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The global justice movement and the social forum process

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The global justice movement (GJM) is a “movement of movements” that draws together all those who are engaged in sustained and contentious challenges to the current global political economy and all those who seek to democratize it. Narrowly defined, it includes:

… campaigns of mobilization against global or transnational neoliberalism or its agents, taking place against the policies of international financial institutions or their meetings; against regional economic compacts and summits; and global or regional Social Forums directed against global neoliberalism, like the World Social Forum and the European Social Forum.

(Hadden and Tarrow 2007: 361)

More broadly understood, participants in this family of “antisystemic” movements draw attention to various goals that aim to improve and democratize the current world-system, such as ending US militarism, democratizing the United Nations, reducing toxic emissions, defending collective land and public social services, building social cooperatives, and empowering oppressed groups (Arrighi et al 1989).

Since its inception in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the World Social Forum (WSF) has has rapidly become the largest international gathering of participants in, and supporters of, movements associated with the GJM. Annual and bi-annual WSF meetings in Brazil, India, and Kenya have attracted hundreds of thousands of participants from around the world. These international meetings have inspired the formation and spread of thematic, regional, national, and local Social Forums across the globe. The Social Forum process has helped activists to connect global and local issues, to coordinate actions, and to expand and strengthen their cross-border and cross-movement networks.

This chapter reviews research on the GJM and the Social Forum process and debates regarding their political significance. We argue that the GJM and the Social Forum process have strengthened efforts to democratize the world-system and encouraged coalition building within an era of globalization and transnational activism. Yet, considerable divisions within the “global left” must be overcome for it to be a truly effective force for global social change.

The global justice movement

The GJM emerged from a long history of transnational activism. Antislavery and feminist radicals in seventeenth-century England and across the Atlantic drew inspiration from egalitarian
indigenous American societies. The American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century sparked the Haitian revolution, which contributed to the fall of Napoleonic France, Britain’s forthcoming hegemony, and the decolonization of Latin America. In 1840, transnational abolitionists organized the World Antislavery Conference in London. The International Workingmen’s Association, organized by Karl Marx and fellow activists in 1864, brought together labor unions as well as socialist, anarchist, and communist groups from across Europe and the United States in class solidarity. Despite its eventual cooptation under Stalin’s Soviet Union, the Communist International of 1919 united a highly heterogeneous group of movements representing the disenfranchised on a global scale. Transnational alliances also grew during the waves of decolonization occurring in the 1950s and 1960s, and through the Bandung Conference of 1955, in which Asian and African countries participated to develop policies outside Western and Soviet dominance (Chase-Dunn and Reese 2007; Santiago-Valles 2005).

While certainly not new, the scope and scale of international ties among social activists have risen dramatically over the past few decades along with globalization; activists have increasingly shared information, ideas, and other resources, and coordinated actions across nations (della Porta 2007; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Moghadam 2005; Smith 2004a, b; Staggenborg 2008). Transnational organizing was facilitated by the four fold increase in the number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) worldwide from 1973 to 1993. Together, these trends fostered the growth of the contemporary GJM, which emerged in response to the global spread of neoliberal policies (Evans 2005).

The GJM, which crosses national boundaries, attracts constituents affiliated with wide-ranging organizations and political groups: unions, direct-action oriented social movement organizations and networks, professionalized NGOs, and transnational advocacy networks. Movement participants also vary in their issue focus and preferred strategies and tactics (della Porta et al 2006; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Reitan 2007; Tarrow 2005). Opposition to neoliberal globalization unifies these disparate forces in the GJM. Refusing to heed Margaret Thatcher’s infamous clarion call that “there is no alternative” (TINA), the distinct yet integrated components of the GJM campaign for a more just world-system. The GJM seeks a more equitable distribution of wealth and power and more environmentally sustainable communities. As a counterhegemonic movement, it builds institutions and forms alliances to foster alternative visions and practices of social justice (Evans 2005; Staggenborg 2008).

