The Porto Alegre Consensus: Theorizing the Forum Movement

SCOTT C. BYRD

University of California, Irvine, USA

ABSTRACT The World Social Forums and corresponding Forum movement marks a shift in transnational social movement methodology and solidarity. The Forums work to thicken linkages between global civil society actors, liberate communicative action, and horizontally integrate the struggle for global social justice. This article outlines a theoretical dialogue linking the concepts of transnational public spheres, political opportunity structures and cosmopolitan democracies to the Forums’ process. The article also discusses the idea of a Porto Alegre Consensus evolving to challenge the economic logic of the Washington Consensus. This Consensus coalesces around agreed-upon methodologies guiding the Forums’ development partly laid out in its Charter of Principles, but, more importantly, interpreted and re-negotiated by participants engaged in the Forums’ many diverse manifestations. I contend that this reflexive process between Forum incarnations and the participatory assessment and corresponding revisions of Forum methodology is at the heart of the movement’s success.

One must speak for a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality.

Antonio Gramsci (1985, p. 98)

Globalization describes what a number of people perceive as a fundamental change in the conditions of human life. Just what has changed and how it has changed, however, are matters of great contention—especially within the social movement community. From the vantage point of social movements, globalization offers contradictory possibilities. On the one hand, to the extent that globalization appears to reduce the ability of states to act
within their own territories, social movements are dislocated from their usual position of petitioning states to redress grievances. The supposed weakness of states within the framework of globalization means that social movements must direct resources toward international institutional linkages, partnerships and coalitions that can diminish movement autonomy in the home country. On the other hand, globalization has provided social movements with new, possibly significant, opportunities and resources for influencing both state and non-state actors (Guidry et al., 2000). Globalization has in fact brought social movements together across borders in a ‘transnational public sphere’, a real as well as conceptual space in which movement actors interact, contest each other and their objectives, and learn from each other. Giddens (1994) describes this process as ‘action at a distance’, or the ability of actors in one place to influence events in other places through economic, political and media processes.

The World Social Forum (WSF), now in its fifth annual manifestation, represents such an opportunity for global, national and local movements to organize, network and struggle in solidarity under the banner ‘another world is possible’. The WSF first convened in January 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil at the same time as and in opposition to the World Economic Forum held in Davos, Switzerland. The ‘Forum movement’ now encompasses many diverse thematic, regional and community gatherings throughout the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. The WSF’s Charter of Principles states:

The World Social Forum is 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, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth. (WSF, 2005a)

Houtart (2001) states that the WSF marks a turning point in social movement mobilization, a birth of a new political culture, in gestation for several years, manifesting as a search for alternatives to globalized capitalism and the neo-liberal model, as displayed at the World Economic Forum. The most recent 2005 WSF drew over 155,000 activists, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) campaigners, academics, journalists and trade unionists from more than 135 countries (WSF, 2005b). The WSF Charter of Principles goes on to claim that:

The World Social Forum is a process that encourages its participant organizations and movements to situate their actions, from the local level to the national level and seeking active participation in international contexts, as issues of planetary citizenship, and to introduce onto the global agenda the change-inducing practices that they are experimenting in building a new world in solidarity. (WSF, 2005a)

The Forum’s Charter of Principles creates a methodology or process for creating open gathering spaces for social movements from around the world to incubate projects and alternatives to economic globalization. Although many of the participants and activists refer to the Forum as if it were a new political agent, the authors go out of their way to acknowledge that it is not a political agent.

