on this issue, not only in terms of size and organizational capacity but also with respect to strategies. For instance, activists disagree on whether to demand debt forgiveness for all countries or at first merely for the highly indebted poor countries. With respect to the social forum idea and the common workshops that the broader debt-movement organized, Hersel pointed out that the innovative element of social forums is that

it is first of all a platform for exchange, explicitly not with the necessity to conclude with an agreement or with a winner ... The idea of political co-existence first and then in a second step cooperation has really helped to lower these conflicts ... We can firstly merely talk with each other without the pressure of having to agree completely at the end. But rather that you distill out where you have commonalities and where they are you can constructively work together.⁷⁶

However, while many positively stress the unconstrained environment, which has generated new networks, there have also been disappointments. Several activists stress that forums should be organized more effectively. As Wentzel pointed out,

we have to design them more to take up specific contact demands while at the same time bringing groups and movements together that do not work on and within the same field. There is a tendency to only meet up with those groups that work on similar issues than your own.⁷⁷

Wentzel's quote exemplifies the difficulty in bridging and interlinking the diverse groups and issue areas on the basis of the "open space method."⁷⁸ In an attempt to improve on that, the organizers of the WSF 2005 set up five "transversal themes," which were meant to function "as 'horizons' and concerns common to the debate."⁷⁹ But still, some activists believe that a moderator role might be helpful, in particular in those cases where there are no networks or where the issue-area movement is split. As Philip Hersel explained

where international networks are missing, where tensions exist or where they are split, a neutral moderation would be needed.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Hersel, *op. cit.*

⁷⁷ Wentzel, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ Many difficulties with the "open space method" are reminiscent of Jo Freeman's critiques in "The Tyranny of Structurlessness," available online at: <<http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>>.

⁷⁹ See <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=eixo_transv_2005_ing>.

⁸⁰ Hersel, *op. cit.*

While debate and the defense of the “open space method” has been prominent at the World Social Forum,⁸¹ local forums have often taken a more pragmatic and context specific take on it as I shall discuss below.

2.2. Proliferation of social forums around the globe

The ongoing proliferation, adaptation and transformation of social forums around the globe is a second central dynamic to foster connections and linkages amongst groups and movements. The primary identification factor of this “globalization of the forum idea” is an open subscribing to the Charter of Principles. On the basis of this charter, autonomous social forums have taken place on all levels, from the continental to the local level.⁸² They are considered as being “part of a process of construction and universalization of the World Social Forum.”⁸³

In particular the local forums are regarded as crucial for many activists and social forum participants, emphasizing the necessity to “ground” the World Social Forum and the social forum idea locally. As Philipp, a member of *Antifaschistische Linke Berlin* [Anti-Fascist Left]⁸⁴ and participant in the Berlin Social Forum emphasized

local social forum have to emerge out of the international social forum movement. The World and European Social Forum with their ideas of another world have to be tied to the local. They [social forums] have to receive a foundation in a continuous discussion process. We have to avoid a concentration of the discussion on the large events. But the international reference stays important.⁸⁵

⁸¹ This debate is often described as being between “horizontal” and “vertical.” Two attempts to move the WSF forward with more “vertical” programmatic documents are informally known as the “Porto Alegre Manifesto” (2005) and “Proposals of the Bamako Appeal.” None of them received much substantive support and the decision seems to be tacitly resolved not in terms of “either or” but “both.” See for instance: Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Dilemmas of Open Space: The Future of the WSF,” *International Social Science Journal* 56:182 (December 2004); Nunes, *op. cit.*

