Open Networking in Central America: The Case of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Political Science
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation considers the case of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum (MPF), a Central American ‘cousin’ of the World Social Forum, and manifestation of the Global Justice Movement. It argues that the MPF cannot be adequately understood as a transnational social movement or as an ‘open space.’ Rather, it is best understood as a political playing field on which the leaders of locally rooted social movements contested the future of the Central American left within an uncertain and changing political context.

Based on extensive ethnographic field work and grounded analysis, it argues that well-placed actors within forum spaces can best be thought of as ‘mediators’ between state and society. The emergence of de facto federated governance structures in Central America, plus weak democratic institutions, have placed new pressures on mediators. Leaders within the Central American left find that they need to build up and/or maintain power bases to shield their positions within an uncertain political environment. They mobilize people to participate in transnational forum spaces because of the legitimating benefits, but shape networked flows within these spaces to limit the potential for networking to erode established positions. Thus I
conclude that openness is neither the condition nor the objective of social forums, but rather a pawn strategically deployed or retracted in the course of networked interactions. The work advances thinking about the nature of collective political subjectivity in an era of transformationalist globalization. It also argues in favor of critical realist perspectives on collectivization in a post-development, globalizing world. Specifically, scholars can best advance an ‘epistemology of the south’ by promoting and protecting cognitive justice, which in turn can be achieved through the use of realist approaches that serve to uncover the practices of power at work within networked spaces.
Acknowledgments

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Preface

Since 1996 I have been involved in international ‘development’ networks headed by Western institutions oriented towards ‘resolving problems’ in Latin American countries, first with the Center for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) at York University, then with the Organization for American States (OAS) in Washington, D.C., and finally with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa. The networks I worked in each had a strong research focus, and all were (or were becoming) very self-conscious about their use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), often because we were actively trying to figure out how to use them.

By 2000, I was working with Central American civil society organizations (CSOs) that worked on information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D). We were interested in questions of access, as well as strategies to promote use, and researched the social impact of ICTs from a grassroots perspective. But the bigger, and more difficult question was (and continues to be) whether and how Central Americans could or would appropriate the technology, and what this could mean for the structure of the opportunities available to ordinary people in the region, especially given the emerging ‘information society’ (whatever one might take that to mean) (Reilly 2007). Given the types of organizations I was working with and the history of the region, we were particularly interested in how ICTs might support political empowerment.

Central America received a great deal of international attention during the 1990s because civil conflicts were ending, countries were undergoing ‘democratization,’ and there was an active experiment with regionalization (under the auspices of the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana - SICA). Added to this was the neoliberal experiment in telecommunications
privatization and deregulation, and the global Internet boom. All together researchers, donors and money flooded the region, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) sprung up by the thousands, and civil society networks multiplied at the national and regional levels. It seemed that ICTs might be a panacea for the ills of development, paving the way towards democracy and a transnational agora.

But by the millennium it was clear that the challenges of the digital divide, as well as the socio-political reality shaping appropriation, meant that the impact of ICTs and the networks they facilitated would be more complex, and not necessarily so positive. Today in Central America injustice and inequality remain prevalent, ICT use is very low, and appropriation of ICTs is uneven (Reilly 2007). The impacts of both donor involvement and ICTs/networking on ‘civil society’ have been complex. Many of the national and regional networks established with the help of donor funding during the 1990s have collapsed. There is also a significant divide between those professionalized NGOs that have become co-opted by donor and government agendas, and more grassroots (and often rural) actors. In the last 10 years, civil society in the region has struggled to reinvent itself in the face of donor withdrawal, cooptation, unsuccessful networks, challenges to legitimacy, and especially, a rapidly changing political context.

Meanwhile on the global stage, by 2003, the ICT4D “Agenda” had matured to the point where the United Nations (in the form of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)) had decided to host a World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). I was invited to participate in this process as the co-author of a report on ICT use by transnational civil society (Surman and Reilly 2003), and attended the first WSIS meeting in Geneva.

The WSIS experience presented several grounds for critique – or perhaps better said – WSIS constituted a target for a growing set of critiques against the whole notion of ‘global civil society’ (GCS). With Al Qaeda on the brain, there were questions as to why ‘uncivil’ or ‘right’
civil society was being excluded from ‘official civil society circles’. It felt apparent that GCS was a creation of the UN system, made in its own image, and designed to uphold western values. In addition, around this time, empirical evidence was showing that GCS actors and networks tended to be hierarchical, Western-dominated, and less than representative in their structures (Edwards 2001; Batliwala 2002). In particular, it began to be recognized that many GCS actors lacked clear connections to the grassroots actors they purported to represent. This paralleled the recognition in academic circles of the continued salience of the state, and growing questions about the feasibility/reality of a “civil society” at the global level. Finally, cultural approaches faced criticism for their inability to deal with material concerns, which are particularly relevant in developing country contexts, where ICT penetration, literacy and income all remain low.

But, the public spaces at WSIS also constituted a meeting ground for global civil society actors interested in the synergies between ICT-supported networks and cultural-production-cum-resistance against some vague notion of a global hegemony which might be capitalism, or enclosure of the cultural/knowledge commons, or globalization, or political oppression, however one might choose to define each of these concepts.

At the very cutting edge of this discussion was growing interest in something called open source software (such as Linux), which had not only managed to challenge Microsoft’s software hegemony – and hence the very foundations of contemporary monopoly and capitalism – but also promised to preserve the information commons, and presented an interesting ‘open’ organizational model for coordination in vast global (and perhaps even culturally diverse) networks (Mulgan, Steinberg and Salem 2005). The open source software production model also seemed to hold a great deal of explanatory power (in a metaphorical, not causal sense) for a unique emergent space that was redefining the way GCS organized itself: the World Social Forum (WSF). Many people suggested that open source was emblematic of new social practices,
such as the Forum, emerging in a ‘networked information economy.’ And, as is typical with big new ideas, the ‘expectation’ was that these new practices, often referred to as ‘open spaces,’ would make people freer, improve democratic participation, foster a self-reflective culture, and improve mechanisms for human development. At the bastions of the left, these new organizational practices were at the centre of strategizing.

All of this left me wondering: How do the emergent organizational forms associated with the ‘information society’ play out on the ground among CSOs in Central America (if at all), and what explains these outcomes? Furthermore, how will the configuration of these spaces (dis)empower Central American actors and affect the structure of opportunities available to ordinary people? In the following dissertation project, I tackle one small slice of these larger questions through an examination of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum (MPF), which can be thought of at the Central American emanation of the WSF and the wider global justice movement (GJM). This is not a project about the Internet. I hardly consider the Internet at all in the pages to come. You will not read about TCP/IP or the digital divide in this work. And yet this is a project about the information society, networks, and what globalization means for the ability of people ‘on the ground’ in developing countries to become the subjects of their own histories. And it is a project which ultimately has implications for how we can think about the impact of the Internet on how we think about development.
Chapter 1
Introduction

At its best, [the World Social Forum] is like a political jam session with people bouncing off each other in harmony and in counterpoint. Like the jazz of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, the Forum is experimenting with a politics that can cope with uncertainty and is not constantly straining for formal harmony. --Hillary Wainwright from “The Forum as Jazz,” 2003

[The WSF] is like an enormous fair, a real party with spaces for demonstrations and ‘performances’ of many different kinds. Nobody is anguished in the Forum, because no one has to fight to see their proposals and ideas prevail over others. Nor is anyone worried about having to defend themselves from others trying to control the Forum, or to impose orientations or rules of behaviour on the Forum that must get together to evaluate, decide, and undertake tasks. --Chico Whitaker from “The WSF as Open Space,” 2004

The idea isn’t to add people, but rather to articulate a resistance movement. [The Mesoamerican People’s Forum] is a horizontal space, but participants need to agree with the objective. Those who are more in the donor vein want the forum to be ‘light’ - a more open political agenda, participatory, etc. The resistance says in reply that ‘we don’t have any spaces of our own, so we can appropriate this one.’ That’s what the forum space is like: somewhat exclusionary, but with its own agenda. --Interview #5

The WSF is a large apparatus. It requires strong financing. Without a doubt there are disputes about financing and control over it; also about where the process will be carried out. [...] If you pay attention, there is an entire scheme of the people, personalities, sectors - they are sectors from on high. [...] They form an international bureaucracy. All of these people are good. But at the same time, they are a hierarchy that enters into conflict over things. --Interview #104

1 Questioning Openness

The social forums that have emerged since the millennium as part of the global justice movement (GJM)¹ are often described as open spaces. The most famous of these, the World Social Forum (WSF), was first held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001. This wildly successful event brought together 12,000 people to celebrate the contributions of anyone critical of neoliberal globalization. It also offered a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum’s (WEF) annual invitation-only meeting in Davos, Switzerland, happening at the same moment on the other side of the globe. In contrast to the closed meeting of the WEF, the WSF was defined as:

¹ See section 4.4 of the introduction for a discussion of this term.
... an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among humankind and between it and the Earth. (WSF Charter of Principles 2001, as printed in Sen et al. 2004, 70-71)

As this quote suggests openness represents more than simply an organizational strategy; it is also a response to neoliberalism as a paradigm shaping development in the world today. Forums are seen as a means to empower people to become the authors of development in a global, networked, informational world in which they are seen to be excluded from both the material benefits of economic integration and the power to decide their own future. In this sense, openness has become central to the definition of collective political subjectivity within the GJM. The model resonated with participants of the first event and the WSF has been repeated annually with crowds as large at 200,000 at Porto Alegre, Brazil (2002, 2003, 2005), Mumbai, India (2004), Caracas, Venezuela (2006), Bamako, Mali (2006), Karachi, Pakistan (2006), and Nairobi, Kenya (2007) (Keraghel and Sen 2004; Melber 2007).

Intellectuals such as Hillary Wainwright and Chico Whitaker, quoted above, have tackled the job of studying, documenting and theorizing the GJM, noting that social forums represent a major departure from past approaches to social justice organizing at the transnational level.² What does openness suggest about how social forums should function? Activists and academics have responded to this question with a range of interpretations. Some suggest that openness implies democratic processes such as accountability, transparency and legitimacy. Others understand openness to be the foundation of diversity and empowerment. Still others see it as a

² The vast majority of early writing about the Forum movement focused on World Social Forum events, and engaged in debate about how the forum could or should be best conceived. See for example: Conway 2005; Féron 2004; Guttal 2005; Kapadia and Ghertner 2005; Keraghel and Sen 2004; Kohler 2005; Olivers 2004; Osterweil 2004; Patomäki and Teivainen 2004; Pleyers 2004; Wallerstein 2004. Other early works on the WSF presented historical summaries (Seoane and Taddei 2002), meeting reports (Lestienne 2002; Petras 2002a; Cooper 2003; Faux 2003; Hammond 2003; Femminis 2004; Alexander and Mbali 2004), overviews of alternatives to globalization (Houtart and Polet 2001; Thompson 2004; Ponniah 2005a/b), or debates pertaining to specific sectors such as the woman’s movement or labour (Bieler and Morton 2004; Waterman 2004; Eschle 2005; Jones 2005; Vargas 2003, 2005).
window on new political opportunities and a means to engender solidarity and self-organization. These various interpretations of openness reflect differing notions of the functions, politics and the desired outcomes of social forums.³

But despite their differences, intellectual accounts of social forums share a fundamental assumption about the political processes that characterize these events. At base, they interpret social forums as a response to one or another source of power and subjugation within the global system. As such, they portray forum events as efforts to empower, mobilize and bring together the GJM around a common complaint (even if this complaint is variously understood). Thus these accounts share significant points of synergy, and perhaps even sympathy, with different discourses of collective political subjectivity emanating out of the GJM.⁴

This is perplexing, because my own research on social forums found these processes to be characterized by divisions and hierarchies, as is suggested by the two anonymous quotes presented above. This leads me to question any intellectual accounts that start from the assumption that forums are wrapped up in mobilization and oriented towards a common political threat. Do such portrayals of social forums really offer the best way to think about the global

³ For some, openness reflects the democratic, transparent and accountable practices that must form the foundation of any serious quest for social justice (Brysk 2000). For others, this approach was thought to embody a counter-hegemonic or anti-power (Holloway 2005a/b) logic which presents an inherent challenge to the top-down nature of global capitalism. This is not unlike how open source software production is argued to challenge the hegemony of the Microsoft Windows operating system for computers. In this sense, “openness” agrees with many facets of feminist, post-colonial, post-structural and environmental critiques of what are perceived to be the two driving forces of imperialism by many critical scholars and activists: Western social science based in positivist and Cartesian philosophies of inquiry, and neoliberal policies designed to further economic globalization and western political and cultural domination. Finally, openness can also be read as a response to the idea of enclosure which forms a foundation of post-Marxist thinking (Bettig 1997).
⁴ Literature on social forums gets wrapped up in debates that are being carried out within forum spaces. For example, one of their sharpest debates has involved a divide between those who see the WSF as a social movement or means to dispute institutional power, and those who argue that it is a space for cultural production (Teivainen 2002, 2004; Marcuse 2005; Conway 2005; Kohler 2005; Bond 2005; Ponniah 2005; Hammond 2006; Patomaki and Teivainen 2004). This debate is also framed as one of anti-power versus counter-power. Counter-power is characterized as a force used to transfer power out of the hands of elites and into the hands of the dispossessed. Anti-power, ‘power-to,’ or empowerment models, on the other hand, seek to distribute rather than transfer power (Dinerstein 2003; Holloway 2005a/b). The results of these debates have important implications for the future direction of the left, and given these stakes, a great deal of writing about the WSF is editorial material masquerading as theory. So, where the WSF is concerned, the ideological positions of key writers provide both fascinating artifacts of an unfolding reality as well as justification for grounded research.
justice movement? Based on in-depth study of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum (MPF), this dissertation presents a challenge to the assumptions and contents of such theoretical offerings. In doing so, it offers a commentary on how to think about development in a world of global flows.

In what follows, I first explore the history of the WSF before introducing both the MPF and the project that forms the focus of this dissertation. This is followed by an exploration of key concepts, and finally an overview of the chapters to come.

2 Historical Backdrop: Social Forums and the Search for New Organizational Models

Activists around the world began voicing concerns about the environmental and social costs of globalization well before the 1992 Environment Summit in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Concern about the effects of neoliberal globalization was galvanized in the late 1990s by the debt crisis, as well as several large-scale economic collapses in Mexico in 1994, Brazil in 1999, and Argentina in 2001. The resulting protests were expressed most famously through the ‘Battle In Seattle,’ the November 1999 protest that managed to shut down the World Trade Organization’s new ‘millennial round’ of trade negotiations. However, many other significant protest events also marked this period, including the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, the Jubilee 2000 campaign, as well as the Zapatista struggle in southern Mexico.

The Battle in Seattle was a significant forerunner of social forums. The left had become increasingly fractured with the rise of identity politics in the 1960s. But more importantly, in the wake of the debt crisis and after more than a decade of neoliberal reforms, left wing (particularly social democratic) parties were on the losing side of politics, social democracies and associated civil society arrangements (particularly labour organizing) had suffered serious setbacks and,
with the fall of communism and the third wave of democracy, parties, social movements and civil society actors were reorganizing around new conceptions of history.

Given the status of the left, observers of the Seattle protests were surprised by the fervent social movement activity, and remarked on the global reach and transnational nature of social movement organizing. Seattle publicly marked the reanimation of the left, which had been in a prolonged period of retreat, but had been rebuilding throughout the 1990s through the above mentioned protest activities. Observers identified new information and communications technologies (ICT) which had emerged in the late 1980s as critical to both the scale and the reach of these protests (Deibert 2003; Cleaver 1998; Warkentin and Mingst 2000). Observers further remarked on the diverse nature of the protests, which brought together concerned parties from across the spectrum of the left (Klein 2000b). Transnationalism, diversity and ICTs appeared to be hallmarks of a newly emerging force.

But despite its success, Seattle also brought to the fore some dilemmas for left-leaning actors. In its wake, protest became increasingly difficult at meetings of heads of state, as security forces worked to prevent ‘another Seattle.’ Meanwhile, Southern voices protested the overtly ‘Northern’ character of these so-called ‘global’ protests (Sikkink 2002; Batliwala 2002), while critics suggested that this loosely connected rabble offered no real alternative to neoliberal globalization, and given the diversity of this tenuously networked movement, would be unable to do so (Klein 2000a; Hertel 2005). The newly re-emergent left realized that it needed to find a new philosophical foundation for its activities, one which would guide inquiry, action and policy in an increasingly global world. In other words, the left was searching for a new political project around which to define its collective political subjectivity (Haarstad 2007). This philosophy

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5 Haarstad defines this as “the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interests of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in contemporary capitalism. Here theory and practice are mutually constitutive, since theory is derived from observation of practice, which in turn receives much of its
would need to unify the left so that it could form a real political force for change—but it would need to create a unity that respected difference.

Metaphors and models from the digital age became a source of inspiration as the GJM searched for answers to the problem of unity-with-difference. For example, after the protests in Seattle Naomi Klein remarked:

> Although many have observed that the recent mass protests would have been impossible without the Internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. … What emerged on the streets of Seattle and Washington was an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the Internet – the Internet come to life (Klein 2000b).

Klein was pointing to a series of new models for social organizing that took advantage of both the substance and the example of the Internet’s digital communications infrastructure to facilitate knowledge and cultural production (see also Ljungberg 2000). These included a series of new models for research, software production, and social organizing that appeared to facilitate dialogue and organizing on a vast scale, with a minimum of centralized coordination, while respecting the individuality of each participant (Mulgan et al. 2005; Milan 2005). Given the perceived potential of these models, both activists and academics became engaged in advocacy work to guarantee the continued openness of the so-called ‘information highway,’ seeing it as the fundamental public communications infrastructure of the digital age. Meanwhile these same actors became very interested in the open source (Weber 2004), peer production (Benkler 2003), or social networking models (Resnick 2005) made possible by this new infrastructure as potential models for transnational organizing.

Meanwhile, a second source of inspiration came from the organizational models of the Zapatista Liberation Army in southern Mexico. Early accounts of this movement focused on its ‘post-modern’ qualities (Burbach 1994) and radically democratic practices (Nash 1997).
Chesters and Welsh argue that the Zapatista uprising had a strong influence on the form of organization adopted by social forums:

The emphasis placed upon encounter within the [anti-globalization movement] was strongly influenced by ideas expressed during the Zapatista *encuentros* (encounters) of the mid-1990s, where the concept of creating a global ‘mirror and lens’ (collective recognition and focus) for antagonistic movements was first elaborated. This process enabled activists to ‘bridge worlds’ through the deliberate construction of spaces wherein links between diverse movements could be made (Chesters and Welsh 2005, 195 citing Marcos 2001).

Within these meetings there was an emphasis on respect for diversity of opinions; in this vein the Zapatistas have eschewed pursuit of electoral power, arguing that they seek a transformation of the practice of power (Cleaver 1998; Lowy 1998).

Taking together the influence of virtual models for open source software production and real world models of radical democracy, a possible solution to the challenges faced by the GJM came in the form of the World Social Forum, first held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2001.6 The forum convened groups from across the spectrums of the left - from labour leaders to feminists, from non-governmental organizations to grassroots social movements, from social democrats to anarchists. Unlike social movements which have traditionally behaved as a single unified actor operating vis-à-vis a state-based interlocutor, the idea of the forum movement is to establish horizontally organized and epistemologically *open spaces* where anti-globalization activists, each challenging globalization in their own way, can network with each other, exchange ideas, engage in debate, and inspire each other.7 In this way, the forum would foster empowerment and self-determination, and it would offer a political project that constituted both an alternative to neoliberal globalization, as well as a foundation for the formation of a collective political subject. Over the history of the WSF, the concept and methodology of open spaces has become one of its defining features.

6 See Teivainen 2002, Seoane and Taddei 2002 or Wallerstein 2004 for detailed accounts of the Seattle protests and the emergence of the first WSF.
7 See Bennett 2005 for a schematic which differentiates older forms of social movement mobilization from these newer forms of mobilization.
3 The Case of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum: Key Findings

As the WSF grew and its open spaces methodology gained notoriety, the forum movement became ‘polycentric’. Social forums began to take place in sub-regions (the Americas Forum), at the national level (the U.S. Social Forum), or in local communities (The Toronto Social Forum). But unlike these offshoots of the WSF, the MPF emerged at the same time as the WSF when a group of activists from Guatemala and southern Mexico faced the possibility that newly elected Mexican President Vicente Fox would work with the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) to construct a Mexico-Colombia trade corridor called Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). They held the first MPF in Tapachula, Mexico in May, 2001 to discuss globalization’s impacts on the Mesoamerican region. The MPF went on to meet annually in almost every country in Central America between 2001 and 2005 and met again in Nicaragua in 2008.

Works on the ‘New Latin American Left’ and social movement activity in Latin America lack careful analysis of new transnational processes that have gripped the Central American left since the millennium. *La nueva izquierda en América Latina* (The New Left in Latin America) by Garavito, Barrett and Chavez (Grupo Editorial Norma 2005) saw fit to exclude Central American country cases from their volume (page 12). *Globalizacion de las resistencias: El estado de las luchas 2005* (Globalization of Resistances: The State of the Battle 2005) edited by Amin and Houtart (Various Editors 2005) lumps Central America in with Latin America (page 125). This is a questionable generalization given the unique position of Central America vis-a-vis Mexico and the United States, its unfortunately strategic position as an export processing zone (Robinson 2003), and its comparatively late and difficult adoption of democracy (Smith 2005). Both *Globalizacion de las resistencias* and *Los Movimientos Sociales del Siglo XXI*
(Social Movements of the XXI Century), a collection of works on social movements in Mesoamerica coordinated by Ricardo Martínez Martínez (2007), represent valuable and fascinating artifacts of current struggles rather than grounded analysis. And finally, while *Latin American Social Movements: Globalization, Democratization and Transnational Networks* edited by Johnston and Almeida (2006) considers several Central American cases, they are studies of national level social movement responses to the local economic and policy implications of neoliberalism, or the transnationalization of local struggles *a la* Keck and Sikkink (1998). By favoring a national perspective, these works miss out on the larger dynamics affecting the region.

As such, the most immediate justification for this work is the relative lack of recent comprehensive research on changes taking place within the Central American left. Very little has been written about the MPF, or even about the contemporary Central American left. The thesis and subsequent journal article written by Costa Rican activist and FLACSO-Guatemala Masters Student Rocío Alfaro Molina are based on her experience with the Salvadoran MPF which occurred in 2005 (Alfaro Molina 2004) and focus primarily on theoretical concerns. The essays by Spalding (2007) and Dierckxsens and Aguilar (2007) use the MPF as evidence of social movement activity in Central America without pursuing grounded or in-depth research about this process. The present project is, to my knowledge, the first systematic study of this particular case, and the most comprehensive recent overview of civil society in the region.

So, while the MPF has been influenced by, and formed ties with its larger, global cousin, it has tended to chart its own course. But, unlike the WSF, however, the MPF has not been the subject of extensive research or theorization. This is surprising, because while the massive,
ambulating WSF presents serious limitations to academic investigation, the MPF took place within a geographical region that allows for more systematic study of the context, history and realization of social forums. The MPF has perhaps the closest relationship of any forum to the Zapatista movement, but has diverged significantly from this initial source of influence. Finally, the MPF, taking place as it does in Central America, a region clearly tied into, but on the margins of global trading networks, offers an interesting case study of development under conditions of globalization (a theme which will be expanded on in section 4c below).

These conditions make the MPF an ideal candidate for grounded research on social forums, which is precisely what this document offers. In contrast to theory testing methodologies in which analytical categories are driven by existing theoretical frameworks, grounded theory starts with intensive field study and personal reflection before interrogating the applicability of existing theory to findings (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998; see discussion in Chapter 3). Using this approach, I conducted 146 interviews with organizers, facilitators, participants, and experts in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and Panama as well as with the organizers of the Costa Rican MPF and donors that supported the MPF process. I also participated in key events put on by Guatemalan and Salvadoran anti-globalization activists between August 2006 and March 2007, held four workshops in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala to verify interim research results with study participants, and participated in the April 2007 meeting of the Comité Mesoamericano, which oversees the organization of the MPF.

Grounded theorizing was an appropriate approach for the study of the MPF for two reasons. First, when this study began, almost all published research on social forums was based in forum events, rather than on sustained examination of the processes that gave rise to or resulted from

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8 Conway argues that, “Even when focusing narrowly on the annual event it is a very complex undertaking to adequately represent the WSF. Any single event is so large, diverse and multicentric as to escape any one attempt to describe it, let alone analyse it,” (Conway 2004, footnote 2).
these events. Grounded research could address this gap in the existing research on social forums and the broader GJM. Secondly, it was appropriate to use an open-ended methodology to study such a new phenomenon, particularly given its own organizational aspirations. Thirdly, using this approach I was able to focus on the history and context out of which forum events arose, rather than the events themselves, a major distinction between this study and many early accounts of the WSF.

What did I discover from my grounded examination of the MPF? First, I found that the MPF needs to be understood as an expression of larger processes of historical and spatial change taking place in Central America. The principle space for transnational civil society organizing during Central America’s period of peace-building (1990-1998) was the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (Central American Integration System - SICA). Originally conceived of as a project of regional political, economic and social integration, the SICA encompassed participation by transnational networks of Central America’s newly emergent, donor-financed ‘associational sphere.’ These networks came together in a transnational space called the Consultative Committee (or CC-SICA). Thus, Central American civil society actors from this period were very much designed in the image of SICA’s vision for democratization and regional integration. When it became clear towards the end of the decade that the SICA process was being displaced by regional trade agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), decision making around national and regional economic concerns began to take place behind closed doors, out of the reach of civil society observers. The transnational ‘network organizations’ of civil society actors established during this period lost legitimacy and began to fall apart. The actors involved in these efforts came to be seen as complicit in the failed SICA process, and were critiqued for their hierarchical and unaccountable styles of organization.
At the millennium, therefore, the region’s civil society actors found they had neither official channels through which to influence decision making on important regional economic concerns such as the PPP, nor a clear agenda for future endeavors. What is more, these actors found themselves in a position of weakness as a result of several factors: exclusion from the SICA process; unresponsive national governments; declining donor financing for civil society in the region; erosion of ‘the bases’ as citizens pursued escapism in response to the region’s difficult economic and political scenario; and disconnections between civil society organizations and the grassroots communities they purported to represent. Given the decline of effective spaces in which to influence decision making at the transnational level, and the decline of the associational model for civil society organizing in the region, civil society actors were exploring new means through which to influence decision making, as well as new styles of organizing at the transnational level. Ultimately the MPF emerged as the flagship transnational space for civil society dialogue in Central America from 2001-2007. The period saw a radicalization of civil society organizations in Central America, and growing connections between these organizations and left-leaning political parties. The space took on even more importance given a growing wave of left-wing electoral victories in South America during this period.  

A second major finding of this study, however, is that the MPF was not a unified or cohesive space. In the beginning discourses emerging from the MPF reflected an ideal of openness in which people take on their own processes of development, and here there is the  

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9 Chavez assumed the Presidency of Venezuela in February 1999, followed by Lula in Brazil in January 2003. Left-wing leaders were subsequently elected in Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador and El Salvador.  
10 Note, however, that although this study uncovered these connections, it does not explore them. This will be the topic of future research. The focus of this study as originally defined was the MPF. In conducting field research it became clear that there were important ties between the MPF and political parties in Central America, and that together they were influencing the direction of the ‘left’ in the region. While connections between the MPF and party left are revealed in the core chapters of this dissertation, it was not possible to explore the full significance of these relationships in the context of this study. For example, this study does not reveal the contributions of the MPF to changes in party policies, platforms, or electoral success. A full account of these processes will require further research. Such a study would provide valuable insights into the recent political crisis in Honduras, as well as the elections of left-leaning political leaders in both El Salvador and Nicaragua over the past few years.
suggestion that the MPF might become a clearly defined collective political subject. But there is evidence that *in practice* this vision was compromised from the very first meeting. Thus, while some authors have suggested that the MPF should be understood as an open space, and others suggest that it was a transnational social movement which emerged in response to the negotiation of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) (2002-2005) (Spalding 2007), I see things differently. My examination of the MPF found plenty of evidence to contradict the idea that social forums necessarily function as open spaces, or even as spaces of coalition building or mobilization towards a general end. Instead, the MPF was found to operate as a political playing field on which the positions of key actors within ‘the left’ were played out in support of their various claims to legitimacy and authority. These claims are in turn tied up in the articulation of development alternatives, which have been in flux in Central America (and indeed all of Latin America) since the millennium. Thus openness was neither the condition nor the objective of the game, but rather a pawn strategically deployed or retracted in the course of game play.

