Street Politics in the Age of Austerity

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Reflections on the Intersections of Global Justice Movements & Occupy Wall Street

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In January 2012, activists who were part of the United States Social Forum’s (USSF) National Planning Committee (NPC) met in Detroit, Michigan to discuss responses to the recent upsurge in anti-authoritarian and anti-austerity activism in the United States and around the world. They considered why previous work to build movements in the United States hadn’t allowed them to respond more effectively to this upsurge and bring more activists into the US Social Forums. The USSF – and the larger World Social Forum (WSF) process of which it is a part – was, after all, the most important focal point for anti-capitalist organizing around the world since its emergence in 2001. It is a space and a movement that organizers have consciously built to help bring together forces seeking to unite around the slogan, “another world is possible.” Why wasn’t this new upsurge connecting to the process? Organizers at that Detroit meeting asked whether and how the social forums had to be adapted in order to be more effective and responsive. Yet, the conversation revealed a general ambivalence about the latest upsurge of protest (NPC 2012). I attended this meeting as a delegate from Sociologists without Borders, a role I have served since 2008.

1 The NPC is the coordinating body for the USSF process, made up of organizations that agree to support the work of organizing the social forums (see https://www.ussocialforum.net/about).

2 In 2012, the International Network of Scholar Activists was recognized as the NPC delegate, replacing and encompassing Sociologists Without Borders and other scholar-activists and their networks. I helped found INoSA in response to what I learned in the social forum process, recognizing that we needed a structure that could activate and engage more participation from scholars over the long term. My role has been more of an ‘observant participant’ than ‘participant observer’ as conventionally understood by researchers. I have been involved first as a member of the communications working group (for the 2010 USSF) and, following Detroit, as a co-chair of the Communications and Technology working group and as an organizer/editor of the USSF Newsletter. Between November of 2012 and May of 2014, I served on the USSF’s coordination team – the executive body helping carry out decisions of the NPC. Thus, my relationship with other leaders in the USSF and therefore my understanding of the process have evolved over the years. My roles and responsibilities have deepened as I have taken responsibility for working...
According to Maureen Taylor, long-time veteran organizer from the Michigan Welfare Rights Organization, “without some level of structure, [OWS] will only wallow and burn-out both the resources and the energies of those involved. It is a ‘flash in the pan’ without direction” (Author field notes, January 2012; see also US Social Forum 2012). Along with others attending the meeting, she noted that, while OWS activists were responding to the same economic and political pressures that motivate the movements in the US and World Social Forums, the participants in these protests lacked a sense of history and a connection to existing movements. They had failed to generate an analysis of the global causes of inequality that could guide and sustain activism over time. And most importantly, this lack of historical and global perspective made it hard for OWS to bridge racial and class hierarchies that divide people and movements in the United States.

Despite the NPC’s ambivalence about some of the manifestations of OWS, organizers in the USSF recognized the need to find ways to connect with those newly activated by worsening social conditions and the protest wave they helped fuel. Discussions within the USSF continue to treat contemporary protests as important and relevant. Indeed, how could the forums be effective at challenging global capitalism if they could not attract the energy and creativity of newly engaged activists, and help them deepen their analyses to connect their personal grievances to the capitalist world-system? Maureen Taylor argued that “[a] sustained, engaged social movement building process can be achieved if USSF/WSF attendees take the time to communicate with folks from the Occupy Movement” (US Social Forum 2012). Both the NPC and the World Social Forum’s International Council have, in months following this gathering in Detroit, worked to include activists from the Arab Spring, the European anti-austerity movement, and the OWS movements in their deliberations. Also, a number of members of the NPC have continued to work locally and nationally to engage with activists in OWS, and OWS organizers have been invited to NPC meetings and USSF working groups.
This outreach from more established movements is leading to some engagement by activists who have been inspired and activated through the more recent wave of anti-austerity protests in the WSF process and who are looking to sustain their activism as these street manifestations recede. Most notably, the World Social Forum in Tunis in 2013 represents a convergence of these streams of activism. As with other WSF events, the 2013 forum attracted more youthful, anarchist tendencies that sought to present a more radical/oppositional position in the space of the WSF. This tendency was reflected in the work of ‘interoccupy’ to mobilize an international convergence at the WSF in Tunis in 2013. Interoccupy grew out of meetings of European and Mediterranean activists who were active in the Spanish 15 May mobilizations, Occupy, and other grassroots groups and movements. Two networks, ‘Agora99’ and ‘Firenze10+10’, helped launch interoccupy discussions about organizing for the WSF in Tunisia, “recognizing this can be the right time and place to come together and share our experiences and practices”. Agora99 and the European Meeting on Debt, Rights, and Democracy organized a meeting in November 2012 in Madrid to discuss shared concerns around debt, human rights, and democracy. This meeting, in turn, grew out of a proposal made at the ‘Blockupy’ meeting in Frankfurt, Germany in May 2012.6