The World Social Forum is also characterized by plurality and diversity, is non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party. It proposes to facilitate decentralized coordination and networking among organizations engaged in concrete action towards building another world, at any level from the local to the international, but it does not intend to be a body representing world civil society. (WSF, 2005a)
The authors of the WSF have discouraged any interpretation of it as a deliberative body or institution. They have instead focused on the Forum as a pedagogical space for activists and organizers to learn what alternatives are being proposed and enacted around the globe. However, clearly the WSF has acted as a political space by giving activists an arena in which to network and develop common projects. The Forum was instrumental in organizing Brazilian social movements and NGOs to support and help elect Lula da Silva, a former radical union leader and member of Brazil’s Workers Party, to that country’s Presidency in October of 2002. During the third WSF, organizers from European peace groups used the opportunity to double the number of countries participating in their scheduled 15 February 2003 (F15) global rally for peace against the threat of war in Iraqi (Frankel, 2003). Many WSF themes, such as debt relief, socially responsible investment, and the idea of a more equitable globalization which have been discussed since the Forum’s inception, are now gaining legitimacy with global economic powers, and have been taken up at the most recent World Economic Forum.

Debate between Forums’ serving as political agent versus open space for exchange and movement building is one of the most contentious between more liberal interpreters of the Forum’s Charter of Principles and its stricter adherents. This tension came to a head during the 2005 WSF when 19 ‘high-profile’ intellectuals produced a 12-point ‘Porto Alegre Manifesto’. The individuals (labeled the G-19) called on other participants at the Forum to sign-on to the list of proposals even though they had no participation in the creation of the document. The document outlined many of the main themes discussed at the 2005 WSF, including such items as debt cancellation, adoption of the Tobin tax on international financial transfers, promotion of equitable forms of trade, anti-discrimination policies for minorities and women, and democratization of international organizations (Anthony & Silva, 2005). For many at the Forum the list of policy statements signaled an attempt to produce a political platform for a gathering whose founding Charter of Principles disallows it. One of the original founders of the WSF Candido Grzybowski commented that: ‘What kills this proposal is the method with which it was created and presented. It goes against the very spirit of the Forum. Here, all proposals are equally important and not only that of a group of intellectuals, even when they are very significant persons’ (TerraViva, 2005, p. 1). The strength of the Forums seems to lie in the process by which decentralized coordination and networking among organizations is carried out, and not the policies advocated in the name of the Forum. Even though specific actions or policies are endorsed at the Forums they are proposed and promoted by organizations which are in attendance and not by individuals representing the Forums at large. This methodology produces a stabilizing framework where diverse organizations and issues may be discussed without the need to construct overarching policy platforms.

The WSF proved effective in bringing together all the different feelings and currents of thought that have come to comprise this rich and heterogeneous global justice movement now taking shape at the international level, and which has become highly visible since the mass protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle (Smith, 2004). The period beginning after 1999 was a new epoch in which worker’s struggles, ‘new social movements’ of the north, and a new group of young activists (anarchists, anti-sweatshop, anti-biotech, peace and human rights movements) have come together via an interrelated set of efforts. The Zapitista uprising in Chiapas in 1994, protests in Seattle against the WTO in 1999, subsequent demonstrations against the perceived agents of corporate globalization in Washington DC, Melbourne, Prague, Gothenburg, Quebec City, and Genoa, and creation of the World Social Forum, coalesced to create a new diaspora of global contention (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003). Furthermore, the Forum movement has made clear its adversary all along to be the neo-liberal capitalist model.
Global Civil Society and the Porto Alegre Process

My intention in this article is to outline what I contend to be an emergent bottom-up model for reconstituting global civil society (GCS) that proves to be adaptive, decentralized and openly democratic. I also hope to continue the theoretical dialogue begun by many other authors in recent years. This developing reflexive and mutually responsive process guiding the Forums’ development through its many manifestations around the globe I describe here as the ‘Porto Alegre Consensus’. This consensus is not a list of policy issues or action plans but instead an agreed-upon set of methods by those attending the Forums serving to guide the process by which this ‘globalization from below’ expands and is reconstituted to meet the threat posed by the global neo-liberal capitalism. Whereas the Washington Consensus guides economic policies such as deregulation, privatization, liberalization, fiscal discipline, tax reform and property rights to encourage rapid economic growth of the global economy (Williamson, 1990), the Porto Alegre Consensus serves to thicken linkages between GCS actors, liberate communicative action, and horizontally integrate the struggle for global social justice.