⁸² Continental social forums have taken place on all continents. Various regional forums have been organized such as the Mahgreb Social Forum, the Mediterranean Social Forum, the Midwest Social Forum (USA), Southern African Social Forum, as well as multiple national social forums such as several editions of the Brazil Social Forum, Chile Social Forum, Danish Social Forum, Social Forum in Germany, and most recently the US-Social Forum in Atlanta in June 2007. Local forums have also mushroomed since 2001, including forums in Berlin, Chicago, Genoa, Houston, Quebec, Rio de Janeiro, or Sydney. Finally, there have been many Thematic Social Forums (such as Border Social Forum in Juarez, Migration Social Forum), which were co-sponsored by the International Council in order to “attend to demands for more thorough investigations of debates to specific issues” (Regional and Thematic Social Forums, June 8, 2002, available online at: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/main.php?id_menu=11&cd_language=2>).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ “Antifaschistische Linke Berlin” (ALB) stands for the Anti-Fascist Left Berlin. It is the most influential anti-fascist (antifa) group in Germany. ALB is a more radical left group, emphasizing direct action. The goal of ALB politics is to “open spaces for the radical left. Addressees are a broad public, in particular outside their own scene [...] break open the isolation of the radical left, and together with other groups, to increase the formation of the left.” See <www.antifa.de bzw >; <www.antifaschistische-aktion.com> . (Author’s translation from German.)

⁸⁵ Interview with “Philipp” (activist in the Berlin Social Forum and member of Antifa), Berlin, December 10, 2007. (Author’s translation from German.)

Many activists believe that the local level is essential for the future of the global social forum process.⁸⁶ The statement of a networking workshop that was held at the ESF in Athens in 2006 by a group of local social forum activists from all over Europe declares:

We want to stress that if the aim is to expand the impact of the dynamics of the European and World Social Forums, this depends also on the existence and quality of many local social forums. We are convinced that the future of the social forum process can only be answered by maintaining a bottom up approach.⁸⁷

Corinna Genschel, from the Berlin Social Forum and participant in the ongoing networking attempts between various local social forums, echoed this perspective,⁸⁸ and pointed to the relationship between forums at the macro and those at the micro level. She argued that there is

a break between something like local work and the superordinate levels, or well, actually not superordinate at all [...] local forums act in very concrete political constellations with concrete actors whereas at these broader gatherings you are with the other actors on a more abstract level and then you are also concerned with different themes and issues and the connection ... the attempt to link local and global is extremely difficult ... it is obvious [the link between global and local] but how do you do that?⁸⁹

Genschel's interpretation also points to the (necessary) adaptability and transformability of the social forum idea and logic. The localization of the WSF also leads to adaptations in terms of organizational context, strategy, and trajectory. Many local social forums on a city or metro-regional level have institutionalized their particular social forum as a permanent space for meetings, debates, networking, strategizing, and actions, convening on a monthly basis. The pace and rhythms of the individual local social forums differ according to the particular circumstances.

Social forums also differ substantially in terms of success in drawing in diverse movements and groups (ranging roughly from eight to 80 regular participants) or their interpretations and adherence to the methods and spirit of the WSF. For instance, many local social forums take decisions and issue statements in the name of the respective local social forum. As such, local social forums are often a mixture of space (e.g., Bremen Social Forum, Ivry Social Forum) and actors (e.g., Dortmund Social Forum, Berlin Social Forum). "It is often difficult," Genschel pointed out, "to uphold the 'pure' teachings of the open space since there is continuous demand for decisions and actions."⁹⁰ At some forums this has led to

⁸⁶ Conversion with amongst others, Jose Ramos (activist and co-founder Melbourne Social Forum as well as the Southern California Social Forum Initiative), at the Polycentric World Social Forum, Caracas (Venezuela), January 23, 2006.

⁸⁷ "Statement from Participants in Local Social Forums Gathered in Athens ESF May 2006," presented and retrieved at the European Social Forum, Athens (Greece), May 7, 2006.

⁸⁸ These networking attempts include national local social forum networks in, for instance, Germany and the United Kingdom, a European Local Social Forum participant network, which was set up at the European Social Forum in London in 2004, as well as a global regional social forum network. A detailed analysis of these networking attempts is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

⁸⁹ Genschel, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

either substantial decreases in participation, the full dissolution of a number of local social forums, or the domination by a particular current.⁹¹ While arguably for many social forum activists the idea of open space is “always in the back of the head to prevent a drift back into old alliance politics,”⁹² others are unsure about the future of their particular social forum and its organizational logic. At the local Berlin level, several activists expressed their disappointment with the little progress. As Axel Strasser explained in 2007

politically nothing is happening anymore at the BSF ... the contemporary structure of the BSF does not work and I do not have any ideas on what to do at this point. The first couple of years the social forum idea worked. We were able to generate action alliances for instance against the Berlin banking scandal, against college tuition or against the privatization of the Berlin Water Company. But these kind of alliances are not happening anymore.⁹³