As a result of these efforts, ‘Occupy the Square’ took place alongside the 2013 WSF in Tunis, engaging with some elements of the Tunisian and other Arab Spring movements.7 The organizing rationale behind Inter-Occupy’s effort to organize around the WSF Process was stated in their outreach call:

Tunis has become a symbolic place for the global movement, as the Arab Spring was born there. March would be a proper time to gather and exchange with all movements and networks flourished in the North African regions, in the Arab World, in Europe and all over the world. This forum could serve as a meeting place for those involved in Occupy/15M and all horizontal assembleary social movements. [...] We can practice our methodologies, as we did in the assembly we organized in Florence during Firenze 10+10 (http://occupyfirenze99.wordpress.com/), communicate and share our new knowledge and tool kits. We can build and strengthen

6 http://99agora.net/2012/07/euro-mediterranean-meeting-debt-rights-democracy/.
7 Tunisian activists invited the WSF to Tunisia to help them build and solidify their resistance. Many Tunisian organizers worked closely with the WSF International Council to organize the WSF meeting. Occupy the Square attracted more anarchist tendencies, many of whom were supported by international funding aimed at bringing OWS and other anti-austerity activists to the WSF.
the links between existing networks around the Mediterranean region and globally.\(^8\)

Moreover, this statement from the initial call for participation signals how activists understood the WSF process as a space or opportunity for helping generate new energy and for focusing on the issues being raised by the Indignados, OWS, and Arab Spring movements:

Do we need to Occupy World Social Forum, in order to come together at the global level, for the first time since 15M or Tahrir moments? Can we create new synergies that would contribute our transnational and trans-local struggles to build egalitarian and genuine democracies globally?\(^9\)

These observations illustrate how the activists who have been mobilized by these new protest surges are relating to pre-existing social movement actors and vice-versa. The WSF provided a focal point and a space that enabled new activists to sustain their activities. Yet, more newly engaged activists tended to take a confrontational stance in relation to the WSF that revealed some important differences and limitations in both movement streams.

Studying these connections and the factors that shape them can help us better understand how movements develop and build knowledge and networks over time. It can also show how movements adapt their analyses, organizations, and models of action in response to a changing environment. By tracing the relationships between actors in the USSF and contemporary anti-austerity movements, we can uncover the activist projects that help engage newly mobilized activists over the long term and connect them to pre-existing movements. In addition, we can identify practices in the USSF and WSF process that are most effective at attracting new energy and participation.

Today’s global wave of protest has origins in the resistance to neoliberal globalization that began with anti-IMF protests in the global South in the 1980s and 1990s (see Walton and Seddon 1994). This steadily rising wave of protest helped form the global justice movement that first drew attention in the late 1990s and remains active in the World Social Forum process and elsewhere. Since the financial crisis of 2008, we have seen a new surge in

\(^8\) http://titanpad.com/agorag9frezneWSF.
\(^9\) Ibid.
this long-term expansion of resistance to global neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{10} Many in this new protest wave are young and newly politicized activists with few ties to pre-existing movements and organizations. Yet, we should consider whether and how earlier protest waves have shaped the opportunities for these newly activated individuals and groups. Have activists been able to forge connections across movement generations and build upon past experience? Through what paths are such connections being made, and what factors facilitate or obstruct cooperation?

To address these questions, I examine how activists in the World Social Forum process have sought to engage with and respond to mobilizing opportunities created by the more recent rise of anti-austerity protests. I consider how models for collaboration that have been used and developed within the WSFs shape the efforts to integrate newly mobilized activists and groups into the WSFs. Of particular interest is the USSF’s specific attention to ‘movement building’, and how this is manifested in response to these new openings for engagement.

\textbf{The Global Justice Movement Meets Occupy Wall Street}

The rise of anti-austerity protests created openings that helped spread movement ideas and analyses to a broader population (cf. Staggenborg 1998). Such openings can alter the space in which a variety of oppressed groups can resist, creating the potential for a further expansion of protests, the re-articulation of movement ideas, and for the bridging of social divisions. For instance, the global justice movement’s success at articulating and disseminating critical analyses of globalization helped encourage more cooperative relations between activists in the north and south. Similarly, for George Friday, US Social Forum organizer, anti-austerity protests and OWS:

\begin{quote}
helped pave the way for people who have long been ready to resist – that is, low-income people, people of color, those who have long suffered the consequences of capitalism gone wild and corporate greed. Those folks are the most vulnerable, so when they see white people enraged and mobilized despite their privilege, there is hope that it will create some more space or breathing room for these folks to escalate the struggle. (Friday 2012)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} This conceptualization differs from that put forward in the introduction to this volume in its attempt to bring a world-historical perspective to the protests.
The wave of protests following the 2008 financial crisis has also helped activists in different countries understand their struggles in more global terms. The financial crisis demonstrates the cross-national similarities in people's everyday experiences, and as people observe protests happening in different places simultaneously, they are likely to think differently about their situations. While established movements and the communities that sustain them (such as the WSF process) help articulate and incubate analyses and ideas about social change, moments like the economic crisis of 2008 help disrupt and delegitimate dominant discourses and create openings in which new publics emerge.