More importantly, solidarity at the Forums is achieved through discursive frameworks with earnest respect for gender, cultural identity and diversity. Communicative openness originates from the desire to create a true transnational public sphere where ideas, resources and strategies are openly exchanged along self-transforming networks, and authority and power is diffused across movements and organizations establishing participatory decision-making structures. This new recipe for GCS did not originate by chance but is the outcome of careful planning by the Forum’s original authors through adoption of the WSF Charter of Principles in 2001 and the willingness to host the Forums in Porto Alegre until the methodology matured and gained popular acceptance.

For an increasing number of theorists, GCS represents nothing less than the outline of a future world political and global governance framework. Keane (2003) describes GCS as a dynamic non-governmental system of interconnected socio-economic institutions that straddle the whole earth, and that have complex effects that are felt in its four corners. It is an unfinished project that consists of sometimes thick, sometimes thinly stretched networks, pyramids and hub-and-spoke clusters of organizations and actors who organize themselves across borders, with the deliberate aim of drawing the world together in new ways. Richard Falk (1995, p. 100) suggests that GCS recasts our understanding of sovereignty as ‘the modernist stress on territorial sovereignty as the exclusive basis for political community and identity is displaced both by more local and distinct groupings and by association with the reality of a GCS without boundaries’. Lipschutz and Mayer (1996, p. 391) sees transnational political networks put in place by actors in civil society as ‘challenging, from below, the nation-state system’, and ‘the growth of GCS representing and ongoing project of civil society to reconstruct, re-imagine, and re-map world politics’. Martinelli (2004) describes a similar model of global civil society that includes three basic principles of authority, exchange and solidarity alongside pluralistic and diverse strategies and methods acting as mechanisms for social integration. Taken together, representations of GCS portray a dynamic network of non-governmental organizations.
from the global to the grassroots, employing a diversity of methods and tactics, and that are in some cases intent on restructuring and in others reforming the mechanisms of global governance. In the following I hope to expand on these three basic principles of exchange, authority and solidarity in order to provide a framework for theoretical discourse regarding the Forums’ methodology, development and popular engagement throughout the world.

Transnational Public Spheres and Open Exchange

This ‘action at a distance’, which Giddens (1994) refers to, does not actually occur from a distance. This action originates somewhere, proceeds through specific channels, does something, and has concrete effects in particular places (Guidry et al., 2000). That action is, however, mediated by discursive relationships that are forged through transnational public spheres. Transnational public spheres create the space for communicative action, tactical exchange, organizational networking, and resource conduits. Jurgen Habermas’ ([1962], 1989) account of the bourgeois public sphere was meant to identify a new kind of space in which rational critical discussion by citizens, rather than sheer economic logic or the instrumentalities of state power, could assist in the formation of state policies and civil, political and social rights. Thirty years later, he still finds the public sphere very influential, noting that the bourgeois public sphere carried its own potential for self-transformation (Habermas, 1992). He also recognizes its transnational potential, invoking the 1989 demonstrations that brought down communism, although he admits that the demonstrations achieved their objectives only by being broadcast on global television networks that are themselves guided by principles other than those defining the democratic potentials of the public sphere. Regardless of its correspondence to communicative rationality with which Habermas is concerned, this notion of a potentially transnational public sphere has nonetheless become a critical element in the constitution of globalization and the role of social movements in it.

