

Learning from the US Social Forum

[The following report summarizes key ideas that emerged from a workshop at the US Social Forum in Detroit entitled, "Future of the Forum II: Rooting the Forum in the Everyday Practices of the Subaltern: How Else are Other Worlds Possible? /Learning from the US Social Forum."]

Panelists: Michael Leon Guerrero, from Grassroots Global Justice, Bineshi Albert, from the Indigenous Environmental Network and the Indigenous People's Working Group, and Will Copeland, from the Detroit Organizing Committee; **Discussants:** Jeff Juris, Thomas Ponniah, Geoffrey Pleyers; **Workshop co-organizers/ facilitators:** Scott Byrd, Ana Margarida Esteves, Thomas Ponniah, Jai Sen, Jackie Smith.

Summary: *The panelist's lead speakers have been organizing the United States Social Forum Process. They each bring a unique perspective to our learning about the effects and strategic thinking about the WSF process. Questions addressed in the discussion include: What are the effects of social forums on the local host sites and vice-versa? How did Detroit shape the second USSF? How did Detroit's movement culture, economy, and its racial composition inform organizing work here? How did the USSF's principle of intentionality develop, and how does it challenge the WSF's "open space" concept and potentially inform organizing work in the US and elsewhere? What are the experiences of Indigenous peoples within the USSF, and what lessons emerge about how to organize groups that are most harmed by neoliberal globalization?*

Because the World Social Forum is a *process*, not an event, it is vital that participants reflect on the experiences of each forum and identify new lessons to best advance the resistance to neoliberal globalization and build unity among the diverse movements that are engaged in this struggle. Considerable time and energy goes into planning and hosting any Social Forum, and with each Forum we have the opportunity to gain insights into how particular themes or conflicts affect our organizing work as well as how the local intersects with national and global movement building work.

The attention given to Detroit as the host of the second US Social Forum provides an opportunity for us to think about ways of helping the WSF process respond better to the needs of local communities, while allowing those involved in the WSF to learn about the similarities and differences in how neoliberal globalization impacts different communities and their movements.

Below are summaries and excerpts from the workshop that highlight key themes and lessons that emerged from the discussion.

Organizers of the workshop believe it is important to take advantage of the convergences we have in the various Social Forums to reflect together on the WSF process and its lessons. In the US Social Forum in particular, this sort of workshop can help people understand how the US work relates to the larger WSF process. We can also share experiences about organizing in different contexts and engage in the important face-to-face discussions that are vital to building strong movements.

The USSF process introduced the innovation of the People's Movement Assemblies, which have not been part of European or World Social Forums. Might this model of organizing contribute to work being done elsewhere? In addition, the nature of US politics requires activists to adapt the WSF vision to local realities. How we apply the WSF principles here might generate insights that can apply to other contexts. And the skills and resources of activists in the USSF may also contribute to the overall WSF process.

Reflection can also help us think more about what has been tried and tested in the World Social Forum context that can help us overcome some of the challenges we've confronted as we engage in the process from within the "belly of the beast."

Will Copeland began his remarks with a selection from a poem, that conveys the tone and some emotions that characterize Detroit/ the space of this US Social Forum.

*As I get older my mind gets bolder my lyrics get sharper my thoughts get colder.
As we get older, as we get older...
I'm halfway between the youth and hip-hop pioneers.
I sit back drink brew, attend Bioneers my peers buy pampers, throw shows and plant gardens,
and organize their hoods into self-defense squadrons.
I write rhymes probably for the hell of it, pardon me, the hell that's not televised,
I mean the East side of me, the east side of D East Coast and East Oakland, for beat composers,
brothers whose throats police choking.
And hopefully "dopeness" in quotes is squeezed vocally like cobras whose own antidote it seems
poison to the untrained eye each note it seems coded.
But as I age I have to mastermind and pass the time kicking classic rhymes to passerbys.
Malcolm tied to Albert Ei ain't your average guy.
I don't watch the Channel 5 news that's half a lie.
Truth where Blacks and crimes zip-zap the US passive minds.
So, as we get older, our minds get bolder, our lyrics get sharper, our thoughts get colder. As we
get older, as we get...*

"I think [this poem] illustrates two aspects of our organizing the Social Forum in Detroit. One is really trying to struggle and see what the intricate nature of culture is in terms of our organizing. Detroit is a very cultural city and throughout this process you can see at the different plenaries and at everything we do we've had the aim and the words of saying that culture is going to be an intimate part of this process. But our political culture is so intellectual, so verbal, so linear it's very difficult to figure out what that means. As a city with people of color we have a very cultural experience, so we're dealing with the tensions between desire for cultural experience and the fact that our organizing is often very intellectual and linear."