By thinking in terms of the intersections of movements and moments, we can better understand how the knowledge and insights of past organizing can shape the leadership and initiatives that emerge later on. In her research on autonomous groups, Flesher Fominaya has observed that the negative experiences activists confronted in their work to advance participatory and autonomous forms of politics, even when they failed, created a shared history and a bond between activists that lasted even as they moved into other projects. They also carried the lessons of their failed experiments into new groups: much of the success of [a newer organization formed by experienced activists] rested on this shared commitment to not repeating past mistakes. (2010: 399)

Similarly, the work of Juris (2008) and Pleyers (2011) reveals how activists who participated in the late 1990s and early 2000s protests against the World Trade Organization and other sites of international financial and trade negotiations have shifted their energies and attention to more localized projects as a result of both lessons from past organizing experience and life changes such as marriage and parenthood. Thus, we see how knowledge from transnational organizing has diffused into local communities through activist networks. Also important in these examples are the life-course impacts on activists' strategic choices.

Spaces such as the World Social Forums provide opportunities for learning across different networks and generations of activists that might not otherwise converge. Reitan and Gibson (2012) and von Bülow (2010), for instance, show how the inter-organizational relationships developed through the WSF and through trade-related civil society forums helped break down rigid

11 This tendency of cycles of protest to be international is not new (Tarrow 1988, 1995; Markoff 1996).
divides between policy-oriented and direct action activists and created new constellations of forces that developed alongside changing policy debates. Hadden (2011) further demonstrates how global justice networks contributed to the emergence of a more radical ‘climate justice’ network that challenged existing strategies in UN climate debates. Juris (2008) shows how radical anarchist networks developed over the course of early anti-neoliberal globalization protests and through participation in early World Social Forums. Autonomous activists pushed the World Social Forum towards more radical and participatory practices by, for instance, resisting the VIP room at the first WSF, opposing celebrity panels and appearances by party and government officials, and by pressing for the democratization of the forum agendas. 

In light of this, we might see the rise of anti-austerity protests as WSF founding member Gustave Massiah does: as a “new phase in the alterglobalisation movement”. He observes that:

> the new movements testify to a new phase. And a new phase does not cancel out the previous ones. *Each new phase extends, adds to and renews the form of previous phases. It forces them to transform.* [...] the two groupings will mutate, leading to the birth of a new era of movements. [...] Older alterglobalisation movements should learn the lessons of their achievements and limitations. (2012b: 5, emphasis added)

Many participants in the most recent protest wave, and perhaps especially those in the United States, have lacked a global and systemic analysis and a commitment to long-term movement building. Thus, we see that in many places the movement quickly dissipated after its initially vibrant first few months. Nevertheless, this wave contributes to the work of other movement streams by advancing new technologies for communication and exchange that help ‘redefine politics’ by testing more democratic practices and helping “link the individual to the collective” (ibid.). Thus, we see in this convergence of different streams of activism a potential for the merging of ideas, experiences, perspectives, and knowledge that contribute to the continuous evolution and reinvention of the practices of contentious politics. In the following section I explore some of the differences in the logics guiding the WSF process and the anti-austerity protest wave and their implications for social movement theory. Again, I do this from the standpoint of doing observant participation in the organizing work at the national and

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12 Massiah is a co-founder and has played a leading role in the French section of ATTAC, which was instrumental in helping launch the World Social Forums.
international levels with the USSF and locally with OWS activists (see e.g. Juris and Khasnabish 2013).

The Logics of Social Movement Action and the WSF Process

The tensions seen between USSF and WSF organizers and newer mobilizations are partly a result of different practices and assumptions about activism and organizing work. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe these as differences in logics of activism. More established activist groups tend to emphasize a logic of collective action, while newer groups reflect a logic of connective action. The former stresses the role of more formal organizations and ideological identity formations, and the latter emphasizes the self-motivated use of digital media and the sharing of personalized content through social media networks:

In place of content that is distributed and relationships that are brokered by hierarchical organizations, social networking involves co-production and co-distribution, revealing a different economic and psychological logic: co-production and sharing based on personalized expression [...] the starting point of connective action is the self-motivated (though not necessarily self-centered) sharing of already internalized or personalized ideas, plans, images, and resources with networks of others. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012 752-753)

The emphasis is thus on personal identity and autonomy, with fluid commitments to groups and a rejection of formal organizations and ideological rigidity. Figure 8.1 illustrates these logics and their implications for organizational strategies.

