

**FROM THE GLOBAL TO THE LOCAL:  
SOCIAL FORUMS, MOVEMENTS, AND PLACE  
(Introduction to Special Issue)**

**Scott C. Byrd**  
*Department of Sociology*  
*University of California, Irvine*  
sbyrd@uci.edu

**Elizabeth Smythe**  
*Department of Political Science*  
*Concordia University College of Alberta*  
elizabeth.smythe@concordia.ab.ca

The history of the modern world-system is characterized not only by the meteoric rise and fall of empires and global elites but also by peoples and movements that have challenged their power and dominance. Globalizing processes working to consolidate and protect transnational capital classes and their state assemblages have been met with fierce opposition throughout these waves by subordinate and threatened groups. The current situation is no different. Since the onset of neoliberal capitalist expansion in the mid-1980s transnational resistance and mobilization around issues such as trade, food sovereignty, war and militarization, human rights, and environmental concerns increased exponentially (Smith 2004b; Smith and Wiest 2005). Fueling this growth are social movements organized from the global to the local that have built solidarity and capacity across borders through a series of global campaigns, transnational gatherings, and high-profile mobilizations. One of the most vibrant examples of transnational activism throughout the last decade has been the World Social Forums (WSF) which originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001. The WSF emerged as a potent transnational mobilizing force within the global justice movement and has provided a space for anti-neoliberal mobilization to flourish.

The World Social Forums represent an ongoing process linking social movement organizations with networks, coalitions, and activists as well as their activities and campaigns the world over. Organizations, movements, and activists engage each other on many levels: they celebrate diversity and generate solidarity; integrate struggles from the local to the global; exchange tactics and strategies; and propose common projects and action plans (Byrd 2005; Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Juris 2008; Smith et al. 2007). Since its inception in January 2001, the WSF has expanded to hundreds of regional, national, and community Forums facilitated by a diverse set of decentralized organizing groups and coalitions (Glasius and Timms 2006; Smythe and Smith this issue). Transnational gatherings such as the WSF promote the integration of local grassroots groups and national civil society organizations into a global civil society whose aim is to create a more democratic, just, and peaceful planet (World Social Forum 2002). These encounters also provide a space for organizations and movements involved in struggles between states and non-state challengers as well as larger states and weaker states to articulate these imbalances and develop strategies to ameliorate those tensions (della Porta et al 2006; Smith 2004a). The WSF has proved especially useful for the formation and work of transnational

networks and coalitions by providing a common space for mobilizing organizations, articulating proposals and projects, and diffusing these mobilizing ideas to participant home countries as well as to other movements and organizations engaged in the Forum process (Reitan 2007; Smith 2008).

This collection of articles seeks to examine the geographic, political, and organizational contours of this expanding process through understanding the diffusion and translation of Social Forum activism in different political and cultural contexts. The special issue begins with a macro-analysis of Social Forum activism and mobilizations throughout the world. From there we have included a series of “on the ground” examinations of the diverse global contours of Social Forum activism: two World Social Forums held in Venezuela and Kenya; a domestic Forum held in Montreal, Quebec; and an account of grassroots Social Forum activism in Italy. We also incorporate a short reflection on nine years of Social Forum activism against the backdrop of the most recent WSF held in January 2009, in Belém, Brazil. At the most basic level, this collection attempts to capture the diversity and multi-level nature of an expanding global process and its relationship to the current economic and political world-system. Empirically, we hope the following articles unpack these transnational movement dynamics and mechanisms in a way that is beneficial to scholars of social movements, globalization, and international relations. Collectively, this project represents an attempt to provide a space for scholars from a diversity of disciplines employing multiple methodologies to describe and explain a complex organizational process evolving at the global, regional, and local levels.