The consequence of this transnational public sphere is not simply its own development but, like globalization, it involves ‘actions at a distance’ that must be understood in terms of its consequences for real people and their struggles, all of whom occupy specific places and communities. That is, the transnational public sphere is realized in various localized applications and discourses, potentially quite distant from the original production of the discourse or practice in question. These transnational public spheres offer a place where forms of organizational networking and tactics for collective action can be transmitted across the globe. It is the medium through which various forms of collective action and social movement practices become ‘modular’ and transferable to distant locations and causes (Tarrow, 1994). It also provides the space where material resources can be developed and distributed across national boundaries in ways which limit the nation-state’s capacity to sanctify and demonize the practices with claims of patriotism and alien influence. Noteworthy examples of this process are provided by Ball (2000) and Keck and Sikkink (1998) regarding the spread of human rights ideologies and movements throughout the global conduit created by the transnational public sphere. Keck and Sikkink (1998) also illustrate the potential for transnational mobilizing structures with their discussion of the ‘boomerang effect’, in which national and international human rights organizations bypass the target states and rely on international pressure from other states and the transnational human rights movement to help accomplish goals in a specific area. The WSF process provides a global mobilizing structure that serves to network organizations from the grassroots to the transnational providing an amplifying sphere to air grievances, gain access to power structures and resource pools.
The transnational public sphere has experienced rapid expansion due to the recent advances in technologies such as high-speed computers, information technologies, and open-source software (Castells, 2000; Bohman, 2004). The Internet has proved to be the global conduit where movement strategies and tactics may be shared and observed, mobilization alerts travel in real-time, and resources can be collected and dispersed to any point in the world (evident from 2004 Asian tsunami relief efforts). The 2005 WSF focused thematic discussions on the use and distribution of open source software and recycled computer systems for civil society organizations. All of the 1,000 computers used at the 2005 WSF employed open source software developed in open source language. A good part of the 2005 budget was also dedicated to helping manufacturers of open communication systems (Milan, 2005). The 2005 edition also offered a new free translation system, and more than 400 panels and workshops were transmitted live online, permitting virtual participation around the world. The promotion of open source software such as Linux operating systems, open communication systems, and organizations like Creative Commons, which provides a flexible copyright framework, reflects the Forum’s search for functional alternatives and models for a better, more open world. The idea of the transnational public sphere allows us to conceptualize these advances in terms of offering greater access to a global communication and mobilization framework that does not depend on corporations or developed countries for its future development and maintenance.

Discursive Frameworks and Opportunity Structures

The World Social Forums are attempting to create a discursive framework where collective decisions can be made inclusively alongside the heterogeneous concerns of various cultures and identities as well as local, national, and international interests. At the 2005 Forum one could find a vibrant assortment of workshops and panels from participatory budget planning introduced by the Workers’ Party in Porto Alegre, to resistance of inequitable free trade agreements, and lectures on sustainable agriculture and genetically altered crops. Some of the 11 thematic spaces at WSF 2005 were: defending Earth and the people’s common goods—as an alternative to mercantilism and control by transnational corporations; defending diversity, plurality and identities; communication; anti-hegemonic practices, rights and alternatives; social struggles and democratic alternatives—against neo-liberal domination, and towards construction of international democratic order and integration of peoples (WSF, 2005a). These themes were selected by open consultation through participation of 1,863 organizations posting what they planned to discuss during the forum on a website (WSF, 2005c). This process was promoted as a way to make the thematic decisions more democratic while maintaining the events diversity and transforming it into a space that is increasingly capable of facilitating linkages and common actions among participants.

While meetings at the World Economic Forum, UN, WTO and other global institutions are often closed and maintain top-down hierarchies, the WSF promotes a transparent organizing structure for its events. All workshops, seminars, round tables, panel discussions and testimonials are openly posted and participants are free to attend whichever event they want. There is no separate entrance for different delegates, no excessive scrutiny as one enters a certain venue. The WSF does not have a draft agreement text to be negotiated. Instead, different groups can come up with different statements on different issues, thus respecting diversity and pluralism. An enormous number of workshops and working groups organized by the participating social movements and organizations are used as opportunities for encounters and exchanges, to spread information on the different national experiences of resistance to neo-
liberal policies, and for coordination of efforts and activities with an eye on the future. Chico Whitaker, one of the original authors of the Forums describes this process:

The Forum opens from time to time in different parts of the world—in the events where it takes place—with one specific objective: to allow as many individuals, organizations, and movements as possible that oppose neoliberalism to get together freely, listen to each other, learn from experiences and struggles of others, and discuss proposals for action; to become linked in new nets and organizations aiming at overcoming the present process of globalization dominated by large international corporations and their financial interests. (Whitaker, 2003, p. 1)

The openness of the discourse during the sessions produces a framework that is very inviting and non-threatening to individuals and organizations with different backgrounds, tactics and cultures.