Reinforcing the claim about the distinctive tendencies in the newer protest upsurge versus established forms of activism, Massiah (2012a) observes that “[t]he new movements place stronger emphasis on individual liberties rather than on social justice and equality, on ‘libertarian’ approaches to government regulation and on spectacular direct action rather than long-term collective action”. And Flesher Fominaya (2010: 382) concludes that “[o]ne of the features of contemporary autonomous politics is the weakening of personal and social identity requirements for participation”. She observes, moreover, that this tendency is “not merely a ‘natural’ evolution, but is a result of the active application of the diversity principle within the movement itself” (ibid: 382-383, emphasis added).
Other observers of the contemporary global justice movement have documented the presence of “flexible identities and multiple belongings” (Della Porta et al. 2006), attributing such identities to activists’ commitments to inclusion and a celebration of ‘unity in diversity’ rather than an aversion to developing commitments to a group. Similarly, Paul Lichterman’s study of political commitment in contemporary US environmental movements revealed a tendency of what he refers to as personalism, or a “cultural form that enables shared commitment to a public good and a dedication to individual autonomy and empowerment” (Lichterman 1996: 19). Personalism leads individuals to develop strong personal commitments to particular movement(s) but not to a particular organization or strategy. It is thus accompanied by a respect for the diverse choices other activists make about their participation in movements. The rise of personalism is linked to the spread of professional norms and skills accompanying wider changes in the economy and labor force. It may also reflect the increased demands that the contemporary labor market places on workers’ personal time. Such demands limit people’s abilities to attend regular meetings and make long-term commitments to organizations. These shared features of people’s experiences where they live and in the workplace and the values that stem in part from these everyday practices are a source of unity among individuals who lack other connections. Since contemporary activism tends to be less embedded in particular religious traditions or shared identity groups, personalist forms of politics provide a basis for unity by enabling activists to “[carry] their commitments as radicalized selves to create a new community” (ibid: 192).
Such individualized political activism is linked to broader changes in society. Bennett presents the rise of ‘lifestyle politics’ as a logical response to changes in the labor force, including dual-worker households and longer work hours. Busy people juggling work and activist responsibilities are less likely to commit to organizational meeting structures and more likely to engage in forms of activism that allow them greater flexibility. Wuthnow (1998) similarly attributes changes in forms of activist commitment to broader shifts in social institutions that reduce people’s sense of security and stability, increase demands on their time and energies, but often leave them wanting to find ways to connect with their communities. He sees the emergence of networks as a response to these institutional and labor market changes. Similarly, López (2007) argues that the prolific growth of the Internet is a response to the alienation that is endemic to globalized capitalism.

While such personalist, individually empowered networks can enable certain kinds of mobilization and activism, the changes in people’s everyday lives that result from shifts in the labor markets and broad structures of social organization make conventional forms of political mobilization less effective than they may have been in the past. More fragmented and individualized populations are “hard to reach and even harder to induce to share personally transforming collective identities” (Bennett and Segerberg 2012: 751-752). As a result,

many organizations are finding they must engage people differently: they are developing relationships to publics as affiliates rather than members, and offering them personal options in ways to engage and express themselves. This includes greater choice over contributing content, and introduces micro-organizational resources in terms of personal networks, content creation, and technology development skills. (ibid: 760)

Reflecting these changes, organizers in the WSF process are calling for a ‘social forum of a new type’. Despite its dynamism and size, the WSF has been limited in its ability to build movement power. This may be due in part to this technological and social-structural context.

Digital technology and social media alter the landscape of social movement organizing in important ways, just as they contribute to the other shifts noted above such as transformations in the workplace. Earl and Kimport’s study of electronic activism (2011) concludes with a call to re-think social movement theory to reflect how technology empowers individual activists, reduces organizing costs, and alters the role of
organizations in social movements. Reflecting these developments, there
have been discussions in both the US and World Social Forums about the
role of formal organizations. Whereas in the past, only organizations had
been allowed to participate in the main decision-making bodies or submit
proposals for workshops and panels (Sen 2003), there have been efforts
to relax these requirements. Organizers acknowledge that many of those
exercising important forms of leadership in the WSF process do so more as
individuals than as representative of organizations – even when they can
claim an organizational affiliation.\footnote{USSF National Planning Committee Accountability and Coordination Team conference
call held on 6 January 2012.} Individual participation is certainly
valued and possible in the forums, and individuals participate directly
in working groups that have important roles in shaping how the forums
develop. As Juris’s work shows, activists working from personalist orienta-
tions and from decentralized network-based structures rather than formally
organized groups have been able to have important influences in the WSF
process, often through collective efforts to challenge or “contaminate” these
spaces (Juris 2008: 258; see also Juris 2005).