We view this collection and analysis of the WSF as important endeavors because of two basic dynamics that make the Social Forum process unique. On one hand, the WSF as an emerging transnational social movement itself is a reflection of the current global economic and political conjecture, and on the other hand, the WSF as a process has been influenced and translated in very different ways by local, grassroots actors across the globe. For example, the WSF has undergone several organizational and ideological innovations throughout its growth and development (Teivainan 2007) which include: deregionalizing the site of the WSF away from Brazil, including a move to India in 2004, the poly-centric Forums in 2006 (Bamako, Caracas and Karachi), and the African WSF in 2007; shifting to a self-organizing structure and more open thematic consultation process; and most recently the decision to move toward a bi-annual format (holding the WSF every two years). Deregionalizing the WSF made the gatherings more accessible and less expensive for local activist and organizational participation, and in symbolic terms, by expanding outside of South America, the innovations helped legitimate the WSF as a truly global, inclusive process. Furthermore, the move in 2005 to more self-organization and a “horizontal” organizing logic embodied innovations meant to ameliorate tensions over representation and control over Forum events as well as to increase participatory pathways for more open collaboration. But at the same time, not all Forum ideas and innovations are taken up by various local organizing groups who have translated Social Forum ideology to fit their local political and cultural context (as noted by Wood’s article in this issue).

The rise of transnational social movement activity and international non-governmental organizations throughout the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, while impressive, also demonstrates uneven growth across North-South divides and regions (Beckfield 2003; Smith 2004b; Wiest and Smith 2007). A need exists for research on transnational movement linkages, coalition growth patterns, and organizational inequalities within this global network of affiliations. Smith and Smythe’s article provides such an analysis of the transnational contours of

### 3 JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH

Social Forum activism and mobilization. They trace and map the geographic and temporal landscape of Social Forum events and organizations across the globe. We consider this an important endeavor considering the lack of such comprehensive data existing to date. The authors find that Forum activities may be influenced by a number of factors that arise at a regional, country, or local level and be reproduced during such transnational gatherings where variation in resources availability, the nature of political opportunities in a region or country, and the history of linkages to Social Forum activism influence the diffusion and fertility of the “event-process”. Their findings confirm earlier work noting uneven global social justice activism throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, but they also find new patterns of involvement in North America and Europe that highlight important differences in political culture and historical linkages to progressive and leftist traditions.

The next two articles bring to life these tensions over political culture and tradition by tracing the diffusion of Social Forum activism to Quebec, Canada and Caracas, Venezuela. Dufour and Conway begin their examination of the Quebec Social Forum by situating the Social Forum as both an event and a process and then embedding their analysis within the longer history of political mobilization in Quebec, Canada. Planning and organizing this domestic Forum proved to be a long drawn-out, contentious process that exposed many tensions and political schisms within the broader progressive community. By historicizing the Quebec Social Forum they are able to interpret these cleavages and conflicts more adequately and apprehend their larger significance within the Quebec political context. They find that the conflicts that plagued the organizing of the Quebec Social Forum are a reprise of those that appeared in the movements of the late 1990s and came to a head in the 2001 massive demonstrations against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Quebec City. The schisms are more substantive, rather than simple conflicts over tactics and resources, but represent differences over political ethics and democratic practices as well as a fundamental disagreement about how political and societal transformation is created.

Wood’s article traces the diffusion of “horizontalism” within the Intercontinental Youth Camp of the Social Forum from Porto Alegre, Brazil to Caracas, Venezuela. Her initial focus is on the importance of understanding the layers of political context in diffusion processes, and how these contexts become important through the ways that they affect internal debates amongst activists. She finds that while elements of horizontalism are not new, the importance of prefigurative forms of organizing within the Social Forum process and the frame of horizontalism as an identity and a strategy fundamental to its success is. Wood argues that the relational context of Caracas and recent events held in that city (The World Festival of Youth and Students) blocked the diffusion of the horizontalist identity from Porto Alegre to Caracas by limiting the interest and willingness of local activists to engage in discussions of identity and strategy. The next two articles while looking at similar issues of identity and diffusion focus in on the organizational dynamics of the movements themselves while also examining framing dynamics and issues of legitimacy, representation, and voice.

della Porta and Mosca’s contribution of the Italian case finds that the Social Forum process there maintains strong local roots but also has differential effects on movement organizational models and collective identities at the domestic level. They show how local Social Forums, serving as arenas for exchanging ideas, play a cognitive role in the import, but also the translation, of new movement ideas and innovations. Through cross-fertilization among different movement families and by spreading a method of working together that becomes part of the

repertoire of action with local social movement organizations, these local, community-based Forums build dense organizational networks and more tolerant activist identities. Their extensive ethnographic methodology provides rich, “on the ground” experiences and findings that highlight, with greater empirical detail, some of the same tensions and issues only alluded to in other research on the World Social Forums or within the broader global justice movement.

