9 Stepping back from your figures to figure out more

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Abstract
This chapter revisits learnings social scientists can draw from “no-replies.” The uneven propensity to answer amongst the international population surveyed during the 2011 WSF discloses the extent to which interviewees evolve in different realms. Indeed, actors’ socialization shapes their linguistic, social and symbolic references. Our conclusions thus bring to the fore a decisive challenge that transnational mobilizations have to face: proposing sound and federative ways of describing the world.

9.1 Why and how to inquire about “no-replies”

Can any survey claim to have replies to all its questions? “No-replies” concern everyone who designs, processes, or analyzes a survey. It is one of the few topics that epidemiologists, psychologists, and sociologists could profitably discuss, as this complex issue is widespread in the social as well as medical sciences.

Early on, researchers realized the extent to which replies depended on questions – and even more on how those questions were formulated (Barr, 1972). This weakness has been well documented, but the cognitive mechanisms underlying the considerable variations in replies (e.g. depending on the order of the questions) are still poorly understood. Even today, a good deal of research work simply brushes aside “no-replies” (Kanas and Tubergen, 2009; Nagel, 2010). The limits of this practice are nevertheless obvious, not least because respondents who do not reply generally have particular characteristics that are likely to bias the results (Cheung et al., 2006; Kotaniemi et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1999). A sizable literature has developed to offset these pitfalls by “correcting” biases induced by no-replies after the survey. We might mention, among others, econometric techniques: Bayesian inference (Rubin, 1987; ) multiple imputation (King, et al., 2001), or latent variable analysis (O’Muircheartaigh and Moustaki, 1999, see also Graham, et al. 2012).

These efforts to “rectify” the results (Goyette and Mullen, 2006; Kreuter et al., 2010) are part of a statistical approach to no-replies. The main goal is
to produce estimates or imputations to “fill in” missing data with plausible values (Pilmis, 2006). Such practices seem questionable from the social science point of view and might raise legitimate doubts on the very possibility to surmise the answers of those who never answer questionnaires. Rather than “filling in” the holes, this chapter proposes to study what such holes disclose. In this respect, the WSF survey makes it possible to extend on the international scale, a fruitful reflection conducted at the national level. It sheds a different light on the assumption that “a simple statistical analysis of ‘no-replies’ offers information about the meaning of the question, as well as the category of people questioned, the category being defined as much by the probability of having an opinion at all as by the conditional probability of having a favorable or unfavorable one” (Bourdieu, [1972] 1979). How do such patterns evolve when the survey population is international and multilingual?

9.2 A panorama of “no-replies” in the WSF survey

The analysis of the “no-replies” in the WSF survey is promising because they concern few questions, and those questions prove to be of a particular type. On the whole, the questionnaires were filled out quite thoroughly, especially if researchers are interested in sociographic variables. The factual questions were answered by virtually all survey respondents, with a very low rate of no-replies (less than 3% for questions regarding age, sex, and level of education, less than 6% for the question about the feeling of belonging to a religion). Even the two questions pertaining to voting in elections were very largely filled in, along with the question about membership in a political party1 (with no-reply rates of less than 3.5% and 2.5%, respectively).

Survey-taking conditions were thus good enough to ensure that, despite the diverse languages and nationalities, the factual questions were clearly understood – and properly answered. The good response rates to the questions on political participation confirm that the survey teams succeeded in establishing a climate of trust conducive to receiving replies to such questions. Moreover, the context in which the survey was conducted was quite favorable, as the schedule of activities generally offered participants free time. Finally, the questionnaires were filled out more fully when they were administered by the survey team rather than self-administered, suggesting

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1 “Are you (or have you ever been) a member or a political party (or of a youth political organization)?”
a positive relationship between researcher and survey respondent, or even
the guiding role of the researchers.

