Observing Protest from a Place

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Latin Americans at the World Social Forum in Dakar

The relationship between the alter-global movement and the institutional sphere

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Abstract
This chapter aims at examining the discussion about transnational social movement’s relationships to politics during the World Social Forum (WSF) held in Dakar, Senegal, in 2011. We make the assumption that Latin American participants pushed towards the movement’s increased politicization, by reason of their considerable connection to conventional politics. This chapter is based on research that involved different empirical materials: a field observation (workshops, presidential declarations, assemblies and social events) during the WSF in Dakar and quantitative data of Latin American participants’ careers.

The relationship between the alter-global movement and politics has been a constant topic of debate within the movement since it first emerged at the end of the 1990s. In scholarly works, the issue has been examined mainly from the standpoint of the forms of organization used to coordinate heterogeneous actors at social forums (Sommier, 2003; Della Porta, 2004: 49-77; Aguiton and Cardon, 2005; Agrikoliansky, 2007: 33-54). At the heart of these reflections lie the opposing notions of the “forum as an open space” and the “forum as a movement,” which arose in discussions among militants concerning Article 6 of the Charter of Principles of the World Social Movement (WSF): “The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body. No one, therefore, will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the

1 We would like to thank Julie Papis, Johanna Siméant, and Isabelle Sommier for their extremely helpful comments on an early version of this text. Our discussions with Nicolas Haeringer, a member of the International Council of the WSF, have also nourished and stimulated our thinking.
majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body.” By rejecting a centralized body and enshrining the prohibition against any attempt to speak on behalf of social forums, the network thus became the accepted form. Since then, however, competing organizations have gradually entered into a power struggle to define the relationship between social movements and institutional politics: “Once it became a space to discuss and develop proposals, the social forum ratified a specific type of division in the relationship between civil society and national political spaces, in which the preferred instrument was to engage in effective lobbying to make political parties officially support the demands and proposals produced in forum debates” (Aguiton and Cardon, 2005: 19).

Our aim here is to explore this issue by analyzing the recurrent debates and tensions within the alter-global movement over developing ties with political parties and “friendly” governments, allowing heads of state to attend social forums or endorsing an ideology and concrete alternatives to capitalism.

At the 2011 WSF in Dakar, these topics were mainly promoted by the Latin American participants who raised the issue of the relationship with political institutions, i.e. political parties and governments, in clear-cut terms. We therefore chose to study this group in particular, in the same way that researchers studied African participants at the 2007 WSF in Nairobi (Siméant and Pommerolle, 2008). It may seem rather strange a priori to take Latin Americans as our focal point when this WSF was organized in Dakar and thus rooted in Africa, especially in view of the fact that the “revolution” in Tunisia was the dominant news story in February 2011. Moreover, Latin Americans are by no means a homogeneous group nor do they present themselves as a “bloc” within the WSF. Studying this subgroup nevertheless offers the advantage of raising questions about the relationship between social forums and politics. First, it allows us to examine the ties between social movements and institutional politics, since some left-wing Latin American governments – with significant national variants – claim to support alter-global, anti-imperialist, and anti-liberal values and projects (Hugo Chávez’ Venezuela) or are offshoots of the social and labor movement (Evo Morales in Bolivia and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, known as “Lula,” in Brazil). It also highlights the question as to whether current government authorities should take part in the alter-global movement, since the Latin Americans were the only group in Dakar with heads of state participating in the forum (Morales and Lula) and several Latin American delegations were partly financed by political and/or government organizations. Finally, by concentrating on the Latin American actors, we can analyze the evolution of international alter-globalization in the debates over the leadership and orientations of the
movement, with the Brazilian participants claiming paternity and leadership of the world social forums born in Porto Alegre in 2001. Our article therefore aims to analyze the discussions held at the 2011 WSF in Dakar concerning the alter-global movement’s relationship with politics in order to test the hypothesis that the Latin American participants are seeking to establish ties between the world social forums and the sphere of institutional politics. We draw upon the assumption that the ways through which these activists create and maintain ties are related to their understanding of the state as well as their position in the public space (national or international).