Strasser is quite defeatist in his critique of the Berlin Social Forum. Other BSF activists propose to rethink the orientation of the BSF, which suffers under the decreasing number of activists. Rainer Wahls, for instance, located the problem at the BSF in the fact that

those that are left are not homogeneous enough to be a group but at the same time too homogenous to be an alliance of different groups. As such we have to decide whether the social forum merely wants to bring groups together or whether it wants to become active as a group.⁹⁴

Similarly, Genschel the second co-founder who recently withdrew from the BSF, pointed out that

the BSF does not have enough active people and thus it is not what it is supposed to be. We are not able to bring different political and social projects together for a sustained period of time. Each initiative is so engaged and overexposed with their own work that it is too much work for many to also engage in the social forum.⁹⁵

The limited number of active participants, the overexposure of many of them as well as the dual nature of the Berlin Social Forum as being an actor- (and) -space, where activists are wearing two hats, the one of their “home” group or movement as well as the one of the BSF, has led to exhaustion of many of them. Moreover, the BSF, as Wahls suggests, has not been able to sustain a critical mass of continuous participants. Neither are the BSF participants linked thickly enough

⁹¹ For instance, several local social forums in Italy, which have been an inspiration for many social forums throughout Europe, are now defunct. The Tri-State Social Forum (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania) has been dominated by two groups (CATA and COYOC) and has thus prevented or deterred other groups from taking part in that particular event (discussion with Philadelphia based activists; participant observation, field-notes and discussions with participants from various local social forums at the ESF in Athens; the workshop “Regional social forum initiative” in Caracas; the regional social forum meetings in Germany).

⁹² “Reader zum bundesweiten 1. Treffen der lokalen Sozialforen, 27.–29. January 2006 in Bremen,” p. 22. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁹³ See <<http://www.sozialforum-berlin.de>>. (Author’s translation from German.)

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Email exchange, November 16, 2007. (Author’s translation from German.)

to become a group in and of themselves nor are they linked widely enough to connect enough groups and movements in Berlin and to successfully function as a resistance relay. Nevertheless, the majority of participants were clearly in favor of upholding the Berlin Social Forum. During early 2008 BSF plenums, participants agreed to concentrate the BSF's work on citywide problems thereby bringing groups and movements together around one set of issues. In addition, participants agreed to more strongly emphasize the profile of the Berlin Social Forum as part of the protest movement against the "neoliberal modernization of global capitalism" and to stress that the social forum idea is a "reaction against the crisis of the party-based politics of representation."⁹⁶

The proliferation of social forums around the globe on the basis of the novel logic of social forums laid down in the Charter has generated a multileveled social forum process. This process shows that place and context-specific praxis matters. Janet Conway nicely summarizes the implications when she writes:

[w]herever the world event is organized, it enacts its own culturally-specific, geographically rooted social movement processes. This makes for significantly different World Social Forums and is critical to deepening the international, multicultural, and inter-civilizational character of the global process and the possibility for genuinely dialogical encounters among movements across difference. Every edition of the World Social Forum is "placed" but transnational. The world-wide process is made up of myriad place-based processes, indisputably localized but both taken as a whole and in many of its constitutive parts, characterized by an expanding globality.⁹⁷

3. *Spreading the Mobilization of Networks Outside Themselves*

A further central dimension of relays is the ability to spread ideas, connections, and mobilizations to groups and constituencies outside the direct confines of social forums. Put differently, this dimension also asks in what way, as Samir Amin put it, "does the World Social Forum benefit popular struggles?"⁹⁸

A fairly successful field in this regard and frequently discussed at social forums has been solidarity economy initiatives such as "community-supported agriculture," "community currencies and barter systems," "cooperative ownerships," "fair trade programs," and "rethinking corporate structures."⁹⁹ Jackie Smith and her collaborators for instance, stress the spreading function of social

⁹⁶ SFB Email, "Einige Thesen für heute Abend," March 19, 2008.