Fisher and Ponniah’s (2003) analysis of the documents from the 2002 WSF reveal these differences among the various networks within the participants as well as areas of convergence. They draw attention to five significant debates: revolution vs. reform; environment vs. economy; human rights or protectionism; the universality of values; and the debate between the local, national and global issues and positions. Despite the differences, several areas of agreement including the perception of a common adversity unify the movements. The perception is that corporate domination has been organized across global space by the most powerful northern states in the world in collaboration with economic and political elites from the southern states. Simultaneously, this expansion is occurring in conjunction with the suppression of political, economic, cultural, racial, gendered, sexual, ecological and epistemological differences. The documents acknowledge the striking aspect of the current form of globalization is its capacity to reproduce, rearticulate, and compound traditionally oppressive social hierarchies. Many of the participants and facilitators view neo-liberal globalization as not simply economic domination of the world but also the imposition of monolithic thought constructs, that consolidate vertical forms of difference and prohibit the public from imagining diversity in egalitarian, horizontal terms. Capitalism, imperialism, mono-culturalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and the domination of biodiversity have coalesced under the current form of globalization and constitute the primary challenge of the movements represented in the WSF conference documents. Thus, the discursive frameworks and public spheres created by the WSF authors and organizers have allowed participants to find commonality in their grievances as well as discover differences in their epistemologies and tactics in order to ultimately build larger networks of contention, which are culturally and conceptually diverse.

Conceiving globalization as producing new opportunity structures for social movements such as with the World Social Forums allows us to examine movements within important frameworks that are already highly developed in social movement theory. A ‘political opportunity structure’ is the way in which present allocations of resources and power privilege some alternatives for collective action while raising the cost of others. The political opportunity model allows us to conceptualize both social movements within globalization and vice versa, since we can conceptualize the latter either as an independent or dependent variable in movement analysis (McAdam, 1996). Thus, movements can both be affected by and transform political opportunity structures. The flexibility afforded by such a perspective opens up the possibility for analysis of the discursive, mutually transforming relationships between states and societies (Migdal et al., 1994). Both the developing idea of the Forums as transnational public sphere as well as a structure from greater political opportunity brings us to the analysis of the Forums’ organizational structure and democratic systems.
Authority, Power and the Forums’ Organization

Regarding global democratization and the building of a global civil society, the World Social Forums can be looked at from two angles. On the one hand, it can be analyzed as an example of an emerging institution that may embody seeds of global democracy. From this perspective, it is particularly important to look at organizational design and the way decision-making structures function. From another angle, it provides a space for actors who may construct democratic projects in different contexts, both local and global, to transfer those modular templates anywhere on the planet. Among its organizers and participants there have been different approaches towards emphasizing these different identities of the WSF that are by no means incompatible (Teivainen, 2002). The formal decision-making power of the Forum process has been mainly in the hands of the Organizing Committee, consisting since its beginning of the Central Trade Union Confederation (Central Única dos Trabalhadores—CUT), the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra—MST) and six smaller Brazilian social movement organizations (SMOs). In response to what many claimed was a lack of transparency and democracy, repetition of dialogue, and political disparities between large and small organizations and feedback received from the Mumbai Organizing Committee, the 2005 WSF bought changes in its methodology and decision-making structures. Forum authors and organizers took the risk of allowing the Forums’ methodology to be self-managed by its participants by asking them how they wanted the Forums to progress and develop (WSF, 2005c; Caramel, 2005). Furthermore, the WSF has claimed all along to have no centralized leadership, no position of power. There is no hierarchy or reporting structure within the WSF. All participants, as long as they neither advocate nor use violence, can take part in discussions about finding alternatives to the capitalist model for globalization. The World Social Forums also do not make decisions on courses of action that are binding on those who attend its meetings (Fisher & Ponniah, 2003). The underlying assumption in this method is that the Forums do not represent a deliberative body or actor that would take political stands and thereby need rigorous decision-making procedures.