Our method is based on observing participants and processing statistical data. For six days at the WSF, we observed several workshops organized by Latin American actors as well as large WSF assemblies (such as the Assembly of Social Movements) and broader debates on changes in the alter-global movement. In particular, we monitored the activities of the Brazilian and Venezuelan delegations in planned workshops listed in the official forum program and festive events or improvised initiatives like the press conference held by the Venezuelans after the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements. We continued our observations after the forum at the meeting of the International Council of the World Social Forum on February 13th in Dakar and the feedback session organized by ATTAC France and the CRID (a group of French international solidarity associations) on February 27th in Paris. In addition to these observations, we analyzed the questionnaires administered within the framework of the forum, combining levels of analysis in order to study a regional population: we compared the three main continental “blocs” (Africans, Europeans, and Americans); we analyzed the Latin Americans as a subgroup within the American bloc and compared them with the total survey population (85 Latin Americans out of a total of 1,069 interviewees); we studied the differences within the Latin American subgroup, particularly the Brazilians who were the most heavily represented (47 interviewees). While the quantitative study has its limits, due to the reduced size of our sample, its chief purpose is to test the hypotheses developed from our observations and support them with data.

We will begin this chapter by showing the specific position of the Latin American participants at the Dakar WSF on the issue of the relationship of the alter-global movement to politics using our observations in the field and then propose factors to explain this Latin American specificity by combining our forum observations with a study of the questionnaires.

2 The testimonials of Latin American participants given in Spanish and Portuguese during these activities or short interviews were translated into French by the authors.
The singularity of the Latin Americans’ relationship to politics

The Latin American participants adopted a specific position at the Dakar WSF on the ties they maintained or wanted to develop with political parties and governments in power in certain Latin American countries as well as on the participation of two heads of state in or on the sidelines of the social forum. Both positions generated considerable debate, notably within the Forum Organizing Committee. During the workshops, the issue of ideology was also discussed more directly by the Latin American participants than by the actors from other continents.

Ties to political parties and “friendly” governments

The Charter of Principles of the WSF stipulates: “neither party representations nor military organizations shall participate in the forum” (Article 9). Yet certain political parties played a major role in the emergence of the first forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, starting with the Workers’ Party (PT). The PT was not officially among the organizers but its militants often wore several different hats both within the party and among the social organizations in the Brazilian Organizing Committee, i.e. small organizations with influence in Brazilian civil society such as the United Workers’ Central (CUT) and the Rural Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) (Aguiton and Cardon 2005). Since then, governments have openly financed the event or their national delegations, e.g. the Brazilian government through its state-owned company Petrobras, which had a stand at the Dakar WSF and paid for the travel expenses of several participants. The issue of relationships with political parties has become more acute since the arrival of leaders in Latin America who are “friendly” or ideologically close to the movement – mainly Chávez, president of Venezuela from 1999 to 2013; Lula, president of Brazil from 2002 to 2010 (succeeded by Dilma Rousseff, also from the PT); Morales, president of Bolivia since 2005; Rafael Correa, president of Ecuador since 2006. As one Ecuadorian participant put it at a workshop on the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA),3 “Latin American activists are the only participants at the WSF who are proud of their governments

3 ALBA, launched in 2005 by the signing of a “commercial treaty of peoples” between Cuba and Venezuela, was presented as an initiative in favor of socialist regional integration and an alternative to other regional alliances based on free circulation and free trade agreements with the United States (notably FTAA, the Free Trade Area of the Americas).
and their heads of state.” This remark shows how much these militants wanted to be viewed as representatives of the entire continent, excluding Latin Americans led by presidents and regimes further removed from the alter-global movement. In the workshops, some activists recommended maintaining a critical distance from these governments, asserting that social forums should remain spaces strictly reserved for civil society, while others insisted on the need to support them in order to build bridges with the social movement.