The gaps become especially evident when we examine opinion questions
as opposed to factual questions, according to the distinction proposed by
Alain Desrosières (2005). Opinion questions were unevenly answered and
sometimes generated high no-reply rates (more than 40% for certain items).
This is not surprising as no-reply rates are usually unevenly distributed
among questions. The resulting uneven distribution of bias (Groves, 2006)
thus deserves a closer look. The excellent rate of replies to factual questions
allows researchers to produce a detailed profile of survey respondents
and therefore to elucidate the reasons why they avoid answering certain
questions. Here we will analyze (1) whether or not the specificities of the
non-respondents explain their no-replies; (2) to what extent the singular
traits of the international population of respondents defy the traditional
framework for analyzing no-replies; (3) what the no-replies reveal about
the alter-global movement.

9.3 Do the conditions of participation shape the modalities of
participation?

The database allowed us to compare the profiles of activists who came
to the WSF from all over the world. It soon became apparent that this
Forum was not a spontaneous gathering of individuals who had come on
their own. Indeed the great majority of participants came on behalf of an
organization (73.5% of survey respondents). Thus they did not come in
a purely private context but within an organized framework to represent
a structure or group (or at least they thought they were representing a
structure). While the great majority of participants came on behalf of an
organization, more than 60% of the total survey population also belonged
to a structure involved in organizing the Forum. The event seems to have
been orchestrated by and for a limited number of organizations (rather
than individuals) – so much so that the Forum widely resembled a profes-
sional gathering designed by and for an associative sphere that used it as
a platform for encounters, discussions, and meetings – in short, for work.
Thus, nearly one third of the participants (30.6%) came to participate in
meetings with their partners or donors (38% of those who came on behalf
of an organization).

2 Question 8: “Did you come on behalf of an organization?” No/Yes.
Depending on the context, one and the same actor had to mobilize different roles from his/her repertoire of identities (Goffman, 1959), sometimes for strategic purposes (Siméant, 1994: 50). Taking part in a gathering as a professional rather than in a personal capacity and coming with one’s organization (55%) or with one’s colleagues (16%) rather than with acquaintances (3%) or as a family (4%) had an impact on the way participants approached the Forum. How did the conditions of participation shape the manner of participation? Did the professional dimension supplant the political dimension? How does the function of representation (coming on behalf of an organization) affect the representative? Is it a favorable context for expressing political opinions? Is coming on behalf of an organization compatible with publicly acknowledging one’s support for violent practices? This seems doubtful, based on comparison of the first cross-tabulations.

The individuals who came on behalf of an organization appear to display perceptibly different opinions from the rest of the participants. The “representatives” are more cautious and prefer petitions to sit-ins; they more readily condemn the use of violence or do not give an opinion. Do they really have different inclinations and are they less radical? (as Chapter 3 by J. Siméant shows). Or are their stated opinions modified by the situation? These individuals were surveyed at an event they were not attending in a personal capacity (and one of the very first questions in the survey reminded them of that fact). It is understandable that the replies reflected this difference. Indeed, there were significantly more no-replies among those who came to perform a representative function than among those who had come in a personal capacity.

In this context, the no-replies can be interpreted as compliance with a duty of discretion (Pilmis, 2006). Indeed, participants who came on behalf of an organization also gave fewer replies to specific questions about their political opinions. There is a clear gap between the few no-replies concerning participation in elections (only 4% of “no-replies:” more than 96% of survey respondents answered both questions on this topic) and the far greater silence on the next question concerning the party for which they voted (17% of “no-replies for the third question”). How can we explain the sudden drop of 13 points when the questions directly follow one another in the questionnaire? The duty of discretion remains

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3 Q22. “In general, do you vote in elections?” 96.8% of replies.
Q23. “Did you vote in the last national elections in your country?” 96.9% of replies.

4 Q24. “Did you vote for the ruling party (or a member of a ruling coalition) or an opposition party?” 83.2% of replies.
an avenue of analysis: of the 163 survey respondents who did not specify whether they voted for an opposition party or a ruling party, 77% came to the WSF on behalf of an organization. The representative function (coming on behalf of an organization) may hamper the inclination to express one's own political opinions – especially if they are radical (as the charts below suggest).