The increasing importance of economic and cultural exchanges across borders and the proliferation of global governance institutions regulating these exchanges have provided social movements with both powerful incentives and greater opportunities for transnational collaboration (della Porta 2007; Smith 2004a, b; Staggenborg 2008). Neoliberal policies, growing economic inequalities and problems, and a growing awareness of worldwide environmental degradation generated calls for coordinated action. Hardships associated with the lending policies of international financial institutions and the debt crisis led to a series of disruptive actions in the global South known as the “austerity riots” that began in the 1970s, peaked in the 1980s, and continued into the present (Reitan 2007; Walton and Ragin 1990). In the 1980s and 1990s, a series of conferences sponsored by the United Nations, and parallel summits by NGOs, addressed problems associated with neoliberal globalization and the lack of human rights; these meetings fostered the creation of new transnational and North-South alliances, while the slow pace of political change contributed to activists’ subsequent radicalization (Moghadam 2005; Smith et al 2007).

The Zapatista revolt in 1994 against the implementation of the North American Free Trade Act in Mexico, and the threats it posed for indigenous peoples’ land, resources, livelihoods, and culture, was instrumental in building North-South alliances in the struggle against neoliberal
globalization and in linking local struggles to global ones. Subcommandante Marcos and his followers demonstrated the potential of the Internet and the capacity of “encuentros,” international gatherings of activists, for bridging cultural divides and building transnational alliances and solidarity, and the power of international pressure and publicity to protect activists against repression (Schulz 1998). The Zapatista revolt revived and drew attention to the struggles of rural indigenous peoples, whose resistance against world-systemic domination predates current struggles by thousands of years (Hall and Fenelon 2009). Furthermore, the Zapatistas’ consensual decision-making process and emphasis on local autonomy influenced future GJM organizations and their handling of internal diversity (Wood 2005; Zugman 2005).

Since the mid-1990s, the meetings of international governance institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Group of Eight (G8) have constituted the principal focal points for transnational activists to protest. These institutions represent the managerial epicenter of global capitalism and core economic interests, and so their meetings remain a natural target for the GJM. Mass media attention to these meetings and protests brought greater visibility to the GJM (Amin 2009; Pianta 2001). The absence or marginalization of government officials from the global South within these institutions also provided powerful allies for the GJM (Smith 2004a, 2004b; Staggenborg 2008; Tarrow 2005). The “Battle of Seattle” in 1999, marked a new era of high-profile protests against the WTO in the global North, and introduced many US activists to the GJM (Boykoff 2006).

Given the high cost of international travel, the availability of organizational resources has been critical to the spread of the GJM. Surveys of participants at five global protest events show that organizations played important roles in notifying participants, bringing them to the protest, and supporting their travel, especially among non-local participants (Fisher et al. 2005). Case studies also document how effectiveness of grassroots transnational social movement organizations depended on access to money and researchers (Bathiwala 2002).