This debate arose on several occasions in Dakar, for example in a workshop on “The Present and the Future of the World Social Forum” organized by the CACIM (India Institute for Critical Action: Centre in Movement) on February 7th. Though the topic of discussion was progress and changes within the alter-global movement, a Chilean participant raised the issue of developing ties between social forums and the institutional sphere, pointing to the importance of “progressive” governments in Latin America “from Lula to Evo Morales.” In general, the activists in Dakar who defended a rapprochement with institutional politics systematically referred to Latin American experiments, distinguishing the more radical path (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador) from the reform path (Brazil). In this workshop, a North American activist, citing the figures on poverty reduction in Brazil and Venezuela, regretted the refusal to establish strong links with electoral politics: “We must work with political parties. It’s true that the US social forum is a success, but the process that has been the most successful in the United States today is still the conservative process.” A German participant retorted that a network organization allowed for “different levels of expectations” regarding such ties, whereas if the forum worked closely with institutional organizations, it might exclude “people coming for the first time” and less politicized partners such as NGOs. The American sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein maintained: “We cannot achieve social transformation through electoral politics,” whereas the Bolivian president, invited to address the participants at the end of the WSF opening march, defended a diametrically opposed position: “Our experiment in Bolivia has been on how to move from these social, trade union, community, and intellectual struggles to an electoral struggle to take back political power, and now it is we – the poor and the marginalized – who govern.” In his speech, Morales insisted on the far-reaching effects of this shift “from resistance to the conquest of power,” underlining the structural transformations achieved, for example, by electing a constituent assembly, including water as an inalienable human right in the Constitution and the “nationalization of hydrocarbons.”
At the WSF in Dakar, the workshops organized and/or led by Latin Americans dealt with more political topics, such as the one-day workshop featuring Latin American and African partners of the Secours Catholique (a French international solidarity NGO), member of Caritas who discussed the “relationship between social movements and political parties.” The debate focused on the weakness of political parties in Africa in contrast to their importance in effecting social change in the experience of Latin Americans. A speaker from Cameroon provided a broad overview of African political evolution from “confiscated independence” to political “party fragmentation” brought about by democratization, which has kept “social projects” from emerging. She went on to talk about the “Latin American model” and how it might be a source of inspiration for others. That idea was taken up by a Moroccan activist who asserted that, although “revolutions cannot be exported” and “each movement must create its own path,” Latin America represents “a school, an incubator for the social movement.” A far-left activist lamented the prevalence of associations over political movements in Senegal, which he explained by the fact that such movements have to appear apolitical in order to be recognized. A Colombian militant, a member of Polo Democrático Alternativo (a far-left coalition), declared “structural change is only possible if the parties survive.” The Brazilian speaker, who claimed to belong to the eco-socialism movement, emphasized the urgent need to turn to parties and governments to “formulate public policies of sovereignty, local authority, regional autonomy, and a new orientation of ownership.” He reminded the audience that Cuba was “the only revolution” and that “the other progressive governments came to power through elections.”

The Colombian moderator concluded the workshop by asserting “the need for a body to centralize the struggle” and a “meeting of social movements and political parties” because “Internet and symbolic declarations are not enough; concrete action is necessary.” Our observation of this workshop clearly shows the different positions within the social movement regarding institutional politics in various contexts in Africa and Latin America, with certain Latin American countries viewed by African activists as “models” for the political outcome of the social movement. During the morning session of this workshop, which mainly attracted Europeans and Latin Americans, some Latin American participants nevertheless adopted a critical attitude.

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4 Another topic raised by the Latin Americans at the WSF concerned Afro-descendants. This was an area of action for the “revolutionary” governments (the Venezuelan delegation, for example, included a representative of organizations of Afro-descendants) and represented a privileged way of integrating Latin American activists in a forum organized in Africa.
towards their own country’s political experiments. The difference in the social movement activist’s receptiveness of institutional politics, from different or same countries, reveals how the relationship to politics is an individual process related to the history of states’ construction as well as individuals’ experiences concerning institutional politics.

**Debates over the presence of heads of state at the WSF**

Since the early years of the alter-global movement, heads of state have sometimes attended or expressed their views at the WSF, under varying circumstances and in different ways (see box). Some members of the movement, particularly the 2011 WSF working and evaluation groups organized after Dakar, saw the participation of political leaders as an intrusion in contradiction with the WSF Charter. In Dakar, the refusal to allow Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade to inaugurate the event was believed to be one of the reasons for the organizational problems that plagued the 2011 edition (the withdrawal of promised funding and the lack of available university classrooms to hold activities) (Scerri, 2012: 4). But apart from possible tensions with the authorities of the organizing host country, the Latin Americans were distinguished by the presence of two heads of state, thus reactivating the controversy surrounding the participation of government authorities in the WSF. The presence of Lula did not generate as much debate among forum participants as that of Morales, because the former president of Brazil spoke outside the WSF grounds, whereas the current president of Bolivia gave the final speech at the opening march of the social movements, which carried strong symbolic significance.