Perhaps to the outside observer, the MPF offered purpose, a new organizational model, and a strategic show of force around which to reanimate the Central American left. But internally it had significant implications for the orientation of both civil society actors and the electoral left in the region. It offered civil society leaders both a space in which to dialogue about appropriate systems of legitimation and political platforms on which to rebuild the Central American left, as well as a means through which to mobilize and articulate grassroots actors into particular visions of the left. But when it became clear that leaders from different sectors of the left and different national contexts had divergent strategic and ideological visions, the MFP became marked by tensions. It became a space organized according to normative and identity-based borders that responded to the maintenance of a variety of political institutions within the left. Leaders began to use permissions and authentications to control the uncertainly caused by
open networking within transnational spaces, and in doing so, to protect systems of legitimation that responded to particular ideological visions and strategic concerns.

Among these strategic concerns, leaders from different sectors of the left needed to take into consideration the changing political economy of the region. In particular, the fragility of individual states and their weakly institutionalized democracies, plus the de facto and unaccountable federated governance structure of the region, has caused a shift in the behavior of organizations mediating between state and society in Central America. Leaders within different sectors of the left found they needed to build up and/or maintain power bases to shield themselves within an uncertain political environment. This suggests that the weight of explanation for the significance and outcomes of the MPF must be carried by meso-level groupings or interactions rather than either macro-level groupings (the MPF as a whole) or micro-level processes (local groups or individuals). These findings also suggest that the above-mentioned intellectual accounts of social forums (to be detailed in Chapter 2) carry unacceptable biases or provide weak foundations for the production of an empirically accurate account of the MPF.

This leads me to a third conclusion about the MPF that extends to all social forums, which is that they should be conceptualized on the basis of the realization of their aspirations rather than the content of their discourses. That is to say, if the ultimate objective of social forums is to ‘empower’ people and facilitate self-determination through the articulation of a collective political subject, then we must ask whether the organization of the MPF contributed to this goal, rather than assuming that the MPF was, as its various discourses suggested, either a unified political subject in formation (however that might be defined) that constituted a clear response to a universally understood threat, or a means to empower individuals. Given the two sets of findings presented above, the MPF offered an effective means to mobilize individuals as
agents of a variety of political agendas--the election of left-wing leaders, the promotion of specific political ends, and the like--which in turn served to legitimate particular positions. But the tensions and political flows that shaped the space--its enclosure, if you will--meant that it was both less effective as a means by which participants could come together as the subjects of their own historical processes and therefore less cohesive than suggested by its discourses.

This causes me to believe that leaders within the Central American left, whether in the form of social movements, civil society organizations or political parties, engage in a tradeoff when selecting between the certainty of established agendas and the emancipatory potential of open networking. In protecting agendas actors undervalue and may even undermine the potential for people to imagine, embrace and advocate alternative foundations for development--in other words, to create change --whether directed at local norms of social interaction, innovations in productive systems, or the institutions of decision making. This finding suggests that theoretical accounts of social forums built around assumptions of common threats or common processes of mobilization lack empirical validity. In short, the MPF cannot be understood as a discourse made real, a cohesive actor, or a unified space but must be read instead as a process.

In developing an alternative account of these findings, this dissertation draws on critical-realist and constructivist theory to develop a ‘Constitutive’ approach to the study of social forums. I argue that we need to understand the principle events of the GJM not as means to achieve ends, but rather as processes that are constituted by and constitutive of the wider

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11 A distinction can be drawn between explanatory and constitutive theories: “An explanatory theory is one that sees the world as something external to our theories of it. In contrast, a constitutive theory is one that thinks our theories actually help construct the world” (Smith and Owens 2008, 176-7). Constructivism is one approach within the constitutive ambit. In this project, I am both aware of my own role in theory-making, and working to understand the role of local actors in constituting their world. Using a constructivist approach, I explore the ways in which spaces are constituted by and constitutive of the actors within.

12 Some more grounded research on social forums has been produced such as Baykan and Lelandais’ examination of the Turkish anti-globalization movement (Baykan and Lelandais 2004), Bramble’s survey of Australian participants in World Social Forums (Bramble 2006); and Rioufol’s description of a French group’s participation in the European Social Forum (Rioufol 2004). These works focus on one aspect of a social forum--the path of a social movement to a forum, a specific meeting, or national engagements with social forums--rather than an entire social forum process.
geographical and historical context in which they take place. How then do I account for the political processes uncovered during field research? I argue that participants in transnational forum spaces are guided or constrained by the relations of power that they experience in their primary (and more permanent) spaces of mobilization, advocacy or empowerment. The identities and frames developed within these ‘local’ contexts are closely tied to the relations of power that grant authority and legitimacy to leaders within the various ideological, thematic and/or organizational corners of the left. When confronting the uncertainty and risk associated with networking in ‘open’ forum spaces, leaders must balance the maintenance of established positions, with the potential benefits of engagements with new people, experiences and ideas. Insofar as networking within forum spaces might threaten established positions, well-situated actors will work to influence the permissions and authentications that shape these events and their outcomes in ways that protect their agendas. Border policing of this nature works not only to shore up the banks of established groups, but also to undermine cognitive justice within the spaces of the left (a point I will return to further along). When this occurs, social forums operate not as open spaces in which individuals become the subjects of social or historical processes, but rather mediated spaces in which individuals can end up acting as the agents of political agendas.

A constitutive approach offers several advantages over those which more actively complement the political agendas of the GJM. For one thing, social forums bring together actors with such a wide range of opinions on the sources of concern in a globalizing world and the appropriate courses of action to overcome them, that any one of the takes on openness described above will be more likely to map an additional layer of rhetoric onto historical accounts than it will be to provide insights into what actually took place. Rather than asking when, how and to what end mobilization should take place, a constitutive approach looks at how social forums are constituted by and constitutive of the wider reality in which they are situated. This leads to the
second advantage of a constitutive approach, which is that it situates forum events within a particular historical and geographical context rather than assuming them to be part of the formation of a global movement against globalization. This demands careful analysis of the actual purposes to which forum participants are putting their travels and travails, rather than simply discourses about forums, as well as the historical impacts these events bear on various local contexts. For example, given the rise of left-leaning political parties in Latin America during this near-decade of social forum activities, a constitutive approach allows for careful reflection about the relationship between transnational meetings of the left and political processes within more consequential political spheres.

4 Defining Key Terms: Openness, Globalization and Development

As I began to theorize a constitutive approach to understanding social forums, I needed to address several broader considerations that set the parameters for this work. Social forums claim to be open spaces, so I needed to reflect on what this term meant. The GJM is global, and as such it is necessary to reflect briefly on how globalization and global processes are understood in this dissertation. The GJM is also an effort to bring about change in the world by addressing costs of the global system borne by individuals on the margins of that system. This makes it necessary to reflect on how I understand development in this study. Finally, it is also necessary to reflect on how I am conceptualizing the target of this study--the global justice movement. I will consider each of these concepts in turn.
4.1 Openness

The idea that social forums were open spaces was what originally attracted me to the study of these events. Type the word “open” into Google’s search engine, and one of the first entries to pop up is Wikipedia’s definition of open source software production. With the advent of the internet and the success of open source software production models, the term “openness” has come to describe large, distributed spaces that invert the logic of proprietary models by organizing around free and open access to source knowledge (Weber 2004, 5). But in the past decade, the idea of openness has come to influence understanding of more than just software or communications. On this day,13 as I write this paragraph, the next few entries in Google are OpenOffice.org, open medicine, open journals, open learning and open knowledge. The term figures prominently in a number of fields, from governance, protest and philanthropy to software and knowledge production, and has come to influence various spheres of organizing, from YouTube and Wikipedia (open publishing), to civil society organizing through the World Social Forum (WSF) (open spaces). What is this thing, openness?

Openness can be viewed as both a normative and practical response to the Western cultural and legal practice of enclosure as a basis for social organization. So for example, exclusionary intellectual property rights form a legal foundation for global trade regimes in an informational world, and support the work of pharmaceutical research, publishing, or software production. Open approaches organize these global trading patterns not around enclosure but around distribution. This is thought to foster collaboration, facilitate innovation, spread more equally the benefits of production (by avoiding monopoly), and enable specialized local applications. Similarly democratic systems of government can be organized around forms of representation which assume society to be organized into relatively exclusive interest groups.

13 February 18, 2008.
Open approaches to governance favor deliberation over representation reflecting the belief that individuals frequently challenge the boundaries of interest groupings, and as such, the demos can never be fully and properly represented by a proxy. Finally, explanatory approaches to knowledge production derive intellectual accountability from foundationalist claims. Open approaches to knowledge production, in contrast, are anti-foundational and recognize that both knowledge, and the basis on which we derive intellectual accountability, must be subject to dialogue.

But there is disagreement about exactly how openness can or does modify our world, and also about how this concept should be understood. For more conservative reactionaries, openness represents a new way of organizing ‘the system’ in a globalizing world, without questioning the foundations of the current ‘order.’ For more radical reactionaries, openness can represent a departure from order as the lens through which to experience history. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the idea of openness goes to the heart of many key questions and debates facing social science. This is not necessarily a new discussion. For example, the open-society debates of the 1960s questioned the ability of the ‘Free World’ to fulfill the promise of democratic freedom through free market capitalism (see e.g. Ryerson, 1965). But today openness brings to mind the fluid, networked modality that characterizes a growing number of social processes in a globalized world. It suggests the economic, political and cultural processes referred to as “globalization” and discussions about shifting forms of organization on a world scale. Openness is thus both a challenge to social scientific inquiry as it adjusts to understanding historical processes in a complex, networked, transnational world, as well as the desired endgame of critical scholars who seek new conceptions of history.
4.2 Globalization

When it emerged in the 1980s, the field of globalization studies was predominantly interested in understanding the origins and impacts of processes happening at a global scale in the post-Fordist/Keynesian era. Early writers such as Wallerstein (1979) and Gereffi (1994) wanted to understand the position of states within a world system, and how this conditioned their prospects for development. More nuanced work by authors such as Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye (1980), Hirst and Thompson (1999) and McMichael (1996) have sought to understand the significance for development of processes associated with intensified transnational capital flows (new global division of labour, transnational / multi-national corporations, and indebtedness / Neoliberalism respectively). These works produced two broad responses to globalization characterized by Bergeron (2001) as ‘national management’ and ‘global imperative,’ or by Held and McGrew (1999, 3-7) as the skeptical and hyperglobalist theses (see also Scholte 2000, 17-18; Sklair 2000). Work in the tradition of Hirst and Thompson argued that governments could develop strategies to regulate global capital and therefore continue to have a role to play in managing national and local development projects. On the other hand, work in the tradition of McMichael found that, as a result of Neoliberalism and the debt crisis, governments no longer had control over processes of development; here the argument was that the only viable response to the pressures of globalization was cosmopolitan localism.

This literature, while significant, has been critiqued in important ways. First of all, Portes (1997) argues that in its rush to understand how nations can best compete on world markets, much of the literature on globalization ignored the impact of global flows on individuals, families and labour, and in particular, on the changing characteristics of poverty and inequality. In the same vein, Escobar (2001) called for a reconceptualization of globalization from the perspective of place and space. Secondly, whether cultural or economic, whether opposed or in
favour, Bergeron (2001) labels the globalization literature “globalocentric” in its assumption that global capital is hegemonic. This literature was therefore disempowering because it left little room for either alternative globalizations, or the study of efforts to create them.

Critiques such as these have given rise to a third approach to globalization often referred to as the transformationalist thesis (Held and McGrew 1999; Scholte 2000; Sklair 2000; Munck 2002; and see Harris 2002 for a literature review of the same). The transformationalist thesis conceptualizes globalization as a process which is resulting in the reconfiguration of social spaces, and which, in the words of Scholte, “is rendering methodological territorialism obsolete” (2000, 315). Taking up this discussion, Nagar et al. (2002) challenged globalization theorists to examine the ways in which “…global flows – of capital, labor, information, and ideas - connect and affect specific social and spatial formations in places that are distinguished by particular histories and geographies” (ibid, 276, emphasis mine; see also Sassen 2000).

Transformationalist works have answered a call for a comparative approach to the sociology of globalization (Guillen 2001, 256) by offering frameworks for analyzing globalization processes. Held and McGrew, for example, present a typology of globalization based on the extensity, intensity, velocity and impact propensity of global networks and flows. Based on this framework, they offer a typology of globalization differentiating between thick, diffused, expansive and thin formations (1999, 16-27). The work of Bartelson (2000), meanwhile, causes us to question whether (and to what extent) we are seeing increased flows of goods across unit boundaries (transference), a transformation in the character of the international system with implications for its ‘units,’ or a transcendence of the boundaries between units or between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. These works are complemented by the conceptual innovations of

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14 See especially literature review page 7 which includes Rosenau 1990 on turbulence theory.

15 Several feminist scholars have begun to pursue work in this area, for example Nagar 2003; Radcliff et al 2003; Yuval-Davis 2003; Rankin 2004.
both geographers (for example Marston 2000; Jessop et al 2008) and sociologists (see for example Holton 2008) for understanding changing configurations of space, networks and flows.

The focus of these works has been on understanding change processes and their impacts, rather than on whether and what type of new ‘order’ might be emerging as a result of globalizing processes. This is not to say that there have not been attempts to define globalization, however early attempts at circumscribing the ‘new global order’ have resulted in rather thin accounts, closely tied to normative positions vis-à-vis global governance (see for example Clark 2008, 563-564). Work in this vein can be contrasted with the most recent debate in globalization studies, which revolves around the complex problem of how to define “a reference point, a clear account of what it is that is globalized” (Albert 2007, 172). This call has emerged in response to Rosenberg’s (2005) critique of globalization theory in which he argues that the literature on globalization which arose after 1989 was so wrapped up in the post-Cold War conjuncture that it lost sight of fundamental elements of social theory. In response, Albert suggests that we need to move beyond forming either empirical accounts of ‘sub-global entities’ or “normative projections of a global commons or a global community” (ibid, 171) to the development of, “theories of global or world society, which assign specific places to globalization processes” (ibid, 173). Rosenberg and Albert have each offered different interpretations of how this project might be grounded, the former based in Marxist thinking, the later in Luhmann’s notions of

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16 I recently graded a very fine essay by a student in my Latin American Politics course that helped me to understand the problem. The essay offered an explanation for the recent victory of the left-wing FMLN party in El Salvador, The explanation was framed within the larger argument that the victory signaled a step along the road to democratic consolidation in that country. My student used various different concepts of democracy in his paper, however, referring to it alternately as delegative, procedural and liberal. This undermined the cohesion of the overall argument, and suddenly I could see why a social theory of globalization was necessary. Without a clear reference point for globalization, accounts of globalizing processes are necessarily unframed and incomplete.
functional differentiation and rationalization, as well as notions of complexity (see Rosenberg 2005, 2007, 2009; Rosenberg and Callinicos 2008, and Albert 2007).\(^{17}\)

From this overview, it is clear that globalization is not an entity that can be easily circumscribed. Rather, it is the object of philosophical debate. We can ask whether and how processes associated with globalization are taking place, and what role old and new actors have in these processes. But as a social theory, globalization is in its infancy. What can be said with certainty is that this work agrees with a transformationalist definition of globalization and responds to the challenge laid down by Nagar et al. by offering a nuanced examination of processes associated with globalization. It does so by focusing in particular on how these processes manifest in spaces of mobilization, protest and resistance, as well as spaces for the creation of political and economic alternatives. In turn, examination of these processes leads to detailed consideration of shifting priorities and relationships among the major actors of a particular region.\(^{18}\)

4.3 Development

Taking a transformationalist perspective, globalization has arguably been a factor in development for a very long time. For example, when the Reign of Guatemala (the ancient fore-runner of what are today Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, parts of southern Mexico and Belize) was established as a political entity some 500 years ago, its *modus operandi* was the support of a monarchy on the other side of the world. But over the past two decades, work on globalization in the south has been tied to ongoing discussion about the idea of

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\(^{17}\) Each set of ideas has sparked forum debates in the academic press. See the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 1 2009 for a discussion of Rosenberg’s ideas, and *International Political Science* 3, 2009 for a discussion of Albert’s.

\(^{18}\) Perhaps I will eventually be able to link my research findings to debates around theories of global society, and I may in fact be doing so implicitly in my findings, but I am not yet ready to make concrete assertions. For now it is enough to recognize the trajectory of debates on globalization.
development itself. There has been recognition that the definition of development is the result of political projects that rely on the nature and organization of political subjectivity, which is itself both responding to and being altered by contemporary processes of globalization.

The field of international development emerged after World War II as the colonial era came to an end, because former colonizers and the emerging American hegemon saw a duty in helping fledgling states transform their agricultural economies into modern industrial powers. Once the Cold War came into focus, however, development interventions by east and west became strategic ploys in ideological battles. By the 1960s, when it became clear that investments in development were paying poor returns, criticism arose from dependistas who argued that the conditions of global trade perpetuated the dependence of peripheral states on those at the core. The argument fueled the fires of nationalist movements as governments, particularly in Latin America, engaged in protectionist measures and implemented programs to incubate ‘infant industries’. Fearing the potential of communism, American development interventions in Latin America became a means by which to influence political and economic paths in that region.\(^{19}\) Thus, although Central America was officially ‘decolonized’ by Spain at the time of Mexican independence nearly 200 years ago, and had long since engaged in national economic management (Mahoney 2001), it too became a recipient of international development interventions.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a third wave of democratization and an age of capitalist domination. On gaining distance from Cold War debates over modernization versus dependency, scholars of international development in the global south took aim at the foundationalism of both the capitalist and communist discourses that had formed the justification for so much violence in the developing world. Anti- and post-development scholars

\(^{19}\) Indeed, Guatemala’s Democratic Spring (1944-54) and US-sponsored CIA-orchestrated coup in 1954 were harbingers of future political developments in the region.
demonstrated links between modernism, positivism and under-development. Using the tools of post-modern deconstruction, they argued that notions of underdevelopment had been constructed by and imbedded in the national consciousnesses of Southern nations through processes of colonization and/or the imperialistic tendencies of the international development project. Post-colonial works argued that cultural violence on the part of the ‘core’ had contributed to the subjugation of underdeveloped countries, and that it was necessary to deconstruct the colonial project.

But while there is corrective value in this work, it has also been critiqued for lacking an emancipatory agenda. Subsequent scholarship has suggested that the protection, recuperation or construction of local history, culture and identity--and research on the ability and means to realize the same--is fundamental to any successful initiative for national political, cultural and economic advancement. This vision is in accordance with the alternative view of development as “centred broadly on entitlement and distribution” which incorporates “political empowerment, participation, meaningful self-determination for the majority, protection of the commons, and an emphasis on pro-poor growth” (Thomas 2007, 473). The specific type of development that is thought to lead to these goals is the objective of political projects around which collective political subjectivity is formed.

With this in mind, we can arrive at a much deeper understanding of what is at stake with the notion of openness in the realization of social forums. Social forums are spaces in which the political project of development is both defined through dialogue between participants, and also enacted through the social processes that happen therein. When drawing on the inspiration of the Zapatistas, social forums are making a commitment to diversity and respect for differing opinions about how to pursue development. When drawing on the inspiration of the Internet revolution, social forums are both expressing rejection of global media concentration and its role
in the sedimentation of colonial or imperial power, as well as supporting a ‘hacker ethic’ in which citizen journalism and open production processes enable cognitive justice within a world of global flows (Kranich and Schement 2008). In their ideal form, then, social forums are meant to create spaces in which every integrant is the subject of the historical processes and political dynamics that constitute development.

An end result of this thinking is the argument that development should be founded on the principle of cognitive justice. Cognitive justice is the idea that no one form of knowledge (way of knowing the world, or being in the world) should dominate at the expense of others, but rather that different forms of knowledge should exist in dialogue with each other (Visvanathan, 2002; van der Velden, 2005; de Souza Santos, 2007). It can be understood as conceptually related to the notion of cognitive politics which includes, “…perception, social learning, and communication, which go beyond strategic bargaining based on fixed interest to encompass the consideration and sometimes the resolution of competing claims” within a process of decision making (Chalmers et al 1997, 565). By extension, the notion of cognitive justice implies that the structures of social networks and systems for knowledge production must also support diversity and dialogue. Thus, according to this line of thinking, in a world of global flows, development -- the opportunity and capacity to develop, and to define what development will mean -- is predicated on openness. Development in this view is not a model, but a condition in which people are the subjects of their own futures. As such, development research and development intervention must seek to both understand and respond to historical processes in ways that respect and facilitate cognitive justice. This also includes my own contributions to knowledge as a researcher studying development under conditions of transformationalist globalization.

Ultimately, then, the central preoccupation guiding this dissertation is whether the social and spatial formations that connect actors within the transnational spaces of the MPF serve to
make people the subjects of social processes (rather than the agents of political agendas). That is
to say, when asking whether the MPF is ‘open,’ I am also asking to what extent it affords
participants the possibility to define development and to become the subjects of development.
As per Nagar’s suggestion (above), the study of global flows must seek to understand the
contemporary ends to which networks and networking are put. Thus, where existing studies of
social forums have frequently ridden on the assumption that openness is a tool for the subversion
of core-periphery relations, I would suggest that this is an argument drawing too heavily on the
foundationalist approaches of the past. Rather we need to examine global flows in terms of the
organization of power in the spaces in which development takes place, and then situate these
processes within wider understandings of geopolitics and political economy. This approach
provides greater latitude for understanding how people are connected into the flows of power
that are shaping social, economic and political spaces in developing regions today. In a region
such as Central America, where official centers of power interact with and are challenged by a
complex combination of illicit, informal, and insurgent forces, this approach can offer greater
leverage for understanding political processes.

4.4 The Global Justice Movement

All of this bears on how the GJM is positioned as a focus of study within this work.
Many different terms are used to describe the organizational dynamics and societal roles that are
filled by participants in social forums. Social forums feature the participation of social
movements and social movement organizations (SMOs), cooperatives and fair trade schemes,
non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civic coalitions, unions and political parties,
journalists, academics and intellectuals, to name but a few. Participants represent urban and
rural settings, elite circles and the ‘grassroots,’ cultural, institutional and economic agendas. In
short, forums bring together everyone who shares a basic dissatisfaction with or desire to discuss the impact of globalization’s transformative processes on their lives. In many ways the use of the term ‘movement’ to describe processes of resistance against globalization gives a vague indication of inclusivity rather than a clear sense of purpose. Indeed, a range of terms have been coined to describe this movement itself: the anti-, alter- or adaptive globalization movement (AGM), the movement against globalization, or the global justice movement.

I have settled on the last term, global justice movement, to describe the overarching focus of attention in this dissertation, because it represents what actors seek (justice) but assumes the least about how it will be achieved (through rejecting, changing or adapting to globalization, for instance). In a similar sense, I also make frequent reference to ‘the Central American left’. In the case of Central America, this term can be tolerably used to delimitate a broad category of people who fall on one side of a pervasive political divide. And finally I refer to civil society in a broad sense to indicate the range of organizational arrangements populating the private, non-profit sphere, and which often act as mediators between this sphere and the public or for-profit spheres (Evers and Leville 2004). Having said this, I am not actually all that concerned about offering clear definitions for these terms. Rather they are placeholders against which to measure changing perceptions of the dominant political agendas within the region. Forums bring together a huge variety of organizational types and agendas, so rather than define the target of the research, I pay attention to how forum participants themselves talk about these categories, and this gives me insights into the permissions and authentications that open or close interactions. Who do they define as belonging to ‘the movement’? Who do they define as being ‘leftist’? The point is not to target the object of study, but rather to study how the targets define the object, and to understand how these definitions constrain or politicize ongoing dialogue, and what this
means for the practice of cognitive justice in relation to possibilities for development in an era of increasing global flows.

5 Introducing the Arguments to Come

An account of the MPF is developed through three broad arguments in the balance of this dissertation. First, Chapter 2 argues that the literature on social forums can be divided into Cosmopolite, Culturalist and Vanguardist interpretations which focus respectively on the institutional, cultural and economic sources of oppression in a global system. Despite their differences, however, these works share an assumption that forum events serve to empower, mobilize and bring together the GJM around a common concern. The assumptions of these works blind them to the internal processes of social forums, as well as the significance of these processes for the larger historical and political context in which they take place. Second, in Chapter 3 I argue that a constitutive approach, as explained above, is more appropriate for understanding social forums. This chapter provides further detail about a constitutive framework and explains how it would think about mobilization and identity formation within civil society spaces. This chapter also argues that constructivist, pragmatic, critical realist and grounded approaches best serve a constitutive approach. In particular, critical realism is most appropriate to the constructivist study of social forums since the relationship between cognitive justice and international development calls on us to distinguish normative and political rhetoric from what actually happened and to what effects.

Thirdly, I argue that a constitutive approach provides the most satisfying account of the MPF. Chapter 4 introduces the reader to recent Central American history paying particular attention to the contextual factors that have influenced the Central American left and the formation of the MPF. These include the recent history of regional political and economic
processes, as well as civil society responses to the changing conjuncture. Chapter 5 presents a historical overview of the MPF and argues that, despite suggestions to the contrary, the event cannot be adequately understood as a social movement against globalization. How then should the MPF be understood? In order to answer this question Chapter 6 presents an analysis of the spatial and historical constitution of the forum from the insider perspective of its constituents. The result is a portrait of a highly fractured space experienced as ‘revolutionary tourism’ by participants, and as a political playing field by leaders. Chapter 7 pulls everything together by offering an explanation of the relationship between Central America’s historical and political context and the constitution of the MPF as a disjunctive and political process. In particular, this chapter explores the strategies used by forum leaders to establish permissions and authentications within the spaces of the MPF. The concluding chapter sums up and reflects on these arguments, and offers some thoughts on their broader theoretical and social implications.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

As with any new phenomenon, academics, organizers and participants (often they are one in the same) have been quick to offer suggestions of how best to understand the WSF and GJM. The majority of this literature is based on studies that reflect on actual forum events. But WSF events are huge, temporary agglomerations, bringing together 60,000 people or more for less than a week. Since events of such brevity and magnitude are difficult to investigate systematically, initial characterizations of the forum process deserve critical reflection on two fronts. First, as Appadurai points out, “the sociology of these emergent social forms—part movements, part networks, part organizations—has yet to be developed” (2000, 15). As a result, explanations of the WSF or GJM tend to draw on or extend existing theoretical frameworks rather than developing new thinking based in grounded research on this new phenomenon. This means that accounts of these phenomena prioritize questions that reflect the research agendas of the theoretical frameworks they draw on, rather than the expressed intensions of the forum itself. Second, Conway points out that, “discourses being produced about the WSF are often politically reductionist, focused on questions of strategy and power and insufficiently sociological and ethnographic in exploring who is populating the WSF and how, through their discourses and practices, they are making the Social Forum what it is” (Conway 2004, footnote 2).¹ That is to say, much of the literature on the WSF gets wrapped up in political debates, often those carried out within forum spaces, and this means that academic representations of social forums embody particular stances on what they believe to be the main role, objective or purpose of the WSF or

¹ Since a great deal of writing about the WSF is editorial masquerading as theory, the ideological positions of key writers require careful navigation. It is important to be aware of which academic works represent fascinating artifacts of an unfolding reality, and which attempt to present more careful analysis. Both are valid, neither is superior, and the borders between them can be fuzzy at times, but the distinction is still significant. For example, Samir Amin and Francois Houtart are central organizers of, and actors in, the WSF. They are also closely tied to the editorials (such as Casa Editorial Ruth) which publish their various books about the WSF (For example Amin and Houtart 2005), and they have a vested interest in how their readers understand the Forum.
GJM. This is to say, many works about the WSF embody suggestions about what the forum as a collective political subject *should* be like, rather than studying what it *is* like in particular historical and geographical settings, and offering frameworks to elucidate this outcome.