⁹⁷ Janet Conway, "The Empire, the Movement, and the Politics of Scale: Considering the World Social Forum," paper prepared for *Towards a Political Economy of Scale: Studies in the Political Economy Conference*, York University, February 3–5, 2005, available online at: <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=159>; see also: Janet Conway, "Reading Nairobi: Place, Space, and Difference at the 2007 World Social Forum," *Societies Without Borders* 3 (2008), pp. 48–71.

⁹⁸ Cited in Alex Callinicos and Chris Nineham, "At an Impasse? Anti-capitalism and the Social Forums Today," *International Socialism: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Theory* 115 (July 2, 2007), available online at: <<http://isj.org.uk/index.php?id=337&issue=115>>.

⁹⁹ Participating observation at various social forums; Rosalba Icaza, Rolando Vazquez, Jackie Smith, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Donatella Della Porta *et al.*, *Global Democracy and the World Social Forum* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), p. 117.

forums. They highlight the establishment at the first World Social Forum of the Global Network of the Solidarity Socioeconomy.¹⁰⁰

In addition, many activists stress that the planning phase leading up to the multiday gatherings of, for instance, the World Social Forum event, are also central to the ongoing attempts to forge linkages and to build trust between various movements. As one activist put it:

The process in between forums is actually the decisive condition. The event itself is important but for, so to speak, a kind of continuous networking and robust communication paths, which go beyond the forum event, it is crucial to do things together and prepare them before the forum event, then also follow up, meet up at other opportunities and thus create a permanent process.¹⁰¹

As such, participating groups, movements and unions from Germany, for instance, have coordinated their activities at the WSF since the second forum in 2002. This coordination encompasses arrangements about shared activities and initiatives. As Manfred Brinkmann pointed out to me

I believe this is something unique, what we practice in Germany; that we try to prepare and come up with a national coordination of participants of very diverse groups at the World Social Forum.¹⁰²

Out of this social forum inspired coordination, Brinkman explains, “common events emerged, bilateral between unions and individual NGOs or several NGOs.”¹⁰³

Furthermore and since its inception, a central part of social forums is the “Assembly of Social Movements,” which over the span of the respective social forum provides a platform for all participating social movements to present their struggles, alternatives and cultures in order to build and strengthen multileveled international networks to struggle against Neoliberalism.¹⁰⁴ During their final meetings, these 200 plus movements and movement networks agree upon a “Call for Action,” detailing the agreements concerning the upcoming struggles, protests, and resistance strategies. The “Call for Action” included, for instance, mobilization calls to protest meetings of the International Financial Institutions and meetings of heads of state, support for activities, statements, and calls by various movements such as the call by representatives of the Palestinian civil

¹⁰⁰ Solidarity economy approaches emerged in Latin America in the mid-1980s and expanded throughout the 1990s. They discredit the singular view of the profit-oriented market exchange of Neoliberalism, emphasizing instead a plural view of the economy “in which individuals, communities, and organizations generate livelihoods through many different means and with many different motivations and aspirations (Miller 2006),” Icaza *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁹⁹ Hersel, *op. cit.*

¹⁰² Manfred Brinkmann (Political and Educational Coordinator of the DGB and WSF participant and organizer), telephone interview, September 12, 2006. (Author’s translation from German.)

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ The Assembly of Social Movements is not an uncontested part of social forums. In particular the advocates of a strict “open space” conception often point out that the assembly wants to transform the social forum from open space to movement; see: Chico Whitaker, “The WSF As Open Space,” in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar and Peter Waterman (eds), *The World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* (India/South Asia: Viveka Foundation, 2004), pp. 111–121.

society for the “4th Week of National and International Action against the Wall of Apartheid” (November 9–16, 2006), or the “World Women’s March” and the campaign “Women say No to War” organized days of feminist action against the tyranny of the free market and war on March 8, 2007. The most well-known event was arguably the large Anti-Iraq War demonstrations on February 15, 2003 shortly before the US-led attack on Iraq, when in 60 plus countries and circa 300 cities roughly 15 million people took to the streets to demonstrate against the upcoming war. This protest was conceived and facilitated through the “Assembly of Social Movements Call for Action” at the ESF in Florence in November 2002.¹⁰⁵ Further mobilization took place at the following WSF in Porto Alegre in 2003. With circa 5,000 organizations present, the call was spreading quickly throughout the globe, utilizing the networks of which the multilevel social forums are crucial nodes, to organize this massive global protest.¹⁰⁶