**Presence of Heads of State at World Social Forums**

- 2003 (Porto Alegre): Hugo Chávez (President of Venezuela); Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, known as “Lula” (President of Brazil, elected but not yet officially sworn in)
- 2005 (Porto Alegre): Chávez; Lula (for an informal meeting with some movements)
- 2006 (Caracas): Chávez
- 2009 (Belem): Chávez, Lula, Fernando Lugo (President of Paraguay), Evo Morales (President of Bolivia) and Rafael Correa (President of Ecuador)
- 2011 (Dakar): Morales (closing address of the march on the first day of the Forum), debate between Lula and Abdoulaye Wade (President of Senegal), organized outside the WSF site

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Though Morales, a former Bolivian trade union leader, introduced himself in his speech as “a student of these forums, which are a major social movement event in the world,” since he was “still, symbolically, a trade union leader,” his presence was not appreciated by everyone. “A head of state should not have been allowed to speak at the beginning of the Social Forum,” declared Gus Massiah, a member of the WSF International Council, at the evaluation meeting organized by ATTAC France and the CRID in Paris following the return from Dakar. At the International Council meeting on February 13th, Massiah, a leading figure in the French alter-global movement, asked to have the WSF Charter include a stipulation that no heads of state shall be allowed to participate in the WSF in the future. The problems of translating certain parts of Morales’ speech – “I would like more presidents to emerge from the ranks of alter-global/social movements” was translated as “I would like more presidents to come/take part in the forums” – also testifies to the tensions among WSF organizers. Morales’ translator was Christophe Aguiton, a militant from ATTAC France, who declared later on at the CRID evaluation session organized in Paris on February 23rd that he was firmly opposed to having the Bolivian president come to the WSF.

Ideology and the reference to “revolutions” in Latin America

In addition to the presence of heads of state, references to political leaders and to their institutional achievements were rejected on the whole in the WSF events in Dakar. At the workshop on “The Present and the Future of the World Social Forum,” held on the last day, the use of the word “socialism” and mention of the experiments carried out in Venezuela and Bolivia – described by a Colombian speaker as “authoritarian” experiments – made the participants uneasy. Initially, the declaration of the “World Water Assembly” held on February 10th was to contain a direct reference to the role of Morales in the “water war” in Bolivia, which ended with the 2003 victory of demonstrators in Cochabamba and El Alto over the public authorities engaged in privatizing the public utility for the benefit of multinational corporations. In the end, however, Morales’ name was removed from the text following protests by several participants against mentioning a political leader by name.

Furthermore, the Venezuelan delegation expressed regret that the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements did not refer more widely to the processes of change under way in Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Brazil,
which had been initiated and developed alongside the social forums.6 At a press conference organized on the last day of the WSF, one of the delegates openly criticized the lack of concrete proposals resulting from the social forum: “It is not enough to criticize capitalism, it is necessary to construct alternatives, which we are doing in these Latin American countries; it is necessary to support this movement.” The first version of the delegation's press release was entitled “Venezuela’s position on the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements at the World Social Forum, Dakar, 2011.” A few paper copies of the release, distributed to the audience just before the press conference, stated:

The World Social Forum was born in Porto Alegre (...). South America is not a small event in the history of the World Social Forum. It is the center of an agenda of political resistance to global capitalism (...). South America feels that the World Social Forum has made an enormous mistake in neglecting these processes under way and that this strategic mistake is almost a betrayal. The basic problem is conceptual: the groups that converge upon the World Social Forum are farther and farther removed from concrete politics (...) We cannot forget that in South America paths have been opened up for the concrete construction of a better world.7

This radical position did not enjoy a consensus among the Venezuelan delegates and it set off a lively debate just before the press conference. It was not reported to the Organizing Committee either in Dakar or afterwards, nor was it included in the final press release published by the Venezuelan delegation in their press at home, where the statement read: “The different organizations that made up the Venezuelan delegation (...) subscribe to the final declaration of the 2011 Dakar World Social Forum and express to the whole world their commitment to build a more just society.”8 All this would suggest that the loud message was not directed to a particular audience in Dakar (the International Council or other civil society organizations) but rather to the power circles of Caracas and that it was primarily intended

6 The Declaration of the Social Movements Assembly contains two references to Latin American political and social experiments, which emphasize their diversity without naming any country in particular and recall that they are part of much broader progress achieved over the last ten years.
7 Emphasis added.
to show the Venezuelan government that the colors of the revolution were being flown abroad.\textsuperscript{9} A careful look at the delegation’s final press release tends to support this hypothesis. The content reiterates the values, aims, and heroes of the “Bolivarian” revolution, which were not widely shared by the WSF participants either as a whole or in their diversity. It states that the WSF brings together “the sons and daughters of the fatherland of Simón Bolivar” and that “the person and the government of Hugo Chávez are a vector and a reference on our continent and in the rest of the world in search of a new model of civilization”\textsuperscript{10} – a position that was far from generating consensus in Dakar or within the alter-global movement or the International Council of the WSF.