"The second thing I've been realizing throughout this Social Forum process is that this Social Forum represents a major generational shift in Detroit. We're very blessed to have many active veterans coming out of the 60's; Marxists, workers, the peace movement and union movements, who are still active, so we as younger folks line up behind that older generation. But in the last seven years we fostered an intergenerational nature, so in the Social Forum you have folks in their 20s and 30s, and then you have the elders who are in their 50s-60s-70s, and then you have folks like General Baker and Grace Boggs who are retired but who are still around and in the picture.

"This Social Forum represents a coming of age for people like myself, at age 31, and for people like Ahmina Maxey, who's about 25 or so, who's organizing the major incinerator action, for people like Rocio Valerio, who's stepped up the leadership in Centro Obrero, so you have a whole generation in their 20s going into their 30s who are taking on major leadership who are going to leave this forum well respected in the city and having worked on a major process and having established themselves in a very significant way in the city. There's always varied concerns with the elders, especially in a city like Detroit. There's the question of what are these young folks doing, can we trust them, can we bequeath our organizing

legacy to them? I think that this Social Forum has been a major shift to show where some of these young forces are in place. I'm going to give more to that also."

Will discussed how the USSF came to Detroit. Along with other Detroit activists, he had participated in a World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, attending workshops and engaging with movements there such as Brazil's Landless Workers Movement (MST) and sharing stories about Detroit's experiences as a former, and now-discarded, industrial powerhouse of the globalized economy. Detroit organizations supported Social Forum fundraisers and report-back sessions to forge connections between local movements and the WSF process.

He discussed the many groups that helped make Detroit a vibrant city for social justice organizing, and that helped convince USSF organizers to accept the city's bid to bring the Forum here. When the USSF organizing team began its work, Detroit anchor organizations insisted on adding an additional fifth goal to the four organizing goals, namely to ensure that the process contributes to strengthening local movements and organizing work. He shared some of his observations about some of the challenges of achieving this goal:

"I think that there are...some gaps between the Black community and the Indigenous community. Detroit is about an 85% Black city, and I think that, in part, it took awhile for us to get the Indigenous communications going, and I think that that's partially because of the whole experiences of the Black community and the different experiences of the Indigenous community and the communications there. We could do a whole panel on that.

"Another thing is we've seen that there's challenges around low-tech to high-tech. We have 20,000-40,000 electricity and water shutoffs. So if we're going to have an organizing strategy that says that all our information is on the Internet, we're going to miss a lot of our people in Detroit. So through this whole process we've pushed to have paper registration, to allow people to come into the office with checks, to just offer support for a low-tech approach. Youth organizing has been a big problem here in Detroit; this has shown us the strengths and the weaknesses of our youth organizing in Detroit.

"Lastly, overall there's a real political question of what does it mean to host a social forum? We tried to decide what are the things that have to happen locally and what are the things that have to happen nationally? We really made it a political issue to say that to host all these people and to take all these people on is a major political task, and we want people to see and to recognize that, and not just to go to the Social Forum and take it for granted, but we wanted to make explicit the political nature of hosting the Social Forum.

Bineshi Albert

Bineshi helped with the planning in Atlanta but focused specifically on the Indigenous working group for this Social Forum. She summarized some key lessons from her experiences.

"One of the big ones ...is that it was very important for the Indigenous Working Group to connect with the local Indigenous communities--from the state or from the region.... We had a very serious challenge being able to do that in Atlanta. Most of the tribal communities had been forcibly removed long ago to Oklahoma, so we were not able to connect with the tribal communities in Georgia in the same kind of way. Here in Detroit there are a lot more communities [nearby], not to mention a very long history of an urban Indian community here in Detroit itself. So being able to make that connection [with] the local community here created a much different space. A few days ago we had a welcoming dinner with the Indigenous people who have come to the Social Forum that was hosted by the local community here in

Detroit, and it was a much different engagement of relationship-- it was much more [consistent with Indigenous cultural traditions and protocols, making this forum more] welcoming for the Indigenous people coming here.

"[Indigenous peoples' engagement with the USSF process has] been a good thing and a challenge at the same time.... There are organizations where it really is about Indigenous people in terms of what they have to bring to the table, of what they have to bring to a discussion about social change and social movements in this country, and what it means to engage in a conversation with folks who have a different thinking pattern, who have a different speaking pattern, who have a different thought process, and being able to do that. It's also been a challenge because there are many other organizations [on the USSF National Planning Committee] who just don't understand that, and are like, 'Why are we taking the time to do this? Why are we making special exceptions to do this?' ... It's...this tension that I think is good and has made [the process] grow.