However, for many activists, social forums have not been able to reach (enough) beyond their direct confines. As one activist put it

[a] mobilization for a mass movement, which many have dreamed of, has not really happened as of now.¹⁰⁷

Others on the other hand regard the recent electoral victories in Latin America, but also those for left parties in Europe, as having been in part powered by the coming together of social movements and groups. For them, social forum relays are also part of these successes. Moreover, many activists stress the “newness” of social forums and that it is too early to pass a final judgment. Jürgen Reichel, a member of the WSF International Council, pointed out that

it takes an incredibly long time. Well, if you think about how long it took within the nation-state to produce something akin to civil society and like-minded communities, so how long this [social forum convergence] takes and that this needs a certain form of continuity and institutionalization, with what kind of demand can you seriously believe that today and on the global scale after only five or six years of World Social Forums we should be a significant step further ... seriously, to believe after ten years to simply stop to make the World Social Forum, because it does not lead to anything, you can say that maybe after 30 or 50 years. ... There is no alternative and I think the people who attend and participate in social forums always also come back home full of energy and new ideas. This character, the forum has to stay.¹⁰⁸

In addition, many activists regard the social forum in itself not only as a means but as an end in itself. This prefigurative understanding of politics is a core part of the final dimension of social forum relays to which I now turn.

¹⁰⁵ Janet Conway, *Identity, Place, Knowledge: Social Movements Contesting Globalization* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2004), p. 256.

¹⁰⁶ “The Day the World Said No to War on Iraq,” *Socialist Worker*, available online at: <http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=3323>.

¹⁰⁷ Interviewee requested to remain anonymous.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Jürgen Reichel, representative on the International Council for APROVED and CIDSE, Berlin, September 18, 2006. (Author’s translation from German.) APRODEV (Association of World Council of Churches Related Development Organizations in Europe, Brussels), is the umbrella organization of the protestant aid organizations in Europe as well as its catholic pendant CIDSE.

4. Social Forums as Practices and Visions over Social Change

A final dimension of resistance relays relates to social forums' use to overcome otherwise existing networking barriers. This is closely linked to social forums' prefigurative and radical participatory understanding of democracy.¹⁰⁹ The World Social Forum Charter of Principles spells out the social forum's understanding of democracy, stating that the WSF upholds

[t]he practices of real democracy, participatory democracy ... in equality and solidarity, among people, ethnicities, genders and peoples, and condemns all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another.¹¹⁰

This understanding of democracy is linked to an understanding of "prefigurative politics,"¹¹¹ prefiguring not an ideal society of the future but a participatory way of practicing politics, articulating the ability of diverse movements to be able to struggle together without a dominant organization or ideology. Ends no longer justify the means but rather the means are in a sense the ends. The Charter enshrines the prefigurative nature of social forums, stating that social forums seek

[t]o introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world of solidarity.¹¹²

Grubacic captures social forums' understanding of prefigurative politics when he describes them as

modes of organization that deliberately demonstrate the world you want to create ... in an effort to think of not only the ideas but the facts of the future itself.¹¹³

As such, social forum politics lie much less in certain definable outcomes or end-products than in shared visions over process, emphasizing autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, and direct democracy, which then allows for the open process of engagement advocated by WSF thriving on local, national, regional, and global linkages. As Williamson reports from her ethnographic research on the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004, the forum is

an end in itself. The "Other World" that is spoken of and the paths for reaching it are being created through the dynamic of the Forum itself ... The World Social Forum is itself part of the solution that its participants are searching for—bring disparate groups together to exchange, grow, and form large networks of solidarity.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ See for instance: C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁰ Principle 9 of the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, *op. cit.*

¹¹¹ David Graeber, "The New Anarchist," *New Left Review* 13 (2002), pp. 61–73.