But the criticism expressed was intended first and foremost at pointing out the limitations of the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements, which invites the “social movements around the world” to “defeat the capitalist system” without defining an alternative to the dominant production model. During the WSF, the issue of concrete alternatives and the ideologies that could support them was raised above all by the Latin American participants. Representatives of the indigenous movement in Latin America showed it was necessary to construct an alternative development paradigm to replace productivism, based on “buen vivir” (good living)\textsuperscript{11}. This concept, presented as an outgrowth of the worldview of indigenous communities, is promoted by the current governments of Ecuador and Bolivia as a new development model, characterized by the search for a more equitable balance among people and in their relationship with “mother earth” (“tierra mama,” “madre tierra”).\textsuperscript{12} While there may be connections between this notion and the idea of “décroissance” (de-growth), which has developed more in France and Europe, the Dakar WSF was not really conducive to in-depth study of concrete alternatives in that direction. In the workshops and assemblies, there was also talk of “female socialism” (socialismo femenino), “eco-socialism,” and “reinvented socialism.” These

\textsuperscript{9} This hypothesis coincides with the theory put forth by Fabrice Andreani regarding the position adopted by Chávez and Morales in the international climate negotiations (Andreani, 2012: 63).

\textsuperscript{10} “Declaración de la delegación venezolana en el Foro Social Mundial Dakar 2011,” op. cit.

\textsuperscript{11} On this vision of development claiming to draw on indigenous cosmology, see, on the Bolivian experience: Ranta-Owusu, 2008.

\textsuperscript{12} These values may seem to be in contradiction with the oil revenues that serve as the main mode of financing the revolution and socialist development to which the Venezuelan and Bolivian governments are committed. On the limits and ambiguities of the involvement of these governments in the fight against global warming, see Andreani, 2012: 69.
direct references to a new conception of socialism, promoted mainly by the Venezuelan militants, were usually rejected by the WSF participants, particularly the members of the International Council, who did not trust the personality of Chávez (unlike Morales, he did not start out in the labor movement but in the army). Their rejection did not stem, by the way, from a serious analysis of the process of transformation under way in Venezuela, even from a critical perspective. A Latin American activist summed up the situation at the meeting of the International Council following the WSF: “One topic did arise: ideology. It is something that has to be discussed; it is a fundamental issue, because for ten years people have been saying another world is possible, but what kind of world? Anything’s possible!” The call to organize “a day of global action against capitalism on October 12th, where in every possible way we will reject the system that destroys everything in its way,” launched in the Declaration of the Assembly of Social Movements, does not really answer this question.

7.2 Explaining Latin American singularity: a specific militant profile

Why did the Latin American participants adopt their singular position in favor of a closer partnership between social forums and the sphere of institutional politics? We will explore two main hypotheses here: the first directly concerns their relationship with institutional politics, which would appear to be closer as a result of their militant and political practices (past and/or present affiliation with a political party, position as elected official, voting) than that of participants from other continents; the second pertains to their sociological profile, which is marked by a high socio-cultural level and internationalization – characteristics they shared with participants from other continents but with added experience in organizing World Social Forums. The Latin American participants seem not only to be highly politicized activists in their home countries but to have long-standing experience in international activism, which prompted them to advocate a more political view of WSFs in the Brazilian tradition – especially as Brazilians were heavily represented among the Latin Americans present in Dakar. To test these hypotheses, we will look at the replies to the questionnaires, combining three levels of analysis. First, we will distinguish three main continental blocs, analyzing the replies of American, European, and African participants (respectively 131, 338, and 531 interviewees) (cf. Table 1). Then we will examine the subgroup of Latin Americans (85 interviewees)
Chart 7.1  Breakdown of the survey population by group and regional sub-group  
(n = 1000)

NA = North America  
SA = South America

Chart 7.2  Breakdown of the Latin American survey population by nationality (n = 85)
within the American bloc, comparing their replies with those of the North Americans (46 interviewees) and above all with the total survey population (1,069 interviewees). Finally, we will show that a further analysis can be carried out within the Latin American group, but only for the Brazilians (47 interviewees), as the number of the other nationalities was too low to be treated statistically (cf. Table 2). After Brazil, the countries with the most attendees were Argentina (10), Venezuela (7), and Colombia (6). While in all there were participants from 14 Latin American countries at the WSF in Dakar, the presence of other nationalities was not very significant: together they represented only 18% (15) of the Latin American interviewees. South America, especially Brazil, was therefore overrepresented among the Latin American participants at the WSF in Dakar, which had an impact on their relationship to politics.

