Is there anything left to say about transnational activism and the alter-global movement? It may seem doubtful, given all the research that has piled up on the topic, the publication of a handbook on World Social Forums (Smith et al., 2011), and even a certain weariness from watching the forums go by, one after another – and even if the World Social Forum (WSF) process does not equate with the whole alter-global movement. But before we conclude that the topic has been exhausted, we should keep in mind two things. First, the feeling of weariness is mainly found among Western observers (journalists and academics), who have indeed been the most influential in drawing attention to this public issue. It may in fact reflect the geographical displacement of alter-globalization from its birthplace in the Latin world to other regions of the globe, particularly Africa. Hence, the intrinsic interest of studying the WSF held in Dakar in January 2011. Second, the spate of research is now dated; it dried up around 2007, when the cause was declared to be dead and buried – again from a Western-centric point of view. As often happens, the epitaph had a performative effect, but it was misleading because, all in all, the alter-global cause was still very much alive and researchers were the ones who, apart from a few exceptions, had abandoned it in midstream. Was this a case of postcolonial occultation? In any event, ten years after the first forum, it was necessary to pick up the research where it was left off, on a continent belatedly incorporated into alter-global networks but crucial to the production of their discourse.

Furthermore, the events that make up social forums, especially when they claim to possess a worldwide dimension, are research objects that have helped to give the sociology of social movements an international vantage point. In so doing, these objects are not only interesting in themselves or because of our interest in them, but also because they question the ordinary categories we use when we ponder the nature of movements, organizations, commitment, etc.

This book is the result of a methodological reflection on how to conduct a sociological survey in an international context and the importance of thinking about the issue of the division of activist labor in this specific context. If, from a Weberian perspective, the task of the social sciences is as much to provide historical context as to make general statements, then the
challenge consists precisely in knowing how to contextualize meaning and observable practices in this type of international setting. In this sense, we perceive the Forum not only as an object in itself – as a “little world” (though it is that, too) – but also as revealing and analyzing broader processes at work (activist internationalization, division of labor, etc.).

1 Methodological reasons for observing a WSF in Africa

The WSF held in Dakar in January 2011 was the second such event organized in Africa, following the Nairobi Forum in 2007. Aside from the Polycentric World Forum in 2006, in which Africa was one of the three sites, all the earlier ones had taken place in Latin America or Asia. One of the primary reasons for specifically studying this Forum lies in the role assigned to Africa in the alter-global movement. Despite its original link to Latin America, Africa is usually described within the movement as a continent victimized by economic globalization (Pommerolle and Siméant, 2011). There is much to learn from examining the issues and particular constraints on global justice advocacy at such a site; this is especially true when we recall that the movement has undergone a decade of geographical and organizational change.

In addition to the content, there was a methodological advantage in choosing to conduct a collective, systematic survey in Dakar: it brought out the difficulties of fieldwork in international contexts, a problem increasingly encountered by researchers studying social movements. The call for “multi-sited ethnography” has unfortunately become a slogan, a magic bullet that does not do justice to Marcus’ text (1995). To grasp transnational activism, it may be useful to look at “knots,” i.e. international organizations, rightly described by Sidney Tarrow as “coral reefs” (Tarrow, 2001) of transnational activists, or other moments in which international actors coalesce. The situations that bring together actors from different national contexts (conferences of major organizations, international meetings of the G8, the IMF or the summit of the Americas, or huge activist gatherings like social forums, etc.) provide exceptional survey opportunities.

This book is based on just such a large-scale, collective study, at once quantitative and qualitative. It is well-known that the use of INSURA (INdividual SUrveys in RAllies), which Isabelle Sommier discusses here, has expanded a great deal over the last 15 years. The method has been practiced less frequently at World Social Forums, however, than at local or regional forums, where there was less linguistic and geographical diversity
within the survey population. This diversity is precisely what we decided to tackle at the Forum in Dakar, through a survey in five languages handed out by a multinational team to nearly 1,100 people during the five days of the forum (see technical appendix for a longer exposition of the method).

The heuristic dimension of transnational surveys should be underlined here. They help denaturalize the routine categories of social science surveys and their ability to account for comparable realities in other countries (whether they refer to socio-professional categories or levels of education). Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) was used to circumvent the increased difficulties of *ceteris paribus* statistical analysis in an international configuration, in which the variables and the practises they measure mean different things to different individuals, depending on their nationality. MCA (see the two chapters by J. Siméant), combined with agglomerative hierarchical clustering, enables the meaning of sociographic variables to be checked more accurately according to reconstructed national groups. Ilka Vari-Lavoisier, in her chapter, shows how useful it can be to analyze systematically Non-response in order to understand diverse feelings of political competence, or self-censorship.