¹¹² Principle 14 of the World Social Forum Charter of Principles, *op. cit.*

¹¹³ Andrej Grubacic, "Towards Another Anarchism," in Jai Sen *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 37.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Long time social forum activist, Judith Delheim emphasizes this self-making function to detect, isolate and start to break down shortcomings to corporations and alliances. She emphasized that

social forums should be the space where actors can change themselves and also seek more cooperation with the others ... The real and exciting question is whether they learn [social movements and groups]—through it [social forum]—to talk with each other in order to understand what is possible and what is not [to do together]. Well, that would be a huge step. Athens [the European Social Forum in 2006] has sustained that this pedagogical task is taken up.¹¹⁵

A large part of this “self-making” process is the discussions and reflections about the nature and identity of social forums. The search for the *raison d’être* of social forums is evident, for instance, at the Berlin Social Forum. At its plenum debates, in dozens of working groups, seminars, panel debates, as well as in publications by activists and social forum organizers and participants, reasons for why social forums should exist, what the self-understanding, the identity of social forums are, is always a central question. Similarly, on the other side of the globe and on the global level, the Caracas WSF featured co-organized activities devoted to the nature and future of social forums, which aimed to

give visibility to the methods of presenting the debate and to the treatment of the themes that have arisen from the historical process of political accumulation of the World Social Forum.¹¹⁶

The monthly convening of the Manchester Social Forum is another example of this on the local level. The protocol sent out over email of a meeting on February 25, 2006 asked:

Do you think meeting together in the space of the Manchester Social Forum is a useful way of organising actions together in an open and inclusive way?

The main risk that the participants and activists of the Manchester Social Forum saw was

to become just an OTHER group and not a SPACE for the individuals and groups to meet and work together.

Manchester activists exemplify not only the self-reflexive understanding of change but also their understanding of providing a space for groups.

In sum, the experimentation with new modes of convergence on the basis of diversity and on the social forum’s “open-space politics” stands in opposition to historical attempts to forge convergences and collectivities, which were based on *a priori* having more or less detailed alternative “blueprints” worked out. Social forums on the other hand are based on prefigurative politics. That is to say, social

¹¹⁵ Interview with Judith Delheim (co-founder Berlin Social Forum, European Social Forum participant, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, Berlin), Berlin, July 6, 2006. (Author’s translation from German.)

¹¹⁶ Report of the Hemispheric Council meeting, August 14–17, 2006 in Caracas (Venezuela).

forums aspire to non-hierarchical, radically participatory and democratically structured ways of doing politics.

Conclusion

This article suggests that we should take seriously capital and class relations in contemporary instantiations in order to understand the coming together of movements and groups through social forums. Moreover, the article argues that social forums start to function as resistance relays for cooperations, alliances, and convergences. Social forums, while riddled with tensions and challenges, function as a medium and crystallization point of various movements, facilitating the production of relations amongst movements based on their shared opposition to neoliberal capitalism.

Contemporary social movements in general and social forums in particular increasingly act on three principles, which delineate an emerging new logic of social movement based resistance: absence of a central actor, necessity for manifold relations, and common opposition to neoliberal capitalism. Within the broader “movement of movements,” social forums can be understood as strategic instruments to generate linkages and convergences. The linkage attempts of social forum relays are based on three core characteristics: a politics of open space, the non-decision-making character of its meetings, and its prefigurative and radical democratic understanding of politics. These three principles inform social forum based experimentations of combining unity and diversity to produce sufficient common ground to generate politics of solidarity.¹¹⁷ This then also allows for the transformability and adaptability of social forums through time and space. Consequently, social forums are spaces and processes that are constantly being constructed and expanded with contributions and strategies from its plurality—a rocky and crooked process to be sure.¹¹⁸ But despite tensions and challenges that this article could merely allude to and which require more research, social forums, as “emancipatory horizons,” have become a mobilizing force for groups and movements to begin finding paths of resistance and alternatives to neoliberal capitalism in the 21st century.

¹¹⁷ Paul Routledge, “Grassrooting the Imaginary: Acting within the Convergence,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 5:4 (2005), pp. 615–628.

¹¹⁸ Gina Vargas, “WSF 3 and Tensions in the Construction of Global Alternative Thinking,” in Jai Sen *et al.* (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 228–232.

Copyright of New Political Science is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.