Transnational movements, especially those bridging North-South divides, tend to be plagued by geographic and organizational inequalities in activists’ access to resources as well as internal democratic deficits. As Bandy and Smith (2005: 232) put it, “the struggle for a democratic and equal form of globalization must overcome the often non-democratic and unequal forces that filter down from the world-system into movements themselves and the civil society they create.” Indeed, the North-South divide has been a feature of global political economy for over 500 years and remains the most pressing and unresolved issues in the GJM. Northern nations continue to exert their economic, cultural, and political power to force their interests on Southern nations, often acting “paternalistically” toward them. Northern states are seen as “teachers” to the still “developing” counties of the South, and these patterns are frequently reproduced in the relations among transnational social justice activists. For example, many Northern environmental activists—a major force in the GJM—continue to advocate for “conservation/preservation” that leaves little space for coalition building with impoverished southern nations who seek “sustainable development.” A truly “global movement” needs to incorporate the ideas of Southern activists, who can teach important lessons to Northern activists about how to effectively challenge neoliberal globalization (Teivainen 2002). Organizations such as the Peoples’ Global Action and transnational feminist and other social movement networks have attempted to mitigate North domination by implementing strategies such as equitable representation in governance structures and decentralization to allow grassroots participation, and by highlighting the ideas and practices of southern activists (Moghadam 2005; Reitan 2007; Staggenborg 2008; Wood 2005; Zugman 2005). Despite such reflexive thinking and practice, the GJM movement still grapples with overcoming the North-South divide.
Ideological tensions also exist regarding goals and visions of democracy, organizational structures, and strategies and tactics. Reformists seek minor changes in nation-states and global institutions, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, and their policies so that they are less repressive and exploitative. Socialists, on the other hand, seek more fundamental transformations in power relations and to abolish capitalism; they often seek to gain control of, and to transform, the state and global political institutions in order to counter the power of global capital, redistribute wealth, and democratize society. Anarchists wish to destroy and eliminate the existing nation-states and global institutions along with capitalism, and replace these institutions with popularly controlled and highly decentralized institutions (Gautney 2010: 112). Religious tensions also exist among the various faith-based activist groups affiliated with the GJM, and between religious and secular activists (de Sousa Santos 2006). Leftists tend to be particularly skeptical of the agendas of NGOs, which rely on corporate and governmental funding. Organizations also vary in their decision-making processes. While anti-authoritarian groups (the “horizontals”) implement direct democratic procedures and establish loosely affiliated networks with little hierarchy, other organizations (the “verticals,” such as NGOs and unions) rely on more hierarchical and representational forms of democracy (Reiter 2009; Rucht 2011).

Finally, while reformists and NGOs tend to rely on institutionalized tactics such as lobbying, more radical groups employ militant, and sometimes even violent, collective actions to achieve their goals (Gautney 2010). The “amping up” of tactics by the GJM to include destruction of property was partly a reaction to the limited space afforded them by mainstream media outlets as well as frustration with the slow pace of change. The mass media worked diligently to discredit the GJM by highlighting its “violent” nature, as was evident in news coverage of WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 and the World Bank/IMF protests in Washington, DC, in 2000 (Boykoff 2006). Thus, despite the power of mainstream media to disseminate information widely, the GJM frequently relies on alternative media in order to communicate to the public.

Many scholars have emphasized the failures of the traditional left in the twentieth century as an influential catalyst and a defining break from the past of the contemporary GJM. Indeed, participants in the GJM tend to celebrate its internal diversity and seek to avoid the problems of hierarchy and division associated with “vanguardism” and democratic centralism. This has helped to make the movement broad and inclusive and to achieve unity over short-term goals, even as participants disagree over long-term goals and strategies (Amin 2009; della Porta et al 2006; Seibert 2008; Wallerstein 2003).

The world social forum process

The WSF was initially organized by the Brazilian labor movement and the landless peasant movement and their international allies in 2001 and it has most often occurred in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a traditional stronghold of the Workers’ Party. The WSF was conceived as a popular alternative to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual private gathering where members of the global elite discuss current issues and develop policy ideas. The WSF, which occurs at the same time as the World Economic Forum, draws together all those opposed to neoliberal globalization to meet, share political ideas, experiences, and to make action plans. All types of individuals and organizations were welcome as long as they agree with the WSF “Charter of Principles,” do not attend as official representatives of governments or political parties, and do not advocate the use of violence. While participants are divided in terms of priorities and preferred goals and tactics, the Social Forum process has also helped to bridge divides within the GJM and to strengthen various transnational campaigns for social and environmental justice. While workshops taking place at Social Forums are largely self-organized by participants, the International Council
and a local Organizing Committee make decisions regarding the event logistics, collective actions, and the content of large plenary meetings. Regional, national, and local forums are likewise organized by planning and organizing committees (Smith et al. 2007).