More politicized than the average activist

To analyze the participants’ relationship with institutional politics, we selected three variables for comparison: involvement in a political party, experience as an elected official, and voting. When our sample is divided into three continental blocs, we observe that the Americans stand out by their experience with partisan activism: 54% declare they are or have been members of a political party, which is the case for only 33% of the Europeans and 44% of the Africans. A closer look reveals that more Americans and Africans (30%) continued to be involved in partisan activity at the time of the WSF in Dakar, compared with only 16% of Europeans. Within the American group, the specificity of the Latin Americans is unquestionable: 59% (48 interviewees) declared they are or have been members of a political party, compared with only 44% of the North Americans (20 interviewees) and 41.5% of the total American survey population. Among the participants actively involved in political parties at the time of the WSF, 27 were Latin Americans, a percentage (33%) well above the survey population as a whole (24%). In the case of the Brazilians, this partisan commitment concerns more than half of the sub-sample (24 interviewees in 47), mainly in the Workers’ Party (16). These figures show a stronger relationship between social movements and political parties in Latin America, but they may also

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13 To construct the sample of Latin Americans, we have given priority to nationality rather than to selecting questionnaires filled out in Spanish and Portuguese, because the criterion of language did not allow us to single out Latin Americans – the questionnaires of our sample were, by the way, filled out in several languages (40 in Spanish, 39 in Portuguese, 4 in French, and 2 in English).
reveal a selection process: as traveling to a forum in Africa was costly for activists from Latin America, in all likelihood the expense was assumed by a political party that favored its own members.

The differentiation of American participants, notably Latin Americans, based on their experience of partisan activism is confirmed when we observe the trends by bloc and subgroup among those that declared they had never had any involvement with a political party. Among the Europeans, 67% of the interviewees stated they never had any partisan experience, whereas among the group of Africans and Americans, the trend was respectively 56% and 46%. More precisely, 56% of the North Americans declared they had never been members of a political party, which was the case for only 41% of the Latin Americans. Involvement in a political party on the part of the subgroup of Latin Americans was almost exclusively on the left of the political spectrum. When they were not members of a party, the Latin Americans nevertheless declared they felt ideologically close to a left-wing party. With regard to their protest practices, these active militants expressed less reluctance to engage in violence and claimed to have taken part in a broader repertoire of actions (except for group prayer) to demonstrate against government policies or regional and international institutions.14

**Chart 7.3** Interviewees who declared current or previous membership in a political party

Although they are closely tied to political parties by partisan affiliation or ideological proximity, only 7% of the Latin Americans declared they had

14 Cf. the contribution of Johanna Siméant and Ilhame Hajji in this book, chapter 3.
run for elective office or assumed a political function. From this standpoint, they resemble the overall survey population: 75 Latin American interviewees (93%) were not currently holding or had never held an elective office, compared with an average of 88.5% for the total sample. The percentage of American participants (95%) that were not currently or had never been elected officials was even slightly higher than those from Europe (84%) or Africa (89%). There were proportionately more Africans in elected office at the time of their participation at the WSF in Dakar (7%), compared with Americans (2%) and Europeans (3%). However, the percentage of Europeans who had run for office but were not elected was higher (8%) than that of Americans (1%) and Africans (2%). Experience as an elected official can nevertheless be linked to the age of the participants: Europeans were overrepresented among attendees aged 60 or above, accounting for 23% compared with 7% for the Americans and 5% for the Africans.