Illustration 9.1  Responses to questions on protest practices (Q25) in % (N= 1069).

These initial elements suggest that the fact of coming “on behalf of an organization” may dissuade participants from expressing their own personal political preferences. When it is a question of asserting one’s opinions to a third party, the context matters (Eliasoph, 1990). “No-reply” to specific questions regarding political preferences is a constant in surveys using questionnaires (Pilmis, 2006: 11). It is not always a neutral act to put forward publicly one’s own political tendencies. The distortions induced by social desirability are well-known (Grémy, 1987). Pollsters are familiar with the need to rectify the bias induced by reluctance to declare one’s political preferences, a fortiori if they are extreme. Here the no-replies regarding violent practices may be partially linked to this bias.

A no-reply is nevertheless a complex phenomenon and a closer analysis yields much more information. We therefore propose to show what this area of inquiry teaches us about the population of WSF participants, the workings of the WSF itself and the obstacles that its participants have yet to overcome.
9.4 When “no-replies” question the question

To understand the logic leading to no-replies, we sought to identify which types of questions more readily prompted no reply (cf. chart).

**Illustration 9.2 Completion rates by question (N= 1069).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Completion Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level of instruction</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electoral participation</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s occupation</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q28: Opposition or ruling party</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q21: means to fight neoliberal globalisation</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3: Identification to the anti-globalization mv</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Illustration 9.3 Replies and no-replies to three opinion questions (N= 1069).**

**“To which extent do you identity with” (Q3)**

- An organization/group in particular: 23.29%
- A particular branch of this movement: 40.97%
- The global justice movement as a whole: 36.34%

**“Which political party did you vote for” (Q28)**

- The party for which you voted was: 16.74%

**“According to you, what should be done to control neoliberal globalization” (Q21)**

- Strengthen national governements: 28.25%
- Strengthen regional or sub-regional organizations: 26.75%
- Strengthen the United Nations: 31.06%
- Build new institutions that involve civil society: 17.77%
- Develop and encourage local initiatives: 13.24%
Why do we observe such strong variations between questions and within questions? The gap seems significant enough to be heuristic: if we consider the last question (Q21), almost half of respondents did not answer at least one item (47.6% of the total sample). The last three questions were framed as indicated in the following chart:

What particular features explain why these questions were answered less often than the others? A classical point of view insists on the specific cultural capital required to form and then express a consistent opinion on political issues. Since the 1970s, authors have emphasized that the ability to formulate an opinion about political concerns is unevenly distributed among the population and hence among respondents (Converse, 1976; Bourdieu, 1979). In this perspective, the propensity to express a political opinion varies according to the respondents’ level of instruction, which led Pierre Bourdieu to conclude that the probability of answering any political question was comparable to the probability of going to a museum (Bourdieu, 1979). To sum up, these findings aim to account for, first, the different completion rates of factual questions and opinion questions (variations between questions); and second, it assumes that no-replies to political questions are due to lower levels of instruction (variations within questions).

Such an approach offers a consistent way to discriminate among more or less completed variables in our survey. We can actually draw a continuum of no-replies rates: lowest for the more factual questions (age, sex, and occupation), increasing for political questions, and reaching a peak for abstract questions. The difficulty of taking a stance on abstract matters (Lipset and Schneider, 1987) can be related to the “cognitive difficulty” of specific political topics (Converse, 1976). Discriminating among questions according to the effort required to produce an answer might partially explain why the most abstract questions triggered the highest no-reply rates. Nevertheless this perspective totally fails to account for differences of completion rates observed within one and the same question. If “political competence” matters, our data challenges the classical interpretation that conflates political skills with the level of formal instruction.

