

Left Forum 2012
Summary of panels addressing links between Occupy Wall Street
and the World Social Forum Process
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The following summary reports on workshops at the 2012 Left Forum in New York City (March 16-18) addressing the lessons and insights from the World Social Forum that can contribute to contemporary activism. Several workshops addressed this topic specifically, and we report here a more detailed summary of one of these workshops, along with selected material from other relevant workshops. If you have additional material or corrections to this text, please email Jackie Smith at (jsmith1037@gmail.com).

Executive Summary

Several workshops at the 2012 Left Forum addressed the connections between the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and the World Social Forum process. Participants noted the importance of the energy, direct action-orientation, and wide popular appeal that has marked the OWS movement in its first few months. The emergence of new fronts of struggle around the world raises new challenges for the World Social Forums. As Michael Leon Guerrero points out, we need to consider what the appropriate vehicle is for advancing our movements in this current moment. The key challenge for organizers seems to be helping people see the connections between global structures and processes and local experiences. But perhaps more difficult is the task of finding ways to encourage meaningful grassroots organizing and activism that can target these global forces. While the large-scale convergences advanced in the WSF may have helped nurture global identities and political imaginations in the past, in the U.S. and elsewhere they've not been able to respond quickly to openings created by grassroots mobilizations like those in Madison in the fall of 2010, the Arab Spring last winter, and now in OWS. Moreover, there seems to be rather limited progress made in developing cross-sectoral connections through the USSF process thus far.

Participants in the Left Forum saw a need for more historical awareness and for a global and systemic analysis among Occupy activists. Much of the discourse and strategic thinking in OWS is focused on the United States, neglecting the movements around the world that have long been fighting this same struggle. Also overlooked is the need for global level changes to address the problems of inequality and corporate power the Occupy movement targets. The World and U.S. Social Forum process provide some important lessons and resources that can help build the power of the *global 99%*--that is for developing a shared analysis and capacity for collective action. In particular, the global structure of the WSF process helps link local and national discussions and networks with their counterparts around the world. It also helps focus activists in different countries on the multiple ways globalized capitalism affects people in different contexts. In other words, it helps expand people's *political imaginations* beyond their own nation so that they can better appreciate global interdependencies and possibilities for moving beyond competitive national policies that are at the core of capitalist globalization. The global and historical perspective also brings into focus the economic and social crises our world now faces. A second theme that emerged from the discussions at the Left Forum was that the U.S. and WSF have generated strategies and models that are helpful for building broad and diverse alliances that include --and in fact give precedence to--the leadership of those most marginalized by global capitalism.

Full panel notes: [“Movement Building in the Current Political Moment: Learning from the World Social Forum and US Social Forum Process”](#)

Michael Leon Guerrero: The US and WSF played some important roles in creating spaces for organizing, generating new initiatives, connecting us with global activist networks, fostering relationship-building.

But in the two USSFs we haven’t seen the level of integration across groups and sectors we had hoped for. Also, the capacity to organize large national forums is lacking, especially given our commitment to intentionality—leadership from the grassroots movements of low-income, people of color, and activist groups most marginalized by economic globalization. This leads us to ask whether the social forum model is the best structure for movement building at the current time. The Occupy Wall Street movement may be an opportunity to refocus energies on the local level. But we still want and need to maintain our global connections and analyses.

Alfredo Lopez: Alfredo reminded us that the political moment is one of **post-hegemony**; that is, of U.S. decline. This has some important implications for our work, and we should try to anticipate the possible challenges as well as opportunities this creates. The technologists working with May First/People Link have learned a great deal about how to use technology to foster the democratic communication we seek and to make this more accessible to low-income people and regions. For instance, we are very proud of the success we had in bringing Palestinian activists from the West Bank and Gaza together during a plenary at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum.

We need to continue to advance the use of technology to increase democracy and participation in our movement. This will require vigilance and struggle to keep the internet free and accessible to all. At the same time, we need to be attentive to potential threats and to maintain the security of our data and systems. We’ve learned some good lessons about how to do this in the WSF process.

Rose Brewer: There is much the Occupy struggle can take from the rich history of struggle, and more efforts to bring this history into current work can help strengthen the movement. Among the key lessons from the U.S. Social Forum process is the idea of **intentionality**, where we organize the process to privilege the leaders and voices of those most affected by capitalist globalization. This model has enabled the articulation and development of new kinds of leaders and leadership. It has fostered the development of new kinds of skills that have altered how we think about social change organizing. The approach has also enabled greater awareness of the intersectionality of the identities, issues, and concerns that motivate our struggles.