These different accounts of the WSF and the wider GJM can be drawn out and categorized according to how each author interprets the sources of power in a global system, their assumptions about the objective of the forum, and what this means for how they think about openness, forum processes, and the role of networks in these processes. Although finer divisions could certainly be drawn, and the borders here are somewhat artificial, for heuristic purposes I have divided these authors into three broad camps: Cosmopolitans, Culturalists, and Vanguardists. This categorization is similar to the distinctions drawn by Goodman, who argues that:

Debates about the politics of globalization centre on conflicting interpretations of the dominant sources of power in globalizing late-modern society. Macro-theoretical disputes between the intellectual traditions of liberal internationalism, post-Marxism and neo-Marxism generate disputes over whether the key power sources are institutional, cultural or material. These contrasting conceptions of globalised power then generate diverging predictions about the likely sources of contestation and democratisation. The three predictions are characterized here as ‘globalist adaptation’, ‘localist confrontation’ and ‘transnational resistance’. Each leads to a particular set of protest strategies, and is being actively exploited by social movements, but each has its inadequacies. (Goodman 2002, xv; see also chapter 2 of della Porta and Diani 2006)

It also mirrors Haarstad’s discussion of theorizations of the collective political subject in which he identifies three main approaches:

…to the question of who/what is in opposition, three answers are currently provided: (1) it is the multitude; (2) it is a range of particular struggles forming a global social movement; or (3) it is particular struggles that are united by attempting to enlarge a democratic space for common benefit. (2007, 60)

Cosmopolitans (Goodman’s liberal internationalism, Haarstad’s point number 3) associate openness with the democratization and legitimation of global civil society vis-à-vis

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2 I struggled with this distinction for about a year before finally running across Goodman’s work. My original distinction included four groups: cosmopolitans, culturalists, vanguardists and institutionalists. The later two reflected the split I observed between classical Marxists and neo-Marxists within the Latin American left. I felt dissatisfied with my distinctions, however, as my ‘institutionalist’ camp, which was more focused on networks and information flows, seemed to fit just as well in either a Vanguardist or a Culturalist interpretation. Osterweil (2005) provides the ultimate logic for division, as we shall see.
official processes of decision making at the global level. The Culturalists (post-Marxism / number 2) see openness as respect for autonomy and diversity, and as an inherent challenge to the cultural-philosophical foundations of the modernist/neoliberal project. And finally, the Vanguardists (neo-Marxism / number 1) define openness in terms of the return of social movements to the forefront of historical processes given recent challenges to the neoliberal project. Of particular concern for this study is how the view of openness implicit in each of these positions reflects a given interpretation of the exercise of power, and a particular vision of how to influence processes of change in a globalizing world. In what follows, I review the literature from each camp, paying particular attention to works that address the WSF or GJM. I identify the major research questions driving each camp as well as the purpose attributed to social forms by the group. This sets the stage for Chapter 3, in which I explain why I think these accounts are lacking in their ability to account for forum processes, and go on from there to develop a constitutive approach.

1 Cosmopolitan Camp

Cosmopolitanism is a school of political theory which argues that humanity belongs to a single moral community which forms the basis for global governance (e.g. Held 2003). For cosmopolitans, social justice actors that pursue actions beyond state borders are the civic elements of global governance. Kaldor, for example, argues that the system of global governance that emerged in the 1990s has been characterized in part by “a growing body of cosmopolite law, by which I mean the combination of humanitarian law (laws of war) and human rights law,” resulting largely from pressure by global civil society (GCS) (Kaldor 2003, 590). The idea of GCS is associated with the rise of NGO-ism during the 1990s and the establishment of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) thereafter (Keck and Sikkink 1998).
Many of these organizations were established in the wake of totalitarian regimes as part of the third wave of democratization with support from the United Nations system. As a result, the idea of universal human rights became central to their efforts for creating change on the world stage. For example, Smith argues in her book *Social Movements for Global Democracy* that transnational advocacy work by ‘democratic globalizers’ (transnational networks of social movement activists) is oriented principally towards democratizing the global system (2007).

The image of a GCS populated by ‘democratic globalizers’ has come to be critiqued on several fronts, however. The notion arose within the early literature about globalization that tended to overdraw the causal importance of the global, and under-emphasize the significance of the local and national. It also falsely implied the existence of a global government, and thus underplayed the continued (though changing) significance of states as a point of reference for contention (Olesen 2005). And while I do not disagree that GCS actors, particularly international NGOs (INGOs) have become a force in international relations, there is considerable concern about the exercise and interpretation of this force. Baker (2002) launches a particularly scathing attack on the Cosmopolitans, and on the concept of GCS as such, questioning the ability of these networks to facilitate cosmopolitan democratization when there is good evidence that they are heavily influenced by Western agendas and financing, and often less than representative or accountable in their practices (see also Sikkink 2002). He objects that the “emphasis upon juridical power – cosmopolitan law no less – would lead to a plethora of (top-down, statist) legal regulations and institutions, which could be read as anathema to political agency in civil society,” (Baker 2002, 932; see also Munck 2002).

Given these criticisms, some Cosmopolitans have seen in the WSF a sort of redemption. The Cosmopolitan camp sees in the “open” processes of the WSF the possibility of democratizing civil society and improving the legitimacy of TANs or similar constructs in global
decision-making processes. Biagiotti, for example, argues that social forums are precisely a rejection of institutionalized civil society participation in world governance. She sees the WSF as a space that privileges representation over the efficiency of state-led consultative processes, and which contributes to a common political culture through exchange, accommodation and debate (2004; see also Teivainen 2002). Sparke et al. (2005) similarly see in the WSF the potential to create a more socially, culturally and geographically inclusive critique of neoliberal globalization. In short, the WSF is seen as an effort to make GCS more equitable, accountable, transparent and representative – in short more democratic – and it is hoped that this will make GCS a more effective and legitimate participant in global policy processes.

The cosmopolitan impulse is reflected in emerging theoretical work on transnational contention from the political process school of social movement studies. In studying the relationship between the GJM and global governance, these works treat social forums and the actors that populate them as one or another form of transnational contention, understood to emerge in response to the opportunities or constraints presented by formal political processes. Globalization, as such, has driven the emergence of new transnationalized forms of social movement organizing by presenting both new political opportunities and new mobilizing structures. These resulting movements include a complex mix of NGOs, social movements, individuals and other actors interacting in complex ways at the local, regional and global levels. Much of the literature on transnational contention, and the emerging GJM, has been occupied with explaining how it was possible for groups to mobilize transnationally, work together on the world stage, and influence global policy processes.

In developing this line of argumentation, a debate has arisen over the difference between transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink 1998) or transnational coalitions (Bandy and Smith 2005) of global civil society actors, on the one hand, and transnational social movements
(Tarrow 1998; 2005; della Porta and Tarrow 2005; della Porta and Diani 2006), on the other. Tarrow has been particularly adamant in arguing that not all transnational contention can be called a transnational social movement: “… forming transnational social movements is not easy. Sustaining collective action across borders on the part of people who seldom see one another and who lack embedded relations of trust is difficult” (2005, 7, see also Tarrow 1998, 184-189).

Social movement theory, particularly that of the resource mobilization school, is based on empirical evidence that domestic social movements arise out of pre-existing networks of social ties in established social settings (McAdam 1986). This ‘setting,’ be it a neighborhood, organization or associational network, is an incubator for the movement, providing resources that help it get off the ground (Tarrow 1998; McAdam 2003). With this in mind, Tarrow’s first definition of TSMs was “sustained contentious interactions with opponents – national or nonnational - by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries” (1998, 184). He went on to emphasize that TSMs must be rooted in the domestic social networks of the various countries represented, experience a sustained connection built upon common ideas and network ties, and engage in contentious action. In response to this debate, Sikkink has argued that the model of protest adopted will depend on whether domestic and international opportunity structures are open or closed (2005; see also Khagram, Riker and Sikkink 2002). However the rise of the WSF and wider GJM in the late 1990s pushed political process scholars to adjust their explanations. If transnational social movements are so difficult to create, then how can the sustained efforts of the GJM be explained? And how can one explain the growing complexity of organizing at the transnational level (Anheier and Themudo 2001; Lindenberg and Bryant 2002)?
As a response, della Porta et. al have relaxed the definition of social movements\(^3\) and argue that the GJM should be understood as a “movement of movements,” supported by “networks of networks” the design of which responds to the complex internationalism argued by some (Risse-Kappen 1995; Rosenau 1997, 2003) to typify the current historical moment (della Porta et. al 2006; see also della Porta and Tarrow 2005). This allows the political process school of transnational contention to focus on its main objective, which is to delimit and study the main actors participating in political tableaus on the global stage. This is a two-stage problem: first, what kind of actor is this – a social movement, a coalition, a network – and second, (how) can this actor ‘get it together’ – i.e. mobilize a pressure group and, in some cases, ‘shift’ that mobilization from local to national, regional and global scales of contention. With this assessment in place, scholars are then equipped to explain success or failure in particular contentious episodes.

In this schema, networks are seen as mere conduits for information, a strategic resource that either enables or challenges contestation. For example, in Reitan’s work on the GJM, networks enable processes of brokerage or diffusion which allow contentious politics to shift from the local to the national, regional or global scale through processes of accretion (Reitan 2007). Her work is similar to that of Mario Diani (2003) whose quantitative network analysis focuses on the nodes and links that structure specific sectors of the GJM at a moment in time. Tarrow, finally, suggests that social forums might be thought of as staging grounds that provide informational or network resources to participants from social movements at lesser scales.

\(^3\) Compare Tarrow’s 1998 definition of a TSM to della Porta’s. For Tarrow, a TSM is sustained contentious interaction with national or nonnational opponents by connected networks of challengers organized across national boundaries. He asserts that “What is important in our definition is that the challengers themselves be both rooted in domestic social networks and connected to one another more than episodically through common ways of seeing the world, or through informal or organizational ties, and that their challenges be contentious in deed as well as in word” (1998, 184). For della Porta a TSM includes “informal networks based on common beliefs and solidarity that mobilize on conflictual issues by frequent recurrent to various forms of protest. Accordingly, global social movements are supranational networks of actors that define their causes as global and organize protest campaigns that involve more than one state” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 18).
(Tarrow 2005). The suggestion here is that networks enable actors to move toward consensuated discourses that will then get launched into the global arena.

And yet, as the WSF has progressed, many observers have raised concerns about the focus on external consensus to the exclusion of internal process. Despite calls for greater examination of the internal politics of civil society spaces (Taylor 2002; Baker 2002; Munck 2002; Amoore and Langley 2004), cosmopolitans pay little attention to how knowledge circuits within forum spaces, or between these spaces and places of decision making are constructed or controlled. In particular, some have pointed out that social forums tend to favor NGOs created in the cosmopolitan image. For example Bond asks:

…do we interpret the politics of the Social Forum as a site in which anti-neoliberal politics are a given, or is the terrain already excessively biased towards a mere reformist agenda, because of the very elements at work, namely civil society organizations? […] This dichotomous reading of civil society – as a stabilizing, conservative force (Gramsci), or instead as a ‘new social movement’ challenge to neoliberalism (Polanyi) – presents the WSF with some pressing challenges. Who qualifies to join processes such as the WSF if well-funded status quo organizations – ‘co-opted NGOs’, in the South African lingo – continue to serve as combatants of the more rigorous social-change activist here? (2005, 435)

Recently, Hertel (2006) has broken with earlier works by exploring internal processes of norm negotiation within transnational advocacy campaigns, but all the same, she does so with reference to North-South divides within transnational networks, belying her interest in understanding whose voice is ultimately represented at the global decision making table.

In sum, while some cosmopolitans express hope that social forums will open up and democratize civic spaces within global governance, research in this tradition focuses primarily on questions of mobilization and contestation vis-à-vis political opportunity structures occurring within processes of global governance. As a result, work in this field tends to overlook (or at least understate) the fact that transnational spaces accommodate various types of actors, and represent a (sometimes uncomfortable) mix of ideas and alliances. Despite more recent work on TSMs (della Porta 2006, Hertel 2006), there continues to be a general presupposition within this
literature that protest activity on the global stage should be studied in terms of their progress towards becoming consensuated actors, that work towards common goals represented by clear enemies or particular political opportunity structures. This cosmopolitan insistence on studying the GJM in terms of contentious politics limits the types of questions that get asked. In particular, there is a tendency to focus on contestation towards the outside, rather than processes happening within these spaces. This may lead researchers within this camp to overstate the cohesion of social groups or overlook the political salience of processes occurring within.

2 Culturalist Camp

Where the cosmopolitan camp sees openness as a vehicle to promote the legitimacy of GCS within global decision making, the culturalist camp sees openness as resistance to cultural hegemony, maintenance of diversity, and respect for autonomy. This tendency grows out of three parallel and related influences within cultural studies: post-colonial literary and historical studies, subaltern studies in ethnography, and post-Marxist cultural studies. Post-colonial studies argues that the material and institutional frameworks that determine possibilities for development in the global ‘south’ are circumscribed within a global cultural hegemony marked by representations of the ‘other,’ metaphors of development and semiotic processes (Mignolo 1999, 2007; Quijano 2000; Escobar 2004a; 2007). Subaltern studies, meanwhile, examines the constitution of the oppressed classes through processes of subjugation and marginalization (Spivak 1988; Williams 2002). These processes of subjugation are often seen to be driven by, or framed within, the global cultural hegemony studied by post-colonial scholars. Post-Marxist cultural studies (Morley and Chen 1996), finally, has argued that the subaltern can resist cultural hegemony through practices of culture jamming and subversion (Klein 2000a) that serve to uncover and uproot hegemonic cultural practices, thereby empowering marginalized peoples. As
a result, for post-colonial scholars in particular, and cultural studies scholars in general, development must be predicated on the deconstruction of hegemonic cultural ties (these ties are often expressed in terms of neoliberal globalization in the contemporary period), and the recuperation of local identity.

The cultural camp has been particularly influenced by debates over the meaning and impacts of globalization. During the 1990s, at the height of post-Marxist studies, social movements in developing countries were influenced by what Falk has labeled the globalization-from-below perspective (1995, 1997) defined as a challenge to “the negative features of ‘globalization-from-above,’ both by providing alternative ideological and political space to that currently occupied by market-oriented and statist outlooks and by offering resistance to the excesses and distortions that can be properly attributed to globalization in its current phase” (1998, 139). Local groups sought to offer autonomous spaces for support that would enable participants to both survive the impacts of neoliberal restructuring and protect local culture from the perceived homogenizing influences of globalization (della Porta and Diani 2006, 49-51). This work coincided with the emergence of movements for local autonomy among ethnic, nationalist and religious groups in which the success of social movements was measured in terms of their ability to construct their cultural identity and secure autonomy (Stahler-Sholk 2001; Goodman 2002 xvii).

This thinking has been accused of disempowering local actors, however, given its assumption that global forces are hegemonic, and that local actors can only hope to resist these forces. This leaves little room for (the study of) efforts to create alternatives to globalization, or to enact alternative globalizations. Furthermore, an attitude of resistance and autonomy undercut any possibility of articulating and enacting alternative visions. As Goodman points out, “If the assertion of autonomy is the foundation stone of the movement, then any cross-cultural agendas
and alliance geared to broader aspirations cannot be allowed to impinge on that autonomy.” He

goes on to paint an image of unified global elites “confronted by a range of groups whose

priority is to maximize their autonomy, and hence whose power is necessarily fragmented. The

result could be a process of endless skirmishing on the fringes of globalised power” (2002, xx).

More recently, therefore, the cultural studies camp has considered the question of how to

empower anti-globalization in ways that continue to respect local autonomy.

One answer to these problems has been to treat the WSF as a meeting space which,

through its open space methodology, constitutes an inherent challenge to the cultural-

philosophical foundations of the modernist or neoliberal project. The WSF is depicted as a space

that will bring about change from within, both by creating (or celebrating) multiple alternatives,

and by putting them into quotidian practice. Here cultural studies theorists are drawing on the

ideas of new social movement scholars such as Melucci (1989) in the sense that they are

studying change at the level of individuals or small groups. Osterweil, for example, argues that

the WSF is a space in which “the struggle to assert the centrality of culture in politics is being

played out” against those who see culture as an add-on to more traditional modes of social and

political change (2004, 297). Rejecting the compromise between resource mobilization theory

and new social movement theory exemplified by Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar’s well known

1998 book on cultural practices in Latin American social movements,4 Osterweil argues that:

… it is in the terrain of culture and micro-practice that the hegemonies of the current economic

and political regimes are maintained. This means that the dominance of these systems are both

manifested in and dependent on various cultural elements, including subjectivity, social

institutions and social relations, the unspoken rules that govern the micro-practices of daily life; as

well as the cultural logics such as progress, individualism and identity. As such, successful

4 Compare Osterweil’s assertions with the following, for example: “…the politics of representation … has a direct

and clear link with the exercise of power and, correspondingly, with resistance to it. Not always, however, are these

links made explicit in ways that illuminate the actual or potential stakes and political strategies of particular social

actors. We argue that these links are evident in the practices, the concrete actions, of Latin American social

movements, and we thereby wish to extend the concept of cultural politics in analyzing their political interventions.

It is important to emphasize the fact that in Latin America today all social movements enact a cultural politics. […]

Our contributors explore the ways in which manifold cultural politics come into play when collective actors

mobilize.” (Alvarez,Dagnino and Escobar 1998, 6)
strategies of resistance must confront not only the political-institutional and economic manifestations of neo-liberal capitalist globalisation, but also, and at the same time, the foundational cultural logics and the quotidian practices and social relations that both constitute, produce, and make the dominance of these systems possible. … As such, ‘cultural politics’ does not refer simply to the means and modalities of doing contemporary politics, but to its very goals. (Osterweil 2004, 498)

For proponents of this position, the idea then is not so much to take power or participate in decision making processes, as it is to change the practice of power, and the terrain on which decisions get made. This is fundamental to countering the twinned, universalizing and hegemonic forces of neoliberal globalization and modernist approaches to science based in Western thought. This idea is reminiscent of Chela Sandoval’s work on oppositional consciousness and methodology of the oppressed – the idea that while individuals might have a multitude of perspectives and experiences, they can come together and achieve emancipation through dialogue around shared oppression (Sandoval 2000).

Other authors of the cultural camp study the question of how to foster these processes within the WSF. For example, drawing on Spivak (1995) and Freire (2002), Andreotti and Dowling (2004) depict the forum as a pedagogical and dialogical space which helps participants ‘think beyond modernity’ and, through self-reflection, break ‘boundaries that have been imposed on our way of thinking.’ This, they assert, helps individuals to reconstitute themselves and imagine a different world so that they can challenge the empires within and ‘construct’ an alternative world. They draw a clear distinction to Vanguardist or Cosmopolitan approaches, in terms of the means through which change can be enacted:

…rather than an attempt to regularize, normalize, and discipline individuals, by describing a set of parameters within which participants should perceive themselves and relate to others within the Forum, we are proposing something that can be articulated as a “reflective” ethic … to enable the construction of an awareness about how social mechanisms have, up to now, been able to work and how, therefore, these systems have conditioned the way we think, evaluate, act and relate to others. And then, starting from there, leave to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence. (2004, 611)

More recently, the cultural studies camp has come under attack for promoting ‘all talk and no action,’ most strongly by proponents of the Vanguardist position (Marcuse 2005, for
example). These attacks respond to a general sense that cultural agency is a romantic idea of limited potential in the face of global capital. In addition, the cultural camp has sought to respond to the difficult human rights issues implied by ethnic or religious autonomy (Dragadze 1996), as well as a tendency within this literature to address the cultural elements of identity in isolation from economic and political aspects. Indeed, there are some very sticky questions about how to work with important cultural and ideological differences within the left. For example, Daulatzai (2004) examines the question of whether an open culture of politics must necessarily be secular. Drawing on de Souza Santos and Connolly she makes a strong critique of social justice actors who are, “complicit in aligning uncritically with secularistic modes of political participation that speak of tolerance, democracy, non-violence and universality, but systematically impose on believers a secularistic mode of political being” (2004, 574). And Caruso (2004) talks from the position of the WSF organizing committee about the very real dilemma of balancing the need for institutionalized conflict management practices with the desire for inclusion.

In response, cultural theorists have offered a Foucauldian, “post-hegemonic” interpretation of power that draws strongly on feminist theorizing. Lash argues that the Gramscian concept of hegemony and “power over” (or power through consent) on which the discipline of cultural studies was built has been superseded by “an intensive notion of power from within (including domination from within) and power as a generative force” (Lash 2007, 56). This suggests that resistance to forces of domination takes place not only at the level of politics, but also at the level of identity. Accordingly, Conway sees the WSF as an effort to create change through:

...a tenacious search for convergence across difference, a reflexivity about unequal power relations within the movement and a commitment to inclusion, participation and amelioration of those conditions of inequality both within and beyond the movement. Central to this politics is the recognition of a multiplicity of oppressions, the search for ways to understand their intersection, and in so doing to build more inclusive and effective movements with more expansive and
transformative visions and powers. And it is doing this without seeking state power ... nor indulging in the dangerous fantasy of a common platform. (2005, 426; emphasis mine)

This is similar to Holloway’s work on the meaning of revolution in a post-Marxist world. Arguing from an ‘open Marxism’ or autonomous Marxist tradition, and drawing on extensive studies of the Zapatista movement, he contends that revolution is no longer about taking state power, but rather about questioning and reworking the practice of power in our daily lives.

Similarly Osterweil argues that activists “work to completely reinvent what counts as political as well as what has global reach. […] by asserting and creating multiple other ways of being in the world, these movements rob capital of its monopoly… They destroy its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address the complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular and embedded locations” (2005, 26)

Given this sketch, cultural studies interpretations of the WSF can be distinguished from either Cosmopolitan or Vanguardist takes on the basis of their interpretation of networks for information and knowledge. Where the latter see networks as a resource, cultural theorists emphasize the potential complicity of knowledge flows with imperialism, racism and patriarchy, even as they argue that networks may offer a means through which to redress these tendencies, by recovering local processes of identity formation. For example, Rioufol (2004) bases her thinking in Foucault’s ideas of struggles against subjugation. She argues that networks offer a means to subvert reductionist power arrangements. Locally-rooted, radical, non-violent groups can operate in networks to seek out and exploit the ‘chinks’ that they encounter in the system. Because each participant would carry out these activities from their unique perspective, she argues that this approach offers a means to ‘occupy the present’ in order to bring out systemic change. Computer mediated networks have been an important touchstone for research on these

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5 The open Marxist or autonomous Marxism tradition seeks to overcome limitations of orthodox Marxist thinking by maintaining the primacy of class, but relaxing teleological notions of development. In particular, sites of resistance are taken to emerge independently of capital, and are therefore understood to be less determined by structural relationships, and therefore more autonomous in their actions.
issues (see for example Thussu 1998; Mills 2002; Shome and Hegde 2002; Ganesh, Zoller & Cheney 2005; Schoonmaker 2007), but debate extends beyond computer mediated networks to questions of discursive power within networks of transnational contention. An important theme in the literature on local resistance, for example, has been the tendency of cosmopolitan NGOs to usurp and/or appropriate the symbolic capital of local autonomous communities. The global norms that are sought by cosmopolitan NGOs are seen as another form of cultural imperialism, and the very networks established to promote this work are understood to be complicit in processes of cultural homogenization.

All together, the cultural camp sees social forums in particular, the GJM more generally, as spaces of cultural practice that constitute an inherent challenge to cultural hegemony. Because of this emphasis, (and despite the recent work of Lash and Conway), culturalist authors such as Jai Sen (2004) often fall back into characterizing cultural practices in terms of a core-periphery divide. In doing so they overlook the role of local political practices in controlling or influencing cultural flows, and promote essentializing discourses of cultural homogenization (Rankin 2004, 56). This causes them to underplay critical questions about what allows these spaces to function even when views diverge radically or come into conflict. Thirdly, the cultural camp overlooks the potential for interaction between spaces of flows and more structured processes, both within a process such as the WSF, and also between such processes and the broader world. Insofar as groups like the Vanguardists and Cosmopolitans seek out power or attempt to influence other spheres, or vertically organized groups such as political parties infringe on forum spaces, then these open dialogues will be compromised by interests and agendas, and permeated by politics.
3 Vanguardist Camp

‘Vanguardist’ might strike some as too strong a term to describe this third and final approach for understanding the WSF, however, it reflects an intense desire for unity within this camp, even if it may be pursued through a more horizontal organizational structure than is invoked by the classical meaning of the term. Indeed, it is on the basis of a tendency towards ‘universalizing globalism’ that this camp can be distinguished from the cultural one, although since both groups take as a starting point the rejection of neoliberal globalization, it is often difficult to draw boundaries between the two. The difference is marked by Osterweil who explains that, although this group may recognize the problem and the importance of diversity, or the risks of vanguardism or dogmatism, “this approach is clearly an effort to move beyond the models of the various internationals and revolutionary projects of the previous century” (2005, 25). Unity of action is prioritized over the autonomy sought by the cultural camp, but more than this, what divides the two camps is their strategic emphasis: whether on the empowerment of local autonomous groups, or the unification of the movement under a specific agenda for action. In this sense, the two camps can also be separated by their interpretation of the main source of power in the global system; Vanguardists locate power in capital, rather than culture. Thus their desire for unity of action accords with the necessity for revolutionary transformations in the global policy structures that govern global capital, rather than the strategy of gradual, internal transformation advocated by the Culturalists.

Given their objectives, the Vanguardist camp is elated to see the rise of a counter-movement to neoliberal globalization, not just in the WSF, but also in the social movements that predate it (the Zapatistas, the Battle in Seattle, the MAI, etc.), as well as the reemergence of the Latin American left over the past 10 years. For this group, which includes luminaries such as

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6 For example, I am following Osterweil (2005) in placing Holloway within the culturalist camp, but as an open Marxist, he could arguably be included within the Vanguardist tradition that Osterweil refers to in her writing.
Marta Harnecker, James Petras, Samir Amin, and Francoise Houtart, we have arrived at the end of Fukuyama’s (1989) end-of-history. Historical processes are once again “open,” and a window sash has been raised to the pending paradigm shift brought on by the failure of the neoliberal project. Drawing on a more orthodox Marxist tradition (than, for example, the autonomous Marxists described above), these scholars are particularly interested in the possibility that social movements could reclaim their position as a vanguard of history at the national, regional or global levels (Evans 2008) after two decades of structural reform in the developing world, which saw these same movements marginalized from power.

With this in mind, Vanguardists see in the WSF a tool to contest the spread of capitalism and its concomitant global institutions (which together are viewed as an expression of empire), as well as a means to construct an alternative set of global institutions. As such, they take a counter-power approach which seeks to transfer power out of the hands of elites and into the hands of the dispossessed without questioning the practice of power per se. Proponents of the universalizing, counter-power position “see the task as necessarily creating a global movement of resistance aimed at new forms of global governance, even new forms of political parties—not fundamentally challenging current political categories” (Osterweil 2005, 25). This is different from the anti-power approach of the Culturalist camp in which the objective is to distribute power through the constant questioning of its practice (Dinerstein 2003; Holloway 2005a/b), in particular the paradoxical and perhaps hypocritical use of power to acquire power. Focused on geopolitical and political-economy concerns, the Vanguardists argue that real cultural autonomy cannot exist without political and economic autonomy, and that these, in turn, cannot exist without frontal attacks on capitalist empire. For example, in this way of thinking, the a-democratic practices of Hugo Chavez are defended as necessary sacrifices in the larger battle
against the capitalist interests which threaten to overthrow Chavez and the project of autonomous
development in Venezuela.

For proponents of the view, the WSF offers the possibility of influencing and/or controlling the parameters of key policy debates which shape the political-economy of developing countries, and it is not unusual for these authors to publish long lists of policy recommendations (for example Tabalada and Dierckxsens 2003), or to move within left-wing epistemic communities that debate these issues (such as, for example, Chavez’s Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA)). Adherents to this position include Hardt and Negri whose book *Empire* (2000) offers a ‘postmodern’ conceptualization of imperialism in a globalized world. Speaking on the topic of the WSF, Antonio Negri has been quoted as saying:

> Porto Alegre is not the Paris Commune! However, the World Social Forum is an important moment, a place where a generosity and militant ability out of the ordinary are about to meet. I am in agreement with the spirit and the objectives of the movement: to construct, at a global level, an opposition to liberalism and to develop a possible alternative, within the framework of globalisation. It is a fundamental stage in the construction of a counter-Empire. (Mandard 2002)

Similarly, Marcuse argues for a radicalization and unification of the WSF movement. Responding to concerns about the specter of Leninism (i.e. verticalism or centristm which would undermine transparency and accountability) within the left, he argues that “the answer lies in a strategy that does not consider the forums as themselves social movements, but as aids in the widening, linking, informing of such movements, and perhaps beyond that in helping such movements organize, clarify focus and implement strategies” (Marcuse 2005, 421).