Within this atypical population – highly educated and committed – the traditional angles of analysis do not account for the strong variations observed. Inequalities seem to be polarized along other dividing lines. Nationality appears to be far more discriminating than educational or political capital. Thus we tried to predict the probability of (not) replying to Question 21 (“What should be done to control neoliberal globalization?”). Using three successive models, we were able to test the percentage of
dependent variation (level of instruction, social capital, and nationality). We can see that nationality alone explains a much greater percentage of the variations observed than the other two indicators we tested (4.8% compared with 1.8% for education and 3.7% for social capital; cf. table 9.1 for a detailed view of the proxies used).

Table 9.1  No-replies to the question (Q21): “What should be done to control neoliberal globalization?” (three simple linear regressions with one explanatory variable).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No-replies to Q21</th>
<th>Level of instruction</th>
<th>Social capital</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of observations</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>1069</td>
<td>1069</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.0240</td>
<td>0.0620</td>
<td>0.1273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adj R-squared</td>
<td>0.0185</td>
<td>0.0368</td>
<td>0.0480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anova</td>
<td>66.42</td>
<td>171.53</td>
<td>303.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIC</td>
<td>4072</td>
<td>4183</td>
<td>4348</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9.5  Level of instruction, social capital, and political competence

The international survey population in 2011 enables a heuristic reexamination of Bourdieu’s seminal position that “political competence (...) is a function of a person’s level of education” (Bourdieu, 1979: 126; Laurison, 2007). In fact, the level of education in the case of the WSF survey by no means exhausts the question. In particular, because the level was notoriously high for the survey sample as a whole: 75.3% declared they had an undergraduate level (less than 7.6% of respondents stated they had left before completing secondary school, 15.8% declared a level of instruction below a high school diploma, 2.8% did not reply). In this respect, such high levels of instruction for the whole sample confirm the overselection of African activists who accede to the international spheres (Siméant, 2013a).

Of course the propensity to reply varies with the level of education, but this correlation does not hold automatically or for all the questions. The no-reply rate is thus lower among survey respondents who left at the end of primary school than the no-reply rate of respondents with a high school

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5 Only the 30 survey respondents who did not reply do not appear in the chart on the following page but they are included in all the subsequent calculations.
diploma (46.6%) or an undergraduate education (40.1%). This supports the idea that the significance of the level of education is not uniform across nationalities (as we saw in the Introduction and in Chapters 1 and 3). Does that mean we should reject the idea of political competence – or that such competence is distributed differently within this atypical population? What are the dividing lines among these generally highly educated survey respondents that would explain the difference in their replies to one and the same questionnaire?

Social capital also proves to be fundamental, but here too the specificities of the survey population tend to diminish the relevance of analyzing no-replies from this angle. A very high overall level on this point as well (and low variations in terms of social capital for the survey population) does not account for the strong variations in the no-replies observed.\(^6\) As our aim here is not to take a position in the abundant debates regarding social capital, we would therefore refer readers to the discussion proposed by Portes and Vickstrom (2011). Following these authors, I have adopted a classical definition of social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986: 248).

We consider affiliations to institutionalized organizations as a proxy (imperfect but instructive) to test this hypothesis. Indeed, we observe a statistical link between the probability of answering abstract questions and the level of social capital (approximated on the basis of the number of associations in which the respondent is involved). This proxy of social capital is a much better predictor of the propensity to reply than the level of instruction. Yet the relation seems neither linear nor systematic (otherwise we would observe a positive slope assessing the increasing propensity to reply with the increasing number of non-profit organization affiliations declared). The model proposed below confirms that neither the level of instruction nor the social capital is significantly correlated with no-reply rates. Nationality definitely exerts the strongest effect.