The media has tended to look at the WSF as a political actor in itself, though many of the organizers have wanted to downplay this role and argue that they simply provide a space for different groups to interact (Solomon, 2001). These different conceptions of the event have clashed, for example, when the media has asked for ‘final declarations’ and considered the lack of any such final document a proof of weakness in the organizational structure. The unwillingness to formulate political statements, beyond the Charter of Principles drafted in 2001, is occasionally questioned among some organizers and related actors who would like to see the WSF as an organization expressing opinions on certain issues, such as the war in Iraq, and crises in the Palestinian Territories, Haiti and Darfur.

Even if it is not clear whether the WSF will become a more active political entity with more explicit internal will-formation mechanisms, it is obvious that until now the most important impact of the Forums on democratic projects has consisted of the myriad encounters between different groups and activists within its confines (Teivainen, 2002). In the final assessment, the Forums’ informal organizational frameworks and decentralized forms of authority serve to make it one of the most promising civil society processes that may both contribute significantly to global democratization initiatives and work to constitute such an initiative in itself. The enthusiasm it has generated around the world will also bring it various dilemmas. Conceived as a civil society initiative, the Forum movement has had NGOs, grassroots organizations, party structures and trade unions proposing different forms of cooperation. Such was the dispute at the
2004 European Social Forum between the ‘horizontals’ and the ‘verticals’ (Osterweil, 2004). Some organizers may emphasize the importance of clinging to strictly defined civil society partners, others are likely to have more pragmatic positions on obtaining material and political support. These decisions will work to shape the future of the Forums and may have significant effects on the organizational and leadership structures. On the other hand, many have questioned formal and organizational problems they believe make it an undemocratic space:

These problems include a lack of transparency in decision making, hierarchical organization, as well as special treatment of celebrities and the creation of elitist tiers that privilege the more well known and consolidated components of the movement over many of the smaller and more grassroots and perhaps more radical organizations. A number of people have also criticized what they consider to be the privileging and co-optation of the forum by institutionalized political structures like political parties, trade unions, and mainstream NGOs that, in addition to being hierarchical organizations themselves, tend to be reformist or social democrat in their philosophy. This is seen as integrally related to the lack of transparency and democracy within the Forum Structure. (Osterweil, 2003, p.184)

There has also been concern over sponsoring organizations at the Forums such as the Ford Foundation, and PetroBras, Brazil’s state-owned petroleum company. Many of the organizers understand that to make the Forums sustainable and actionable they must risk partnering with strange bedfellows, but is not always easy to see the differences between ‘alternative’ globalization proposals with the idea of many business leaders being involved in the process, and the prospect of another, better world without their influence. This is an inherent difficulty that cosmopolitan theorists have faced in developing their mechanisms for civil society organizations and grassroots movements to influence policy and achieve agency within this hierarchy of transnational corporations and state institutions.

In perhaps the best known of such models from David Held (1995), GCS organizations provide the space for transnational public spheres which, taken together, operate as a basis for dispersed sovereignty in a system of global governance, generate critical resources directed towards the institutional power required by such governance and provide opportunities for voluntary association at the ‘local’ level. Nevertheless, civil society is by no means self-governing in Held’s model, being constrained within a wider framework of cosmopolitan democratic law that ‘delimits the form and scope of individual and collective action within the organizations of state and civil society. Certain standards are specified, which no political regime or civil association can legitimately violate’ (Held, 1993, p. 43). Of course, for this cosmopolitan democratic law to have any authority, transnational sovereign institutions are required, though Held imagines these also being constrained by such a law, particularly by the principle of subsidiarity or the dispersal of sovereignty, but also through ensuring that these are representative global institutions (Baker, 2002). Held summarizes his model as involving the call for a double-sided process of democratization in both political and civil society. Thus, although Held sees civil society as one of the agents of democratic global governance, it is as much acted upon as actor, object as well as subject of his cosmopolitan democracy. This feature is mirrored in the theory of other cosmopolitan democrats. Archibugi (1998, p. 219), for instance, wants GCS to participate ‘in political decision making through new permanent institutions’, but then states that such institutions ‘would supplement but not replace existing intergovernmental organizations. Their function would be essentially advisory and not executive’, which points to agency as a crucial element missing from cosmopolitan democrats’ theories of GCS.