"A brief example of that is that in both of the USSF opening marches the Indigenous people have led the march. That was a very key discussion that happened early on in the planning. People were like, 'Okay, that makes sense, but we also want this,' and then there was this back-and-forth discussion and negotiation that happened to end up also recognizing all the other constituencies that we wanted to have at the front, but still recognizing the need for having Indigenous people lead the march. In Detroit it was a much easier discussion because [of the earlier decision we had made in Atlanta about the role of Indigenous peoples in the opening march].

"Getting to the social forums has been a challenge both in terms of the logistics and transportation and in terms of awareness. In our communities there are only a handful of people that have any experience with the World Social Forum....So it took a lot of education and communication with the ... Detroit local Indigenous community [to show what the Social Forum is about, what it's supposed to be, what we hope is going to happen, and what we [will] benefit the community here. Those conversations had to happen in a lot of communities in the Southwest, in the Plains, in the Dakotas, in the Northwest. They had to happen over and over and over again, and they were ongoing conversations.

"I would say one of the key lessons for me, from the Atlanta Forum and then coming here to Detroit, is we had a lot of Indigenous people that came, we had an Indigenous space, we had an Indigenous tent that was part of Atlanta. One of the things that I realized about a day or two in was that it was very easy for the Indigenous people to connect and communicate in their own space, but those issues were not in other spaces or workshops. It became very apparent especially when going through the People's Movement Assembly process. I was working on the resolution from the Indigenous people. There were at least ten different issues that were all combined with a whole lot of very specific native issues. But there were maybe ten issues that could have connected with a whole lot of other constituencies and communities around militarization, around environmental protections, around the criminal justice system...

"It became very apparent that we also have to do education in our own community about the social forum as a space for Indigenous peoples to connect with each other and where we can make connections with other activists and movements. So it's still a challenge, and it's still a challenge that we're learning and developing and trying to move forward. I would definitely say that the process has helped us develop an ongoing discussion and People's Movement Assemblies for Indigenous peoples outside of ... the social forum. How do we continue this conversation about the social forum and what we learned from the

Indigenous people that came here, but also what have we learned from the other communities that were here too?"

Michael Leon Guerrero

Michael re-stated the importance of having this sort of workshop at the Social Forums and also emphasized the critical role of bridge builders in the Social Forum process.

"In [my limited] time ...to talk about the US social forum and how it came to be, what's important and significant about the model, and how we've tried to utilize it here in the United States ...I will say this first and foremost – One: I think this is a people's victory already.... The forum provided us a model and a tool that really was absolutely necessary and timely in the US. Because we had setbacks when we tried to bring together people at a broader level and build this broader unity, we failed at a number of levels. People may recall 2005, the Northwest Social Forum, which at that time was one of the more significant social forum efforts in the US, was cancelled within a week of the event. It broke down along these lines: around race, around Indigenous sovereignty, around respect for youth, around a number of things. So that was one in a number of challenges that we had to overcome in this process."

Michael talked about his background in grassroots and community organizing in New Mexico and involvement in the Environmental Justice movement. His participation at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre laid the groundwork for his USSF involvement.

"But it was really the World Social Forum that actually started to bring us back into that [global organizing] process, and from my experience it was 2002 when ... I was part of a delegation of about 40 organizations from the US. It was such an eye opener to see movement at such a scale and level in Brazil and all these other countries. It really excited us and led us to question – what is it that we are not doing in the US to reach that scale – what is it that allows the kind of power to control the government of Porto Alegre?

"This led to deep reflection and conversations back in the US. This is when we formed the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance to strengthen the grass roots movement-building efforts in the US and be much more strategic and proactive in international movements, because we were... consistently losing ground [on various social issues]. And we [were starting to see that economic and political] decisions made at a global level meant we had to act locally and globally at the same time."

Michael discussed the birth of the idea of the USSF in 2002-2003 and noted how organizers adapted the World Social Forum model to the US context.

"One of the first deviations from the social forum model that we took is on the second page of your [USSF 2010] program. The "We Believe" statement by the US National Planning Committee was our addendum to the World Social Forum Charter of Principles. It lays out very clearly the importance we felt about emphasizing outreach first to marginalized communities that have historically been left out of the national process. If we did not start there it would be much harder to bring them in later. We got a lot of criticism from that decision. I'm hoping for more rigorous debate about that intentionality but I'll say this to frame it: an open space is not necessarily a level playing field. You have to level the playing field for everyone to be able to come in. We felt it was important to do that, and it took us three years.