The size of WSF meetings grew dramatically. Allegedly about 20,000 people from 117 countries participated in the first WSF meeting in 2001, while the fourth WSF meeting held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2005, drew a record 155,000 registered participants from 135 countries. The 2007 WSF meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, drew about 74,000 registrants, a remarkably feat given that it was the first WSF meeting to take place in Africa. The 2009 meeting in Belem, Brazil, drew more than 130,000 registered participants. Meanwhile, hundreds of regional, thematic, and local Social Forums have been organized. Although this trend has been more concentrated within Latin America and Western Europe, sub-global Social Forums are now reaching into Africa, Asia, and North America (Rucht 2011; Smith and Smythe 2010).

Social Forum participation and organization has spread unevenly across the globe, affecting who attends and the issues raised. Smith and Smythe (2010) suggest that the spread of forums is contingent upon multi-level networks and the topics addressed. Diffusion follows both an indirect and direct path, while thematic sessions are largely centered upon context and place. Since most participants come from the host country, differences in population density, the strength of organizational infrastructures, and the political opportunities within those countries help to explain why some Social Forums are larger than others (Reese et al. 2008; Smith and Smythe 2010).

National political cultures and the shifting composition of local and international organizing committees also influence the issues addressed at Social Forums. According to Brunelle (2009), the history of popular opposition to neoliberalism and strength of socialist parties within Latin America shaped the discussions at the initial WSF meetings in Brazil. At the 2004 WSF in Mumbai, India, Dalit activists (formerly known as the “untouchables”), feminists, other Indian activists, broadened the agenda of the GJM by highlighting issues of casteism, patriarchy, and religious fundamentalism (Hewitt and Karides 2011; Smith 2011). Similarly, issues of racism and the global HIV crisis were brought to the forefront of discussions at the 2007 WSF held in Nairobi, Kenya.

Location and local organizers influence the composition of Social Forum participants. WSF meetings held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, were surprisingly “white” events (Teivainen 2004), while the location of the WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2007 and Mumbai, India, in 2004, helped to increase non-white participation in these meetings. Based on findings from surveys of participants at the WSF meetings in Porto Alegre in 2005, the WSF in Nairobi in 2007, and the US Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007, researchers find “considerable variation in the political views and activities of attendees across these three venues” (Reese et al. 2008: 1). At both Porto Alegre and Atlanta, participants were politically homogenous and predominantly leftist. The Porto Alegre forum had strong representation from the local and national Workers’ Party, leftist movement organizations, and unions. Participants in Atlanta were far to the left of the political mainstream in the United States and disproportionately non-white, which is largely attributed to organizers’ intentional incorporation of left-leaning mass-based community organizations in forum leadership and outreach. The Nairobi forum, however, was largely affiliated with politically moderate NGOs and churches, and participants were more religious and less radical in orientation. Yet across these venues, young adults and the college-educated predominated, as did activists affiliated with two or more social movements (Reese et al. 2008). Surveys of participants at the 2005 WSF meeting reveal both North-South convergence and division in terms of preferred goals. Although a majority of participants from all world-system zones favored the abolition and replacement of both capitalism and international financial institutions (IFIs), Southerners were more favorable than Northerners toward simply abolishing IFIs (Chase-Dunn et al. 2008).
Despite the successes of the WSF, participants regularly critique its organizational shortcomings leading to structural exclusion, as well as co-optation by political parties and agents of global capitalism. When it comes to organizational shortcomings, Smith (2004a) notes the constant tensions between the demands of organizing large, heterogeneous meetings and maintaining inclusive, decentralized decision making that allows for wide expressions of diversity. While some activists conceive of the *laissez faire*, “open space” format at the WSF for workshops and presentations as democratic and inclusive, other activists are more critical of it. Critics have called for more purposeful interventions to counteract power imbalances between social groups and organizations so that more socially privileged and resource-rich organizations do not dominate, and such views informed the organizing of the US Social Forum (Gautney 2010; Guerrero et al 2009; Juris 2008; Karides and Hewitt 2011). The privileging of formal panels at the WSF featuring famous intellectuals and politicians was also criticized for leaving limited time and space for grassroots dialogue (Gautney 2010; Smith 2004c). Concerns about the participation of moderate NGOs and church organizations, many dependent on Northern donors, were especially heightened during the 2007 WSF in Nairobi and 2004 WSF in Mumbai. Due to such concerns, radical activists have sometimes organized parallel summits to WSF or European Social Forums, drawing greater participation from more radical and grassroots activists (Pommerole and Simeant 2011; Reese et al 2008; Smith 2004c; Smythe and Byrd 2010).