The USSF process has helped generate new models for democracy that challenge existing hierarchies and privileges. Such models are essential to thinking about alternatives to the dominant models of economic and political organization.

We’ve learned in the USSF the importance of fostering a spirit of community....

Jerome Scott: We need to keep in mind that the current moment of crisis will affect the possibilities for our organizing. It will continue to fuel the opposition to the current economic and political order and can expand the base of our movement. We should anticipate an increase in our capacity and be ready to respond to this.

We also need to set priorities for action and be strategic in thinking about how we respond to changing context.

We learned from Atlanta that we can rely on our base for the resources we need. We need to do more to call on folks to support this movement and to mobilize resources to do this

work. Again, keep in mind that we should be seeing a growing base of disaffected people who will be joining our struggle.

We know and were reminded with the US Social Forums that we need to tell our story about the work being done to respond to crises and build a movement for alternatives. We need to do more to engage in this work of helping people know that there are alternatives to globalized capitalism and that there are large numbers of people organizing to make these alternatives a reality.

What is so important about the US Social Forum is its ability to bring us together in a national struggle so that we don't get reduced to isolated local efforts. In addition, the social forum process connects us to the global networks. We need these connections to help us understand what we're up against and also to help us build our collective power. We also have a responsibility to those outside the U.S. to change the policies of our government. The WSF process helps provide the analysis and inspiration to guide this necessarily global struggle.

Questions from audience

*What skills or models can we take from the WSF and USSF to help better facilitate or manage the process of consensus or participatory democratic decision making?

*How should we respond to the tensions between engaging in patient and deliberate work of movement building versus being responsive to openings like OWS?

*How to transfer skills learned in social forum organizing into our work, homes, communities? What have we learned about the practical applications of movement skills?

*What lessons do we have about communicating about our movement? How can we do this better?

*How can we better manage the tensions between ideological poles; such as the radical/reformist divide, NGOization/professionalization of movements?

*How can we better integrate new and less experienced activists into the movement, such as those newly engaged by the OWS movement?

MLG:

Time-scales of organizing are important to keep in mind, and we have to be better at responding. For instance, the mobilization in Madison in 2010 was a missed opportunity. The social forum is a vehicle for doing certain kinds of movement work. What other vehicles are needed right now?

There may be a growing role for direct action, and we see this discussion developing with ideas such as the 99spring initiative.

On the radical/reform divide. Many groups see the nonprofit 501(c)3 status as a tool rather than a container, but it is important that this vision doesn't get lost in the day to day work. Many groups all over the world are struggling with resource constraints, and we need to keep this in mind.

There are important struggles internationally that are important to our movement such as the Arab Spring and the Andean movements. And climate is the next big front of struggle as capitalist forces are putting forward important proposals for the Rio+20 conference in June to re-assert their agenda. What sort of organizing vehicle do we need at this time to respond to these opportunities and build unity across these different fronts of struggle.

ALFREDO:

We need to learn from and share lessons with organizations and activists emerging with the OWS movement.

We need to stay optimistic and be open and inviting to a wider public. People will be looking for alternatives.

It is important to recognize that many approaches are needed to respond to crisis and advance more systemic change. Reformist efforts should coincide with more radical analyses and actions for transformation.

There is much more potential to mobilize technology for our movement. For instance the ability to share video instantly over the internet will challenge those who want to repress our movements. But it is important that we defend the information commons and maintain vigilance and security to protect information and access.

ROSE:

We need to stress the long-term perspective and help maintain our energies for the long haul. Now is a teachable moment that we need to respond to with renewed efforts at basic political education.

JEROME:

Reminded participants of the history of the Montgomery bus boycott: The boycott was to last a single day, but it ended up taking off and lasting far longer. The lesson is we need to foster a base that can sustain and support actions that emerge, and also be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances.

Transforming capitalism requires an analysis of that system, and **it is the systemic analysis that is key**. The tactics we use to challenge this system can differ as long as there is a sense of the bigger struggle. So we shouldn't focus on differences over tactical approaches, but rather focus on expanding the audience for a critical analysis of the capitalist system. We need to build skilled leadership of people who understand this analysis.

*****A digital recording of the panel "Movement Building in the Current Political Moment: Learning from the World Social Forum and US Social Forum Process" can be found at (Thank you to Micha Fiedlschuster): <http://ubuntuone.com/1bEWdf1hEjv3LLk5ZMc7g>**

Selected notes from other Left Forum 2012 Sessions

Nicole Doerr—Stressed the need for us to tell and re-tell movements' stories as part of a dominant narrative of social change. Her work on deliberation in the WSFs in various places shows that shared memories among activists are required to build durable alliances among those working for social change.