Juris’s work lends insights into how these overlapping and competing
logics are manifested in the work of the social forums and perhaps other
contemporary movements. He develops the idea that elements of the earlier
global justice movement incorporated a ‘logic of networking’ that is clearly
a key force driving the WSF process. This logic of networking might be seen
as an intermediary between Bennett and Segerberg’s logic of collective
action and their logic of connective action:

\[ \text{[N]etworking logics specifically entail an embedded and embodied set of}
\]
\[ \text{social and cultural dispositions that orient actors toward 1) the building}
\]
\[ \text{of horizontal ties and connections among diverse autonomous elements,}
\]
\[ \text{2) the free and open circulation of information, 3) collaboration through}
\]
\[ \text{decentralized coordination and consensus-based decision making, and}
\]
\[ \text{4) self-directed networking. (Juris 2008: 11)}
\]

The World Social Forums have been important sites where activists could
come together to “perform their networks, create affective solidarity, and
communicate oppositional messages” (ibid: 238). The movement rather than
the government-centered logic of the forums helps them contribute more to
the work of building the networks than other protest sites such as anti-WTO
or anti-G8 protests. Their transnational character, moreover, has allowed groups to test forms of activism developed in national and local spaces on a wider scale while articulating and strengthening broader identities (global, regional, etc.). Activists in the forum have also been developing uses of technology that expand participation in forum activities from outside the forums’ host cities. According to Juris (ibid: 262-263), “forum events are critical sites for technological and organizational experimentation, while forum architectures incorporate a horizontal networking logic within their organizational designs expressed through the discourse and practice of open space”.

This networking logic that predominated in the earlier wave of global justice activism has, according to Juris, been overshadowed by new forms of engagement in the most recent anti-austerity uprisings. The latter is characterized by a “logic of aggregation” that “continued to exist alongside rather than entirely displacing logics of networking” (Juris 2012: 260-261). Consistent with Bennett and Segerberg’s notion of the logic of connective action and the above discussion of how this connects with larger social structures and everyday practices, the logic of aggregation:

is an alternative cultural framework that is shaped by our interactions with social media and generates particular patterns of social and political interaction that involve the viral flow of information and subsequent aggregations of large numbers of individuals in concrete physical spaces (ibid: 266).

Juris’s comparison of these two logics is instructive for our understandings of contemporary efforts to mobilize and coordinate large groups. He notes that:

Whereas networking logics entail a praxis of communication and coordination on the part of collective actors that are already constituted – including particular organizations, networks, and coalitions [...] – logics of aggregation involve the coming together of actors qua individuals. These individuals may subsequently forge a collective subjectivity through the process of struggle, but it is a subjectivity that is under the constant pressure of disaggregation into its individual components – hence, the

14 During confrontational protests at inter-governmental meetings, activists organized spaces similar to the WFs. However, such sites were often framed around inter-governmental meetings rather than movement-building.
importance of interaction and community building within physical spaces. Whereas networks are also given to fragmentation, the collective actors that compose them are more lasting (ibid: 266, emphasis added).

In addition to the logics of connective and collective action outlined above, Bennett and Segerberg’s work also identifies the presence of this third, network logic of organizing, subsuming it within the logic of connective action. They note (see Figure 8.1) that the traditional logic of collective action stresses the role of formal organizations in coordinating and facilitating action, generating “organizationally brokered networks”. The logic of connectivity governs two other ideal types of organizing, which they see as including both the self-organizing networks of autonomous activists who often reject formal organization and a hybrid form of “organizationally enabled networks”, where formal organizations play key roles in supporting network activity but remain in the background.

Referring again to Figure 8.1, the World Social Forum process most clearly reflects “organizationally enabled networks”, since it helps create spaces for diverse groups and individuals to converge over different time points and develop network ties (see Byrd and Jasny 2010). By bringing organizations and activists together to construct and participate in social forums, the WSF process and the organizations helping sustain it provide critical resources and spaces that facilitate networking while backgrounding the organizational work typical of the collective action’s logic of organizationally brokered networks. At the same time, participants in the process may emphasize any one or a combination of these three tendencies. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that these ideal types are, in practice, quite fluid, and different groups and individuals can manifest multiple tendencies or stress one or another at different times.

Interestingly, a look at very recent discussions in the US and World Social Forums suggests that activists are uncomfortable with the limits of the logic of connective action and more personalized action frames and commitments, even as they resist forming a unified platform or voice within the WSF. Ongoing discussions seem to point to a recognition of a need to

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15 Such backgrounding can in fact be problematic, as social forum participants may tend to either criticize (sometimes unfairly) financial and other decisions taken by organizers, and take for granted the time-consuming organizing work done by volunteers. It also can make it hard for newcomers to get involved, which can lead to burnout among those most central to the leadership work. Both USSFs ended with many groups stepping back from the process due to burnout (author’s fieldnotes).
adopter practices that better support concerted if not collective action. The crisis has made it more urgent that those coming together around a critique of capitalism find a way to have more influence on global transformation.