Our approach to forums claims to be more than strictly quantitative. Although it is not always possible to conduct ethnographic research at these events (if by that we mean being immersed for a long period of time in a circle of people who are familiar with each other), the fact that they have a dimension of theater (Rucht, 2011) and performance lends them to very rich, qualitative observation. This theatrical dimension is fundamental, due to the unified time and place of the event, its finality and groups mobilizing in front of what they perceive to be a global audience to stage what is at stake worldwide (the effects of globalization, the future of the planet, global inequalities, international solidarity, etc.). It is therefore particularly instructive to observe such events in a systematic way. Given the limited time available to researchers and their lack of familiarity with the local context, this presupposes engaging in collective observation and whenever possible by multinational teams to prevent ethnocentric interpretation. In both cases, the participation of the whole group at every step in the research process, together with accommodations for the group in the same place, which enabled evening debriefing sessions, was a powerful tool to ensure rigorous “qualitative” as well as quantitative results.

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1 Even though such investigations were possible due to the fact that most members of our expanded research team also met with an activist network at the Forum to work more specifically.
We had already adopted a comparable approach (collective and reflexive, with an ethnographic dimension) in Nairobi (Pommerolle and Siméant, 2011) in 2007 (on the benefits of collaboration in participant observation at intense, multifocal events, see also Mazie and Woods, 2003). At that time, we were seeking to understand how Africa was described and staged, how the idea of a capability for action specific to the inhabitants of the African continent was generated and how pan-African and anti-imperialist discourses were mobilized in the process. During the study, which involved some 25 veteran and junior researchers, both French and Kenyan, we engaged in systematic observation of around one hundred workshops selected from the general forum program. The observation guide (Sommier and Agrikoliansky, 2005) encouraged researchers to pay attention to the way the participants expressed themselves in public, the composition of the assembly, whether speakers referred or did not refer to Africa, the degree of expertise mobilized at the workshop, and the role of NGOs, among other variables. Each workshop was observed by a binational duo, which made it possible to grasp points that could be identified only by someone familiar with the alter-global movement, Kenya, or a specific language (Spanish, Swahili, etc.). Working in multinational teams proved to be useful not only from the standpoint of language and social familiarity, but it also revealed that the research teams functioned like a microcosm of the international event: some topics that seemed unimportant to some members of the team, who went so far as to stop observing them, were seen on the contrary as absolutely central by the others (e.g. the topic “Young People and the Future of Africa,” which seemed trivial to some young French researchers but extremely important to Kenyan students). Naturally, incidents that occurred on the sidelines of the 2007 Forum were also scrutinized (such as the looting of a Forum dining room operated by someone close to the Kenyan Minister of the Interior, which was experienced as a moment of radical concrete protest against “the politics of the belly”) (Bayart, 2009).

This qualitative, ethnographic aspect of the study, though less developed in Dakar where we focused on the survey by questionnaire, is nevertheless present in this book. The chapter by William Herrera, Alice Judell, and Clément Paule is intended precisely to show the advantages of using an approach inspired by Erving Goffman to grasp the theatrical dimensions of the event. By choosing an object as insignificant as waste management at the Forum, the authors show how the political dimensions of the forum can be understood not only through discourses but also through practices and performances designed to be exemplary (even if they did not always succeed). Delimiting the area of the rubbish dump was also a way of drawing
a map of Forum boundary lines separating those who belonged from those who were excluded. The chapter by Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle, which examines symbols of nationalism at the Forum, and Julie Castro’s chapter on gender dimensions make similar points.

There would be no reason to highlight the methodological aspect of the survey in an international activist situation if all we did was present research procedures, no matter how satisfying they may be. Our methodological reflection is tied to two core issues that nourished this study: the international division of activist labor (Siméant, 2013), and the contexts of transnational collective action.

2 The division of labor and the paradoxes of activist internationalization

Through experience we have found that focusing on the division of labor is an especially fruitful approach to the study of activism, particularly in international contexts. By “division of labor” we mean both the effects of the international division of labor between activist organizations and the forms of division of labor within transnational activist movements (e.g. networks that claim to be rooted in the North as well as the South) or within the alter-global world.

Thinking about these aspects of the division of labor means grasping the asymmetries within a space that challenges them and tries to overcome them.

With few exceptions (Rothman and Oliver, 2002; Wood, 2005; Smith et al., 2011) the sociology of transnational movements has failed to devote much attention to the southern part of those movements, and still less to the social characteristics of southern activists. It is therefore difficult to test in the South the interesting hypothesis proposed by Sidney Tarrow according to which the participants in global justice movements, mainly from northern countries, are both “rooted and cosmopolitan” (Tarrow, 2005).