"So the open space is really important because it allows people to come in on their own terms, and we may not agree coming in, but everybody has a commitment to building the broader unity. We used regional forums in that process to help build momentum towards the forum, and that was really

important. It set the character and tone. It was largely led by poor people and people of color. [At the Southeast Social Forum], 80% were African-American and Latino, and so people saw that this is a space that we can be a part of. And the next regional forum, a border social forum in Ciudad Juarez, [made our process] much more internationalized.

"What was the most important to me was the sense of transformation, the sense of possibility. There are some things about the Forum that are really really important that you can't really document; it's how people feel, and that energy and that excitement and that sense of possibility was one of the most important things that people left with, and to this day people still come up to me and say 'That was one of the most life-changing experiences for me.'

"...The other alteration the USSF brings to the World Social Forum model is the People's Movement Assemblies. We know there has been a deep historic tension within the forum [about whether it should be a space for dialogue and convergence or a space of action]. We've tried to embrace both. We feel that you've got to have both, because people are demanding [that action and strategy be] tied to this effort. We don't want to disrupt the integrity of the open space, but I think the Forum should play more of a role in allowing these different types of assemblies to happen. There were already 30-40 People's Movement Assemblies before we got here, and 50 more are happening here, and then there will be the big national assembly on Saturday."

Michael ended his talk by asking 'how does it all come together?' and stressing the need to build broader unity from fragmentation across sectors and movements. He thanked everyone who has been involved with the Social Forum process, which he called a "gift" to people in progressive movements.

Jeffrey Juris (Discussant)

Jeff discussed the tension in the WSF process between the Forum as a space versus the Forum as an actor or subject, and the ways USSF organizers introduced the idea of "intentionality" to overcome the inherent exclusions that open spaces unintentionally reproduce.

"[Intentionality for the USSF] National Planning Committee was very explicit about the types of politics they had and who was going to be at the table. [It meant] organizing a forum around grassroots base-building groups. ...At the European level...the folks that have been most affected [by neoliberal globalization] haven't been at the table (or at a forum), not to mention leading the process. So by focusing on certain sectors, certain kinds of organizing, I think [the USSF has made] an amazing and unique contribution to the Social Forums: how do you build a forum where the groups that are most affected are actually here? But, reflecting on this tension between intentionality and open space or openness, did the USSF move too far toward intentionality? Was there too much directionality on the level of, you know, organizing the process around grassroots base-building groups, and maybe some of the larger sectors, the larger NGOs, the policy NGOs, maybe some of the more direct action folks, the anarchists, were they being left out of the organizing process? ... I think we all kind of agree that those grassroots base-building groups, those folks who are most affected, should be at the forefront of the process, but I think the question was more on this continuum between intentionality and openness, is there a way to push back a little bit toward the openness side without having the grassroots base-building sectors be overrun, so that we don't lose the unique contribution of these diverse sectors to the Forum?"

"I think the challenge here as Michael said is that we need to help incubate a strong progressive force, and that needs to be a big, large coalition and alliance, and so the question moving forward is, can this space be expanded, but without sort of overrunning those folks that need to be at the center? Maybe it

can't, or maybe it can. But I wanted to open up those questions to see how people see these issues, and for me there's no right or wrong answer, it's really just putting the conversation out there."

Thomas Ponniah (Discussant)

"It is a good idea to focus on the question of the subaltern as an essential innovation in the US Social Forum and the social forum in general. Effective political action begins at the level of the subaltern; locally, from the bottom up. But if we remain at the local level, then we end up with a dispersed politics. The US Social Forum has a number of solutions to this problem, with the most obvious one being the People's Movement Assemblies. What's innovative about the PMAs is that they're held before, during, and after the Social Forum, thus giving movements an opportunity to construct long-term strategies rather than remain caught in the present."

"This subaltern and inter-subaltern practice is vital in the current context because it gives people a feeling of agency. Right now in the context of global, national forces people feel like spectators. Focusing on the local gives people agency....The People's Movement Assemblies offer progressives an opportunity to build from the bottom up, put pressure on congressmen and senators, and serve alternative candidates in the Democratic primaries or build an alternative political party. The key challenge for the Assemblies and for the Social Forum process in general is that many progressives, unlike conservatives, have, I think, a narrow understanding of the potential of political power. There's a very prominent view on the left that we should not engage with state power, and that we should remain solely focused on the subaltern around the local. And this viewpoint, I think, is too influential in the Social Forum process. The right wing also has its powerful sector that believes the state is a threat to their liberty. But conservatives have always understood that they should possess state power and that they should use it to implement their visions and their goals."