The WSF’s inherent logic of open space and the ideology of horizontality and autonomous action that permeates these spaces mitigates against a predominance of conventional ‘organizationally brokered networks’. But because all of these logics are in play in the open spaces of the WSF, we see the tensions among them. For instance, the USSF National Planning Committee sees a need to play a strong organizational role in defining NPC membership in order to avoid reproducing prevailing hierarchies, and it currently is working to provide greater central coordination of the content of the USSF program in order to ensure that the forums better advance movement-building goals. However, this goal is in tension with the radical democratic premises of the movements themselves and may complicate efforts to create openings for new and historically oppressed groups to actually emerge and help lead the process. On the WSF’s International Council, there is a recognition of the need to provide greater space for the development of collective action within the forums, in addition to calls for greater transparency and participation. This suggests a move towards more elaborated organizational structures, but how this will unfold within the forum’s culture of radical democracy and opposition to hierarchy is uncertain.

In light of this theorizing about the logics orienting different streams of activism, it is instructive to examine experiences in the US Social Forum and in a local site of OWS activism to explore the possibilities for bridging different modes of thought and action.

Logics and Tensions in Contemporary WSF and OWS Activism

In both the USSF process and in the WSF International Council, there have been recent moves to formally recognize individuals as participants on decision-making bodies (author’s field notes; Whitaker 2012). These developments are a response to the actual experiences of organizers working within the WSF framework who have recognized the need to acknowledge and create space for individual leadership, as well as a result of WSF activists’ reflections on the similarities and differences between the new upsurge in

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16 USSF organizers speak of the third US Social Forum as moving “from convergence to cohesion” (author’s fieldnotes).
protest and the practices in the Social Forums. They reflect a recognition of the changing nature of individual activism and its relationship to formal organizations. They also present a challenge for activists seeking to ensure that open spaces do not privilege particular groups in ways that reproduce race, class, gender, or other oppressions. The discussions and debates within the WSF process nevertheless reflect the ways this process draws activists’ attention to the operation of power within movements (see e.g. Teivainen 2007). Such attention has been absent in most (though certainly not all) spaces of OWS activism (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Whitaker 2012).

The question of the role of individuals has emerged in the context of the US Social Forum’s work to expand and revitalize the National Planning Committee during the fall of 2012, as activists grappled with the question of how to better engage the new wave of protests. These conversations have helped organizers confront the reality that many of the organizational ‘representatives’ on the NPC are really committed individuals working as liaisons between particular organizations and the USSF process, in addition to their other organizational work. In addition, some individuals who played important leadership roles on the NPC but who have left the organization they were representing were not able to find an obvious way to sustain their activism in the USSF. Active participants in local organizing committees who became deeply involved in the national organizing work of the NPC thus found it hard to fit within the existing organizationally defined membership structure of the NPC. At the same time as passionate and experienced leaders were unclear about how to remain involved in NPC work, the NPC has struggled with a need for more committed participants to carry the workload over the long term. A rather small number of core leaders have been critical to helping sustain the process. Recognizing this, organizers in both the US and World Social Forums are calling for a “social forum of a new type” and moving to formally define new categories of membership to include more space for individual activists.17

The networking logic has helped the USSF mobilize people with established organizational and movement/activist identities. However, experience in the forums has shown that prevailing organizational logics and demands often prevent organizations from maintaining long-term commitments to and support for the social forum in between forum meetings. Individual activists, however, have demonstrated sustained commitments to the work of coalition and movement-building over the WSF’s more than

17 Notes from NPC meeting in Chicago held on 9-11 November 2012. Discussion of this item was on Sunday, 11 November.
ten year history. Despite a lack of a strong organizational base of support, they have nevertheless been able to channel important resources and skills into the WSF process and to help build and sustain a network of activist-organizers with varying levels of organizational support. It is this somewhat fluid network of organizers and organizations that has helped sustain the WSF process and deepen understandings of its place in contemporary social movement work. The work of organizing social forums, in turn, has helped reinforce the unity and collective identities of participants in the process.