Here there is the suggestion that the WSF is a strategic space that should have as its goal the weaving of a global network of networks, but the question is how to do so without falling prey to the problems of centralized leadership. As a result, this group has developed an interest in organizational models that can connect large groups of diverse actors across large geographical distances in a productive enterprise without compromising the individuality and liberty of participants. Such models include the peer production approach (Benkler 2003; 2006)
underlying Wikipedia, or the open source production models (Weber 2004) used to construct open source software such as Linux. In fact, a special ‘stream’ at the 2005 WSF was dedicated to ‘hackers’ and the ‘digital revolution.’ Speakers included information society scholar Manuel Castells, Lawrence Lessig from Creative Commons, John Perry Barlow of the Electronic Frontiers Foundation, and Gilberto Gil, celebrated musician and Brazilian Minister of Culture responsible for migrating that country’s government from Microsoft to Linux software platforms.

In his speech at the 2005 WSF Castells told participants that:

Open Source is not necessarily anti-capitalist. There are many capitalist firms, including very large corporate firms that practice open source. But it is a-capitalist, meaning that Open Source is compatible with different social logics and values. It does not need the incentive of profit to work, and does not rely on the private appropriation of the exclusive right to use and enjoy the product. It is based on a form of social organization that has profound political implications and may affect the way we think about the need to preserve capitalist institutions and hierarchies of production to manage the requirements of a complex world (Castells 2005; emphasis mine).

Since many WSF actors associate capitalism and neoliberalism with the institutions of the modern era, Castells’ observations have profound implications. The suggestion is that open source offers an alternative model of organization that can accommodate unity of action and autonomy of purpose.

But more than this, since for Vanguardists the unity of the movement is key these approaches offer a means to bring Culturalists ‘into the fold.’ Note that authors writing about the relationship between structure and openness tend to embed assumptions about the objectives of the space within their models. Indeed, one of the key dilemmas for authors writing about open organizational models is the tension between the perceived need for unified strategy and the maintenance of diversity and spontaneity within these spaces. So for example, Escobar is interested in a model that will promote cooperation, pluralism and collective learning, and suggests that networked models can meet this goal since they “have no overt single goal”

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7 I am aware that he is typically considered a Culturalist, however in the case of this particular work I believe he is better placed in the ‘unity of purpose’ camp.
But there is a tendency in such works to assume that complex relationality will be imbibed with classical power structures dividing “elites” from those who “resist elites,” introducing assumptions about who holds the upper hand or where these practices take place (see Urry 2005, for example). On taking up the issue, Escobar is forced to admit that “Self-organization needs to be steered in specific ways to produce the kinds of collective intelligence that are needed.” One might ask, appropriately enough, ‘needed for what?’ He suggests that steering can be achieved through a kind of negative feedback which lends “some measure of leadership, structure, and regulation” to the dynamics of positive feedback and self-organization. “In the jargon of ICTs, the system needs to be wired accordingly,” he concludes (2004b, 354).

In sum, the Vanguardist camp seeks to mobilize power, but does so without questioning its own practice of power. It sees social forums, and the networks within them, as a way of articulating autonomous groups towards the realization of alternatives to the hegemonic forces of capital. Networks in this vision are resources that can be appropriated to facilitate counter-hegemonic process in ways that create unity among the diverse participants of the GJM. The agendas which will serve to guide these processes, as well as the means that will be used to facilitate linkages, are contained in the policy recommendations written by popular intellectuals. This might raise some eyebrows given the linkages that often emerge between forum spaces and political parties (Hammond 2006), or the suggestion by some that social forums may be the early forerunners of new forms or transnational political parties (Osterweil 2005).
Table 1: Analysis of Literature Review and Foundations for Alternative Position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forum is thought of as:</th>
<th>Openness is understood to mean:</th>
<th>Information / Knowledge / Networks</th>
<th>Type of Actor Featured</th>
<th>Source of Power in global system</th>
<th>Assumed Objective of Forum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cosmopolitan:</strong> social forum as staging ground</td>
<td>Democracy: accountability, transparency, legitimacy</td>
<td>Networks are a resource that enables diffusion and brokerage</td>
<td>Adaptive-globalization movement: GCS, TANs, TSMs, Movement of movements</td>
<td>Institutions of global governance (complex interdependence)</td>
<td>Construction of policy frames that can be carried into governance forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural:</strong> social forum as reflexive space</td>
<td>Autonomy, diversity</td>
<td>Knowledge flows (and the networks that carry them) complicit with imperialism, racism, patriarchy</td>
<td>Anti-globalization movement: Subaltern / Spaces of resistance</td>
<td>Culture (hegemonic or post-hegemonic conceptions)</td>
<td>Transformations of cultural practices of power (including dominant identities and frames) from within</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vanguardist:</strong> social forum as process of articulation</td>
<td>Political opportunity, self-organization, solidarity</td>
<td>Networks are a resource that can be appropriated to facilitate counter-hegemonic project</td>
<td>Alter-globalization movement: Counter hegemonic force; articulation of autonomous forces.</td>
<td>Material (expressed through state, economic &amp; social power)</td>
<td>Articulation of a global force to contest spread of capitalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical Reflection of Above Positions:</strong></td>
<td>These takes on ‘openness’ are each value laden &amp; mission defined</td>
<td>These positions focus on networks as a structure rather than networking as a process</td>
<td>These positions tend to focus on the whole (unity) rather than the parts (might be disunity?)</td>
<td>Predicated on control/subversion of power sources rather than negotiation</td>
<td>Based in discourses rather than studies of constitutive processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alternative “Constitutive” Position:</strong> social forum as constituted and constituting</td>
<td>Dissolution of borders, increased interaction across ideological divides &amp; increased networking</td>
<td>Networking can influence allocation of power so channeling used to maintain/influence distribution of authority and power</td>
<td>Differently situated actors that interact through networking but are influenced by networks</td>
<td>Legitimacy: Position and Brokerage Practices (influence over key points in networked flows)</td>
<td>Theatre of mobilization which obscures struggles for legitimacy &amp; position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Summing Up: Analysis of the Literature

When the various positions discussed above are presented side by side in Table 1 it becomes possible to compare their differences as well as extend some observations regarding their similarities. These three different views of the WSF show us that the concept of openness can be interpreted in very different ways with important implications for how proponents think about priorities for action, means of affecting change, foundations for legitimacy and notions of equity. These differences reflect, in turn, the major research questions pursued within each of the three camps. Goodman ascribed the term ‘adaptive globalization’ to the Cosmopolitans given their tendency to focus on political conflict between social movements and the institutions of global governance within the confines of the existing state system (2002, xv). Here social forums are seen as staging grounds that may or may not facilitate brokerage and diffusion, which in turn may or may not facilitate the emergence of various different types of global or transnational actors. Openness is equated with the major tenants of democracy: transparency, accountability and participation, while networks are interpreted as linkages with little consideration of how they shape the achievement of these ideals. The Culturalists, meanwhile, can be summed up by the term ‘anti-globalization’ (Escobar 2004a) reflecting their concern with local autonomy, diversity and resistance to cultural hegemony. For this group, social forums are conceived of as an academy for deconstruction and critical self analysis which serves to undermine imperialism, racism and patriarchy and challenge the power that both flows through and shapes the contours of global networks. Work focuses on uncovering hegemonic forces and developing methodologies to overcome these forces. Finally the Vanguardists can be described by the term alter-globalization (Milani & Laniado 2006, 22) signaling their desire to be not just a counter-hegemonic force on a global scale, but also to provide an alternative to neoliberal globalization. Social forums are, in this view, a strategic space that needs to serve the purpose of
unifying a ‘movement of movements,’ and which should appropriate global information networks as necessary to do so. Here networks, particularly complex networks, are lauded as the mechanisms of a unified but leaderless left.

Despite their differences, these three approaches to understanding social forums and the GJM share important similarities. The three camps were organized according to their foundational assumptions about the key sources of power in the global system, and these sources of power were assumed to emanate from outside the spaces of the forum. ‘Sources of power’ can be thought about in terms of the main factor determining the quality of people’s lives. In other words, if you wanted to improve the situation of a particular group, would you best direct your efforts at changing the institutions of governance, the rules controlling markets, or the normative biases of a culture? Where are the key sources of oppression and subjugation? What in turn is the key means through which to empower and mobilize people to create change? Each of the positions described above provides a theory of social mobilization and change that addresses one of the key sources of power in the global system. But common to all of them is a mechanistic notion of social change and a teleological analysis of development: successfully adjust such-and-such part of the system through X variety of social mobilization, and the machine will start churning out a better future, where ‘better’ is defined in terms of democracy, diversity, and community respectively. There is an inherent assumption that it will be possible to discern clear targets for action, and as such, there is tolerance for the notion that globalization is a force rather than a process.

Taking this as a starting point, all three camps tend to focus on social forums as a whole, or to ascribe to forums a certain unifying character. And even though each camp treats networks

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8 Thank you to Kregg Hetherington for his comments on this point. I do not mean to suggest that these authors think the developing world will naturally evolve to become like the Western world—the fault of scholars accused of teleology in earlier times—but rather that their analysis is done against unexamined normative objectives. Thus, their analysis hinges on the assumption that the GJM will necessarily evolve towards a given end.
slightly differently, these are nonetheless seen as the glue that holds social forums together, or as a means to create cohesion. As a result, forums are treated like a lever that can or should only be pulled in one direction, and will have, if not a single impact, then only one kind of impact. This allows proponents of each position to identify the key mission of a social forum, and then to judge its success in contributing to that mission. This understanding of social change implies a particular type of politics, which is that of empowerment, mobilization and unification against a common threat or towards a common goal. There is a tendency to prioritize within the discourse of ‘openness’ surrounding social forums a particular value proposition or mission: to inform or consult; to reflect; to generate solidarity, respectively. Implied here are specific visions of the typical actor within a social forum: the liberal citizen, the marginalized or oppressed individual, the loyal resister, respectively. All together, each of these approaches embodies a suggestion about the type of collective political subjectivity to which social forums should aspire, instead of the various types of collective political subjectivity that are advocated, and perhaps enacted, in a particular social forum, given the context in which it takes place, and the groups that it brings together.

In a sense, then, each of these approaches could be considered a sort of ideal type. If one or another were an accurate representation of what was going on within a social forum at a given point in time, or in a particular setting, then it would be a useful model. However, I find it troublesome that these models began to appear early on in the history of social forums. So, as the quotes from Appadurai and Conway presented at the beginning of the chapter suggest, they both prefigure examinations of what actually goes on in social forums, and they may actually be complicit with political struggles that were going on within social forums. (Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter seven, they actually serve to illuminate the positions of different interests within the MPF much more effectively than they do the forum as a whole.) In this sense, any one of
these theories is not likely to apply well to the GJM, given that it brings together such disparate strands of the left. What this signals is the tendency within these approaches to underplay the multiple divides and processes of networking and negotiation that characterize forum events, as well as their multiple intended and unintended outcomes. Furthermore, while these approaches might make sense in the context of a nation-state, they are less appropriate at the transnational or global scale, given that there is no single hegemonic culture, governance mechanism, or economic policy against which the GJM directs its activities. And, while these approaches may provide a foil against which activists can debate particular strategies for action, they obscure the reality of what happens when different groups with different agendas for action come into contact with each other in the planning and realization of forum events.

Am I just swapping out the telescope of other theorists for the microscope of an ethnographer so that I can focus on the micro elements of a space rather than its macro characteristics? I do not think so. There is a difference between an actor with a clear collective political subjectivity that knows both what it wants and how it wants to act to achieve that goal, and a space in which there is competition among various actors about what the goals should be and how they should be achieved. To look at a space like the WSF and suggest that it is an actor is to accord political consequence to a weakly articulated and ungrounded discourse, or worse, to a methodology. In such a case, the story itself must be moved onto a different plane all together. But instead, what we tend to see is that each of these theories of the GJM get situated within larger theorizations of international relations or globalization, and we then witness the compounding of an error.

Taken as a whole, these observations form the basis for an alternative, constitutive framework for the study of social forums. If we are to arrive at an understanding of collective political subjectivity that respects cognitive justice, then we require frameworks and approaches
that both address the processes occurring within these spaces, and also do so in ways that respect those processes. I turn to the elaboration of such an approach in Chapter 3.
Chapter 3
A Constitutive Approach: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 showed that Cosmopolitan, Culturalist and Vanguardist approaches offer different interpretations of the means and ends of the GJM, but that nonetheless, they all offer theories of social mobilization oriented around unification against a common threat or towards a common goal. In contrast, this chapter offers an alternative, ‘Constitutive’ approach to studying these phenomena as expressed through an alternate set of theoretical and philosophical assumptions, as well as specific methodological prescriptions.

While mobilization-based approaches are founded in a teleological analysis of development, I understand economic, cultural and political “development” not as an end point, but rather as a continuously negotiated compromise. Development is not an objective but a historical condition (Hart 2001). This means that it can actually be very difficult to know how (through community education, advocacy, protest, violence?) or where (social norms, institutional practices, taxation policies?) to intervene in fostering development or social change. What is more, there will be great disagreement about the best answer to these questions.

Furthermore, I understand globalization not as a single, hegemonic force of homogenization, but rather as a variety of boundary blurring and boundary shifting processes, which will have differential impacts in geographically and historically significant spaces. Thus, in my view there is no single or clear source of culture, governance or capital against which the GJM can direct its energies. Forums are a multitude of levers, each of which can be pulled in any number of directions, with variable effects. Thus for me, the notion of openness cannot be ascribed a mission or set of political values. Instead it is defined according to less value-laden criteria such as dissolved borders or increased interaction across ideological divides, which will have, in turn,
implications for normative objectives, such as cognitive justice. In this sense, social forums are not so much a reaction to globalization as they are part of the process of globalization; they are a multitude of social processes engaged in adjusting to the changing set of factors that influence how we relate to and experience material, cultural and institutional life in an age of global flows and flexible borders.¹

This very different set of fundamental assumptions about development and change suggests a ‘constitutive’ position on social forums -- one that studies how they are constituted by and constitutive of the wider reality in which they are situated. Rather than trying to identify the factors against which social forums mobilize, or the measures of their success, here the idea is to understand forum events as part of historically and geographically situated processes which bring together actors from various sectors of the left and which have differential impacts on those actors, their relationships and their ideas. With this in mind, I wish to extend a sociology of the micro tensions that drive change in a world of global processes. I see these global processes as taking place through transnational networks which are not detached from the material and cultural realities of local spaces, but rather interact with and transform these realities by re-combining the local, national and global in new ways (Yeoh et al. 2003).

This vision coincides with accounts of the GJM that emerged around the millennium. As early as 1998, for example, Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar talked about ‘social movement networks (or webs)’ as a metaphor that made it “possible vividly to imagine the multiple leveled entanglements of actors within the movements and the natural-environmental, political-institutional, and cultural discourses in which they are anchored,” (1998, 15-16). In her independent article in the same book, Alvarez suggested that Latin American feminism could

¹ Where development in concerned, therefore, Rigg (2003, 328) further differentiates between the official development carried out by states versus the alternative development carried out by community organizations. Here there is recognition that, while they may have different objectives, or use different methodologies, there are a variety of actors in society who engage in projects to create change. Together these efforts contribute to the overall historical change that constitutes a place and moment in time.
best be characterized as, “an expansive, polycentric, heterogeneous field of action that spans a vast array of cultural, social, and political arenas” (1998, 295; emphasis mine). One could also imagine these processes at work in the “transnational publics” outlined by Olesen (2005). By defining transnational publics in terms of political action waged against official governing bodies, Olesen assumes intentionality of action, ignores potential non-state loci of impact (such as the private sector or other social networks), and ignores other reasons for networked action such as survival, community building, commerce, or cultural production. But regardless, I find direction in his account of transformative spaces of both mediated and face-to-face communication, rooted in real people and places, with implications for the ways in which social spaces at the local, national and transnational levels are manifested (Olesen 2005).

These conceptions fit into the wider body of work produced around the millennium by geographers and ethnographers of global processes. Nagar et al. (2002), for example, challenge globalization theorists to examine the ways in which “…global flows – of capital, labor, information, and ideas - connect and affect specific social and spatial formations in places that are distinguished by particular histories and geographies” (ibid, 276, emphasis mine; see also Sassen 2000; 2004). Several feminist scholars have begun to pursue work in this area (Nagar 2003; Radcliff et al 2003; Yuval-Davis 2003; Rankin 2004). Their objective is both to better understand the experience of local actors vis-à-vis globalization, and to produce knowledge that contributes to development through illuminating those processes. Overall, these critical works call for careful, detailed examinations of the ways in which the spatialities of power (Massey 2005), flexible borders (Brenner et al 2003), and the variable scales of decision making that have emerged in a global era (Swyngedouw 1997; Marston 2000) influence the impact of global flows on individuals and social relations at the local level, and in turn, the character of local participation in, or resistance to, global processes.
In what follows, I offer a theoretical framework to account for the MPF drawing on the notions of development and globalization presented here. The second part of this chapter presents the research design used in this study. In that section I discuss both the philosophical commitments driving this work, as well as the methodological choices taken in this study.

1 A Constitutive Approach

Grounded theorizing resulted in an account of the MPF already presented in Chapter 1. In this section, I will expand on the theoretical implications of this account. We start from the observation that the actors participating in transnational forum spaces are constrained (restricted or compelled) by the relations of power that they experience at home. Why is this observation important to our story? Any given system will exhibit particular relations of power between the various actors within it. These relations of power will give certain actors power over other actors, both because of their position within the emerged system, but also because that position gives them access to resources that give them the ability to shore up the very system which grants power in the first place. People in positions of power will also have incentives to maintain their power over other actors insofar as the strength of their following facilitates influence within cultural, institutional or material realms. Note that this need not necessarily be a violent or negative relation of power despite there being the potential for abuse. It is enough simply to say that it is a relatively stable relation of power.

Take for instance the social institution of authority as it is practiced within social movements or advocacy networks (Hensman 2003). These entities have an institutional permanence and political agenda lasting far beyond specific campaigns, actions or mobilizations. Thus, both as a social institution, and as an attribute of specific individuals, a relation of authority emerges over time, giving individual leaders within specific pockets of the left various
types of power over specific followings, whether these be in nationally-based social movements or regional thematic advocacy networks. This allows leaders to shape the overall system (a set of relations within a sector) in ways that perpetuate the very institutions (authority, legitimacy) that grant them power in the first place, and which in turn ensure the continuance of the institution. However, all actors within the system have, at least in theory, the power to transform a stabilized relation of legitimation by challenging the foundations on which it is based.

The system is stable insofar as relations of power are kept in check—people in positions of authority monitor compliance with the system, adjusting their practices and discourses as necessary, while other individuals in the system continue to bestow legitimacy on their leaders, expressing their support or dissatisfaction as they see fit. Such relations of power assume a fairly constant roster of actors enmeshed in this emerged relationship of power with both material and ideational elements. In fact, I would argue that part of what allows these relationships to become stable is the fact that social, political and economic systems become intertwined in their maintenance of the system. So, for example, a social challenge to the authority of an actor in a position of power might jeopardize one’s economic situation. But what happens when these relations are destabilized, say, because a relatively constant roster of actors comes into contact with a series of new and different actors?

This is what happens when people attend social forums and engage in networking with individuals from other countries and different strands of the left. Networking has both instrumental and affective benefits (Horst and Miller 2005), and this is why local leaders, given their positions of authority and legitimacy, feel that it is very important for their followers to attend forum events. The opportunity to learn, to become exposed to new ideas, or to meet other actors contributes to the continued mobilization of actors within social movements or advocacy networks. Providing that opportunity to a member of one’s group contributes to one’s position
of authority and legitimacy. But there can also be significant risks to networking (Mohanty 1992; Vargas 2003). Attending a social forum exposes participants to new people, experiences and ideas which can serve just as easily to foster solidarity, enthusiasm and innovation, as they can destabilize existing agendas, organizational strategies or subjectivities. In fact, transnational forum spaces can be thought of as a collision of various stabilized systems of legitimation, putting into conflict the foundations of legitimacy for various pockets of the left.

All of this leads me to believe that in order to ensure participants accrue the many benefits of networking, while limiting the risks inherent therein, these types of flexible spaces must reflect a particular exercise of power by individuals in positions of power. This was suggested by Castells when he pointed out the following character of the ‘information society’:

> Because informationalism is based on the technology of knowledge and information, there is a specially close linkage between culture and productive process, between spirit and matter, in the informational model of development. It follows that we should expect the emergence of historically new forms of social interaction, social control, and social change. (Castells 1996, 18)

In other words, in situations where networking can influence the allocation of power and authority, efforts will be made to channel material, ideational and political flows in ways that protect or enhance the existing distribution of authority and power. The question then is: how is compliance secured, coerced or manipulated – how is power exercised - in the context of open spaces? In other words, how might the effects of shocks experienced as a result of networking across existing divides be dampened while still ensuring the benefits of these interactions?

Cohen’s work on the politics of cyberspace offers a compelling explanation:

> Flows of information through networked space, and across the interfaces of networked / embodied space, are constructed substantially by choices expressed through technical standards and protocols. These processes are social and emergent, and have consequences both spatial and material. They operate in what Saskia Sassen terms 'analytic borderlands': between public and private, between technical and social, and between network and body. Mapping these borderlands requires descriptive and analytical tools that do not simply reduce them to borders. (Cohen 2007, 251)
A strong analogy can be drawn between the embodied/cyberspace relationship considered by Cohen, and the local/transnational relationship experienced by social forum participants. Cohen further explains how we can understand the processes that shaped these information flows:

Relevant patterns will include flows of information to, from, and about the self, and flows of information that link the self to and enable the constitution of groups and communities. For law and technology alike, relevant questions will include the allocation of rights and abilities to access, control, and alter these flows. … Another way of putting this point, perhaps, is that the nature of networked/embodied space, and of the networked/embodied self, will depend critically on the construction of differentially bounded space, which I will define provisionally as space within which information flows are defined by a semantic and technical structure of permissions and authentications. Networked/embodied space can be a space of domination or a space of critical practice, depending on who keeps the boundaries and controls the permissions. (Cohen 2007, 248)

Just as Cohen suggests for the embodied/cyberspace relationship, in the case of social forums we can also ask: Who sets the permissions and authentications? What motivates the types of standards that are set? How are these standards established and enforced?

While I would fall short of arguing that processes occurring within social forums can be controlled, the research presented in this study will argue that in the case of social forums, permissions and authentications are influenced through network management (allowing flexibility for networking while conditioning loyalty to a particular network), gate keeping (influencing who attends), identity formation (training local delegates in a particular ideological position before events), coalition formation (building relationships with allies across borders), and manipulating the openness of debate (narrowing debate when terms are in one’s favour, forcing a continuance or widening parameters when they are not). These processes are managed by individuals in positions of authority who use brokerage as a means to influence networked flows. These practices will both shape any given social forum, but will also have implications for how that forum impacts relations among those segments of the left that choose to participate in a forum events. They will also have an impact on subsequent social and political activities once forum participants return home to their countries of origin. For example, forums can have a bearing on local discourses, policy agendas, and electoral processes. These activities will, in
turn, shape the response of differentially situated local actors to the effects of increased trans-border flows and flexible borders. In particular, since networking is a socio-cognitive process, then insofar as boundary policing and network control contribute to the constitution of social forums, these mechanisms will have implications for cognitive justice within the left.

1.1 Constitutive Implications for Thinking about Mobilization

The picture I have painted here has implications for our understanding of two processes of relevance to the GJM. The first is that of mobilization for social change. I have argued that leaders leverage social forums to enhance their legitimacy, and to maintain a certain level of mobilization around specific, permanent political agendas during the periods between forum events. This raises the question of how a constitutive approach to social forums would understand processes of mobilization in contrast to existing theoretical frameworks. In what follows I offer three possible ways in which forums can contribute to mobilization, and then draw out the relationship between these different processes and the constitutive approach describe above.

At a minimum, social forums provide access to basic training or education by exposing participants to speakers or information. Training, however, is often criticized as a tool of mobilization, since ‘students’ receive information without questioning the system into which they are being trained. What is more, individuals who receive training require constant re-training as technologies, techniques and circumstances change. The result is a certain level of dependence: while training might lift people out of immediate difficulty, it does not ultimately change the conditions that shape their lives. This had led proponents of social change to shy away from training as a strategy of mobilization. A second possibility is that social forums contribute to the empowerment of participants, a concept which emerges out of the work of Paulo
Friere (2002). Here the idea is to give people the motivation and critical thinking skills they need, not only to be able to learn for themselves, but also to question the system within which they learn, envision alternatives to that system, and contribute to change (see for example Kabeer 1994, Chapter 9). Forums might contribute to empowerment insofar as they open participants’ eyes to the differences between sectors of the left or local circumstances, expose participants to new people and ideas, and provide inspiration and motivation to promote change.

There are problems with the notion of empowerment, however, particularly when it is associated with the act of mobilizing people around a political end. Parpart, Rai and Staudt argue that “empowerment must be understood as including both individual conscientization (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to politicized power with others, which provides the power to bring about change” (2002, 4; see also Rowlands 1997). Here there is the notion that individual empowerment is separate from, but foundational for, the articulation of group power. But as Parpart herself suggested in a recent talk, when empowerment is taken up as an agenda, it is frequently imbued with a dualistic ethos. People are without empowerment, and then as a result of a technical intervention, they ‘get’ empowered. Empowered individuals come to be pictured as people of achievement, with autonomy, a particular image, a level of legitimacy, or standing. This means that being empowered becomes something to be measured, something that can be accumulated, an achievement, a goal, a standing (UofT, January 9, 2009, Munk Centre). By what standard is this achievement measured? When empowerment is taken up within social movements, its measure becomes mobilization into a perspective. In other words, empowerment is valued in terms of whether it enables individuals to make strategic changes in the ‘system,’ given a particular political agenda, rather than the extent to which it changes the quality of that system. Empowerment gets embroiled in a zero sum game, where it is perceived to be an effect of the relationship between
an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’ and thus becomes a tool to mobilize people within a particular agenda, such as gender equality. So rather than being directed at creating individual self-worth and self-motivated action, empowerment becomes subjected to the formation of collectives, and by extension, to the maintenance of a particular system of legitimation and authority.

Beyond training and empowerment, then, a third possibility is that social forums facilitate spaces for networking as an activity in and of itself. Beyond becoming something by assimilating information, and beyond being motivated to do something as a result of heightened awareness, people also need to coexist, and this requires contact and exchange. What is at issue here is the establishment of conditions under which dialogue can lead to exploration and self-reflection. Rather than mobilization within groups to create changes, this is about facilitating the types of networking interactions at the level of individuals that offer small opportunities for innovation and change at the margins. These small changes can eventually lead to cascades of change that bring about larger shifts in social organization. The question is how to induce conditions for dialogue (and remove conditions which undermine the same) that enable people to discover and recognize the potential for innovations, to be open to that change, and to capitalize on the possibility. This is also a question about how to remove the pull of existing systems of legitimation and authority on the individuals who participate in social forums so that they can be open to the new ideas they experience within these spaces.

This discussion of three different types of mobilization augments our framework for understanding politics within social forums. The Cosmopolite, Culturalist and Vanguardist positions discussed above are theories of social mobilization. They are concerned with the question of how people get mobilized into a social movement. Rather than asking ‘when does mobilization take place, and to what end’ a constitutive approach would instead ask, ‘under what conditions does training versus empowerment versus networking take place, and with what
implications for stability and change within a particular context? Different approaches to mobilization have implicit within them particular patterns of permissions and authentications. Training and empowerment can work to shore up the banks of a particular system of legitimation or authority, and thus are one way of protecting islands of security. This may ultimately have the effect of preventing change from taking place. Networking, however, can lead to the questioning and dissolution of these boundaries and can, as such, open up possibilities for change.

This suggests that we can understand politics of social forums as a process of strategic interaction in which the leaderships of different positions constantly balance the desire to forward an agenda, or to open up space for innovation, against the risk of eroding the foundations of their own security. When there are entrenched and competing views of future alternatives, and in particular, when the political, social and economic situation means that there will be few windows onto the achievement of those alternatives, then leaders will be particularly inclined to create islands of security, and this will undermine any attempts to create open spaces for networking. Thus the very conditions in which open spaces are launched can limit the possibility for openness as well as for change.

1.2 Constitutive Implications for Collective Identity

A constitutive approach, as I have expressed it, also has implications for the notion of collective identity within the GJM. A particular challenge for theorists of transnational protest activity has been the question of whether a collective identity can exist at the transnational or global level. Historical examples suggest that resources can be mobilized to protest against globalization, and that there are political opportunities to make incursions against globalizing processes - one need look no further than the historic Battle in Seattle discussed in Chapter 1. But it is less clear whether we can speak of a cohesive movement against globalization, and more
to the point, whether we can think of social forums as spaces in which collective identity is under formation.