A few works show genuine sensitivity to the contradictions and difficulties of transnational activist cooperation (Smith and Johnston, 2002; Bandy and Smith, 2005; Bandy, 2004; Chase-Dunn et al., 2008). Some deal in particular with the disparities that may be increasing between the local agendas of southern activists and those of their international supporters (Fireman, 2009), or why some of them receive international support and others do not (Bob, 2001). Even fewer recall the way organizations that operate in the South distinguish between their international and local
workforces. Finally, certain researchers analyze how the transnational social movement has been unified by global narratives (Nepstadt, 2001; Smith and Johnston, 2002; Smith, 2002). But as soon as one shifts from the field of discursive studies to examine the concrete conditions of activist internationalization, based on a materialist sociology, a “sociology of the plane ticket” as it were, the research work grows scarce. It is as if the field of alter-globalization studies combined an ultra-macrosociology of contexts referring to economic globalization with an idealistic sociology of activists without borders (Keck and Sikkink, 1998), who seem to float about freely, eager to align their international ties through discourse.

We can therefore regret that the international division of activist labor, when it is mentioned, tends to reflect thinking on global economic inequalities, even if it tries to challenge that thinking. Thus, in one of the very few items (taken from a quantitative study of a World Social Forum) that focuses on the differences in the positions of activist workers from the North and South, the protest potential is analyzed as a reflection of their positions in the divisions between core, semi-periphery and periphery, in line with world systems theory (Kwon et al., 2008). But do all the inequalities that limit participation really stem from the structure of world capitalism?

Our approach aims to examine and qualify this point and draw attention to the material aspects of activism. The traditional problems of the iron law of oligarchy, now familiar to activist organizations, are compounded in international configurations where travel expenses can sometimes represent months of wages for activists in poor countries. In Nairobi, we had already engaged in the “sociology of the plane ticket” and observed that not a single African participant would have been able to come to the Forum without funding from a northern organization, which put the spotlight on NGO patronage of African “activism.” But the relationship to the material basis of activism also concerns the extent to which WSFs have become gatherings of organization professionals (in Dakar, 20% of survey respondents were currently employed and 12.5% previously employed by an NGO, a trade union, etc.). The connection with activist professionalization is even stronger on the African continent, given the importance of the development

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2 Thus, Lesley Wood (2005) points out that southern organizations belonging to the Peoples’ Global Action network clearly distinguish their work and cooperation with NGOs lobbying the North from their participation in popular movements.

3 It should be noted, nevertheless, that in Dakar, 25% of the European respondents were employed, in such organisations, compared with 15% of the African respondents. Travel expenses, combined with the professionalization of the associative world in Europe, certainly explain the high percentage of salaried employees in the first group.
industry. The issue not only fuels recurrent debates over legitimate forms of mobilization (NGOs v. social movements), but also reflects the problem of increasingly moderate types of mobilization. Some activists experience NGOs primarily as a sector of jobs and resources, which may preclude more radical forms of protest. A form of “mobilization without protest,” embodied by advocacy and highly expert types of activism, has now been accepted by this world.

Such an approach also implies identifying the dividing lines within the alter-global movement itself, from the twofold perspective of social composition and the causes proclaimed. The most obvious divide – between North and South – first comes to mind. But cleavages between different “Souths” are equally important. This is the focal point of the chapter by Hélène Baillot, Isaline Bergamaschi, and Ruggero Iori. The authors reveal the inequalities not only between northern and southern activists, but also between activists in the South (in this respect, the advent of the BRICS countries is confirmed within alter-global activism as well). These cleavages translate into different relationships with the alter-globalization cause and with the role of politics, as Isaline Bergamaschi, Tania Navarro, and Héloïse Nez show with regard to the Latin American participants at the Forum in Dakar. The same holds for gender aspects, as Julie Castro explains, which are interpreted differently according to the participants’ origins and activist traditions, which result in practices that are not always attentive to these issues.

In addition to these aspects of the division of labor, the international meeting situation itself can produce paradoxical effects. One of the best examples of these effects is the issue of nationalism. Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle shows that expressions of nationalism and defense of sovereignty were widespread at the World Social Forum in Dakar. In this historically international and internationalist event, nationalist symbols and slogans – Brazilian flags, Palestinian keffiyehs, T-shirts proclaiming “Guinea is back,” Congolese hymns – seemed to be ordinary activist repertoires provided they were not contested by other groups of participants. The controversies that arose in Dakar over violent or insistent nationalist claims (Saharawi v. Moroccan; Venezuelan patriots) shed light on more accepted nationalist practices and symbols. Why and how do nationalism and sovereignty become legitimate repertoires of internationalized activist claims? M.-E. Pommerolle demonstrates that the World Social Forum is a delocalized place of encounters, where people are often drawn together by basic national ties as well as around common causes based on “working misunderstandings” (Sahlins, 1981). Structured by anti-imperialist discourses, the World Social
Forum accepts nationalist or secessionist claims as legitimate as long as they come from the global South. Disconnected from their own territories, these claims benefit from the distance and match the diverse expectations of the participants: nationalist intellectuals from the South, anti-imperialist activists from the North, and politicians from everywhere invest nationalist symbols and discourses with their own purposes and in line with their own ideas. These various investments produce different sorts of long-distance nationalism in the context of an internationalist activist event.