Falk illustrates this hope in the agency of GCS with his call for ‘globalization from below’ through the activities of transnational social movements. ‘Globalization from below’, such as
displayed at the Forums, is seen as an alternative to the hegemonic ‘globalization from above’ imposed by transnational capitalist elites through a worldwide normative network premised not on human rights but on the rights of capital flow, multinational corporations, and ‘liberalized’ markets. For Falk there can be a democratic global normative framework or ‘law of humanity’. Yet unlike Held, with his weak notion of agency, Falk sees GCS as the only means to this humane law—‘as the hopeful source of political agency needed to free the minds of persons from an acceptance of state/sovereign identity’ (Falk, 1995, p.101). Furthermore, such global governance, contrary to Held who seeks to achieve it ‘from above’ from ‘cosmopolitan law’, must be built ‘from the ground up’ and continue to be anchored in GCS itself (Baker, 2002). This universality ‘from below’ is also sought by Paul Ghils, who wonders whether the ‘universality of action in association’ makes ‘civil society and its transnational networks of associations the universam which competing nations have never succeeded in creating’ (Ghils, 1992, p. 429). Thus, from this perspective, the Forum movement could represent nothing less than the outline of a future world political and global governance framework. There is this continuing ‘framework of rights’ involved in instances where WSF process is invoked from the ‘bottom-up’ and the cosmopolitan perspective informs our understanding of these mechanisms, and indicates that this facet of the Forums process is essential to the future evolution of global democratic structures.

**Methodology, Consensus and Movement Solidarity**

I describe the Porto Alegre consensus as a set of agreed-upon methodologies serving to guide the process by which the World Social Forums and the Forum movement thickens the linkages between GCS actors, liberates communicative action, and horizontally integrates the struggle for global social justice. This consensus is not a list of policy demands or actions plans, but a self-adapting process partly laid out in the Forums’ Charter of Principles, but, more importantly, interpreted and renegotiated by the many participants engaged in the process and the many different manifestations of the Forum all over the world. The discursive frameworks, communicative openness, and participatory decision-making structures established by the process not only allow organizations and activists to share strategies and projects, amplify political frames, and build solidarity, it also serves to stabilize the global social justice movements and GCS (Chesters, 2003). Chesters describes the Forum gatherings as ‘Plateaus’ or moments of intensive network stabilization where formulation and shaping of political projects, strategic and tactical reflection, construction of alternative means of communication and information exchange, and development of mechanisms for the expression of solidarity and mutual aid may be achieved. This stabilizing process may help explain the Forums’ success in drawing large audiences and the motivation behind its continuance, but can methodology actually drive a global movement? If so, then it will certainly influence the way in which we conceive of global transnational movements.

Though my theoretical dialogue covered the landscape of transnational public spheres, political opportunity structures and cosmopolitan democracies, there are other theories that may inform activist and scholarly understanding of the Forum movement. More importantly, there is the question of praxis. What does the Forums’ process mean for the over a quarter of the planet’s population who struggle daily in abject poverty, and will the Forums’ panels, workshops, and cultural gatherings actually produce an alternative globalization that is better than the one we have now? If the Forums prove to be a powerful mechanism for struggle that works to improve the livelihood of oppressed peoples, and creates practical alternatives to global
capitalism that begin to balance geopolitical power relations then the process will be legitimated. Unfortunately, there is no concrete framework for evaluating such questions. The Forums seem to operate on more of a qualitative system of relationships and encounters rather than a procedure that gives rise to clear empirical data points. Consequently, this questions the Forums’ ability to self-manage its own evolution without established reflexive systems built into the process.