On offering a solution to this problem, Chesters and Welsh (2005) argue that the GJM can be understood as an ‘expression of global complexity’ in which participants practice *becoming* over being, and celebrate a ‘complex ontology of signification’. As they explain it, the identity of the movement is wrapped up in its engagement with ‘reflexive framing.’ Rather than the strategic framing done by social movement organizations working against specific goals within the context of the state, reflexive framing is the practice of individual and collective sense-making which prefigures individual and group actions against globalization. These framing processes take place both within “plateaux” for intensive networking (such as social forum events) and through computer mediated communication networks.\(^2\) Here, in particular, citizen journalism enabled by the Internet is highlighted as a means by which the GJM can engage in and share processes of reflexive framing outside of institutionalized channels of communication. In a sense, the collective identity of the movement becomes the process of reflexive framing, but various different identities engage in or are formed through this process.

While there is a great deal to admire in this work, I have two major concerns. First, this account lays a great deal of responsibility for individually self-motivated and independent action at the feet of the individuals and groups that participate in the GJM. Chesters and Welsh assume the individuals and groups that participate in the GJM to be free of any geographically or historically rooted legacies of normative, identitary or ideological formation, and overlook the role that this might play in the ability of actors to engage in individually self-motivated action. Secondly, drawing an analogy with my earlier discussion of globalization, complexity here is viewed as a state of being rather than a process. Furthermore, the notion of ‘global complexity’

\(^2\) They draw the idea of plateaux from the work of Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).
offered in this account overlooks the possibility that complexity would itself be imbued with - or limited by - practices of power.

Empirical studies show that participation in the GJM includes individuals (academics, concerned citizens, and journalists), international and non-governmental donors, social movement organizations, social movements, political parties, non-governmental organizations, and many other types of organizations. Extensive research shows that frames and/or identities are formed within these various different groups, and that participation within them carries various normative expectations for behaviors, identities and interests (Polletta and Jasper 2001, 285; Cerulo 1997; Benford & Snow 2000). So the people attending social forums will most certainly be carrying with them a series of normative, identitary and/or ideological ideas, understandings or expectations. While different groups use different pedagogical techniques in the formation of collective identity or frames (see Issa 2007 for example), it stands to reason that structures of power will be at work in these processes, a finding which is also substantiated by research (Routledge et al 2007; Bassett 2009). Even an individual with no active participation in ‘the left’ would attend a social forum carrying with them the baggage of their social conditioning. We simply cannot assume that the individuals and groups that participate in the GJM are free of geographically and historically rooted legacies.

It is also not the case that complexity necessarily makes this baggage any less present, or any more flexible. While Chesters and Welsh look on complexity as a condition of the globalized and mediated world, Hoffman (2005) shows how one of the conditions of complexity, complex adaptation, functions as part of a mechanism of norm adoption. Specifically he argues that agents interact with norms in the process of their regularization through Finnemore and Sikkink’s (1998) norm life cycle. A norm entrepreneur introduces a norm into a particular space, but the regularization of that norm depends on its adoption by ‘adaptive agents’ operating within
a complex set of relationships. Once a critical mass of adopters forms, a norm cascade takes place, substantially changing the conditions in which non-adopters find themselves. This ultimately brings about the universal acceptance of the norm as non-adopters adjust to the changing context. While Hoffman does not examine in detail the processes that lead to norm adoption or non-adoption, he notes that individual agents may be persuaded, socialized or sanctioned into compliance with norms (Checkel 2001; Johnston 2001), and this is understood to form part of their process of complex adaptation within changing circumstances. If your boss were an early adopter of a new norm, for instance, you might find it in your interests to take on this norm as well, even if you did not personally agree with this new direction. You would, as such, become part of the norm cascade leading to a larger change in the context for all actors. The example demonstrates how we cannot assume complexity to vary with either anarchy or freedom; rather complexity should be understood as a factor in social processes.

Hoffman’s work provides a jumping off point for thinking about the role of identities within social forums. Hoffman looks at complex adaptation at the level of international relations, studying how norm cascades shift the attitudes of entire states to the conditions for global policy negotiations. So if this is true, then perhaps norms could cascade through the GJM? I agree that this is certainly possible. It must be, if we are to explain the shifting norms of the GJM around, for example, who should be considered welcome at a social forum (for example Caruso 2004). Where, however, norms impinge on the collective identity of a participating group we can expect resistance, rejection or noncompliance with that norm. By extension, where the frames or identities of two different groups come into contest with each other, we can expect each group to engage in efforts to protect its socio-cognitive investments in group formation. As Routledge and his colleagues sum up:

… it is our contention that the diversity inherent in global justice networks will inevitably give rise to conflicting goals, ideologies, and strategies, and, as a result, conflictual geographies of power.
Such concerns are not only tied up with considerations of place and the ability to act politically in coalitions across space, they are also associated with the (place-specific) operational logics of participant movements of global justice networks. (Routledge et al 2007, 2576)

Saunders similarly argues that:

Regardless of the importance of collective identities in definitions of movements, there is confusion in the literature over whether ‘collective identity’ is a term best applied to the movement organization (or group) level, or to movements as a whole. As we shall see, the term is more frequently used to refer, and seems better applied, to the group level. Far from uniting movements, this gives collective identity the potential to create conflicts between organizations that define themselves differently, have clashing ideologies, and engage in different styles of protest, even if they, as part of the same movement, share a broad concern. (Saunders 2008, 228)

Why is this so? This is because processes of complex adaptation similar to those described by Hoffman are also taking place at the level of social movements, network organizations or NGOs when they go about forming a collective identity. It can take a lot of hard work to establish a collective identity or a set of frames for collective work around a cause. Leaders, in particular, will have a vested interest in policing the borders of their group given its relationship to their position of legitimacy and authority. Thus we must also consider the possibility, in contradistinction to the relatively unencumbered processes of norm emergence suggested by Hoffman’s account, that processes of complex adaptation to normative, ideological or identitary influences will be curtailed by border policing on the part of specific agents within the GJM. If compliance can be encouraged, so to can avoidance be arranged.3

How might this take place? In complexity theory, the stability that comes about as a result of patterned regularity is called self-organized criticality (SOC). In situations of patterned regularity, the sensitivity of linkages between the parts of a system increases with the total number of linkages in the system. In this sense, even though social systems may appear

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3 See Acharya’s (2004, 241) discussion of norm localization on this point. In this work, “The success of norm diffusion strategies and processes depends on the extent to which they provide opportunities for localization.” Localization is defined as “a complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms (including norms previously institutionalized in a region) and local beliefs and practices.”
organized, they may still exhibit unpredictability as a result of their sensitivity to small changes.\textsuperscript{4} This is what allows for complex adaptation by adaptive agents to new norms introduced by norm entrepreneurs. Then why is it that we do not see more unpredictability and change in social systems? Because agents within social systems have the ability to learn from past experiences and anticipate or plan for future possibilities thereby ‘dampening’ the natural effects of complex adaptation. Brunk (2001) likens this to shoring up the banks of a river with dykes to slow the effects of erosion, a metaphor which suggests buffering to external shocks. Portugali provides a similar explanation to stability focused on internal ‘dampening’ processes within social groups. Here individuals interpret new information with reference to the cultural and social norms of certain key references (certain individuals or existing group practices). As a result spaces become “self-organized, that is to say, closed in a specific way: in other words, after information has been compressed in a specific way” (2006, 658). This has the effect of buffering individuals within groups from adaptation to normative shifts that come from outside of their sphere of social reference.\textsuperscript{5}

In total, the suggestion here is that agents may be more or less adaptive to new norms, ideologies or identities depending on their make-up, historical contingencies, and the influences they experience. While some individuals may be individually self-motivated to pursue ‘independent’ action, we cannot assume this to be the case with all those who participate in the GJM. With this in mind, we need to pay attention to the means by which change is negotiated.

\textsuperscript{4} As Brunk explains, “When SOC systems have evolved to a critical level of linkages, the sensitivity to their individual parts to each other’s behavior becomes so great that their micro-level fluctuations propagate into large complexity cascades. This evolutionary process eventually results in bursts of macro-level instability” (2001, 435).

\textsuperscript{5} In Portugali’s words: “Self-organization is a process of information compression: a large number of parts, each conveying its own specific message, enter into an interaction that gives rise to one or a few order parameters. On emerging, the order parameter(s) enslave the many parts of the system with their many messages. The \textit{slaving principles} of synergetics can thus be seen as an ‘information-compression principle’; the many potential messages enfolded in the system are being compressed or enslaved into the message of the order parameter. Or, in other words, depending on the internal dynamics of the system, a given external message or set of messages, which can be interpreted and affects the system in a multiplicity of ways, is eventually compressed in a unique way.” (Portugali 2006, 658)
and/or curtailed within the GJM since these are precisely the strategies that work to limit
cognitive justice by undermining openness. In this sense, it is more appropriate to focus on
uncertainty (of a realist and constructivist nature - see Rathburn 2007) rather than complexity as
the condition shaping interactions within social forums. From a constitutive point of view, rather
than reading social forums in terms of collective identity, we need to look at circumstances under
which identities are guarded, and the conditions under which they are allowed to mingle; or the
conditions under which uncertainty is embraced versus the conditions under which it is mitigated
within transnational encounters. In the end, it is not a question of whether the movement has a
collective identity, but rather whether social forums provide the conditions for and reflect a
society in which open networking and cognitive justice provide foundations for change.

2 Research Design

2.1 Philosophical Commitments

As was suggested above, the differences between a Constitutive approach and those
reviewed in Chapter 2 result partly from their understanding of development. In this section,
departing from the discussion of ‘Openness, Globalization and Development’ presented in
Chapter 1, I explore the relationship between cognitive justice and a historical approach to
development and argue for a critical realist, constructivist approach to studying social forums.

Much of what is at issue with social forums is a perceived need to find new
epistemological frameworks that suit a post-end-of-history, post-impasse reality marked by the
collapse of both the neoliberal and orthodox Marxist projects as well as intense debate about
globalization. If development no longer responds to foundational truths or an intended end, then
how should we understand efforts to create a different world? Given this historical and
philosophical moment, the architects of the social forum movement are concerned with the
creation of frameworks for knowledge production that re-value and re-energize the creative force of ordinary people. That is to say, they have championed the cause of cognitive justice. In fact, many people argue that this is the key value of social forums. It is thought that these types of spaces, along with new epistemological frameworks, will enable the creation of a vibrant civil society based not in donor-funded NGOs, but in empowered citizens.

For example, de Sousa Santos recommends a sociology of absences and emergences that uncovers the multiple truths obscured by positivistic approaches, and also provides grounds for imaging multiple alternative futures. This can be done, he proposes, through a dialogue between post-positivist science and “common sense knowledge, the ordinary, practical knowledge that guides our everyday behavior and gives meaning to our life. … Common sense knowledge tends to be a mystified and mystifying knowledge, but in spite of that, and in spite of its conservative quality, it does have a Utopian and liberating dimension that may be enhanced by its dialogue with scientific knowledge” (2007, 40). In this way, the marginalized of developing countries will feel qualified to advance solutions to their own problems, able to debate the merits of various alternatives, and justified in demanding that solutions be made material, forming a sort of counter-power to frameworks for knowledge production that have traditionally guided decision-makers (Holloway 2005a/b). Particularly in Latin America, the origin of the social forum movement, where delegative democracy (O’Donnell 1994) and apathetic citizenry (Oxhorn 1998) are understood to be part of a larger problem of underdevelopment and subordination in the global arena, the suggestion is that alternative epistemological frameworks will animate citizenship and create the basis for a true civil society based not in NGOs and imported human

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6 This was defined in the introduction as the idea that no one form of knowledge (way of knowing the world, or being in the world) should dominate at the expense of others, but rather that different forms of knowledge should exist in dialogue with each other.
rights discourses, but in grassroots investments in the construction of local normative commitments (Gallardo 2006).

This commitment to cognitive justice poses researchers with a demand and a dilemma. The demand is for an emancipatory agenda that seeks to understand and ensure cognitive justice by studying not just what is said, but also the conditions under which it is said. With this in mind, de Sousa Santos argues, “what is important is not to see how knowledge represents reality, but to know what particular knowledges produce in reality” (2006b, 27; emphasis mine). In other words, we need to understand the effects of different forms of knowledge production on the real world, why, for instance, certain ways of knowing the world seem to support deforestation or monoculture, while others seem to support conservation and biodiversity. Similarly we need to understand what power relationships ‘in our thought processes’ mean for the possibility of innovation, imagination and creativity. I understand de Sousa Santos to be saying that we should be looking at the mechanisms through which systems of knowledge production, or ways of knowing the world, create and/or limit particular empirical outcomes. Accordingly, in the case of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum I am looking at how the permissions and authentications that shape ways of knowing the world conspire to shape what goes on in forum spaces, and ultimately their implications for cognitive justice. The dilemma, then, is how to study processes of knowledge production envisioned by the social forum movement without ourselves contributing to conceptual enclosure and thereby undermining cognitive justice. That is to say, how can I study the MPF as a process of knowledge production without myself engaging in conceptual enclosure? How can I study collective political subjectivity without assuming either a staging ground for policy interactions, a reflexive space for cultural production, or a process of articulation against capital?
Clearly foundationalist approaches based in enlightenment thinking, structuralism and positivism would be inappropriate for this project. As discussed in Chapter 1, the collapse of the Berlin Wall coincided with a collapse of grand projects anchored in enlightenment thinking in both the modernization and dependency camps of development theory. Positivism as the dominant methodological framework in the social sciences came under increasing attack. In particular, in the field of development studies, positivism’s search for prediction and control has been linked to modernism’s belief that humans can shape the world through the power of science and technology (Scott 1999). Together they have been widely condemned for providing the philosophical underpinnings of the ‘colonial’ or hegemonic projects of global capital by upholding the notion of big “T” truths, or at least Kuhnian dominant paradigms. The resulting notions of “development-as-modernization” are accused of professionalizing knowledge production and removing these processes from the reach of ordinary people.

This leaves us with three other possibilities (Guba and Lincoln 1994). First, there are anti-foundationalist approaches based on relativistic ontology as expressed, for example, in the works of anti-development scholars. The work of these scholars has been acknowledged to provide a valuable corrective by showing that knowledge of our social world is constructed, and as such embodies deep biases. For example, anti-development scholars have demonstrated the relationship between modernism, positivism and under/mal-development (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1992, 1995; Crush 1995; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; for a review of this literature see Simon 2007). However, anti-development provides little ground for moving forward to produce emancipatory knowledge about our world (Schuurman 1993, 30), and as such, this approach is lacking as a framework for studying social forums. I find support for the rejection of these two positions in the writings of de Sousa Santos. Steering a middle ground between relativism and absolute truth, he argues that:
It is not about discrediting sciences or about an essentialist anti-science foundationalism; as social scientists, we cannot do that. What we are going to try to do is use the hegemonic science in a counterhegemonic way. That is to say, the possibility that science enters not as a monoculture, but as part of a larger ecology of knowledges, where scientific knowledge can dialogue with lay-knowledge, with popular knowledge, with indigenous knowledge, with the knowledge of marginalized urban populations, with campesino knowledge. 7 (de Sousa Santos 2006b, 26; see also de Sousa Santos 2007, particularly chapter 1)

Between the foundationalist and anti-foundationalist ends of the scale we find different constructivist prescriptions for how to create a compromise between absolute relativism and absolute truth. Here I am following the definition of constructivism used in international relations in which structure or institutions are understood to reflect historical context rather than absolute categories (as opposed to the philosophical meaning of constructivism which carries specific epistemological assumptions). This ‘IR’ view of constructivism is subject to several different interpretations including modernist (positivist, foundationalist), post-modern (anti-foundationalist, radical), post-foundational and critical realist approaches (Adler 2002, 97; Klotz and Lynch 2006; Ruggie 1998, 35). As I have already rejected modern and postmodern approaches above, in what follows I will focus on what separates the two compromise positions.

Post-foundational constructivists create a compromise by arguing for an intersubjective criterion of validity. In other words, the solution is to behave ‘as if’ the values, ideas or identities of a particular group were true—that theories of the social world are best built based on “social facts,” which are the intersubjectively naturalized ideas constructed by social agents. These social facts provide a foil against which social science researchers can explain social phenomena or historical events. This basis for theorizing is troubling to me. As Pouliot argues, “Ultimately, to know whether a social fact is ‘really real’ makes no analytical difference; the whole point is to observe whether agents take it to be real and draw the social and political

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7 Original text as follows: “No se trata de ‘descredibilizar’ las ciencias ni de un fundamentalismo esencialista ‘anti-ciencia’; nosotros, como científicos sociales, no podemos hacer eso. Lo que vamos a intentar hacer es un uso contrahegemonico de la ciencia hegemónica. O sea, la posibilidad de que la ciencia entre no como monocultura sino como parte de una ecología mas amplia de saberes, donde el saber científico pueda dialogar con el saber laico, con el saber popular, con el saber de los indígenas, con el saber de la poblaciones urbanas marginales, con el saber campesino.”
implications that follow” (2007:364). But as my discussion of norm cascades and collective identities above makes clear, the values, ideas or identities that people ‘take to be real’ are often not representative of the ‘social facts’ that actually shape their experience, nor their true desires. And given the role of popular intellectuals (Baud and Rutten 2005, 8) in shaping public perceptions about social forums, there is a risk that the ‘social facts’ encountered by researchers are actually discursive claims or rhetorical devices emerging from a particular theoretical perspective or political agenda (viz Chapter 2). It has been argued that such a focus can lead researchers to overlook people’s desires and to reduce their subjectivity to that of official accounts (De Vries 2007; Escobar 2007). This means that post-foundational constructivism serves as a poor basis for examining the processes that result in a particular distribution of cognitive justice. In other words, it leaves us unable to assess the whether, how, and to what extent a particular set of circumstances constrains or encourages openings for new thinking.

An alternative compromise is a critical (or scientific) realist take on constructivism, which argues that, “part of the rationale for science is the attempt to know whether or not things are really as described, and what it is that makes them appear as such” (Patomaki and Wight 2000:218). According to Wight, critical realism, “…can accommodate many of the so-called ‘postpositivist’ criticisms of positivism without regressing into a debilitating, and potentially relativist, anti-science stance” (2006:14). This approach is based on three key assertions: 1) that “there is a reality independent of the mind(s) that would wish to come to know it,” (ontological realism); 2) that all beliefs are socially produced (epistemological relativism); and 3) that all the same, “it is still possible, in principle, to choose between competing theories,” (judgemental rationalism) (Ibid: 26; see also Danermark et al., 2002). When applied to constructivist interpretations, critical realism tends to take a pragmatic approach, as explained by Adler:

Pragmatic realism says that although representations of the natural and social world are always made from a point of view and are thus interpretations, there none the less exists a material reality
outside human interpretations; social facts emerge from the attachment of collective meaning to a previously existing material reality. It follows that rules that evoke reasons for action, individuals’ reasoning processes, and collective understandings within dialogical communities - all of which are part of a pragmatist interpretation of social reality - may also be interpreted as being part of the social mechanisms that scientific realists believe help explain social reality. (Adler 2002, 98)

I find that this pragmatic, critical realist constructivism matches well with paradigms for development research that have emerged in debates over what comes after the impasse in development studies. In particular, Bebbington’s work argues for greater attention to the ways in which communities respond to neoliberal policy incursions:

If research engaged with questions of practice—both popular and bureaucratic—it might become apparent that the goals, meaning, and power relationships underlying development often differ from those imputed by much development theory. *Power, meaning, and institutions are constantly being negotiated, and these negotiations open up spaces for potentially profound social and institutional change. Understanding how these spaces open and how they are used is a critical research challenge,* and will take us beyond some of the oppositions that haunt much development theory. (2000, 497 emphasis mine)

Here we see both support for the notion of constituted realities, but also for a pragmatic approach that eschews theoretical encampments.

Is critical realism an appropriate framework through which to study cognitive justice? I believe it to be consistent with this agenda for two reasons. First, critical realism upholds epistemological relativism and is methodologically agnostic. This means that it is inherently accepting of multiple, unconsensuated or contested knowledges and the various processes through which they are generated. Secondly, critical realism’s commitment to an ontological basis for reality provides a basis for ensuring cognitive justice. As Adler explains, “Critical constructivists … share the view that striving for a better understanding of the mechanisms on which social and political orders are based is also a reflexive move aimed at the emancipation of society” (Adler 2002, 98). Unless we base research on social forums in an ontological understanding of reality, it will be difficult to identify and address the mechanisms and power relations underlying information, knowledge and cultural production. If we cannot do this, then it will be impossible to establish whether and when these systems unjustly limit particular ways of
knowing or processes of knowledge production. Finally, while it is conceivable that certain criteria for validity might dominate within the tenant of judgmental rationalism, there is no reason why the campaign for cognitive justice cannot be carried out on this philosophical plane in debates over what counts as valid criteria.

The question now is how to operationalize this theoretical vision in a ‘real world’ research project.

2.2 Grounded Theory Approach

Both critical realism and constructivism are philosophical commitments; neither offer specific advice on how to carry out research. However, proponents of different constructivist interpretations in international relations do offer recommendations on how to approach research given their respective philosophical commitments. I have already mentioned that this project applied a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1998) however there is also debate about how to conduct grounded research. In this section I explain the relationship between critical realist and grounded theory approaches. Here I am particularly concerned with two issues: how to uncover ‘what’s going on’ and how to defend intellectual accountability while doing so.

Grounded theory is an inductive technique that starts with a research situation and focuses primary on producing an empirically accurate account of that situation. As Strauss and Corbin explain it, grounded theory is:

…theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another. A researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind… Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 12)
Once the research situation has been identified, grounded research proceeds with data gathering simultaneously complemented by coding (identifying key ideas) and memoing (diary entries that try to make sense of the relationship between key ideas). All of this material is then sorted into written chunks that form the basis of a formal account of the targeted situation. Thus grounded theory moves from the specific to the general through a rigorous process in which the author works to construct an account that a) ‘fits’ the situation, and b) helps the individuals in that situation make sense of their experiences (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 257). There are broad similarities between grounded theory and inductive forms of process tracing (George and Bennett 2005, 111). However, grounded theory is theory building rather than theory testing (i.e. it tries to avoid preconceptions), and this allows field work to guide the research process.

In this sense grounded theory differs in important ways from research designs suggested by constructivist scholars. Working from a post-foundationalist perspective, Pouliot (2007) recommends a three step process: 1) recover subjectively held meanings, 2) put subjective meanings into context, thereby rendering them intersubjective, and then 3) set meanings in motion by adding a historical element. Modernist scholar Lupovici (2008), in contrast, recommends starting with a discourse analysis and then using process tracing to put discourses in a context of causal relations. While similar in their overall trajectory, these two approaches reflect the level of stability that each author accords to ideas (Klotz and Lynch 2006). Pouliot understands ideas to be flexible or unstable, and so he takes pains to respect subjective meanings and to make plain his contribution to constructing intersubjective meanings. Lupovici, meanwhile, sees ideas as more stable and resistant to change, which allows him to jump from discourse analysis straight into process tracing. For pragmatists, the social world is characterized by both stability and flexibility:

As Colin Wight (1999:122, emphasis in the original) points out, ‘we can expect both determinacy and indeterminacy’ in meanings and practices. By looking at ‘representations,’ ‘norms,’
‘discourses,’ ‘rules,’ and other types of intersubjective understandings, constructivists demonstrate that certain ideas get taken for granted or dominate while others remain unspoken or marginalized. Positivists and post-positivists agree, in other words, that agents or subjects create meanings within structures and discourses through processes and practices. (Klotz and Lynch 2006, 357)

This pragmatic thinking accords with a constitutive approach; recall that actors within forum spaces will manipulate openness to suit their ends. Pragmatism raises the question of how researchers following the prescriptions of Pouliot or Lupovici can know what to focus on before beginning field work.

A grounded approach has the advantage of allowing the researcher to take in everything simultaneously, and then to make sense of the relationships between key variables. The researcher uncovers key discourses while in the field, rather than presuming the importance of a particular discourse given research interests. Indeed, norms, ideas, identities, etc., the relationship between them, and their level of flexibility, are all uncovered rather than assumed. Also, grounded theory can address the quandary of maintaining ontological openness. As Hopf explains, “…the more conventional constructivism moves to furnish …causal theory, the more it loses the possibility of maintaining the ontological openness that its interpretivist methods afford” (Hopf 1998, 198). The problem is heightened, he further explains, by the tendency of researchers to specify theoretical elements in advance of field work according to “empirical interests and theoretical priors” (ibid). By allowing theory to emerge out of data, it is possible to strike a balance between ontological openness and causal theory (what grounded theorists call ‘staying open’).

In fact, there has been lively discussion about this point by scholars who work with grounded theory (Health and Cowley 2004; Boychuk and Morgan 2004). The initial grounded theory framework published by Glaser and Strauss in 1967 is considered a touchstone document. It is, however, founded in positivist notions of social science that dominated social sciences at that time. As a result, there is heavy emphasis on allowing theory to emerge from the data. But
since rigorous application of this technique can result in descriptive works that lack connection to larger debates it has rendered grounded theory susceptible to accusations of ‘abstracted empiricism’ (Williams 2008). Later works, such as Strauss and Corbin (1998; see also Clarke 2003) have sought to rectify this problem by recognizing the role of the author in constructing the theoretical accounts. This provides greater scope for drawing a relationship between findings and theoretical debates, and also for drawing out the major story line. However, this shift has opened the door to non-positivist interpretations of the approach, which has challenged the original emphasis on data-driven, empirically ‘accurate’ results.9

With this in mind, I have chosen to follow Strauss and Corbin’s advice in striking a balance between allowing theory to emerge from the data, while also recognizing my own role in conducting the research (1998, 145). This implies a particular compromise between what can be called the ‘Three Rs’ of intellectual accountability: Recursiveness, Reflectiveness and Reflexivity (Figure 1). Recursive research is that which moves back and forth between data and theory, adjusting the model until it accurately reflects the data. This term is used, for example, by economists in the building of mathematical models (in which, at the most sophisticated level, recursion is built into the model itself) (see for example Ljungqvist and Sargent 2004, 16-25). Here there is both a useful notion of theoretical adjustment which was reflected in the idea of grounded theory as presented above, but also the problematic notion of empirical foundationalism (Ulrich 2006, 2) which I would like to mitigate (I am using that word very deliberately) for the reasons stated previously. Reflectiveness offers a solution to this problem. It is the notion that researchers should engage critically with the standards by which they (themselves) judge verity. Ulrich defines this practice as:

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8 This is a term coined by C. Wright Mills in his work *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) as a critique of sociologies studies that fetishized data and statistical analysis to the exclusion of historical context and analysis.
…*self-critical*: the effort of systematically examining one’s own premises through self-reflection and dialogue, with a view to carefully qualifying the meaning and validity of one’s claims; *emancipatory*: working actively to help others in emancipating themselves from one’s claims, as well as from theirs; and *ethically alert*: making transparent to oneself and to others the value implications of one’s claims, and limiting these claims accordingly. (2006, 15; See also Adler and Haas 1992 for early IR-related engagements with this theme; See also Wiesman et al. 2008)

Reflectiveness recognizes the contingent nature of theorizing, but ultimately the author of the research will produce an account true to her own biases, agendas and experiences. This means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 1: The ‘Three R’s’ of Intellectual Accountability (IA)</th>
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<tr>
<td>On what basis does research derive its validity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflexive</td>
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<tr>
<td>(fulfilling an end)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective</td>
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<tr>
<td>(self-criticality)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recursive</td>
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<tr>
<td>(data-theory fit)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both engage in collaboration between researcher and subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results circumscribed by (potentially unexamined) foundations in both</td>
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<tr>
<td>Both Researcher-Driven</td>
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that the research will likely reflect the ends of the researcher rather than those of the subjects (Nagar 2003). Working within a tradition of action research, the third ‘R,’ reflexivity, takes issue with this tendency and suggests that research should serve the objectives, needs or desires of the communities under study (Nicholls 2009). Here the researcher becomes a facilitator of the intellectual requirements of others, but then there is a risk that she will become complicit in perpetuating the foundationalisms of this group (Ibid; Nagar 2003). Taking all of this into consideration, the balance I wish to strike is one that is cognizant of the objectives, needs and desires of the MPF, searching of a good fit between data and theory, but ultimately committed to
reflectiveness as per the definition offered by Ulrich. In particular, an important goal of this project is to do a responsible, ethical job of holding up a mirror that accurately reflects the claims and actions of the MPF so as to emancipate the space from itself (see Edelman 2009 for applied discussion of the same). What I mean by this is that the work should ideally increase awareness of how collective political subjectivity manifests in the case of the MPF and the implications of this for how it can be understood. Ideally this would enable people to better evaluate their participation in the space, and as such enhance the potential for cognitive justice.