In the WSF and USSF, then, a logic of networking has drawn together a variety of individuals and organizations with varying degrees of centralization and formalization. Although individuals lack formal decision-making authority – that is reserved for organizations – the lived experience of the forums indicated that individual leadership has been key to the development of the WSFs, and the working group structure allows individuals to raise proposals and launch initiatives. Individuals have been able to be involved in the process as attendees of WSFs, working group participants, and as participants or organizers of social forums at local, national and regional scales. It is thus noteworthy that concurrent discussions have emerged in the USSF and in the International Council about how to integrate individual participants in a more formal way, and that this discussion is happening in the midst of the new wave of anti-austerity protests.18 The explicit ‘process’ that embeds the WSFs provides an ongoing framework wherein activists come together repeatedly over time and across space. Sequential iterations of forums have allowed activists to critique shortcomings of past forums, compare experiences across place and time, and articulate new practices and principles to remedy exclusions and omissions. Through this reflexive and dialogic process, participants develop a collective identity from these diverse entities and deepen commitments to the social forums and the people and movements that comprise them.

Occupy Pittsburgh and the Logic of Aggregation

In contrast to the social forum’s logic of networking, the logic of aggregation or connectivity that is more characteristic of the OWS and anti-austerity protests starts with individual participants whose main motivation is communicating and engaging personal action frames. But in many places this action has been rather short-lived, even in locations with histories of labor

18 NPC and WSF IC Meeting notes, late 2012-spring 2013.
and progressive activism. The temporary and geographically defined spaces in which these protests have emerged have complicated efforts to expand conversations across different social groups and locales.

Occupy Pittsburgh’s camp was situated in the middle of downtown Pittsburgh, surrounded by high-rise buildings owned by the likes of BNY Mellon, a financial services company. The camp attracted many youth and older unemployed people, Iraq war veterans, young people with significant student debt, and residents from other parts of the state and country. Although the city has several universities, relatively small numbers of students were active. The camp was supported by strong local networks of activists, including both labor unions and various progressive groups which provided significant financial and legal support. Pittsburgh occupiers held general assemblies during the encampment and even for a short period after the camp disbanded, but participation was mainly by activists who were part of the camp. Although some non-campers attended the general assemblies, many grew frustrated with these and either focused on working group activities or left the movement. The camp lasted for nearly six weeks before it was closed by the police. During the encampment, activists staged regular protests at downtown corporate headquarters or at the offices of public officials. Many of these protests were led by activists tied to local trade unions and linked to ongoing campaigns. In addition, teach-ins and opportunities for political education and dialogue, including a monthly ‘Occupy Your Mind’ series, helped sustain participation by a diverse range of participants and nurtured connections among activists. Early in 2012, Pennsylvania’s governor helped revive activists’ energy and momentum by threatening major cuts to public transit budgets, thereby providing a focal point for Occupy Pittsburgh through the winter and spring. But by June of 2012, most participants had faded away, and those remaining grew frustrated with the group’s inability to generate any effective structure to coordinate Occupy Pittsburgh’s activities and expand its outreach to diverse residents of the city (Smith and Glidden 2012).

The operation of the logic of aggregation/connective action in Occupy Pittsburgh complicated efforts to build a cohesive organizing framework. As was also seen in Desbos and Royall’s chapter in this volume, activists

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19 I participated in Occupy Pittsburgh as a (non-camping) co-convener (‘bottom-liner’) of the outreach working group for its entire existence, from October 2011 through October 2012. I attended several general assemblies and other meetings of working-group leaders. I also worked to plan events that involved multiple working groups, including a rally and march for International Human Rights Day (10 December 2011), which was the first and only major Occupy Pittsburgh action in a gentrifying, primarily black neighborhood.
who had participated in the camp and who remained active over time resisted the idea that people who were not staying at the camp could be full participants in the movement. Yet, the location of the camp, the physical and time demands associated with camping, and the operation of race, class, age, and gender-based tensions in the camps meant that many people could not participate in this way. Nevertheless, many people joined working groups and participated in Occupy Pittsburgh demonstrations and other events. Regardless of how active they were, many were still unsure of whether they could claim to be ‘Occupiers’ (author’s field notes). This exclusionary view of what constituted membership persisted even after the camp was disbanded, preventing the renewal of activism and energy and further demobilizing activists. Dysfunctions in the camp – such as inter-personal conflicts and disagreements over safety and drug use – as well as a lack of clarity and unity around goals contributed to the decline of participation in Occupy Pittsburgh activities.

General assemblies (both in Pittsburgh and elsewhere) proved incapable of providing space for coordination and cooperation among working groups, and efforts to create a more formal process for such coordination failed, mainly due to attrition (author’s field notes). And while social media were helpful for turning out activists and providing an easy way for OWS activists to establish broad communication networks, as with the general assemblies, the absence of a process for ensuring mutually respectful and equitable participation and for holding individual participants accountable to shared norms led many to abandon the movement in disgust. Moreover, many of the active participants in the social media sites were not involved in the working groups or public activities of Occupy Pittsburgh, creating a disconnect between real-time practices and online discourses (author’s field notes). Beyond Pittsburgh, the limitations of the anti-organizational logic of connective action behind the OWS protests is evident in the difficulties national USSF leaders had in even identifying individual OWS activists whom they could invite to movement-building strategy meetings. Desbos and Royall point to similar organizational challenges in their analysis.