Beyond even working misunderstandings, the Forum in Dakar offered an opportunity to observe the “activist taste for others,” a form of enthusiasm peculiar to international encounters, where exoticism mixes with cultural goodwill, if only through clichés that reproduce certain national stereotypes. But such an assessment presupposes that the observations are more deeply rooted in contexts of collective action.

3 Contexts of international collective action

“All politics is local politics.” This truism reminds us, quite rightly, that even in the area of transnational activism, local practices and strategies matter, provided the term “local” is used with care. No doubt the most accurate way of formulating this would be: “All political activity (even international) takes place somewhere.” Hence the importance of identifying that “somewhere,” of localizing it. How can this rule of interpretation be applied to the WSF in Dakar?

First of all, by understanding what this Forum represented in local politics, both at the Dakar level and in Senegalese political life. We know that representatives of the “Y’en a marre” (We’re fed up) movement spoke out during the event and that this group played an important role later on in challenging the rule of Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade. More broadly, it is necessary to grasp what the organization of this type of event tells us about the field of activism in Senegal, and even about its relationship to political power, which is more complex than clear-cut opposition to the authorities. In contrast, among the NGOs that participated in the Forum, we observed a form of associative activism sometimes closely linked to the authorities’ patronage networks. Beyond the Senegalese political field, we might note that the representations of political legitimacy may differ widely from one

4 Significantly, long-distance nationalism has been inadequately studied in transnational social movement studies; for an exception see Guidry et al. (2000).
national group to another and some of the most confrontational forms find less support among African participants than among Europeans, for example.

Contrary to the claims of space-blind social sciences, places are important (Gieryn, 2000 and on forums, Reese et al., 2011) and they are another component of context. Of course we are referring here to physical locations and the constraints they place on organization, such as the campus of Cheikh Anta Diop University. But the history of places and the memories associated with them also count. The fact that the Assembly of the Social Movements (the concluding assembly of the WSF) was held in the main amphitheater of Cheikh Anta Diop University is significant: it was the same amphitheater in which Nicolas Sarkozy, then president of Senegal’s former colonial ruler, gave his all-too-famous speech in Dakar in 2007, asserting to the Senegalese intelligentsia that Africans had not “sufficiently entered into history.”

The advantage of this type of study is that researchers can simultaneously work on the overall survey population and then come back to focus on a national population (the two main ones here were the French and the Senegalese) or a continental population (three large blocs were distinguished in Dakar: Europeans, Africans, and Latin Americans). The value of arriving at cautious generalities about alter-globalists is shown by Isabelle Sommier with regard to the French, Johanna Siméant with regard to the Senegalese and the French, and Isaline Bergamaschi, Tania Navarro, and Héloïse Nez with regard to the Latin Americans. At the same time, close-ups on national context reveal what certain affinities with activism and protest practices owe to local activist traditions or to the influence of the organizations in the home country. Isabelle Sommier correctly emphasizes that it is difficult to deduce a trend in the alter-global movement from the comparison of events that took place under the same label but in very different locations, involving different travel expenses and issues depending on the group. Thus, she asks, does the increase in the number of participants affiliated to religious groups at the last two WSFs reveal the growing involvement of these groups in alter-globalism or simply that the African participants are more religious than their European counterparts? Similarly, the chapter by Johanna Siméant shows the considerable difference between Brazilian trade unionists who were not opposed to violent forms of protest, Senegalese participants who were wary of any form of dissent – even moderate, and left-wing Christians from France in favor of non-violent modes of action.

5 The number of participants from Asia and Oceania was extremely limited: the total number of respondents from Asia and Oceania accounted for 5.5% of the survey population.
Therefore, if we limit the contextualization of transnational collective action to the processes of international mobilization in a local space (usually understood as referring to a national organizational field), we run the risk of neglecting the impact of certain international fields and configurations. But that would mean reconstructing the most relevant affiliations of the individuals at these events by determining which ones are national and refer to specific groups, training (in human rights, environment, etc.), special status (NGO employees, academic, etc.) and the meaning they take on in various contexts.

One last point to highlight an important lesson of this study: the value of multinational research teams. Due to lack of more plentiful funding, we kept the division of labor to a minimum within our research group. These moments of scientific and communitarian utopia, marked by shared commitment, helped to create a relatively limited division of scientific labor, culminating in research and data production practices that were at times the envy of other, better-endowed colleagues from other nationalities. They convinced us that it is sometimes possible to engage in social science differently.