Maiguashca’s article on how to study the anti-globalization movement provides a useful guide for striking such a balance. The first step is to engage the ‘insider perspective’ of the research subjects. Here, “…members of social movements are seen as active participants in the constitution of their social world and in its transformation. The goal … is to understand these movements as the collective embodiments of certain practices that express the ideas, beliefs, wishes and hopes of a constituency of people” (2006, 124). The second stage is the outsider perspective of the researcher in which, “…the goals … are to contextualize the practices and meanings of activists, to reach for a comparative analysis of them and to offer a critical evaluation of their overall dynamic and impact” (ibid, 125). This approach mirrors Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) distinction between open coding (gaining a sense of what is going on) and axial coding (making relationships between phenomena, context, causal conditions, etc.). Maiguashca’s approach is similar to the strategies employed by Pouliot and Lupovici in that it engages in two stages of investigation and moves from the specific to the general. But her approach lends itself more readily to grounded research, since, rather than assuming the character or role of meanings or ideas, it focuses on understanding the whole research context in the pragmatic sense suggested by Wight.
How then did I translate this philosophical approach into the practical work of field research and analysis? In the final section of this chapter I explain the research protocol that was followed for data gathering and analysis, and then explain how these activities contributed to the results you will find in the following four chapters. In particular, Table 2 (presented at the end of this chapter) makes the connection between data collection, analysis and presentation of results.

2.3 Data Gathering and Analysis

Field research covered the entire expanse of the MPF--both historically (2000 to 2008) and geographically (Mexico - Panama)--but focused especially on the participation of Guatemalan and Salvadoran actors in the sixth forum which occurred in Costa Rica in December 2005, as well as the actors who made up the organizational committee of the forum during this time period. It is important to note that the constraints of field research prevented me from participating in an actual forum event, as the event scheduled to occur during my tenure in Central America (April 2006 - May 2007) was postponed until the summer of 2009. But as noted above, this was somewhat advantageous in that it allowed me to focus on the contexts and processes that constitute forums rather than the forum itself.

The research was, as noted above, inductive, moving from the specific to the general. In what follows I list the various activities used to gather data and conduct analysis:

Data Gathering - Field work started in April 2006 and was completed in May 2007. The following data collection activities were carried out:

- One month of advance field research in April 2006 to identify the research focus.
- An extensive bibliographic review of academic references available in North American publications, as well as a review of academic and journalistic references from Latin American resources, including Latin American debates around the ‘new left’.
• Approximately 130 interviews with leaders, organizers, facilitators, participants, and experts in El Salvador and Guatemala as well as with the organizers of the Costa Rican MPF and donors which have supported the process, all conducted between September 2006 and January 2007.

• Additional interviews with international donors that supported the process, as well as with Mexican activists who participated in early forum events (February 2007), and Panamanian activists that hosted the below mentioned workshop.

• Collection and analysis of internal and official MPF documents including websites, announcements, methodological guidelines, evaluations and reports pertaining to each forum event.

• Participation in key events put on by Guatemalan and Salvadoran anti-globalization activists between August 2006 and March 2007.


It is important to note that the interviews used to gather data for this study took place approximately a year and a half after the sixth MPF held in Costa Rica in December 2005. As a result, interviewees had achieved a certain level of distance from the MPF, and they were also in a reflective mood, given the failure of the MPF to impact the signing of the CAFTA. The agreement had been ratified in all negotiating countries but Costa Rica at that time. While interviews targeted individuals who had travelled to the Costa Rican forum, many of these had also participated in other forums, especially the fifth forum in El Salvador. A summary of the main characteristics of interviewees is presented in Appendix 1.

Memoing - Initial hypothesis generation was carried out through the maintenance of a personal diary (see Figure 1), field reports to my dissertation committee, and initial presentations of research results in which I struggled to make sense of what I had encountered. I held four workshops in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala to present interim research results and to receive feedback from study participants. Subsequently I travelled to Panama in April 2007 to participate in a meeting of the Comité Mesoamericano. There I was able to present interim
research results and also to engage forum participants in additional discussion about emerging reflections.

Interviews took place in the context of cross-cultural exchange between myself, a white, North American woman who is fully fluent in Spanish, and has considerable experience in the region, but is nonetheless an outsider, and a variety of interviewees who entered this exchange in a variety of ways. I do not consider the reality of cross-cultural exchange an impediment; rather I see it as a factor that must be taken into consideration in field work and analysis. The character of exchanges requires interrogation as part of field work and analysis: when I sensed that the

Figure 2: Personal Diary for Memoing

![Diary File](image)

wool was being pulled over my eyes, or that an interviewee was holding back, or that cultural difference was shaping the exchange, I began to reflect on why this might be the case, and how
this may have affected the narratives I was encountering. These experiences were recorded in research memos, and in this way entered the body of research data.

**Sorting** - The initial sorting process was done in the form of a working paper in which I started to make sense of what I had found in the field. This was written while working as a research fellow in Mexico City. Because I was still in the region, I was in the fortunate position of being able to conduct follow-up interviews during this time, on issues that emerged as I began to organize my findings. On returning to Canada I began the arduous job of making sense of all the mountains of data I had collected, verifying and discounting hypothesis, and putting them in order. Figure 2 demonstrates one element of this sorting process, which was done with sticky notes so I could move ideas around to create a suitable narrative.

**Figure 3: Example of Sorting Exercise**

2.4 Presentation of Results

The presentation of research findings is summed up in Table 2. Chapter 4 presents historical and contextual information necessary for understanding the emergence of the MPF.
Here it is argued that we need to understand the MPF in the light of ongoing processes of regional integration, rather than the framework of democratization and peace-building, as is typical of many accounts of social mobilization in the region. I also demonstrate that the MPF represents a break with the dominant forms of organization typical of the left within Central America during the period of peace-building.

Chapter 5 is guided by the question of whether the MPF can be adequately thought about in terms of social mobilization. The analysis presented here is based principally on official discourses produced about the MPF by its organizers. Having concluded that the forum is not a social mobilization as such, Chapter 6 turns to the question of how the forum is constituted. In answering this question, this chapter uses the geographically and historically situated ‘insider

Table 2: From Research Protocol to Presentation of Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase of Research</th>
<th>Aspects of Data Source</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Verification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: Historical and Contextual Backdrop</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5: Can the MPF be adequately understood as a social mobilization?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>a) Evolution of MPF as depicted in official discourses</td>
<td>Lit Review  Document Analysis  Participant Interviews</td>
<td>Elimination of competing explanations  Data Triangulation  Participant Verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 6: What is the constitution of the MPF? (Its socio-spatial logic?)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constitution</td>
<td>a) Objectives  b) Experiences &amp; Characterizations</td>
<td>Document Analysis  Participant Interviews  Participant Observation  Action Research</td>
<td>Phenomenological Grounded Theory Method  Data Triangulation  Participant Verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 7: What explains the constitution of the MPF? (What explains this logic?)</strong></td>
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view’ (Maiguashca 2006, 123-135) of its various participants to distinguish the discourse of the MPF from the specific ways in which it is open or closed. A variety of qualitative research methods ranging from standard case study to more ethnographic approaches were used to generate data about the forum, and to facilitate data triangulation of the resulting analysis. In addition, the empirical account of the forum was verified by the research participants themselves through a series of presentations conducted in the region shortly after initial fieldwork was completed.

Chapter 7, then, presents the ‘motive, means and opportunity’ that give rise to the empirical account presented in Chapter 6 (what Maiguashca calls the ‘outsider view’ of the researcher). Drawing on previous chapters, this account addresses both the underlying causal structures that motivate and shape action, as well as the specific generative mechanisms that arise out of this causal milieu to shape the MPF as a concrete phenomenon. The analysis in Chapter 7 is conducted using retroductive iterative abstraction. Retroduction is the practice of generating a causal account of known events predicated on concomitant events. Iterative abstraction is the practice of refining an account until “the alleged generative mechanisms are robust and powerful enough to explain the concrete phenomenon” given specific circumstances (Yeung 1997, 59). In grounded theory terms, these processes can be thought of as axial coding and selective coding respectively (Cresswell 1998, 57). Causal structures are presented on the basis of an analysis of the conjuncture, while generative mechanisms can be said to be the result
of a general form of process tracing oriented towards “a higher level or generality and abstraction” (George and Bennett 1997, 211).\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{10} Together causal structures and generative mechanisms constitute the causal mechanisms behind the MPF, which can be defined as, “…unobservable physical, social, or psychological processes through which agents with causal capacities operate, but only in specific contexts or conditions, to transfer energy, information, or matter to other entities. In so doing, the causal agent changes the affected entity’s characteristics, capacities, or propensities in ways that persist until subsequent causal mechanisms act upon it.” (George & Bennett 2005, 137). I prefer this definition of causal mechanisms for two reasons. First of all, by encompassing both the context for action, as well as the actions themselves, it upholds a much richer understanding of causality. That is to say, in this account causality encompasses not just the mechanisms leading to an outcome, but also the conditions under which these mechanisms might be enacted. Secondly, this definition is more complete in that it allows for the possibility that causal mechanisms will have impacts of differing magnitudes, durations, and effects, and not necessarily those intended by the actors involved. Compare this definition, for example, to that of Mahoney, who says simply that causal mechanisms are an “unobservable entity that—when activated—generates an outcomes of interest” (2001; as cited in George and Bennett 1997, 136). However, note that this conception of causation introduces an important nuance to the analysis; it suggests that desires and or attempts to carry out causal effects still form an important part of the causal story even when they have no observable or significant impact on the dependent variable.
In order to understand the MPF, particularly its significance for the direction of the left in Central America, it is necessary to first reflect on the context that formed its backdrop. Here I will argue that the main factors of relevance to the MPF include the changing nature of the response to globalization in Central America, which in turn has had implications for the character of transnational civil society networking. In doing so, I am also suggesting that Central American civil society can no longer be adequately studied in the context of democratization and peace-building as it was during the 1990s, but that both civil society and the processes it feeds into all need to be looked at in the context of regional processes as well as the global circuits of power to which they respond. In developing this historical backdrop, the chapter demonstrates certain parallels with the history of the WSF as was presented in Chapter 1.

Just as in that case, the MPF emerged out of a search for new organizational strategies at the transnational level, and was influenced by both the Internet revolution and the Zapatistas. However, the chapter also provides grounds for contrasting the MPF to other social forums. Much of what has been written about World Social Forums has been done in the context of growing challenges to the neoliberal model and the rise of the New Latin American Left in South America. But while this larger context has a strong impact on Central America—both discursively by changing the parameters of the conversation, and also materially, by changing the geopolitics and economic flows of the region—we need to read the history of the MPF in the context of Central America’s changing responses to globalization.
1 Central America’s Changing Political Economy

Twinned processes of democratization and economic reform have taken place over the past 15 years in the majority of countries participating in the MPF. These processes constitute the stage on which the Forum has played out. Democratic systems of government were established in Panama in 1989, in Nicaragua in 1990, in El Salvador in 1992, and in Guatemala in 1996, all with important spill-over effects in Honduras and Costa Rica. In the period immediately following democratization, these countries experienced a surge of hope in democratic processes. By the millennium, however, actors and academics began to question, if not democracy, at least the given democratic arrangement, as a solution to continued social and economic ills in the region. As Barnes points out:

> With regard to Central America in particular and Latin America in general … the euphoria did not last very long. Center and centerright governments in many new democracies behaved badly and performed poorly. By the mid-1990s, the topic of discussion was not the triumph of democracy but ‘crisis of confidence,’ ‘crisis of representation,’ and ‘crisis of governability’—based on great fragmentation and instability of party systems, marked failures and corruption of public administration, great volatility in electoral support for parties and politicians, and sharp declines in public confidence in political parties, politicians, and government institutions, shown in opinion polls. (1998, 64)

Growing dissatisfaction with democracy can be linked to the changing political economy of the region. As Robinson (1998, 2001) argues, Central America’s process of peace building and democratization needs to be understood in light of the region’s 30-year long re-articulation with the global economy. To understand why this is the case, we need to review some recent history.

The Esquipulas Peace Accords that negotiated an end to Central America’s conflicts (Zamora 2006) were also responsible for establishing the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA – Central American Integration System). SICA is a regional political organization that was charged with overseeing the political, social and economic integration of Central America. Regional integration was seen as a means to promote peace and democratization throughout the isthmus. As the SICA website notes:
The System was designed taking into account past attempts for regional unification as well as lessons learned from a history of political crisis, belligerent conflict and dictatorial rule in Central America. These considerations, coupled to internal constitutional transformations and the existence of democratic regimes in the region, were contemplated in establishing the fundamental objective of realizing the integration of Central America in order to transform the area into a region of Peace, Liberty, Democracy and Development, based firmly on the respect, tutelage and promotion of human rights. (SICA 2009)

The linking of peace and regionalization was considered necessary because the Central American nations have small, price-taker, export-oriented economies that exist on the margins of the global economy. (This makes these nations very unlike their South American neighbors, but very similar to the other small countries of the Caribbean basin (Klak 2004).) The economies of the region have traditionally relied on rising export prices and significant inflows of foreign investment for growth. As Vilas explains:

"Given the high reliance on imported inputs, the only costs in which there remains some room for maneuver are domestic, mainly the cost of labor. Herein lies one of the reasons for persistent authoritarianism in most of the Central American republics. If export producers are to remain competitive in the global economy, they must keep worker salaries and prices paid to peasants at the lowest level compatible with the reproduction of an abundant, unskilled labor force. (Vilas 1995, 216)"

Insofar as conflict was tied to inequality, the Peace Accords were founded on the hope that Central America could negotiate global economic integration more effectively as a region, using the SICA to enter into a regional block. This, in turn, would provide new economic foundations to support lasting peace and democracy.

This was the theory, at any rate. But with the perspective of time the Esquipulas Accords have come to be interpreted as an ‘out’ for Central America’s fading agro-export oligarchy which faced declining real prices for export commodities on global markets, rather than a means to restructure economic relations in the region as a foundation for democratic peace. This is evidenced by the timing of the peace processes in different countries of the region (Robinson 2001). For example, in El Salvador the peace process came earlier because by 1988 the oligarchy had reconfigured itself economically, and a new right faction had taken control of the country’s right wing political party, ARENA. The very real threat from an organized and well-
supported opposition force led the insurgent FMLN force and ARENA to negotiate behind closed doors in a comparatively brief and controlled process. While ARENA controlled the transition process, they had to make real concessions to the left which helped establish the FMLN as an effective official opposition party\(^1\) (Burgerman 2000). In Guatemala, on the other hand, the peace process started later due to the entrenched political power of the traditional oligarchy. Civil strife did not threaten the state, but rather transnational capital, so even though the left had requested negotiations in the 1980s having recognized that regime change was both unlikely and too costly in terms of the human tolls of civil conflict, it was not until after the business-oriented ‘new right’ National Action Party (PAN) took power in 1994 that substantive negotiations could get off the ground. These factors meant that the peace process in Guatemala was both longer and more contentious, and that the left went to the table with less leverage.

Though the timing was different, the end result was the same. Rather than fundamental changes to the relations of production, the Peace Accords were complicit with the emergence of new transnational elites in the region. As Robinson argues: “… it would be a mistake to assume that because the old agro-export oligarchy has been displaced from dominance by this emergent transnational fraction that the class barrier to development has been overcome […] The transnational model … is not a break with the earlier export-led models; it is a deepening of those models” (2003, 304). For example, in the case of El Salvador, Goitia (in Dalton 2006) shows that the 14 families of the coffee oligarchy have transformed themselves into 8 transnational business groups\(^2\) which dominate financial, commercial, agro-industrial and real-estate investments, and maintain strong ties with ARENA, the ruling right-wing political party.

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\(^1\) “The Salvadoran government delegation focused on the political sources of conflict, promoting procedural agreements that would enable the FMLN to be reintegrated into civilian life and political activity” (Burgerman 2000, 79).

\(^2\) They are Cuscatlán, Banagricola, Banco Salvadoreño, Banco de Comercio, Agrisal, Grupo Poma, Grupo de Sola and Grupo Hill.
The new economic agenda of these centers of power reflects the current perceived strategic advantages of the region in a global market-place: its cheap labour supply and geographically strategic location as a trading hub between North and South America and between Asia and Europe. Maquiladoras and export processing zones as well as docking and transport facilities have become an important part of official development strategies in the region.

By 1997, the new transnational elites in both Central American and the Caribbean began to demand greater trade liberalization so they could compete with the newly deregulated markets created by the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in Mexico (Bair and Peters 2006). Specifically, when NAFTA threatened to divert foreign investment in assembly operations away from Central American and the Caribbean, the countries of these two regions began to press the United States for bilateral trade agreements (Klak 2004, 90). This is an important point because the bilateral activities of national governments began to undermine the processes of regional integration underway in Central America. As SICA sought to remain relevant to the changing economic scenario, its discourses of peace, democracy and regional integration began to give way to those of global economic integration, as is thoroughly documented by Bull (1999). Eventually, however, as Central America’s economic ‘role’ in global trading networks began to crystallize, the SICA fell away as an effective regional political space. As a result, economic decision-making began to take place behind closed doors, beyond the reach of constituencies which had enjoyed the benefits of participation in the SICA process. I will return to this point further along.

Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) was one of these newly-distant processes of economic decision-making that took place beyond the reach of many Central Americans. Announced in 2000 it was intended to create a trade corridor reaching from Puebla, Mexico into the northern reaches of South America. Though it included infrastructure projects, Hussain argues that the
PPP was primarily an attempt to prevent maquilas from migrating out of the region given rising competition from Asia:

PPP seeks to shift the Maquiladora fulcrum from the Mexico-US border. … Significant though maquilas were to Mexican development, they inevitably became uncompetitive. Mexico’s average maquila hourly wage is $2.4, but in its southern states only 96c and in Guatemala $1.4. It is six times higher than China’s 40c. PPP dampens North American industrial outmigration by making CA rather than Asia the industrial destination; and it extends the ripple effects of commercial undertakings, establishing forward linkages across Central America to retain North American fruits in North America. (2006, 63).

Mexican President Vicente Fox lost interest in this project, however, when the US shifted its priorities in the wake of 9-11 (ibid 64), given the failure to achieve regional objectives through the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Cox 2008). And at any rate, the program was built around Mexico’s interests, not those of Central American investors. The PPP was picked up by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) in partnership with the moribund SICA as an umbrella under which to negotiate integration-related loan packages with Central American governments. While this partnership did negotiate some loan packages for trade-related infrastructure projects, the PPP ceased to be the central axis of economic planning in the region (interview #106).

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), announced during a state visit by President George Bush to El Salvador in January 2002, was much more actively sought after by Central American trading partners. While the PPP was tied to infrastructure projects, and the Canada-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CA4FTA), which was under negotiation around the same time, had gotten tied up in difficult political issues, the CAFTA was a straight-forward trade agreement which more directly served Central American business interests (Hussain 2006, 96). The PPP and CA4FTA did offer some important lessons for the CAFTA process, however. The difficult trading points uncovered by the Canadians were avoided, and the special interests and social protests sparked by PPP were addressed through closed-door tactics and backroom deals (Martinez et al. 2005). As a result, the CAFTA proposal achieved
successful implementation throughout Central America by 2006. Meanwhile, the PPP and SICA have never completely disappeared, and Hussain predicts that they will be resurrected now that the CAFTA has been signed (2006, 97). This conclusion is supported by the recent publication of an OECD report which recommends infrastructure developments to “help turn the [Mesoamerican Region’s] strategic location into a competitive advantage,” in the service of light manufacturing industries (OECD 2006, 15-16) as well as to introduce reforms to regional governance in the service of “Mesoamerican” integration. Recommended reforms include introducing a stronger business orientation to SICA, or creating specialized organizations to manage specific business concerns.

What can we conclude from these processes? On the economic front, rather than changing the position of Central America vis-à-vis other countries in the global marketplace, processes of economic integration have served only to transform the basis of Central America’s economies from the export of commodities to the export (figuratively speaking) of cheap labour. As Taylor’s work on world city networks shows, the region remains peripheral in the global economy: ‘a region beyond world cities.’ The service industry in particular consists of small non-global firms which, “operate beyond their normal geographical range by forming alliances or having other, similar relationships with firms in other regions” (Taylor 2003, 78-79). Manufacturing sectors, meanwhile, have tended to adopt a subcontracting model in global commodity chains. This model fails to generate endogenous growth as it provides little opportunity for forward or backward linkages in the local economy, or for the advancement of workers (Bair and Peters 2006; Robinson 2003, 300; Klak 2004, 89). Finally, market niches available for specialized products from the region are “narrow, highly competitive, and fraught with obstacles” (Klak 2004, 78; see also Robinson 2003, 302). The result has not been virtuous growth nor fundamental changes to the relations of production, but the insertion of Central
America into global production networks that provide menial employment but little else to the local economy. Klak concludes that: “…current economic and political trends are not really globalized, but rather highly uneven geographically, in terms of both impacts and control. Peripheral regions are certainly shaped now, in the era of globalization, as they have been under previous phases of capitalism, by the ideas and actions of outside investors and political leaders” (2004, 79).

How have these economic processes affected the political situation in the region? It is important to note that the above described transformations in the model of economic development have taken place in a context of electoral democracies. In theory, therefore, these processes must be subject to some level of national dialogue, or compromise between the major interest groups at the national level. Robinson argues, however, that processes of peace-building and ‘democratization’ taking place during the 1990s were complicit with the entrenchment of polyarchy (or low intensity democracy) as the dominant form of governance: “With its mechanisms for intra-elite compromise and accommodation and for hegemonic incorporation of popular majorities, polyarchy is better equipped in the new global environment to legitimate the political authority of dominant groups and to achieve the political stability necessary for global capitalism to operate” (1998, 471). More recent work raises the question of whether the polite assessment of ‘low intensity democracy’ continues to accurately reflect the quality of politics in some countries of the region, or if perhaps a different moniker is warranted. Salvadoran economist Alexander Segovia finds that:

… the current process of regional economic integration has had important benefits … However, integration has also unleashed or deepened troubling tendencies in terms of the democratization and development of the region. Among the most important are the higher concentration of regional wealth in few hands and the change in the correlation of political forces in favour of regional economic groups and transnational firms. […] This imbalance of regional power (social economic and political) has contributed to the weakening of the State and the redefinition of its role (as a fundamental prerequisite and desired consequence of the new economic model); a crisis in political parties…; the weakness of social actors, such as the middle classes and union movement; the absence of modern and intentioned leftist forces; the coming to power of pro-
Segovia’s observations suggest that after a brief experiment with democracy and economic integration during the 1990s, Central America has fallen back into the oligarchic tradition of its small, price-taker, export-oriented economies. Where the SICA provided limited opportunities to participate in, or at least observe, decision making processes during the 1990s, these spaces have gradually disappeared, leading to an erosion of transparency and legitimacy, a larger divide between individuals in positions of power and the people they represent. The processes of negotiation and implementation surrounding the CAFTA agreements further revealed that democratic processes at the national levels would be subjugated to the objectives of transnational business elites (Martinez et al 2005; Ricker and Stansbury 2006; Cox 2008; Madrid 2009).

It is not surprising, given this scenario, that Central Americans have become increasingly disillusioned with the new economic trajectory and limited democracy of their countries. Quantitative figures published by the Latinobarométre showed that “In Central America, satisfaction [with democracy] has declined from 57 percent in 1996 to 49 percent in 1997 and 39 percent in 2000” (Lagos Cruz-Coke 2001). A later article on the Latinobarométre by the same author found that “satisfaction with democracy is highly sensitive to variations in economic performance” (Lagos Cruz-Coke 2003). And, while brute poverty figures exhibit a general decline in Latin America as a whole (ECLAC 2007), in Central America they do not tell the whole story (Estado de la Nacion 2003). As Gonzalez and Martel point out in a 2006 Social Watch publication about poverty in Central America:

… it is clear that precariedad social (social insecurity – literally social precariousness) affects the majority of the population. This insecurity maintains a close relationship with the inability of the productive apparatus to generate adequate levels of employment, both in terms of number of jobs and in terms of salaries, in accordance with the basic needs of Salvadorans. Unemployment,

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3 The initials “tm” written in italics in citations throughout the balance of the text indicate ‘translation mine’. These indicate quotes taken from Spanish-language texts or from Spanish-language interviews conducted during fieldwork.
underemployment and low salaries translate into permanent difficulties for accessing a dignified and secure employment, as well as adequate levels of health and education. (2004, 55; note that they are making specific reference to El Salvador in this quote; emphasis mine; tm)

Gonzalez and Martel go on to employ 20 years worth of statistical data to demonstrate the erosion in purchasing power in El Salvador resulting from a gradual decline in real wages and a gradual increase in prices for consumer goods. They conclude that, in El Salvador, it is impossible for a minimum wage earner to cover the cost of a basic basket of goods.

More generally Costa Rica’s second State of the Region report published in July 2003 opens with a clear evaluation of this situation:

Central America has lost dynamism in the rhythm of progress that characterized its human development during the first half of the 1990s. In the last 4 years, advances in human development have not maintained the push achieved in the previous ten years during which time the region recuperated social and political stability and left behind the armed conflicts and recession. The best achievements of the 21 Century, in life expectancy, child mortality, health and education coverage, have been affected by economic desecration, disarticulation between the productive sector and employment, some deterioration in equity, social and environmental vulnerability, and a democratization process that maintains its achievements but advances slowly (Estado de la Nacion 2003; tm).

The resulting and well-documented crisis of governability in Central America (Torres-Rivas 2001; Kincaid 2001) has been complicated by a worsening economic situation, which has in turn been linked to rising levels of crime, insecurity and poverty (Ramos 1998; Perez 2003). Together these forces have led analysts to suggest that the Central American states face strong challenges from alternative centers of power from Paramilitary forces (Kruijt and Kroonings 2004), policing extensions (Van Reenen 2004) and organized crime (Savenije and Van der Borgh 2004). Thus it is not surprising that several Central American states used the excuse of 9-11 to implement anti-terrorism laws, which have been used them to suppress the protests that emerged against the economic reorganization shaping the region (Ladutke 2008). This situation has not shown signs of improvement in the last half-decade as the assessment of the 2008 State of the Region report suggests:

The international situation surrounding the isthmus is characterized by the destructive geopolitics of security associated with drug trafficking, the growing vulnerability of the isthmus’ least
developed countries in the international economy, and high international oil and food prices. […] Central America is facing a new and more compelling international situation with the burden of important historical deficiencies: a cheap and unskilled labor force, majority poor populations, a large emigrant population, environmental degradation, and weak rule of law. This scenario reduces the strategic options available for addressing new challenges. (Estado de la Nacion 2008, 23)

The report goes on to offer the following somber assessment:

… from many perspectives, Central America is no longer what it used to be. Its countries have larger populations, they are more urban, their economies have opened up to the international system, and their governments are electoral democracies. These are remarkable transformations. Nonetheless, the sum total of social, demographic, economic, and political changes do not translate into noticeable improvements in human development, nor have they converted the isthmus into a dynamic pole of economic growth and social progress. In fact, these changes have widened the deep gaps between countries and even greater ones within the countries. (Estado de la Nacion 2008, 23)

Given the few options available to the vast majority of Central America’s citizens, many seek solutions in ‘escapism.’ Seeing little possibility of investing in substantive changes that will improve their immediate, personal situations, people escape their context by engaging in migrant labor, turning to addictions, searching for answers in protestant religion, or becoming involved in criminal networks. Escapism can provide immediate solutions, but it may also erode the social capital of communities. It also has the effect of eroding and/or shifting the basis for political mobilization, further exacerbating the crisis of representation in the region. The combination of disenfranchisement, frustration and weakened social ties has in turn put pressure on left-leaning political groups and civil society organizations to seek out new avenues for change, including, in some instances, more radical approaches to pressuring for change.