The considerable disparities between nationalities suggest several avenues of analysis, and we propose to explore three of them here: (i) the feeling of political competence is unequally distributed within the various

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\(^6\) Thus the average number of associations to which the respondents currently belong (or previously belonged) is high and quite homogeneous: between 4.1 and 4.8 for all the respondents except Asians (7.1) and citizens of the Americas (5.8). The effect of selection (linked to distance in particular) no doubt played an important role: the Asians who came to Dakar were well-known as activists. The low numbers of the latter groups (22 and 131 of respondents, respectively) limit their weight in overall estimates.
nationalities surveyed; (2) the observed variations are linked to linguistic constraints inherent in administering questionnaires to such a diverse population; (3) nationality reflects something else, such as the respondents’ world of political socialization.

9.6 Feeling of political competence and nationality

The uneven propensity to reply to abstract questions according to the nationality of the respondents reveals a definite cleavage between Europeans and nationals from other continents, especially Africa, who showed far less inclination to respond. At the very least, the data suggests that the
propensity to grasp this type of question and recognize oneself in the proposed responses is socially and also geographically situated. Although these disparities are seldom discussed, they reveal basic dynamics that shape transnational mobilizations.

Fighting against North-South inequalities does not mean we are totally free from them ourselves – on the contrary. The participants at this Forum revealed an unusually keen awareness of the international process of division of labor in which they are trapped. They always know that borders are not the same for all of them (Siméant, 2013a). This critical view of their own position seems to be confirmed when we look at respondents’ opinions on North-South inequalities (within established North-South networks). The participants who make the most critical assessment of their own South-North networks are mostly Africans. Though transnational movements may not exactly replicate world-system stratification (Smith and Wiest, 2005), they do not change out of the blue. When it comes to carrying out an assessment (not only of problems but of solutions as well), such inequalities may be part of an uneven feeling of legitimacy. The extreme interpretation of this idea is summed up by the terse statement that “Interest or indifference towards politics (…) is commensurate with the reality of this power (…) indifference is only a manifestation of impotence” (Bourdieu, 1984: 405).

This formulation is too lapidary, although it is plausible that the feeling of having a legitimate and sound opinion on political matters is unevenly distributed among such a transnational population. The idea of political competence mostly emphasizes the way social stratification is reflected within polls. Here, the international scale merely modifies the dynamics of social stratification and thus calls for a pinch of sociological imagination to propose satisfying explanations. The WSF survey provides an unusual opportunity to assess the extent to which the cleavages between the dominant and the dominated may be polarized along different lines, depending on the scale at hand. We have underlined here the importance of national origins but we certainly need further investigation to understand how nationality is intermingled with other relevant forms of capital. These stimulating areas of research concerning the uneven distribution among nationalities of the feeling of legitimacy and other forms of immaterial capital seem to have been seriously neglected by the empirical literature. To what extent is this linked to the notorious difficulties involved in conducting surveys among multilingual populations?

60% of the most pessimistic opinions were expressed by African participants. Nevertheless, the headcounts are small (38 persons), thus limiting the reliability of this trend.
9.7 Conducting surveys in several languages: methodological challenges

“Cultural and organizational constraints weigh on surveys too” notably because “questionnaires rely on the cognitive and linguistic categories of respondents” (Desrosières, 2007). The discrepancies observed within national populations when it comes to designing surveys on political matters are merely wider and deeper in a plurinational population (Schwarz et al., 2010; Stoop et al., 2010; Thornton et al., 2010). Forty years of experience have made it possible to document the pitfalls of carrying out nationwide opinion polls – within populations that share the same language and a certain number of common references (cultural, political, etc.) (Fillieule et al., 1997). All these aspects help to explain why the problems are compounded by conducting surveys at international events (Siméant, 2013a).