Jeffrey Juris—Discussed the different logics that underlie Occupy Wall Street and World Social Forums. The former reflects what he called the "logic of aggregation" that is aided by geographic proximity and social media. It is able to respond quickly to evolving situations and can generate significant participation in collective actions. It also reflects greater participation in OWS by individuals as opposed to organizations. The WSF, in contrast reflects a "networking logic" that is shaped largely by the organizational makeup of the process. Organizations have provided the resources and links to networks of participants that have been essential to the WSF's impact and success at mobilizing large numbers for regular social forums. The networking logic has also contributed to the WSF's ability to advance two important functions, namely: the work of **translation** across differences and **bridging** of diverse groups. The shift in logics is important for assessing the capacities and prospects for these movements as well as for understanding how technology impacts organizing processes.

Walda Katz-Fishman—Offered ideas about the ways forward for movements for global and local social justice. She noted that the Occupy movement serves as a reminder and perhaps a turning point for the WSF to address the real need for a vehicle that can “build a counter-hegemonic movement for humanity.” She noted that we need to “engage in the serious political work of articulating alternatives and ways forward to realizing these alternatives.”

Brooke Lehman of the Institute for Social Ecology observed that the culture of OWS helped advance prefigurative politics and more participatory forms of democracy and direct action. But she warned that the General Assemblies stressed individual participation often at the cost of developing a collective identity and vision. She noted that strategy and long-term vision has been lacking in the OWS, and in part this is due to the fact that the model of the General Assembly being used by many OWS groups has allowed form to override the function. In other words, models of consensus process are being adopted without much critical reflection on how well they reflect diverse interests. Often the GA meetings exclude those less confident or able to participate in long meetings.

Thomas Ponniah—The current contexts is a reminder that movements need to strengthen their abilities to respond to crises. Also, an important aim of contemporary movements must be to transform the state—which has been transformed in recent decades by capitalists for their purposes, resulting in the substantial weakening of the welfare state we see today. He has in numerous publications indicated the need to consider alternative political party structures which can advance a struggle for state transformation. Another important reminder Ponniah raised is the observation that an important source of vulnerability of the current system is that it *cannot survive without* sustained (and expanding) levels of consumption. Movements can work to develop alternatives to capitalist-based consumerist practices. Finally, Ponniah stressed the importance of the success of Left-wing parties in Latin America at addressing some of the needs of “the 99%” in those countries. We can help tell these stories and draw from the models tested in Latin America.

Ariel Salleh—reported on her analysis of the negotiations surrounding the upcoming Rio+20 Climate Change conference, offering critical insights into the problems of the draft negotiating text being discussed by governments, which has as its central focus the “green economy initiative.” The green economy language, according to Salleh, preserves the basic orientation of capitalism of exploiting land and labor for profit. It continues to undermine the true green producers—the women, small farmers, and Indigenous peoples—whose unvalued work sustains and nurtures natural processes of regeneration (for the full text, see: <http://www.zcommunications.org/rio-20-and-the-green-economy-technocrats-meta-industrials-wsf-and-occupy-by-ariel-salleh>).

Engagement with the international WSF process can broaden and deepen the self-understanding of Occupy in the global North. But the learning goes two ways. Occupy gives energy, inspiration, and direction to the WSF through its prefigurative commoning.

...A focus on the Rio+20 agenda should help ground free wheeling “political subjectivities” in both WSF and Occupy. Certainly, it becomes more critical than ever to avoid internal movement conflicts - masculinist or ageist competitions in the guise of ideological or strategic purity have no place in the politics of life itself. The key is an open textured resistance with diversity of approaches and scales of action. Without unity of purpose, the professional managers of capital and their media will have a field day redefining political realities and forcing the Left into the divide and rule of wedge politics. The characterisation of WSF as “old movement vertical” and Occupy as “new movement horizontal” lends itself to this external manipulation.¹ Moreover, it is a facile dualism, since these dimensional abstractions

can be found criss-crossing daily life in multiple ways. One activist even argues that
When the passion, fearlessness and vision of Occupy intersects with the resources and membership of community groups and unions, we'll find the sweet spot that makes it possible to force the richest to negotiate with the rest of us. It is where these two worlds meet - horizontal and vertical - united around common issues and enemies that we create the potential to start winning together.²