2 Civil Society Responds to the Peace Process

Central America’s peace process saw a massive shift in the dominant style of civil society organizing in the region. First, social movements which had made radical or insurgent demands during the civil conflicts were demobilized and weakened (Equipo Envio 1992; Oxhorn 1996;
Various factors served to challenge these movements including:

- the demoralization of ending up on the ‘losing’ side of internal conflicts and/or of losing early electoral competitions,
- in some cases, the wide-spread entrance of social movement leaders into party politics, leaving social movements ‘decapitated,’
- the rise of identity-based (or ‘new’) social movements which began to question their ideologically Marxist progenitors,
- the fall of the Berlin Wall and the emergence of the ‘end of history’ argument,
- the rise of conservative politics and neoliberal economics in the region, and,
- in some cases, the reorientation of donor funding away from resistance movements and towards civil society organizations.

Meanwhile, internationally monitored processes of democratic transition opened the gates to a flood of donor financing largely directed toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Howell and Pearce 2001, Chapter 7; Biekart 1999; Foweraker 2001; Robinson 2003, 226-231; Mitlin, Sickey and Bebbington 2007). Drawing heavily on the liberal democratic ideas put forth by Jean L. Cohen and collaborators (Cohen and Arato 1992; Cohen and Rogers 1992; see also Brysk 2000), donors and international actors saw these newly minted “civil society organizations” as a keystone in the process of democratization. NGOs were encouraged to play the role of public policy advocate and technical bridge between government and society at the national level.

These same organizations were also viewed as an important means to validate SICA as Central America moved toward regional integration. The SICA statutes contemplated the formation of a space for “business, labour and academic sectors, as well as the primary Central American forces that represent economic, social and cultural sectors” (ODECA 1991). The space was to be called the Consultation Committee (Comité Consultivo) or CC-SICA for short.
It was felt that CC-SICA would “strengthen the integration, development and democracy of Central America” (CC-SICA 2008).

Given the significance of Central America’s regional integration process, NGOs began to create a series of regional, sectoral, network organizations in areas such as environment, agriculture, human rights, and indigenous rights.\(^4\) These networks were each angling for representation in the soon to be consolidated CC-SICA—a situation exacerbated by donor financing of the evolving efforts.\(^5\) The United National Development Program (UNDP) and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), for example, became interested in the potential of information and communications technologies (ICTs) to create regional networks, facilitate participation by local organizations in emerging regional and global processes, and promote sharing of best practices, among other things.\(^6\) As early as 1994 “SICANet,” the information system of the Sistema de Integración Centroamericana (SICA – Central American Integration System), was proposing to use the Internet to enhance communications between civil society and institutions for regional governance (Calvo-Drago 1994). By 1996, CIDA was providing funding for some of SICA’s networking activities. Meanwhile the UNDP’s Sustainable Development Networking Program (SDNP) was meant to expand networking between local groups.

The road to consolidating a working Consultation Committee was not a smooth one. The SICA, and therefore the CC-SICA, emerged at ‘the end of history,’ a time during which “The

\(^4\) It is important to note, as one interviewee reminded me, that there have been regional networks in Central America for quite some time: “There have always been networks in the region, but the thing is that they have existed as unofficial and unrecognized. In the 1970s there were networks that obeyed interests to mount a revolutionary project at the regional and global level. With this, when we arrived at the 1980s, there were representations in these countries, and there are grassroots communities.” (Interview #76). However, these earlier networks collapsed, got reoriented, or were overshadowed by the “formal” networking efforts of the 1990s.

\(^5\) Robinson refers to this as a “productivist ideology” in which NGOs “carry out programs oriented towards enhancing the ability of poor communities and marginalized groups to participate more effectively in the new economic model” to the exclusion of more political or participatory work (2003, 234).

\(^6\) This is evidenced, for example, by a 1995 report written for the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which argued that donors needed to contribute more funding to support information technology in developing countries (Thurston 1995).
only valid history … is that of the market” and “regionalization … is explained … by the
conformation of economic blocks which group countries from the centre with those that, because
of their geographical location, are identified with a specific region (Hernández 1994, 206-07,
tm). But in Central America, it was also seen as important to contemplate social actors because,
“In order for integration to arrive at the pueblo is it necessary to deepen democracy, making it so
that all sectors have a channel for expression in the new project of Central American integration”
(Hernández 1994, 242, tm). Thus, as the CC-SICA came together, there was a great deal of
political maneuvering as the actors involved began to interpret and take on the new roles that
were expected of them in this new political scenario.

The first regional civil society space associated with SICA reflected this ‘end of history’
line of thinking. The Comité Centroamericano de Coordinación Intersectorial (Central
American Committee for Intersectoral Coordination - CACI) was formed in 1992 to bring
together the broadest possible expression of non-state actors (as represented through regional
network organizations). However:

Despite efforts to arrive at an internal consensus in various themes, some sectors at the interior of
CACI started to question the excessive protagonism of the business sectors, and also because they
frequently held official positions in the Comité Consultivo. In response to these concerns, put
forth by the most belligerent, non-conformist and autonomous civil society organizations, an
Intersectoral Meeting on Alternatives for Central American Integration and Channels for
Participation by Civil Society was held. (Matul 2006, tm; See also Serbin 1997; Herrera Valencia
and Estupiñán Vargas 1998; Monge Granados 1999, 42-43)

The result of this process was the creation of the Iniciativa Civil para la Integración
Centroamericana (Civil Initiative for Central American Integration - ICIC) in October 1993. The
ICIC became an important regional space for civil society actors in Central America. As Matul
explains:

The constitution of ICIC made it possible for many of the themes relative to the participation of
civil society to be seen more clearly; that is to say, the ideological orientation of the platforms
became clearer. In CACI the large business organization were represented, while in ICIC the
popular sectors and NGOs were. (Matul 2006, tm).
CC-SICA was finally consolidated in 1996 with the participation of 17 regional organizations, including members of CACI and ICIC. Additional members were added to represent women and other groups in the following years. It functioned as an effective regional space for civil society articulation for about 3 years.

By the late 1990s, however, it had become clear that CC-SICA in general, and ISIC in particular, lacked any real influence over regional political dialogues (Monge Granados 1999, 48-55). Participants were particularly troubled about being excluded from decision making spaces and relegated to ‘el cuarto a lado’ (literally ‘the room next door,’ often also referred to as ‘el cuarto oscuro’ or the dark room). They began to feel that they were being used as political props to legitimize regional political processes and integration policies. The regional networks formed during the 1990s began to fall apart, as did ICIC. As one interviewee explained it, making reference to several important regional networks from the period:

At this time [1999-2000] there is this issue of the networks starting to weaken. For example, with ASOCODE, they start to get wrapped up in a vision of popular resistance movements versus social democrats. People start to see Wilson Campos [the leader of ASOCODE] as a representative of the latter position – from the point of view of assistencialism. ASOCODE, SETECA, OSTECA, FCN – they all collapsed, a whole organization. All of the networks that were created during 8 years collapsed. (Interview #57; see also Edelman 2003)

While CC-SICA still exists, and the shadows of former ICIC organizations continue to participate, this process has been largely abandoned by civil society actors in Central America.

3 Civil Society Contemplates New Modes of Organizing

By the turn of the millennium, the associational organizations and networks advocated by academics and donors during the 1990s were being questioned and criticized on many fronts. This was no exception in Central America. Civically-oriented organizations came to be referred to as ‘Professionalized NGOs,’ lampooned for engaging in ‘asistencialismo’ (a play on the words assistance and existentialism (to exist) which in Spanish are asistencia and existencialismo).
Central American NGO’s have been accused of being a-political or subject to co-optation by governments, donors or economic forces (Pearce 1998a; McIlwaine 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001, 172). Research has shown how, in practice, they often ended up being the outsourced arm of a dwindling state bureaucracy during a period of structural adjustment (Pearce 1998a, 177). Their transparency and accountability have also been questioned, as has their ability to represent the communities on which they base their legitimacy (Macdonald 1997; Kowalchuk 2003). In particular, the strong divide between urban NGOs and grassroots actors, particularly those in rural communities, has suggested that many NGOs have had little or no connection with the citizens they purported to represent (McIlwaine 1998; Bebbington 2004).

The trend towards forming professionalized organizations served not only to distract many left-wing actors from work of a more grass-roots orientation, but created incentives that led to a reorganization of civil society and a reorientation of its work away from contentious and toward associational politics (Foley 1996). Altogether, Robinson argues that donor support for NGOs in Central America during the 1990s constituted part of the regional project of economic reorganization:

By the 1990s, with political society having been reorganized and secured by the dominant groups, transnational elites in and out of the region turned to penetrating and conquering civil society. The challenge was to undercut the autonomy of popular sectors by incorporating them ‘upwards’ in to the state and at the same time to strengthen dominant groups in civil society as a counterweight to the popular sectors. (2003, 225)

Regional NGO networks also came to be questioned during this period. Robinson argues that they served as “a structure which mediates relations between the popular classes and states in the new transnational order” (2003, 230). He goes on to argue that, “In theory this network [between popular classes, NGOs and states] may be interactive. Yet the evidence from Central America, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere suggests that transnational elites have been able to filter down their agenda through NGO networks with much more ease than popular classes can percolate their demands upward through this network” (ibid). Edelman’s work also supports
When Hurricane Mitch pummeled Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador in October 1998, new visions and approaches for regional civil society organizing found space to express themselves. A new regional and inter-sectoral network called by some actors Centroamérica Solidaria (CS)7

7 Centroamérica Solidaria was the name of the Costa Rican response to Hurricane Mitch. In interviews with Costa Rican actors, they also referred to the regional effort as Centroamérica Solidaria, but Bradshaw, Linneker and
was formed in the wake of the disaster to coordinate regional civil society reconstruction efforts. This group also became the main civil society interlocutor at the Inter-American Development Bank’s (IADB) consultation process around reconstruction (see Bradshaw, Linneker and Zuniga 2002 for details, especially 252-257 and Box 10.2).

In terms of a changing approach to organizing, “Hurricane Mitch represents a breaking point because the impact was so strong in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, it was like an unleashing of the reorganization of social movements and NGOs in the region” (Interview #92; translation mine). Torres, an activist from a Costa Rican NGO who participated in CS, provides an overview of what she considers to be the major differences between CS and other regional networks (Torres 2002, 129-132). For one thing, CS was an autonomous regional space, unlike the ICIC with its historical ties and financial links to SICA. Secondly, CS was more bottom-up in its organization, linking “in a virtuous manner the local, the national and the Central American, facilitating the construction of a regional vision, anchored in the national, that facilitated the relation between the national and the Central American” (tm). Thirdly, as a regional space CS tried to avoid centralized leadership, competition with other regional spaces, or claims to be the official representative of civil society in the region. Taken as an artifact, Torres’ writing provides insights into changing attitudes towards civil society organizing in the region.

The experience of CS was also important in terms of how actors viewed the strategic potential of civil society organizing. In a very immediate way “…Hurricane Mitch put into evidence the fragility and unsustainability of the development model that had been constructed in Central America in the previous decades” (Torres 2002, 79, tm). The hurricane brought into strict

Zuniga (2002) focus on the Nicaraguan effort, and refer to the regional response under a different name This lack of precision around names (among other things – dates, participants, locations are also often difficult to pin down) is common in the region, and it is generally a matter of opinion whether the cause is confusion or competition, though interviewees would be loath to make a judgment either way.
relief the vulnerability of popular communities to outside shocks. Later on, during the reconstruction process, CS gained further insights into the development model, which they felt was the cause of such extreme levels of vulnerability. Through participation in the *Grupo Consultivo para Centroamérica* (Consultative Group for Central America) in Stockholm (1999) and Madrid (2000), actors involved in CS discovered that SICA’s proposal for reconstruction focused on regional economic restructuring (Interview #92; see also Bartra 2001, 43).

Meanwhile, events were occurring in Guatemala and Southern Mexico that would come to strongly influence the conformation of the MPF (Spalding 2004). In 1992, Rigoberta Menchu won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work advancing the cause of Mayan people, raising awareness of the emergence of indigenous movements in the region. In addition, throughout the 1990s Central Americans watched along with the rest of the world the activities of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico. While the significance of the 1994 Zapatista uprising and subsequent occupations and autonomous governance practices of this movement are today debated (Berger 2001) there is no doubt that early accounts of this so-called ‘post-modern’ movement (Burbach 1994), and of its radically democratic practices (Nash 1997) caught the imagination of activists and intellectuals alike (Cleaver 1998; Lowy 1998). Then in 2000, a watershed document was published in Mexico City called *El Sur Tambien Existe: Un Ensayo sobre el Desarrollo Regional de México*. The document opens with a telling definition of ‘the problem’:

The first of January 1994, Chiapas surprised Mexico and the World. The entrance into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, unequivocal proof of a Mexico disposed to enter full force into modernity, coincides for many, not casually, with the discovery of an unknown Mexico, and for others, with proof of the neglect, poverty and marginalization in which a great many citizens find themselves submerged. With the beginning of the armed conflict in Chiapas the gravity of the socioeconomic problem was made obvious. This situation is shared, to some measure, with the rest of the south-east of the country, a region with abundant national resources and with a rich cultural history, but which, at the end of the twentieth century, had not managed to defeat the weight of underdevelopment. (Dávila, Kessel, and Levy 2000, 54, emphasis mine, translation mine)
The document goes on to argue that the Mexican government should implement public policies to promote economic development in the region, specifically those promoting growth poles. The statement provided a ready-made basis for the new Fox administration’s economic and social policy towards southern Mexico.

According to one interviewee, this document, published just before the formal announcement of the PPP in 2001, evidenced the Mexican government’s policy of economic colonization in Southern Mexico, and its desire to extend that policy into Central America (Interview #100). This vision is evidenced in the writing of Mexican activist and academic Armando Bartra: “Shamefully, the government’s plans for the South are a combination of demagogy, counterinsurgency and hopes – not always founded – for a new and purely industrial colonization” (2001, 31; tm). And further:

The document distributed in March 2001 with which the PPP makes its formal presentation is a clear example of a double discourse. In the so-called Base Document – as inconsistent and loose a document as any – coexist two proposals: paternalistic and clientelistic social development, sustained by service and social programs, and the savage colonization with transnational capital, favored by the State through guarantees, infrastructure and credit. … And given that capital demands guarantees, a social policy of counterinsurgency and control is indispensable, as it permits the maintenance of “social tension” and reduces the political “risk”. (Bartra 2001, 41-42; tm)

When Fox gained the Presidency of Mexico in 2000 and announced the now famous Plan Puebla Panama, the members of Centroamérica Solidaria concluded that this was what the IADB and SICA had been working towards all along. In fact, the Plan has been called a ‘conceptual umbrella’ because it consolidates a series of disparate initiatives already financed by various multilateral lenders such as the IADB (Barreda 2001). Subcomandante Marcos, intellectual leader of the Zapatista movement, was quick to condemn PPP as an assault on native peoples (Spalding 2004, 6 citing Rendón 2001). And throughout 2000, meetings of civil society actors were held in the cities of Oaxaca, San Cristobal de las Casas, Tapachula and Guatemala City to discuss its significance for the peoples of southern Mexico. These smaller meetings
culminated in a Forum on Globalization held in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico in November 2000. It was at this event that the decision was made to convene a regional forum in the frontier city of Tapachula with actors from Southern Mexico and Central America with the objective of sharing information about the state of globalization and anti-globalization initiatives throughout the region. With this, the MPF came into existence. As will be documented in Chapter 5, what began as a space to inform and be informed about the PPP in Mesoamerica quickly changed into discussion about the left in Central America given the negotiation of the CAFTA.

4 Conclusions

Several years ago I was asked to chair a panel at the Canadian Political Science Association Annual Congress. The panel was on an unfamiliar topic: political parties in post-democratization contexts. One of the presenters was using statistical modeling to study the question of how and why the number of political parties dwindled over the course of the first three elections following a transition to electoral democracy. He was working with data from the Eastern European context. This was a question not only of why some parties disappeared (or got incorporated into other parties), but also a question of why some other parties persisted. The presenter had a good explanation for party disappearance - he argued it was because of the failure to win an election. This is not an outrageous assumption to work from. The discourses produced by parties, academics and the press would lead you to believe that the most important objective of parties is electoral victory. But then, how to explain the second part of his puzzle? I suggested he look past common discourses about party objectives and re-examine his central assumption. Thinking of the Guatemalan context, where there is a multitude of political parties, but party institutionalization is low (Asies 2004; Mack 2006), I argued that parties are not
necessarily formed to win elections, but rather for other reasons, especially in uncertain contexts, such as forming a power base or gaining access to significant spaces for decision making or control. They become a means to navigate uncertainty from the relative comfort and safety of a recognized organization. Certainly not every electoral system allows for a multitude of political parties, (the situation in Guatemala is unique in Central America), but the conversation got me to thinking about the organizations mediating between state and society, and the drivers of development and change, in the Central American context.

What can be concluded from the discussion presented in this chapter about the changing character of Central America’s political economy, and of the factors setting the backdrop for the MPF? There are several important points to note about this overview of Central America’s reintegration into the global economic arena. The processes of economic restructuring shaping Central America since the Esquipulas Accords have increasingly taken place behind closed doors, through processes that exclude the vast majority of society, and with questionable implications for the social and economic well-being of the majority of the region’s peoples. Although flawed, as a process of regional integration the SICA provided a wide variety of interests with some means of informing themselves about, and interceding in, the processes of global economic integration being undertaken in Central America. Furthermore, SICA offered the hope that Central America would leverage its strategic location and combined strengths to enter global markets on more favorable terms. With its demise it became clear that the governments of Central America would compete with each other to enter global markets on terms that principally benefitted a narrow segment of society. These were processes that were taking place outside of the region, beyond the control or even the view of ordinary people, or even well-placed academic or social justice observatories.
An overview of the region’s political economy is presented in Table 3. Of primary importance is the recognition that official decision-making is being carried out through a dual governance structure in the region. At the level of individual states, the political compromise is fragile and contested, and governance is managed through low-intensity democracy. The compromise is held together through a combination of threats of violence (militarization or violent repression), appeals for international support, corruption or coercive tactics, and populist electoral discourses. Meanwhile, regional level institutions and processes offer a relatively unaccountable *de facto* federated governance structure. Key decisions about the character of the

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**Table 3: Characterization of Central America’s Political Economy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Responses from Key Actors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regional Level</strong></td>
<td>Unaccountable <em>de facto</em> federated governance structure that sets key tenets of economic development model.</td>
<td>Take advantage of accountability vacuum. Compete with other members for ‘best deal’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State Level</strong></td>
<td>Fragile and Contested States lacking in legitimacy / authority. Challenged by various alternative centers of power.</td>
<td>Oligarchic tendency. Indications of militarization. Appeals for international support to legitimize regimes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Mediating” Groups</strong></td>
<td>Exclusion from regional dialogue; Transformation of role from mediating to powering; Challenges to state authority / legitimacy (insurgent tendencies, criminal networks, etc.)</td>
<td>Radicalization; New process of mobilization and legitimation; Competition for Recruitment; Construction of spheres of security and legitimation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Society</strong></td>
<td>Insecurity, Exclusion, Delegitimization of Democracy</td>
<td>Reactionary tendencies; escapism (religion, migration, addiction); disaffection / disengagement; radicalization; ‘turn inwards, turn away from state, turn towards alternate centers of power’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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8 This table is inspired by Skidmore and Smith’s (2005) general characterization of patterns of change in Latin America through different historical periods. In that table, the current period is marked by economic crisis and neoliberal reform, increased mobilization, and limited democracy. Here my intention is to make a similar generalization for the Central American case.
economic development model are established at this level. Participating state actors can take advantage of the accountability vacuum to advance unpopular development policies, but also compete with other members of the ‘federation’ for the best deal, or best positioning within the deal. Meanwhile, at the level of society, the vast majority of people find themselves excluded from governance processes as well as from the benefits of the region’s development model. Their lives are marked by insecurity, and they have become disillusioned with democracy as it has been implemented in the region.

Together, this dual governance structure and the growing disillusionment of society have important implications for the character of groups mediating between the state and society (Migdal 1994). Official channels for participating in regional policy discussions are few and/or weakly institutionalized, and the same is often the case at the state level. Thus mediating groups have undergone a transformation since the 1990s era of democratic euphoria. Where before these groups worked to be interlocutors between state and society, now they are constructing alternative bases of support that will allow them to pursue ‘powering’ strategies. As Koonings and Kruijt argue (here making reference to the authoritarian regimes of the pre-democracy era), “Whereas the ‘old violence’ revolved around defending or challenging the power of the state and the position of certain regimes, new violence entails in a way its ‘democratization’ in the sense that a variety of social actors pursue a variety of objectives on the basis of coercive strategies and methods” (2004, 8). The Central American panorama includes business associations that lobby government officials for favorable concessions, criminal organizations that create and/or exploit voids in state penetration and control, civic organizations which pressure for democratic institutional reform, and civil society organizations which seek to influence decision making processes through protest. As Koonings and Kruijt go on to explain, this situation represents a hidden form of state-failure where, “on the surface the institutions and practices of democratic
politics, civil society and the rule of law hold sway; at the core, these very notions are undermined by violence” (2004, 9). In this sense the democratization of Central America provided a context for radical changes in the organization of authority and representation around electoral politics. But the limits of democratic consolidation have led to a second transition in the organization of authority and representation around coercion and violence. Challenges to the fragile consolidation of Central American states thrive in the hothouse of low-intensity democracy, and provide a counterpoint to the controlling and coercive tactics of the ‘new’ oligarchy. Interestingly, in the Central American case these threats take place not only at the level of national states, but also at the regional level, vis-à-vis processes of regional integration. Thus both organized crime and civil society engage in regional networking as they work to influence policy processes that will have a bearing on their respective bottom lines.

The MPF arose in this context of changing relations at the regional level. Prior to the 1990s, regional networks of civil society actors in Central America established and maintained relations within a context of civil conflict. During the 1990s civil society networks were transformed in light of the double process of democratization and regional integration. It is important to note the significance of this shift: a space like the MPF would have been impossible prior to 1990. However, we should not confuse the possibilities opened up by democratization with the constitutive realities of the current political scenario in Central America. The MPF takes place against a particular political backdrop which has implications for its internal functioning. The mediating organizations that participate in the spaces of the MPF operate in a political scenario in which authority and representation reflect insecurity, exclusion, weak institutions and unconsolidated power.

This is significant for two reasons. First, although the WSF and MPF emerged at the same time and have both taken inspiration from the Internet revolution and the historical
example of the Zapatista movement, the circumstances under which the respective forums have been carried out are quite different. It is clear that the search for alternatives promoted by the WSF means something very different in Brazil, Bolivia and Venezuela than in does in Guatemala, Nicaragua or Costa Rica. The Central American nations are not experiencing a political reawakening and reinvigoration of democratic processes resulting from the exhaustion of the neoliberal economic model as is purported to have occurred in South America. Rather, it would be more accurate to suggest that neoliberal restructuring has long since determined the character of the Central American political-economy, and that these export-oriented economies are engaged in restructuring to maintain their position within global commodity chains with implications for social relations and political practices.

Secondly, we should no longer be thinking about Central America’s civil society in the context of democratization and regional integration as was done in the 1990s. The days of assuming that the region’s civil society actors are necessarily pro-democratic civic forces or necessarily pro-liberation social justice actors are past. Both the regional political and economic scenario and the response of Central Americans to their local reality have important impacts on political mobilization. Given the difficult political and economic climate, individual Central Americans have also been repositioning themselves vis-à-vis global commodity chains through strategies such as alternative production and marketing, migration, worship and crime. Meanwhile, as Segovia’s work (cited above) suggests, the Central American left is weak, and faces a geo-political context and political-economy with important implications for organizing. In particular, the attenuation of spaces for political expression puts pressure on political positions to radicalize, while the preoccupation of ordinary people with survival makes mobilization more challenging. All together, leaders within the Central American left face a context wrought with insecurity in which it becomes necessary to build up and/or maintain power bases that can shield
them within a complex political environment, even as they are searching for alternatives around which to mobilize people. The strategies they use to generate legitimacy, and the ways in which legitimacy is conceived of, shift to reflect the constitutive political environment in which they operate.

Given all of this, the MPF could be understood as a space of mobilization against the processes of globalization affecting Central America, but Chapter 5 will argue that this is not necessarily the best way of understanding the processes of mobilization taking place within the MPF or the wider political scenario in the region.
Chapter 5
History of the MPF

As the preceding discussion established, the MPF was in line to become an expression of larger shifts taking place in Central America. The question is, however, what sort of expression the MPF would be. Some authors have viewed the MPF as a social movement that arose in response to the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and as such, have applied elements of social movement theorizing to explain the functioning and import of the space (Spalding 2007, 97). This mirrors the discourses that emerged from the MPF during the middle period of its history. But as Chapter 4 demonstrated, the MPF emerged out of a longer trajectory of historical processes that caused the left to search for new organizational models so that it could address a changing political and economic context. With this in mind, this chapter will demonstrate that the search for new modes of organization and a new collective political subjectivity was not always met with clear answers about how the MPF should organize itself or what its goals should be. This puts into question the use of theories of mass social mobilization for analyzing forum activities.

In this chapter I present the history of the MPF as told through two sets of official documents, each of which was produced in the follow-up to the various forums. The first are the official *declarations* from each event, which were typically written by the national organizers of each event and revealed at the closing ceremony. The second are the official *reports* from each event, which were produced by the local organizing committee after each event and made available thereafter. Sometimes these official reports were presented at the subsequent forum. These documents give a general sense of how the MPF changed over time, and are reflective of the major concerns of the organizers of each forum event. A chronological list of social forums
and related events is presented in Appendix 2, while details about each event including the topics covered, the number of participants, and key actors are presented in Appendices 3 and 4.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first considers the initial two MPFs which were characterized by academic presentations about the PPP. These two events carried an undercurrent of debate about the relationship between NGOs and grassroots actors within regional networks. The second section looks at the middle three MPFs, which debated the possibility of forming Mesoamerican political subject in response to the negotiation of the CAFTA trade agreement with the United States. The final section looks at the most recent two MPFs, which took place in the post-CAFTA context. These two forums adopted a model more closely resembling that of the WSF. The concluding section of the chapter considers the overall history of the MPF, and sums up the argument for why the theoretical perspectives presented in Chapter 2 lack sufficient leverage to explain this phenomenon.

1 Initial Forums

The many small meetings about the PPP held in southern Mexico and Guatemala during 2000 culminated in the idea of a regional forum that would broaden discussion about the impending trade corridor. The Tapachula Forum for Information, Analysis and Proposals from Mesoamerican Civil and Social Organizations: The People are First Before Globalization, held in Tapachula, Mexico in May 2001 was a response to the formal announcement of PPP and the larger discussion about its implications for Mesoamerica. The event reflected a growing awareness of shared challenges between Southern Mexico and Central America. This and the second event, Xelaju Forum: Analysis, Discussion and Proposals about Plan Puebla Panama, held in northern Guatemala in November 2001, were more ‘academic’ in their orientation, placing emphasis on presentations by experts, followed by round tables where participants could
discuss the implications of what they were learning. The documents about these two events consist primarily of speeches given by academics during the events. Nonetheless, the introductions from these documents, as well as the declarations from each event (as reproduced in the reports) prefigure debates that would later emerge within MPF.

In particular, the documents from the first MPF evidence tensions between the grassroots or radically democratic organizational style of the Zapatistas and the top-down, NGO-driven network organizations that had been formed with donor assistance during the 1990s. For example, the overview of the first Forum offers the following observation on the changing nature of organizing in the region:

It was evident during the Forum that there is notable maturity in local organizational experiences despite coming in many cases from conventional forms marked by centralism, verticalism, ideological dogmatism and vanguardism; and in other cases by corrupt populist corporatism. The forms of organization that arose at the Forum itself privileged horizontal procedures and assemblies in debates and decision-making, which starts to prefigure superior forms of organization that in different ways recall principles of self-management and autonomy. (FMP 2001a, 2; **tm**; emphasis mine)

This picture of radical democracy and rejection of vanguardism is not surprising when one considers the list of attendees at this first forum. The vast majority of participants at the first MPF came from Chiapas, Mexico, and of the remaining delegates the majority came from the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Puebla, the Distrito Federal, Tabasco, Campeche and Yucatan, some of which were sites of struggle during the Zapatista uprising of the early 1990s. The discourses contained in the report from the Tapachula Forum closely mirror the central ideas of Zapatismo. This is particularly evident in the introduction to the report which includes this lengthy homage to the Zapatista movement:

… the popular response has not waited: communities and organization have raised their voices to say Enough! and to demand from states a real consultation and the will to incorporate alternative and valid proposals into projects. As such, before the march of misery begins to emerge a Great Mesoamerican Anti-Globalization Front that rises up to confront the arrogance of Capital and its loyal servants of always: the regional governments of one or another stripe. In this trajectory of social insurgency one of the most important local experiences in the region in the last years is without any doubt the current Zapatista movement: its legitimacy and the originality of its forms of struggle have gained global acclaim and have represented an unbeatable shield against the
repressive and militaristic temptations, so desired by the pseudo-democratic thugs and bosses of the entire region commanded by the United States. Thanks to the collective solidarity and to the women and men of the corn, those of the colour of the earth, the debate about indigenous rights and culture finds itself among the most important matters pending social transformation in Mexico and the region. (FMP 2001a, 4; tm; emphasis mine)

… as well as the official declaration, in which signatories pledge to:

… promote processes of integration for our pueblos under democratic principles of equity, justice and sustainability emanating from the needs and the cultural, social and economic diversity of each one of them. History has shown us that only through processes of planning and integration from the bottom up can respect for the rights of the pueblos, communities and society as a whole be assured, starting from a corresponding respect for diversity. (FMP 2001a, 6; tm).