Thus, what distinguishes the Latin Americans present at Dakar is not holding an elected office, but rather their involvement in a political party and the practice of voting. The same percentage of Americans and Europeans (88%) declared they had voted in the last elections, compared with 75% of Africans. This trend is confirmed when we look at the participants who declared they always vote, whether in national/federal or local elections (72% of the Americans and Europeans, 63% of the Africans). However, when we focus on the subgroup of Latin Americans, the specificity of their voting practice stands out more clearly: virtually all the Latin Americans declared they voted in the last elections (76 interviewees, i.e. 92% of the sample), which is a higher percentage than in the North American subgroup (82%) and in the overall survey population (81%). This particular trait is reinforced when we look at those who stated they always vote in elections (85% of Latin Americans compared with 50% of North Americans and 67% of the total survey population). The nearly universal practice of voting among Latin American participants can be explained by the high proportion of Brazilians in the sample, for whom voting is mandatory: 42 Brazilians in 47 declared they had voted in the last elections and 43 stated they always vote.

The tendency of Latin American participants to vote for the party in power (34 interviewees) or for an opposition party (45) depends in large part on the national context. The ties between WSF participants and parties in power were particularly close in the cases of Brazil and Venezuela: 16 of the Brazilian interviewees belonging to a political party were members of the Workers’ Party (PT) currently in power and 5 Venezuelans were members of Chávez’ United Socialist Party of Venezuela
We also observed in the field a close relationship between Brazilian and Venezuelan activists and their governments and the parties in power, which determined how their delegations were funded, presented, and organized. The Brazilians were partly financed by the state-owned company Petrobras. When the WSF ran into organizational problems on the campus, the Brazilian delegation held its workshops at the Goethe Institute, away from the rest of the forum, in order to comply with one of the conditions laid down by their sponsor. The Venezuelan delegation arrived at and departed from the Forum like a sports team at an international competition, dressed in jogging outfits in their country’s colors (violet, red, and yellow), identical to the one worn by Chávez in television appearances or at events abroad.
Trained, highly internationalized activists

From a sociological standpoint, the Latin American activists appear to be endowed with a considerable amount of educational capital and they stand out in particular by their high level of internationalization, which partly explains their visibility and their specific positioning at the forum. When the survey population is analyzed by continent, the Americans often occupy an intermediate position between the Africans and the Europeans. That is the case, for example, for those belonging to an organization they represented at the WSF (72% of the Americans – midway between 65% of the Europeans and 80% of the Africans); in their professions – the Americans tended to occupy a position between the Africans, who were overrepresented in handicrafts and commerce or among those without an occupation, and the Europeans, overrepresented among executives and scientific professions; and for their education level: 87% of the American respondents to the questionnaires had a college or university background, between the Africans (67%) and the Europeans (90%).

When we examine more specifically the subgroup of Latin Americans, they appear to be highly educated, on a par with the Europeans: 91% went to college or university (53 interviewees at the most advanced level of higher education and 21 at a lower level), compared with 81% of the North Americans and 77% of the total survey population. This was especially the case with the Brazilians within the Latin American sample: 42 interviewees in 47 went on to higher education, including 28 at the most advanced level. A high percentage of the Latin Americans who went to Dakar were college or university graduates. Two-thirds (50 interviewees, i.e. 77%) speak two or more languages, proportionately less than the North Americans (32 interviewees, i.e. 84%), but more than the survey population as a whole (44%). These polyglot militants with their college and university degrees have qualified jobs: university professors (15 interviewees), mid-level professionals in healthcare and social work (13), professions in the media, the arts and entertainment (9), elementary and secondary schoolteachers (8), and liberal professions (7). By the way, more than half the Latin Americans (59%, i.e. 50 interviewees) declared that their current occupation corresponded to their expectations, a percentage that is still below that of the Europeans (72%) but far superior to that of the Africans (49%).

While the Americans are often positioned midway between Europeans and Africans, they nevertheless stand out for their participation in
international activist events. It is true that the WSF in Dakar was the first international activist experience for 43% of them, a higher percentage than among the African participants (37%) and especially the Europeans (24%). But among those who had participated in more than ten alter-global rallies or antiglobalization demonstrations during the ten years prior to the WSF in Dakar, more than half were Americans (53%), a higher percentage than among the Africans (28%) or Europeans (19%). This difference becomes especially obvious when we observe the trends within the subgroups of the American continent: the WSF in Dakar was the first experience of this kind for 11% of the Latin Americans (9 interviewees) compared with 26% of the North Americans (12 interviewees) and 33% of the total survey population. Among the Latin Americans with experience in alter-global events during the ten years prior to the Dakar WSF, 33 took part as event organizers, 40 as speakers and 35 as ordinary participants. Compared with the total survey population, the Latin Americans had distinctly more experience as speakers and organizers of this type of mobilization, which may explain their visibility at the WSF in Dakar and their professional approach to social forum organization.