In this respect our survey contributes to an ongoing reflection about cross-national data collection: for instance, the Gallup project deals with similar issues, but on a larger scale. The Gallup enterprise endeavors to conduct worldwide surveys and already covers more than 160 countries. Their way of dealing with the translation of subjective questions consists in favoring dichotomous response categories (Harkness et al., 2010: 535). In our view, this approach conflates errors of measurements and rules out any possibility of understanding them. Yet debates over suitable approaches illustrate the growing awareness of the caveats raised by translating questions, especially subjective ones. Conversely, we would argue in favor of protocols to cope directly with those difficulties instead of eluding them by oversimplification. For instance, an upstream “country-specific” analysis can be fruitful (Thornton et al., 2010). In this respect, the very process implemented by our research team to design the questionnaire is innovative and promising.

In designing the WSF questionnaire and more broadly putting together our multilingual survey team itself, we were aware of the difficulties involved in making the questionnaire accessible to speakers from all over the world. Before overseeing the translation into five languages, we first reduced the proportion of opinion questions in the questionnaire compared with the previous surveys conducted at alter-global gatherings (see I. Sommier’s contribution). The relevance of collecting factual information was widely confirmed by the survey results. The questionnaire was above all the fruit of a joint effort. From the outset, the team comprised French, English, Spanish, and Wolof speakers. The team’s Senegalese researchers and doctoral students were asked to collaborate at various stages and in
particular to give us their reactions to the questionnaire, its structure and its items. Their contributions certainly helped us make our questions more comprehensible, for example with regard to religious membership. Nevertheless, it was not always possible to find equivalent expressions for everything.

9.8 Insurmountable difficulties? Different worlds of meaning

Let us focus for a moment on one of the questions that received the most no-replies, which was formulated as follows: “In your opinion, what should be done to control neoliberal globalization?” The sharpest differences in attitude revealed by this question were those of the two largest sub-populations: Senegalese and French (who together made up 48.8% of our respondents). The phrase “control neoliberal globalization” is not commonplace in Senegal. Whereas the expression had been repeatedly employed at recent mobilizations in France and broadcast by the media, it was seldom used in West Africa. What can be grasped through qualitative studies is sometimes hard to objectify in quantitative terms. We are by no means in a position to offer proof here, but a small example based on the media in these two countries may help to illustrate our point. “Rue89” and “Seneweb” are online information sites that are very popular among young people in France and Senegal, respectively. A search for the expression “neoliberal globalization” yielded 254 hits at “Rue89” but only 6 at “Seneweb” (the most recent dated back to 2008 and two of the six results were from foreign sources). At the same time, “Seneweb” posted a very large number of articles on the WSF in February 2011 (5,330 results!), in which it talked more readily about the “struggle against capitalism” or “against imperialism” than against “neoliberal globalization.” This is not solely a question of methodological problems. The example suggests that some aspects of the diversity of WSF participants were irreducible. An expression that would have made more sense to Senegalese association members would no doubt have lost its force for French activists.

Senegalese and French WSF participants have been socialized in different political worlds and endowed with different linguistic capital. This does not involve mastering a foreign language, but a much more fundamental relationship to language. Politics is first – and perhaps above all – a way of talking about the world. Because our survey questions used categories or language and thought derived from the French political, activist, and cultural context, they had a different resonance for Senegalese participants, including those with equivalent social capital.
The case of West Africa is fascinating in this regard, because it was not necessarily relevant to translate the whole questionnaire into Wolof. Incidentally, few Senegalese participants (7%) wanted to reply to the survey in Wolof. While their choice of language may have been due to the nationality of the survey administrators, it may also have been linked to the fact that Senegalese political life often plays out in French at the national level (much less often at the local level). Newspapers are published in French and French is still the administrative language, the official language as well as the national language in a land where the Soninke refuse to speak Wolof. So much so that many socio-economic words and phrases do not exist in Wolof or in Soninke and political discussions in ethnic languages are sprinkled with French expressions. These French words and expressions are not those commonly used in the French media (in France, who knows the term délestage?). Clearly, it is not so much a question of the language (French, English, or Soninke) as of a world of meaning incorporated in political language (Eliasoph, 1990). Informal discussions, speeches, public meetings and debates, and the media contribute daily to the ongoing redefinition of political language and expressions that, brandished as banners, polarize discussions and even thinking.