Although the World Social Forum may be the most promising embodiment of GCS to emerge in the modern world, the challenges and tasks before it are daunting.\(^7\) The plethora of critiques leveled against the Forum process include: the lack of transparency and democratic decision-making; the gatherings are too big and chaotic; lack of direction or final declarations; too centralized and commodified (Sen, 2003). In North America, home of the Washington Consensus, the Forum process has had a rather tough go of it. The Boston Social Forum held in August 2004 drew about 5,000 participants and, although a success by the organizers’ standards, was also perceived as being a gathering of the usual white, affluent activists (Berkshire, 2004) poised to protest the Democratic National Convention occurring the next week. The Northwest Forum that was to be held in Seattle during the autumn of 2004 fell apart due to a breakdown of the planning process which left the Indigenous Programming Committee and Youth Planning Committee pulling out at the last minute (NWSF, 2005). Though a setback, the organizers of the Northwest Forum admit that their experience was an opportunity that may ultimately bring the organizations together to work out their differences and commit to greater coordination in the future. In the final calculus, the Forum process requires activists and organizations to be introspective and assess their own biases towards power and control, movement strategies and tactics, and intra-movement networking and collaboration. This may be one of the most overlooked characteristics of the Forums, its ability to provide movements and organizations the opportunity to become more open, equitable and democratic.

The 2006 Forums will be ‘spread out’ across the globe, in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas, providing yet another concrete possibility to give the process a better geographical and cultural balance while integrating transnational networks of contention. This will also give scholars, organizers and activists an opportunity to refine their assessments and critiques of the Forums. The reflexive process between Forum incarnations and the participatory assessment and corresponding revisions of Forum methodology is at the heart of the Porto Alegre Consensus. This dance between theory and practice is crucial to the role that the Forums play in reconstituting global civil society and within the possibility that exists of constructing future alternative globalizations which are more just, equitable and sustainable.

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Notes

1 The World Social Forum ‘slogan’ from the first World Social Forum in 2001. I interpret the phrase to represent the hope and possibility of building other more just and equitable forms of globalization.

2 The World Economic Forum is generally accepted to be a meeting of global business, industry, and governmental leaders whose aim is to define global economic strategies and policies. From the World Economic Forum’s website.
The World Economic Forum is an independent international organization committed to improving the state of the world. The Forum provides a collaborative framework for the world’s leaders to address global issues, engaging particularly its corporate members in global citizenship.

I use the term ‘author’ to refer to those activists responsible for ‘authoring’ the Forum’s original Charter of Principles. This term is separate from Forum organizer, which I use to describe someone who interprets and facilitates the Forum process.

I use ‘Forums’ to describe the many thematic and regional manifestations of the Forum movement since its inception from Europe to Africa and the community Forums in Italy. I use Forum to represent the annual World Social Forum or the original 2001 Forum held in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Literature on the Forums both popular and academic has grown exponentially in recent years. The breadth of ideas and critiques represented in these pieces is well beyond the scope of this article. I would at least like to recommend the online text Challenging Empires located at: http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html, and the special issue of the International Social Science Journal, 56(182) on ‘cultures of politics’ and the Forums.

Bernard Cassen, one of the original founders of the Forum, first put forth the hope of a Porto Alegre Consensus challenging and if not eventually replacing the Washington Consensus.

Again, to summarize all of the critiques of the Forums in limited space would not do them justice. Please see texts from note 5 above as well as Sen (2003) and Smith (2004).

References


Scott Byrd is a graduate student in the department of Sociology at the University of California, Irvine in the United States. He researches and writes on issues of global governance, international development, alternative globalization movements, and self-organizing activist networks. His thesis research was conducted throughout Brazil interviewing authors, organizers and activists involved in the World Social Forums’ process.