Now on the left, many of us believe that we can do a kind of end-run around the state. We stay focused on local organizing, we do not propose political candidates, and we do not build alternative political parties. And for this reason progressives have not had as much political influence over the past year as our conservative counterparts have had. . . . So my question for my friends on the panel and for audience members is, how do we get the Social Forum movements to not remain locked in the local, but to take our subaltern practices into direct engagement with national electoral practice? We are understandably cynical about electoral politics, but without this engagement with the electoral and the national we will remain fundamentally powerless and at the mercy of right-wing social movements and their subaltern practices."

Geoffrey Pleyers (Discussant)

Geoffrey began by pointing out the marginalization of young people of color at the 2003 European Social Forum near Paris and the lack of access of poor people to the WSF in Nairobi (Kenya) in 2007.

"Here in Detroit, people of minorities are the very heart of the social forum process; they are everywhere and have a real lead in several major dynamics. It is also true for disabled people. ...The participation of people from different generations is another major success. The opening march was particularly enthusiastic in this perspective. In each and every single group, there were people from different backgrounds, from different colors and from different generations. The US social forum represents in this perspective an important experimentation for the worldwide social forum process. Opening the process to different categories of people, going beyond the educated middle-class that usually forms the majority of social forum participant, is a major challenge. It takes time and requires considerable commitment from the organizers."

"The core dynamic of the US social forum is actually very distinct. As people talk about "slow food" to oppose the fast food, we may actually talk about the US social forum process as a "slow movement": to build a strong grassroots movement takes much more time than to build a movement of worldwide elites without grassroots. To build a grassroots movement takes time, but that's the way we build a very strong base."

"Opening the movement beyond the usual public and giving an active role to the people who suffer discrimination should be a challenge within each organization. It is a permanent struggle, a process that requires us to maintain a permanent push toward more opening. I would like to thank the organizers of this US social forum for showing us all that this opening is possible. It is now up to us to transcribe it to the international level but also within local movements."

The question and response period raised a number of important themes. These included ideas about alternative notions of power that incorporate an *ethic of care*; challenges to the dominant paradigm of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of political organization; questions about how to enhance communication about the social forum process to avoid the creation of insiders and outsiders; and queries about how we can create alternative spaces and maintain our vision within the reality of state repression. Several speakers also reiterated notions of care that should be part of a new politics that they see emerging in the social forum process.

Time constraints prevented panelists from responding to all the questions, but Will Copeland raised some new and important themes in his brief response:

Will Copeland: I'm going to start out by saying a word that has not been mentioned yet that I feel like if we're talking about intentionality and openness this subject must be broached, and that subject is whiteness. If we talk about anarchists and we talk about NGOs and we talk about "open space," one of the things that we've come through this process is when you're dealing with race or racial issues sometimes someone gets hurt, and many times in this society when someone gets hurt the people of color are the ones that say "I don't feel safe here," and they leave the process. One of the things we did in this process locally is we had discussions about race, racism, white allies, and white supremacy. The first time we sent out an announcement for this we had people coming out the woodwork, people we'd never seen at meetings, people who'd never contributed anything, [objecting to these kinds of discussions]. ... So if we're talking about expanding, I really feel like white folks need to make a concerted effort to have some discussions, some workshops, some planning to [come to a better understanding of how race works in our movements]."

"I've been to many activist gatherings in Detroit...with 1-2 people of color out of 50 or 100. How do you organize that way? But it happens, and so, many white people don't have a certain skill set, I feel like, in order to work in a certain kind of way that we're requiring. ...So part of the challenge of having an "open space" is going to have to be work amongst "white allies" to figure out how people interact in a multi-cultural space with some notion of equality. We did some experiments at a local level, we didn't do experiments at a national level, but that's been part of the story of this process."

In response to a question about how to make information about the organizing behind the USSF less remote/ more "horizontal," Will suggested that our movements need to think a bit differently about how demands for accountability and transparency are framed.

Will Copeland: "There are a lot of challenges with horizontally, one of the challenges is that people [tend to come and go from the process, and] have limited information [about the whole]. ...I think we do want to get information out there, but there's [a real need for] people to step forward to do the work. We want to see a horizontally of people getting the port-a-potties, of people doing the childcare, of people doing the logistics. ...It's the same 50-100 people running around doing all these things. ... Also, it tends to be women that are holding down these roles... [thereby missing their own opportunity to engage in the forum activities and debates]. So I want [us to consider what it means] to be horizontal in terms of realizing what it takes to host a gathering like this. ...How are we going to have a movement if people just want to show up and get benefits from it? Everyone has to contribute to doing the hard work."

Jackie Smith edited this transcript. Special thanks to Julia Duranti for her transcribing work, and to Amy Braun for editorial assistance.