Although some contend that Social Forums are merely “talk shops,” these meetings have been instrumental in coordinating mass actions, such as international protests against the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and against free trade policies. Local and national campaigns, such as for Dalits’ rights, workers’ rights, or indigenous rights, have also gained wider support and publicity through involvement in the WSF process. Social movement networks have formed and expanded during Social Forum meetings, and funders meet with and identify international partners (Smith et al 2011). Attendees also take action during Social Forums; they participate in an opening march to highlight their wide-ranging demands for “another world,” engage in protests around specific concerns (such as reducing Social Forum entry fees or improving banks’ lending and investment practices), sign petitions, and raise money for their organizations (Smith et al 2011). “Social Movement Assemblies” were eventually developed as part of Social Forum process so that participants could make and express support for calls to action (Smith and Doerr 2011).

**Conclusion**

The GJM and the Social Forum process have brought together a variety of antisystemic movements from around the world through the overarching frame of “global justice” and opposition to neoliberalism. Both of these forces have helped raise the political consciousness of social activists, particularly young activists. The current GJM has largely overcome the problem of vanguardism that plagued the old left by celebrating diversity, incorporating critiques offered by identity-based movements, and through decentralized networks. Yet, the greatest strength of the GJM and the Social Forum process is also their greatest weakness. The “global left” (de Sousa Santos 2006) is still highly fragmented ideologically and organizationally, and remains quite small relative to the global population. While activists are united in what they oppose, they remain divided in their long-term visions of social justice and how to best achieve it. North-South inequalities and divisions also persist, creating tremendous challenges for transnational alliances.

Scholars find commonalities and differences in the spread, organizational development, mobilization efforts, and political tactics of the GJM by country. This is true even within Western Europe (della Porta 2007), although European global justice organizations have generally experienced a boom in membership, partly in reaction to European Union policies. Meanwhile,
US GJM participation has declined after the “Battle in Seattle,” partly due to activists’ increasing involvement in the anti-war movement and electoral politics (Hadden and Tarrow 2007). Differences in the GJM are also noticeable in the global South. Nanga (2009) notes the weakness of continental networks and the dominance of a small number of NGOs in the African GJM; many NGOs are tied to Western multinational partners and conservative, United States backed Christian charity organizations that threaten to push back gains made by feminist and lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and queer organizations. However, further growth of Pan-African solidarity could counteract these tendencies (Nanga 2009; Reese et al 2008). In contrast, the GJM has been more robust within Latin America, where impressive transnational campaigns against neoliberalism and socialist parties have flourished, especially among semiperipheral nations such as Venezuela and Brazil (Chase-Dunn et al 2010). Greater research on such cross-national differences in the development of the GJM is needed.

As Staggenborg (2008: 136) concludes, “the extent to which the movement succeeds depends on its ability to develop long-term campaigns with solutions to the problems that global justice activists have identified.” Whether or not such long-term campaigns will emerge and be strong enough to effectively challenge the existing world-system remains to be seen. The economic crisis and the hardships associated with it present opportunities for mobilizing the public and expanding the reach of the global left. However, they also present opportunities for conservative forces, as the rise of public sector cutbacks, fascist organizations, right-wing parties, and anti-immigrant sentiment in many countries demonstrates. The appeal of nationalism and protectionism could also increase as economic conditions worsen, exacerbating national and regional divisions among activists, while building and sustaining transnational alliances may become more difficult as funding for such projects becomes more scarce. Countering such forces and trends effectively requires greater unity and concerted mobilization within the GJM, and a concurrent expansion of its reach within the broader public. While the Social Forum process and its movement assemblies has helped to increase the coherence and effectiveness of the GJM, there is still much work to be done.

References


The global justice movement