The experience of both the USSF process and OWS shows that collective movement identity is not a prerequisite for mass mobilization in an age

20 Their timing and the absence of pre-announced agendas and end-times made it difficult for those with regular work schedules to attend. As a middle-aged woman and a newcomer to Pittsburgh, I also found the sessions I attended to be uninviting if not hostile (see also Anonymous, 2012).

21 Notes from NPC planning call held in October 2012.
where social media and other forms of communication technology abound, and where economic globalization and crisis have generated greater commonality in people’s experiences of capitalist exploitation and marginalization. However, the work of developing individual activists’ commitment to a collective political project remains important to sustaining large-scale action over time. The physical spaces in which the contemporary anti-austerity mobilizations have taken place have enabled participants to have inspiring but brief experiences of community and radical democracy. But the socially and geographically situated confrontational and temporary nature of these spaces has limited the ability of activists to sustain their engagement over the long term. It has also inhibited a diversity of social groups participating in these protests. On the other hand, the WSF process has been able to articulate a process that has at least created a structure within which activists can work to build unity among diverse movements and identity groups. However, it continues to struggle to sustain a sense of community, mutual solidarity, and long-term commitment that is essential to overcome the constant pressure – created by the logic of capitalism it confronts – “of disaggregation into its individual components” (Juris 2012: 266).

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Movements for global economic and ecological justice are seeking to engage opportunities created by the political moment of deepening crisis and popular uprising. It is useful to know what accomplishments and strengths established movements can bring to the new or re-engaged activists who have emerged in the recent wave of anti-austerity protests. However, it is also important to note how the logics and modes of action characteristic of earlier struggles might be limited for engaging activists who are part of a culture that emphasizes logics of connectivity and digital communications.

The global justice movement and World Social Forums can inform an emancipatory project that connects activists and groups across different generations and logics of political action. First, the global justice movement’s work in mobilizing resistance to economic globalization can inform a deeper analysis among contemporary activists that connects local grievances with global structures and institutions. Second, global justice activists have long been articulating and practicing alternatives to capitalism, and a good deal of space in the WSFs is devoted to sharing experiences and supporting these alternatives. The opportunities to experience these alternatives helped motivate and inspire many OWS and other anti-austerity
activists, but the context meant that these were often short-lived. Without connections to community groups or other established sources of support, the projects could not be sustained once the encampments ended. In the social forums, such foundations are intact. Third, the WSF process has stressed the importance of long-range work of movement-building, which was missing at least in the early waves of OWS and anti-austerity protests (see Smith 2012). However, the more recent efforts of USSF organizers to engage with some of the enduring OWS networks, and the participation of OWS and anti-austerity activist networks in the 2013 WSF in Tunis, show how the form and process of the WSF can help give this new wave of activists a focal point that can sustain their collective energies and visions.

This look at the ongoing work of activists in the US and WSF process to respond to the recent surge of anti-austerity protests suggests that the networking logic that has characterized the global justice movement, articulated through the concretized practices developed in the WSF process, may be important for connecting the knowledge and experience of past movement with the new energy, cultures, and technologies reflected in contemporary protests. One key factor that must be resolved, however, is the integration of individual activists into a long term movement-building process. This will require the development of shared identities and commitments that, in turn, will need to be developed from the integration of the diverse experiences and values of participants rather than from some existing model. More activists are recognizing the need to move beyond familiar templates of action and modes of commitment as they articulate a need for “social forums of a new type”. Such work to develop new organizing and identity forms is cultural work, and it seems that the cultural challenge posed by OWS and other recent protests was most appealing to a larger, non-activist public. While this recognition of the importance of culture permeates most movements of the past and indeed has always been important in the WSFs, the struggle to make cultural work more central to social movements remains.

We might revisit the puzzle of the disconnect in the diverse streams of activism between the logics of collective and connective action, including how larger structural changes in society have shaped these logics. To survive and succeed, movements must mobilize new generations of activists and unite them in common struggles. In light of the relationships between collective, organizational actors and individuals outlined in the figure reproduced from Bennett and Segerberg, we might ask whether there is a need for a self-conscious attempt to develop more organizationally brokered networks that can translate between the logics of connective and collective action.
and help link global justice movements with the generation of activists more accustomed to using digital technology and online communications. The mutual engagement and learning that is possible at the intersections of movements and moments can lead to innovative practices that will radically transform political activism and the societies that shape it. In any case, it is clear that an appreciation of the different organizational and cultural logics shaping World Social Forum and anti-austerity activism can help address some of the tensions that have inhibited greater convergence among these parallel emancipatory initiatives.

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