Observing the interconnection between sustainability and peace, the WSF Thematic text, ("[Another Future is Possible: Come to Re-invent the World at Rio+20](#)", Porto Alegre, 24 January 2012). speaks of opening up the Security Council to "new actors" - states, regional organizations, global networks - with a new balance of power based on bodies appropriate to watching over life, peoples, and planet. However, under existing geopolitical relations, this vision could be readily appropriated by established class interests as a step towards Earth System Governance. Perhaps the movements should simply Occupy Rio+20 and close it down? Yet this too, would play into the hands of corporations and governments like the US, which really want nothing to change. How do the movements deal with this tortuous ambiguity? My sense is that here the initiative falls back to Occupy as it grows regional awareness and support on home ground. Yet will grassroots activists - committed to an affective politics - be able to sustain this testing, often unglamorous nurture of the Mums and Dads? If yes, the dialectical interplay of WSF and Occupy will become a powerful historical force.

Saskia Sassen—OWS is important for helping people become political actors. That is, it helps create avenues for people to move from being passive to active and critical citizens. It also reminds us of the importance in movements of "making the social." What has attracted support and participation for Occupy has been the sense of community and creative self-reliance that it has generated. People are attracted to the community spirit and participatory nature of OWS. What the US and WSF helps do is to expand people's political imagination and sense of community beyond the local. But clearly the ability to be present in the cities where people live and to offer a model for bringing new practices and conversations into people's neighborhoods and homes has helped fuel the surge of activism of the Occupy movement.

Jackie Smith, who is active in the US Social Forum and Occupy Pittsburgh summarized three key resources the WSF process brings to contemporary OWS activism as: 1) a global analysis; 2) principles and models for alliance-building; and 3) strategic insights. First, she stressed the significance of having global networks and perspectives in this work. To understand how capitalism works, we need to hear the voices of people from around the world who experience its effects differently. For instance, U.S. activists can learn a great deal from hearing about Southern activists' decades of opposition to the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and IMF. OWS activists also need greater sensitivity to how U.S. policies impact the global "99%." Second, the WSF and especially US Social Forum offers important lessons for how to build diverse alliances, most notably with the principle of *intentionality* that has guided the USSF and that privileges leadership by those most affected by global capitalism. Practices cultivated in the WSFs--such as active listening, creating spaces that stress relationships over programmatic campaigns, and Indigenous notions of *collective* as opposed to individualized autonomy—can strengthen the OWS movement. Third, the WSF process has helped bring to the fore strategic emphases and ideas that can advance collective struggle. For instance, demands for human rights (universal and economic as well as political) have proved effective at uniting diverse groups and interests in joint struggle. Similarly, the defense of public services can be readily linked to a critique of global capitalism and a global struggle for an alternative to globalized capitalism. Finally, calls advanced at the 2009 WSF for the rights of Mother Earth and for notions of progress based on Indigenous values of *buen vivir* (living well) versus economic growth/profit can be focal points for a global movement.

Hamouda Soubhi, a Tunisian organizer with the Maghreb Social Forum observed that the Arab spring helped overcome fear and expand people's enthusiasm to struggle for justice, freedom and dignity. He pointed out that the emergence of anti-austerity protests in Europe and the

OWS has helped people in the Middle East understand their struggles not simply as resistance to national authoritarian governments but as a struggle against global capitalism.

Cindy Wiesner, of Grassroots Global Justice, discussed some of the challenges of the Occupy Miami effort to bring together “the 99%.” In Miami there are significant numbers of right-wing participants in Occupy actions, making it difficult to forge unity. How do we organize in ways that highlight the needs of “the bottom 20%”? We need to bring to the forefront the ways class, nation, race, and gender shape experiences. Our analyses of differences can help us develop strategies for forging unity. Another key lesson is that while we need to avoid the hierarchies that pervade traditional left organizing models, we can’t lose sight of how structures such as trade unions can be resources to help build power for our movement.

A panel on [Feminism, Occupy and the Left Organizing-Past, Present and Future](#) discussed how women have always played a critical, if sometimes overlooked, role in leftist movements but women's struggle against patriarchy is not always focused on society at large. Women have also been fighting for left groups and other formations to become more inclusive spaces where women's voices and ideas are valued.

End Notes

¹ M. Steisslinger, “Occupy, the World Social Forum and the Commons”, 13 March 2012: <http://thefutureofoccupy.org/2012/03/13/occupy-the-world-social-forum-and-the-commons-social-movements-learning-from-each-other/>.

² Stephen Lerner, “Horizontal Meets Vertical”, *The Nation*, 2 April 2012, p. 20.