Indeed, the percentage of Latin Americans with experience at international activist events stems in particular from the high proportion of Brazilians in the sample. Their presence in large numbers explains the advocacy of a more politicized conception of the WSF, closer to the first forums organized in Porto Alegre than to the world of NGOs and donors at the African events.

Behind the debates concerning the Forum’s relationship with politics lay a conflict over who should lead the alter-global movement. The prevalence
of the Brazilians was challenged by the participants from other continents – notably Africans –, which could be explained by the ambivalent position of a major emerging power like Brazil claiming to speak on behalf of the South. The huge Petrobras stand set up on the WSF grounds, a material embodiment of the pervasive Brazilian presence and the close ties of the Brazilian delegation to their country’s government (cf. photo), revealed the Brazilians’ superiority to local actors and organizations and offended the sensitivities of environmental organizations. Later on, the working group in charge of evaluating the 2011 WSF concluded that the presence of Petrobras had “a negative impact on outside perceptions of the Forum.”

At the International Council meeting on February 13th, the Brazilians proposed to organize the next WSF at Porto Alegre, pointing to the disorganization of the event in an African context and arguing that they already benefited from the approval of all the elected officials in the municipal council as well as their experience. At the sub-continental level, a widening gap could be observed between the member countries of ALBA and the others; and competition between the Brazilian and Venezuelan delegations manifested itself in the Assembly of the Social Movements. These conflicts over the leadership of the alter-global movement are a reminder that the Latin American group was not a bloc within the WSF in Dakar, even though similarities can be noted in their relationship to politics.

Photo 7.1  The Petrobras stand at the WSF in Dakar, a symbol of the leadership claimed by the Brazilians

7.3  Conclusion

This study of the Latin American groups at the Dakar WSF shows that the relationship of the alter-global movement to politics is still being debated within the social forums. As recalled by Jai Sen, an Indian activist and writer reflecting on the history and evolution of the global justice movement, the WSF has periodically and increasingly been criticized for being “a talk shop (...) removed from the real world, that has diverted people who are concerned and looking for ways to resist, from more militant and radical politics.” Because its organizers have put the focus on “deliberation rather than on action or (...) prefigurative politics,” they have lived out “the change and social relations that you want to see taking shape in society” (Sen, 2013: 484).

Whereas the organizers of this international event in Africa held a number of workshops and discussions on the topic of development and NGO actions, the Latin Americans championed a different conception of social forums by openly asserting the need to establish a close relationship with political parties and governments with a similar ideology. In the activities they organized or in which they participated, the Latin Americans often
freed themselves from the thinking and structuring characteristic of development projects – the dominant and sometimes inescapable form of action (notably in sub-Saharan Africa) – and instead centered their contributions on the topic and specific examples of social and political mobilization. While they promoted a strategy of forging stronger relationships with the institutional political sphere in order to have a direct impact on national public policies, the position adopted by the Latin Americans nevertheless remained a minority view in the Dakar debates, which calls into question a broader rapprochement between the alter-global movement and institutional politics, except for a few, specific national configurations.

Our analysis of the Latin American group at the WSF in Dakar also shows the connection between the position of participants who favor closer ties between social forums and the institutional political sphere and their individual sociological and activist profiles. The Latin Americans who were able to make the journey to Africa are highly politicized militants, who maintain strong ties (through voting or activism) with left-wing political parties and governments in power. The position they advocate concerning cooperation with the institutional political field is directly related to this activist experience. Furthermore, they are strongly internationalized militants with solid experience at international activist events and a significant amount of cultural and educational capital. These militants, Brazilians for the most part, promote a conception of social forums closely linked to political organizations, as they were during the early years of alter-global movement organization in Porto Alegre. Thus the specific relationship with politics advocated by Latin Americans in Dakar raises the issue not only of close cooperation between social forums and institutional politics, but also of continuing Brazilian leadership of the alter-globalization movement.

16 In its final release, disseminated to the national media, the Venezuelan delegation condemned, for example, “the infiltration of right-wing organizations that seek to diminish the revolutionary and anti-establishment nature of the Forum; in particular, the non-governmental organizations whose reputation has been tarnished by advocating neoliberal politics and ambiguous political positions,” in “Declaración de la delegación venezolana en el Foro Social Mundial Dakar 2011,” op. cit.