The final article by Pommerolle and Simeant is also a rich ethnographic examination; this time, of the 2007 World Social Forum held in Nairobi, Kenya. This contribution is valuable because there has been very little written about this Social Forum, as well as African transnational activism in general, and because the next WSF in 2011 will go back to Africa and be held in Dakar, Senegal. They examine the complex relationships between “northern and southern” activists and organizations, South African activists with activists from the rest of the continent, and French and English-speaking activists from Africa. Issues at the crux of this analysis are those that challenged the heart of Social Forum legitimacy in Africa—those of voice (who speaks for and with Africa), commodification (who owns the Forum and stands to benefit from it), and inclusion (who is in and who is out of decision-making processes and Forum participation). To engage with these issues they assert that scholars must examine the “concrete conditions” and exchanges between transnational organizations and campaigns, national context, and individual activists to understand tensions, alliances, and “lines of domination” within global civil society.

Taken together the articles in this special issue provide specific accounts of a transnational social movement process embedded in various national and local, political cultures and spaces. We believe that these accounts represent a deeper understanding of Social Forums and their development throughout the world while also develop an alternative epistemology of transnational activism, one that places movements and place in a reflexive, multi-level framework of analysis. While various political contexts may function as forces or structures that moderate, amplify, or dampen Social Forum activism and diffusion we are also reminded that movements are the cause and the Social Forums are the effect. Thus, where movements are strong, the Forum process is strong; and where movements are weak, the Forum process struggles to set roots or risks being translated by the local actors to serve their own needs.

Lastly, we would like to thank all contributing authors for their hard work and patience as well as the entire editorial staff of the *Journal of World-Systems Research* for helping make this special issue a reality. We hope that this collection of articles expands our current knowledge of transnational activism and movement processes not only related to the World Social Forum process and global anti-neoliberal mobilization, but also to global civil society in general. It is also our hope that such knowledge will work to ameliorate inequalities that exist between organizations, movements, and activists throughout the world-system and help incubate alternatives both global and local that seek to manage the negative impacts of the world-economy.

## REFERENCES

- Beckfield, Jason. 2003. “Inequality in the World Polity: The Structure of International Organization.” *American Sociological Review* 68: 401-424.
- Byrd, Scott C. 2005. “The Porto Alegre Consensus: Theorizing the Forum Movement.” *Globalizations* 2:151-163.

## 5 JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH

- della Porta, Donatella, Massimiliano Andretta, Lorenzo Mosca, and Herbert Reiter. 2006. *Globalization from Below: Transnational Activists and Protest Networks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fisher, William .F. and Thomas Ponniah. 2003. *Another World Is Possible: Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*. London: Zed Books.
- Glasius, Marlies and Jill Timms. 2006. "The Role of Social Forums in Global Civil Society: Radical Beacon or Strategic Infrastructure." Pp. 190-239 in *Global Civil Society Yearbook 2005/2006*, edited by M. G. Helmet Anheier, and Mary Kaldor. London: Sage.
- Juris, Jeffrey S. 2008. *Networking Futures: The Movements against Corporate Globalization*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Reitan, Ruth. 2007. *Global Activism*. London: Routledge.
- Smith, Jackie. 2004a. "The World Social Forum and the Challenges of Global Democracy." *Global Networks* 4:413-421.
- Smith, Jackie. 2004b. "Exploring Connections between Global Integration and Political Mobilization." *Journal of World Systems Research* 10:255-285.
- Smith, Jackie. 2008. *Social Movements for Global Democracy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Smith, Jackie and Dawn Wiest. 2005. "The Uneven Geography of Global Civil Society: National and Global Influences on Transnational Association." *Social Forces* 84:621-652.
- Smith, Jackie, Marina Kardes, Marc Becker, Dorval Brunelle, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Donatella della Porta, Rosalba Icaza Garza, Jeffrey S. Juris, Lorenzon Mosca, Ellen Reese, Peter Smith, and Rolando Vazquez. 2007. *Global Democracy and the World Social Forums*. London: Paradigm Publishers.
- Teivainen, Teivo. 2007. *Global Civil Society in Action: Dilemmas of Democratization in the World Social Forum*. London: Routledge.
- Wiest, Dawn and Jackie Smith. 2007. "Explaining Participation in Regional Transnational Social Movement Organizations." *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 48:137-166.
- World Social Forum. 2002, "Charter of Principles", Retrieved on February 21, 2009 ([http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.asp?id_menu=4&cd_language=2)).