9.9 Conclusion: what no-replies reveal

The WSF survey confirms that this type of event brings together actors caught up in diverging approaches stemming from material concerns. Those who were able to make the journey to Dakar were not necessarily the most radical: they were often those who belonged to organizations capable of financing their participation. This context shaped the profile that respondents wanted or decided it was wise to show survey administrators. These factors spurred us to analyze the no-replies more closely. The WSF survey made a major contribution on this point by showing how a transnational population defies the traditional analytic framing of surveys by questionnaires. Here no-replies cannot be explained by a lower level of formal education or less social capital. The inequalities among participants seem to be organized along different lines. More analyses – especially qualitative – would be necessary to understand more fully what “nationality” encompasses or perhaps even hides (as Chapter 3 demonstrates). In

8 The term designates a power cut and is frequently used in Senegalese media (2,250 search results on “Seneweb,” 8 search results on “Rue89”).
the meantime, our analysis confirms the extent to which “transnational mobilizations also have a local dimension, which is geographically and socially situated” (Mayer and Siméant, 2004).

We wanted to analyze no-replies because no aspect of the WSF survey should be ignored. Thus, the distribution of no-replies can be interpreted not only from a methodological standpoint but also per se as information. It suggests the difficulties faced by participants at transnational mobilizations, particularly in developing a common language. The obstacles encountered at European social forums (Doerr, 2012) are compounded by the transcontinental dimension of a World Social Forum. The multiplication of transnational political platforms gives this linguistic issue greater importance. The way political debates are translated shapes the way people engage in politics on the supra-national scale (Doerr, 2008). Indeed, how to formulate the stakes of the struggle is in itself a challenge. Politics is a way of putting our experience into words; political socialization is also the convergence of ways of thinking and talking about the world.

No-replies tell us a great deal about the semantic dimension of politics

This reflection on national variations is essential: a growing body of evidence is shedding light on how national contexts affect respondents’ involvement in surveys. Psychologists are exploring how different socialization processes feed differences in “situated cognition” that shape attitudes towards surveys (Schwarz et al., 2010: 177). Using their own vocabulary, social scientists have noted that survey participation has “cultural and national” components (Stoop et al., 2010: 9). We propose instead to think in terms of framing. In this respect, the WSF survey has paved the way to understanding more fully how primary socialization shapes actors’ perceptions – and hence cognition of their environment. An interdisciplinary perspective would stand to gain by combining sociology, anthropology, and psychology.

Indeed, actors’ socialization shapes their social, symbolic, and linguistic references. Those dimensions are intermingled. “The content of a speech is inseparable from its form,” and this whole makes sense only in a specific social context (Eliasoph, 1990: 465). Groups have their own systems for describing their environment and an element can hardly be isolated from its context without affecting its very meaning. If questions concerning age or sex can easily be translated, a phrase like “neoliberal globalization” has a specific (and more meaningful) sense in the linguistic, social, and political realm of a given group. The short time period in which questionnaires are administered merely reinforces the role of predetermined categories.
In this context, political opinions, especially when publicly expressed, seem virtually inseparable from linguistic framings, which are themselves socially situated.

Here the social researcher can intervene as a “translator,” accounting for the way the actors’ expressions are shaped by the context (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 1989). The willingness of respondents from eighty-seven countries to participate in our survey is assessed by the time they devote to answering our questions, as well as by the average high rate of completion. The sparse no-replies are in themselves informative. They suggest that one of the ongoing challenges facing antiglobalization activists is a linguistic one: proposing sound, unifying ways of describing the world is crucial. No-replies, so unevenly distributed, are meaningful: they suggest that even if those participants wanted to meet – and actually did meet – they still have to develop a common language to denominate their environment, their enemies, and their goals. This challenge is in itself of paramount importance – once we acknowledge that people “do things with words” (Austin, 1975).