But curiously, the signatories to this declaration also pledged to begin the construction of an alternative ‘Plan Panama Mexico’ and to maintain contact with each other as they began to construct “a ‘Grand Mesoamerican Social Alliance’ as an instrument to strengthen the Hemispheric Social Alliance” (FMP 2001a, 9, emphasis mine). The statement stands in stark contrast to the principles of Zapatismo. Alongside the many grassroots organizations at the event were a handful of Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan NGOs representing the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA),¹ a coalition of network organizations opposed to neoliberalism. The HSA has roots in the struggle against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), but formally emerged in 1997 at the time of the Belo Horizonte Meeting of Trade Ministers from the Americas in response to the pending Free Trade Agreement of the America (FTAA). Like other regional networks that emerged in the 1990s (and as discussed in Chapter 4), the HSA struggled with verticalism and elitism:

… perhaps the biggest challenge that lies ahead for the HSA is to fulfill its mandate as an agency for social inclusion and democracy. While social movements normally arise from grassroots mobilization, the idea of the HSA was conceived by the leaders and professional cadres of civil society organizations across the region. The HSA must therefore take a step back and expand its mass base appeal. (Legler 2000, 13; see also Saguier 2007).

¹ The coordinating group of the HSA includes several organizations that were present at the first MPF such as the Initiative on Central American Integration (ICIC), Mexican Free Trade Action Network (RMALC), and the Central American branch of the Latin American Congress of Rural Organizations (CLOC).
The declaration from the first event reads as if HSA actors were planting their flag on the MPF. In doing so they were pointing the MPF in the direction of particular network organizational models as well as pre-determined agendas.

The declaration from the second, Guatemalan MPF reiterates the commitment to forming a Mesoamerican network working together with the HSA. The major conclusion of the second forum was summed up in the following paragraphs:

The debates demanded that the Xelaju Forum 2001 turn to the construction of a Mesoamerican collective action network, oriented both to the PPP and to the FTAA project. The development of new networks and forms of cooperation was also proposed around various themes, such as maquilas or complaints against hydroelectric megaprojects. …

In the 2001 Xelaju Forum we agreed that in the social process to reject free trade and imposed globalization it is necessary to develop the largest quantity of social alliances possible starting from popular and social organizations and NGOs in order to drive punctual actions around specific themes. (FMP 2001b, 2)

The document goes on to propose the establishment of a network of organizations and communities against globalization and the PPP. In addition to ratifying support for the HSA, this declaration also ratifies support for the World Social Forum, “of which we feel a part” (ibid), as part of a strategy to extend regional networks and facilitate information flows.² From its inception, therefore, the MPF was a space within which organizational and ideological tensions were played out. On the one had there was a call for the creation of radically democratic spaces, but on the other hand forces at work within the MPF sought to orient it around specific policy agendas and shape it in the image or existing organizational projects. All of this came to bear on how the MPF changed after the 2002 announcement of the CAFTA initiative.

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² The first WSF took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January of that year; the second MPF took place 10 months later, and 2 months before the second WSF which took place in January 2002. Interviewing revealed that delegates to Xelaju attended the first WSF, and were scheduled to attend the second. What is more, the results of the first WSF would have been amply disbursed and discussed throughout southern Mexico and Central America. Interestingly, when the WSF formed its hemispheric council, the HSA became a member.
2 The MPF and the CAFTA

The third, Nicaraguan forum, held in July 2002, marked a major turning point in the history of the MPF. For one thing, despite continued references to the PPP, the immediate threat of this initiative had diminished by 2002, given changing relations between Bush and Fox in the post 9-11 political context (see Chapter 4). As a result, the MPF was left casting about for a new agenda around which to convene people (interview #106). This, combined with the fact that the forum was held in distant Nicaragua, meant that far fewer Mexican delegates were in attendance, and the MPF began to take on a distinctly Central American flavor. When President George Bush visited San Salvador in January 2002 to formally announce the CAFTA negotiations, a clear new focus emerged around which to organize the event. The urgency of the CAFTA struggle swelled attendance at the Nicaraguan forum, and the question of how to respond to the CAFTA became a lightening rod for debate. Participants hotly contested whether the left should pursue an agenda of *incidencia* (policy advocacy) or *resistencia* (resistance) vis-à-vis the trade negotiations. The debate brought to the fore already existent tensions between those who supported grassroots efforts, and those who pursued NGO-led networking initiatives. Ultimately the position of resistance was adopted by the majority of the participants, and supporters of policy advocacy were marginalized within the space.  

All of this is reflected in the official report from the third forum. While the previous two forums had been convened with the objective of informing participants about the implications of the PPP, the “representatives from the Mesoamerican organizations that elaborated and approved the proposal to realize the Forum in Managua,” decided to change the “objectives, methodology and dynamics” of the event (FMP 2002, 5). Specifically, a decision was taken to: 1) move beyond a discussion of PPP to create a resistance movement against all expressions of the

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3 See Chapter 7 for further discussion of this episode.
broader “Mexican-North American offensive,” including structural adjustment and free trade agreements; 2) incorporate evaluation and solidarity into this process in order to “visualize and advance the construction of a model of well-being for our populations,” and 3) bring a more political character to the event such that any seminars or workshops would contribute to the formation of said movement (FMP 2002, 5).4

What would this emergent ‘movement’ look like? The report includes lengthy discussion about this issue:

> A movement is not a political party, since we are not trying to take government power, which is not to say we are divorced from politics or concerns and necessities for freedom or welfare strategies. A movement can have alliances with other public forces or not, including government and political parties, as long as the identity of the movement is protected.

> A movement is not a federation of guilds or unions, but it can include in its interior guilds, unions or any other form of organization in existence.

> A movement is characterized by the mobility of individuals or groups around a ‘central claim/grievance’ (bandera reinvindicativa which literally translates to ‘flag of vindication’) or a program of struggle, but the central claim or program is prioritized above the apparatus or organ behind it. All those who identify with the central claim can participate in the movement as individuals or as collectives of any type as long as their participation contributes to strengthening the movement and not the organism or acronym from which they participate. We believe that in the Mesoamerican movement there are no privileged subjects or organisms or conceptually instituted hierarchies, nor individual leaders or decisive acronyms. We say this because of the proposals of some compañeros who suggest that social movements should be the ones who conduct these forums, while others say that it should be the NGOs, and others political parties, etc. Historical experience shows that the veracity or authority of a hegemony is gained through daily practice, around the concrete grievances of the people. We believe that in this way, daily struggle will dilute dogmatisms, sectarianisms, hegemonies that we all carry. (FMP 2002, 7; *tm*; emphasis mine)

The text also supplies several guidelines for ‘popular integration’. These include improving the participation of local groups in the Forum through the use of quotas allocated by sector, as well as incorporating political acts into the event, such as visits to projects or protest marches. In this case, the final declaration from the forum does not mention the HSA or the WSF but instead ratifies, “our disposition to resist, using all the forms of social mobilization within our grasp, putting always first the flags of dignity and national sovereignty in a framework of solidarity and

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4 The emerging effort was renamed the Mesoamerican Movement for Popular Integration, but the authors of the report concluded that their ideas should be presented for approval at the subsequent forum in Honduras. At that time the name was again changed and ratified as the Mesoamerican People’s Forum.
integration that has as the pueblos its principal protagonists” (FMP 2002, 11). This description of the MPF can be read as both a reaction against the role of the HSA within the MPF, as well as approval for the Zapatista and WSF models. More importantly, however, the Nicaraguan forum seeded the idea that the MPF should become a unified space of resistance against the CAFTA, an idea which led to larger discussions about the possibility of forming a regional political subject in Central America. It was not possible during field research to locate the origins of this proposal, nor was it possible to identify a clear definition of this term. Instead, the question of how to define the concept was itself the topic of intense debate during the subsequent meetings. This is to be expected, since as Haarstad explains, collective political subjectivity is a process informed by theory rather than a concept defined by theory:

Collective political subjectivity can be understood as the theory and practice of constructing a project around the interests of a broad range of actors who can negotiate the fundamental power relations in contemporary capitalism. Here theory and practice are mutually constitutive, since theory is derived from observation of practice, which in turn receives much of its imagination from theory. Leftist discourse presents several competing, or complementary, approaches for theorizing the possibilities for concerted action towards common goals outside the category of class. (Haarstad 2007, 57)

Hence the suggestion that the MPF should form a regional political subject would, out of necessity, have raised debates about the nature of the left and the best way to achieve change in the contemporary era. These debates would have revolved around precisely the sorts of theoretical divides explored in Chapter 2 (for example: Read 2005; see also Alfaro Molia 2004).

The fourth MPF attempted to implement the intentions of the Nicaraguan event by creating “…a space to denounce, mobilize and permanently resist; to recover morals and our national, afro-indian American and popular identity; also of solidarity with the struggle of the pueblos of the world to strengthen the unity of popular Mesoamerican resistance movement”

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5 The final declaration from the third Forum mirrors the sentiments of the official report. For example, it is noted that one of the “principal problems that popular organizations run up against in their purpose and in the formation of their alternatives is the domination of the capitalist system as a form of political, economic, social and cultural organization” (FMP 2002, 10). Further on, the declaration notes that through education about the negative impacts of the PPP they can “visualize experiences of struggle and labour to advance in the construction of an alternative economic model based in the popular economy…” (FMP 2002, 11).
The main task of this event was to define strategies that could be used to confront and undermine neoliberalism. But while the declaration from this forum outlined a concise analysis of the many problems caused by neoliberal policy reforms in the region (such as labour flexibilization), it was short on concrete proposals. This was the largest of the MPFs to date, and as a result of methodological limitations and the size of the meetings, the event managed only to generate lengthy and diffuse lists of action plans (FMP 2003a, 77-79).

Frustration and impatience can be read in the transcription of the closing remarks:

Each day we become more conscious that we are Mesoamericans, our identity is this, this is our homeland. It has been very difficult to realize this Forum, both for those who have arrived and for those who have been here trying one way or another to receive you. We hope that you do not take into account our errors, but that you only see the faith and solidarity with which you have been received. We have a plan of action, we have some outlines for a declaration. The important thing in all of this, compañeros, is the commitment that we acquire here. It is not an issue of methodology and anti-methodology; if the things that we do come from the heart, if we put our conscious into this struggle, be sure that we will come out ahead. (FMP 2003a, 86).

The final paragraph from the declaration belies the difficulty facing the Mesoamerican process, and the specific challenges faced by the organizers of the fourth Forum:

The complex reality of the region demands the strengthening and consolidation of a Mesoamerican movement that can stand in a unified way for an iron resistance against the projects of commerce and investment. For us the key is social organization accompanied by literacy campaigns and circulation of information about commerce-investment, improving communication and mechanisms for articulation between networks, organization and movements on the local, national and regional levels. Advancing in the conformation of an alternative project born from and for the pueblos is an immediate challenge. (FMP 2003a, 85).

Both this document and the evaluation that followed highlighted the need to work on strengthening the capacity of the bases in Central America, and generate alternative models of popular power, if the MPF was going to be able to articulate a movement. This explains the name finally bestowed on the forum during the Honduran event: the Mesoamerican People’s Forum. In order to achieve this goal, the evaluation which took place after the Honduran forum stressed the need to create a more permanent process of resistance in the region (FMP 2003b).

With this in mind, the formation of a Mesoamerican political subject became a central topic of conversation at the fifth forum in El Salvador, and formed the main ‘official’ rational for
the creation of a regional Comité Mesoamericano (CM - Mesoamerican Committee) to guide the MPF process. In its conceptual ‘ideal’ the CM was a sort of matrix organization with two representatives from a national level organization in each country (the ‘National Referent’) that represented the broadest possible expression of the left, as well as two representatives from each regional level thematic network. National referents were meant to send one man and one woman to each meeting of the Comité. In this way the thematic, national and gender interests of each participant would be represented. This ideal is represented in Figure 3. So for example, Costa Rica could send two representatives from its national referent, Encuentro Popular, to each meeting of the CM, and Grito de los Excluidos could also send its representatives to CM meetings. All together, a meeting of the CM might convene some 35 individuals from various expressions of the left. The committee charged itself with a number of tasks including:

- creating continuity between one event and another in order to foster the formation of a regional political subject;
- encouraging local events in the run-up to the forum to broaden participation in the process;
- providing a means for regional sectoral networks (such as Grito de los Exluidos) to give their input into the process;
- providing input from the regions into the organization of forums so that they were more representative of regional (rather than host-country) concerns;
- ensuring the inclusivity of the MPF by overseeing the activities of national organizing committees, and providing a recourse for groups that might be marginalized from the process;
- overseeing the use of donor funds by the national organizing committee; and,
- evaluating the results of each forum.

In short, the CM was conceived of as a democratic institution that would uphold the best interests of the MPF.

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6 Popular Encounter - a Costa Rican umbrella organization that became the official interlocutor for the MPF in that country.
7 Cry of the Excluded - a hemispheric social justice network which has a Central American regional presence.
Under the guidance of this now formalized regional committee, the national organizing committee of the fifth MPF trained some 75 facilitators in an attempt to limit the thematic diffusion that had occurred in Honduras (interview #92). One of the major themes addressed at this forum was that of the political subject. No clear conclusion was reached on the topic in El Salvador, but the report from this event documents the conversation, putting some of the different positions on the table (FMP 2004a, 45-49). This text starts with an essay by Costa Rican sociologist Wim Dierckxsens (in FMP 2004a, 45). This is followed by a statement by one participant, Lorena Zelaya, who notes that a discussion of this kind, “…should be done with the understanding that the work is different than in other round tables; that in no moment does it try to have a finalized document; that this was the start of a discussion that requires a lot of detachment and disposition from each participant...” (Zelaya in FMP 2004a, 49). Finally there
Dierckxsens’ article presents one vision of what a political subject might look like. In this vision, change happens through “an inclusive struggle without vanguardism” in which individuals acquire their full potential as political subjects through spaces that are created to facilitate their development. Specifically the political subject is constituted through “organization and self-organization of those from below to create, in the medium term, through a horizontal and inclusive process, a new democratic power … where this new power no longer replaces the masses in the realization of a change in rationality.” (FMP 2004a, 48) But for Dierckxsens, simply strengthening political subjectivities is not enough to ensure the ultimate goal of transforming the capitalist system. In addition to a means for change, he also offers an objective: “the politics of alliance will be based in uniting those social forces that share the same end: a change in economic rationale.” (FMP 2004a, 49) Specifically, he says that social movements will come together initially to fight for short term changes in the economic system, such as the Tobin Tax. Building on these initiatives, they will fight for medium term changes such as reforms to global financial institutions. But they must ultimately come together around a common long-term goal: “The simple sum of specific alternatives … does not guarantee change in the economic rational. Struggles need to be inscribed in a utopia such as a mobilizing project oriented towards the modification of the economic rational in the long term. Long term alternatives cannot appear except through concrete short term struggles which develop their project in the long term by illegitimating the regime in force.” (FMP 2004a, 47)

Though Dierckxsens’ contribution lauds the radically democratic processes of Zapatismo, (he cites this movement specifically, in fact), his comments ultimately reflect a long-standing tension within the Central American left between revolutionary change on the one hand, and
more gradual social or cultural change, on the other. For example, some activists would question whether a change in economic rational can happen, or would necessarily improve the lot of disenfranchised groups, without a changes in fundamental cultural norms of social interaction. With this in mind, discussion about the political subject in El Salvador was reported to have been complex and difficult. They resulted only in a provisional conclusion: that the political subject would need to be in constant construction, emerging through an articulation of diverse people and organizations, generated by processes of individual and collective reflection and critique. This notion is summed up in the following paragraph from the official report:

Our aspiration is the construction of an integral subject, with social and organizational practices that form an alternative to the capitalist and patriarchal system, redefining the familiar subjective dimension in which the dominant relations of power are constructed. Construct, consolidate, deepened and construct [sic.] the Mesoamerican identity. In this way aspire to a new political culture that modifies styles of leadership and promotes diversity constructing horizontal relations of power. It will be constructed from the specificity of the people. (FMP 2004a, 50)

Rather than presenting their conclusions orally, however, the participants in this round table opted to present a small play, as is documented in the text by Zelaya. Here they used a dramatization to represent the difficult task, at both an individual and collective level, of becoming the political subject, as well as the challenging processes of self-reflection and self-criticism required to achieve this goal. In the play (see Figure 4) several individuals discussed the ‘political subject’ while a single actors stood excluded from the group representing the political subject. As the play progressed, the group-in-conversation began to realize that they were talking about the political subject in a removed or distant fashion - or talking around the
Figure 5: Enactment of Political Subject Debate

From top left: 1) *talking around* the political subject, 2) speaking to the political subject, 3) failed attempt at engaging the political subject, 4) embracing the political subject.

Source: Photos complements of William Castillo from CEICOM, El Salvador
subject. They struggled to engage the political subject in their conversation, but they failed several times. Finally, they (theatrically) put on glasses so that they could see more clearly, and they took off the political subject’s jacket, symbolizing the removal of prejudices that get in the way of self-critique and self-actualization, and they began to ‘embrace’ the political subject. In the end the political subject became part of their group and their group became the political subject that formed the object of their aspirations.

As the author of this account, this is an ideal place to leave the story of the MPF. There is a satisfying circularity to the account: The MPF started out with an aspiration to adopt the example of Zapatismo (Chiapas), but this aspiration ran up against centrist tendencies (Guatemala), confrontations (Nicaragua) and some stumbling (Honduras). Ultimately, however, everything came full circle. In discussing the political subject (El Salvador), the participants realized the impossibility of surgically extracting an ethos of ‘inclusive struggle without Vanguardism’ from the Zapatistas or the World Social Forum and implanting it into the MPF. While examples from other movements could serve as inspiration, the Mesoamerican political subject would need to construct itself from the inside out through processes of self-reflection. Ultimately the MPF conquers the latent influence of ‘old’ organizational styles and begins to pursue new organizational models…?

But while this makes for a complete story, it is far from being the entire story. Some lingering questions need to be answered. Why, for example, is the idea of self-examination so difficult to broach within the Central American left, that its very suggestion needs to be presented through theatrical allusion? Why is it so difficult for these groups to move beyond yet another agenda—that of self-critique—to the concrete activity of creating the ‘horizontal relations of power’ they seek? While the middle period of the MPF’s history is characterized by
the search for unity around new forms of organization, there are hints that perhaps something
deep is going on within the space.

3 The MPF after CAFTA

The question of what made unity so difficult within the MPF was made very relevant to
feminist organizers at the sixth MPF, held in Costa Rica in December 2005. In El Salvador they
had lobbied hard to ensure the final declaration include the following affirmation: “With a
purposeful vision, in the IV Mesoamerican Forum we affirm the need to construct a
Mesoamerican political *sujeto* [subject, masculine] and *sujeta* [subject, feminine], which should
be multicultural and inclusive, with a responsibility to forward our alternatives for the common
good of the pueblos …” But on continuing the debate about the political subject in Costa Rica,
a violent dispute arose between labour leaders, Trotskyite youths, and feminist organizers. The
idea of constituting a political subject through multiple processes of individual self-reflection
was strongly rejected in favor of mobilizing *the* political subject as a unified top-down
organization mobilizing against capital. Feminists were shocked, especially considering what
they had achieved in El Salvador, to discover the depth of resistance to ideas which might
threaten established positions. At the final plenary of the Costa Rican Forum they issued a
declaration condemning, “mysogeny through aggression, discrimination, violence, and exclusion
against women in the realization of the VI Mesoamerican Forum” (Encuentro de Mujeres 2005).
Jannette Cooper, a representative the Costa Rican Association for Afro-descendent Women
issued the following statement to the crowd:

*Compañeras and compañeros: We, the women that gathered during three days at this VI
Mesoamerican Forum have analyzed each of the different round tables that have been realized. As*

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*8 It is interesting to note that this phrase appears in web-based versions of the declaration from the fifth forum (for
example FMP 2004b), but not in the official publication (FMP 2004a), which presents a truncated version of the
declaration.*
you can see, we are wearing a lilac ribbon as a form of protest against the mistreatment towards our participation in the different round tables. (Encuentro de Mujeres 2005)

No final report was published in the follow-up to the event, leaving this feminist declaration and final declaration from the forum (FMP 2005) as its only official public records.⁹ These events made it clear that the MPF was expressing a deeper set of processes occurring within the Central American left. As one feminist organizer put it, “What happened to us is a dramatic expression of the indisposition to modify the relations of power” (interview #98).

What could have happened to cause such a dramatic turn of events? The location of the sixth forum was significant. Costa Rica is a special case within Central America, having achieved higher levels of economic and political development than its neighbors to the north. In the year between the fifth and sixth forums, the CAFTA agreement had been passed in every negotiating country but Costa Rica. Given its long democratic tradition, the debate over the CAFTA agreement in Costa Rica was much more pluralistic and took place through well-established public forums. Prolonged negotiations with the United States reflected the greater complexity of the resulting trade negotiations. During this process, the opposition was able to leverage legal maneuvers to force a referendum on the issue, further delaying its ratification.

Given this context, the sixth forum took place in Costa Rica because it was strategically significant for all involved. The Costa Rican left was much less involved in the MPF during its early history, and only took on the job of hosting when it became strategically relevant to the national anti-CAFTA battle. Participants from other countries, meanwhile, hoped that if the CAFTA failed in Costa Rica, its ratification could be reversed elsewhere. In practice, however, the sixth forum was characterized by discussion about what had gone wrong and by expressions of frustration over the ratification of the CAFTA deal. The guiding objective which had allowed

⁹ In fact, while I was doing field research many people asked if I had managed to acquire a copy of the final report from the sixth forum. Not even the final report to donors had been produced.
so many different groups to set aside personal agendas had suddenly disappeared. Tensions which were manifest beneath the surface of the MPF since its inception now exploded forth, belying good intensions and discourses alike.

After the sixth forum in Costa Rica, the MPF entered into a prolonged period of retreat. Midway through 2006 rumors circulated about the possibility of a seventh forum in Panama in January 2007. These plans were in doubt later that year, however. The Americas Forum was discussing the possibility of holding their third meeting in Central America. If the MPF was moribund, then the Americas Forum could replace it. But even if the MPF still had life, it would schedule its event to coincide with the lead-up to the larger Americas forum. Meanwhile, FRENADESO, the national referent of Panama, was preoccupied with the formation of a new national political subject. A meeting of the Comité Mesoamericano was held in Panama in May 2007 to coincide with the formal constitution of FRENADESO, but still no date was set for the seventh forum. Eventually the seventh MPF was scheduled to take place in Nicaragua in July 2008 in the lead-up to the third Americas Forum, which took place in Guatemala in October 2008.

As in the past, specific trade-related negotiations were used to convene participants. This time, the Association Agreement between the European Union and Central America formed a focus for discussion at the event, as did the ongoing implementation of infrastructure projects related to regional trading networks (which continue to be referred to as the PPP). In addition, an important theme at the seventh forum was the relationship between civil society and elected left-wing governments, given the election of long-time left-wing FMSN leader Daniel Ortega to the Presidency of Nicaragua in 2007, and the electoral campaign of left-wing FMLN leader

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10 The America’s Forum is the Latin American (some might say hemispheric) emanation of the World Social Forum.
Mauricio Funes, which was ongoing at the time of the forum. (He was subsequently elected President of El Salvador in March 2009.)

The convocation to the seventh forum suggests that the MPF had set aside the issue of forming a political subject. Background information published by the organizers positioned the forum as, “…a critical space where diverse activists, representing hundreds of organizations can reflect and plan together – identifying common strategies to fight against the growing inequality, poverty, injustice and militarization that result from the dominant neoliberalism imposed on our region” (FMP 2008 Convocation). The document went on to explain that the MPF “ascribes to the dynamic of the people at the level of the World Social Forum” (ibid) and that it is anti-imperialistic, anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, constructive, collective, inclusive, democratic, multicultural and festive. Of note, the document promised that “An open exchange of experiences related to the central theme is guaranteed, based on the active involvement of all participants and the acceptance of all views” (ibid).

In a similar tone, the final declaration from the event concluded that, “The realization of the VII Mesoamerican Forum has been of vital importance to the continued construction of ideas and articulation of collective actions; it has permitted us to re-encounter each other in much needed discussions and debates that help us to know ourselves better and think about alternative social products for the region” (FMP 2008 Declaration; tm). Having said this, the evaluation of the event included the following sentiment: “The Forum should move towards a more permanent, consolidated structure; it should become a Mesoamerican social movement that exceeds discussion and develops political actions (mobilizations) throughout the region, with a clear political objective …” (FMP 2008 Evaluation; tm). So, there continue to be voices within the MPF that want to see the formation of a regional political subject, even though official accounts of the event chose to avoid the issue.
4 Conclusions

The chapter has shown that the Central American left has been involved in a search for new and different forms of organization and that the MPF was a space through which actors were trying to identify and implement these changes. Taking into consideration the changing political and economic context covered in Chapter 4, the MPF has been complicit in a shift in the predominant mode of civil society organizing at the transnational level in Central America. In this sense, perhaps the most significant achievement of the MPF has been the formation of a regional and inter-sectoral space where the various stands of the left can come together– from union organizers to the women’s movement. But can we go one step further and say that the MPF is also a consolidated social mobilization?

Having reviewed the history of the event, there are several reasons why the logic of social mobilization should be questioned as a framework for understanding social forums. It is true that during the middle period of its history, the MPF became subsumed in opposition to the free trade deal with the United States. During this time, the forum took up the possibility of forming a regional political subject. Here there is the suggestion of forming a unified actor with a clear political agenda. However, if we consider the entire history and scope of the forum, it becomes clear that this was a passing interest rather than the central characteristic or objective. The MPF was meeting to discuss the PPP before the CAFTA was even announced. It was convened again in 2008 in Nicaragua around the Association Agreement between the European Union and Central America. So, clearly social mobilization against CAFTA cannot explain the continuity of the MPF as a long-running event. While the theme of mobilizing a regional political subject became pervasive during the years of the CAFTA negotiations, it did not predominate in MPF discussions either before or after those years.
Perhaps, then, the MPF can be thought of as a social movement responding to globalization in general? Here again there are problems. When the idea of forming a ‘political subject’ was tabled, there was a great deal of disagreement over what that subject might look like. Some understood this to mean the formation of a revolutionary political subject reminiscent of militant organizations from the region’s civil wars (Vanguardist). Others searched for new forms of organization that would engender respect for diversity in the realization of common ends (Culturalist). Still others understood the MPF to be a strategic space with implications for specific political objectives (Cosmopolitan). In fact, throughout the entire history of the MPF there was disagreement within the forum over whether the event was meant to create a regional social movement or merely convene actors for an annual dialogue. Thus, while there are voices within the MPF calling for the formation of a unified political subject, this should not be confused with the actual character of the event, which tends more towards dialogue, debate, articulation or conflict.

All together, therefore, while certain elements of social movement theory might assist in analyzing the role of the MPF in anti-CAFTA mobilizations that took place from 2002-2005, these theories fall short of accounting for the full character and history of the event, or of situating it within the changing political context of the region. To account for the debates taking place within the forum, and to situate it within the larger context of political and economic change taking place in Central America, we need to look at it as a space rather than as an organization or campaign. Is the MPF is necessarily ‘open,’ as the convocation to the seventh forum in Nicaragua promised? In tackling this question Chapter 6 suggests that there is a great deal at stake in regional meetings of left-leanings actors, so openness needs to be evaluated rather than assumed.
Chapter 6
An Insider View of the MPF

After reviewing the history of the MPF as presented in its official documentation, Chapter 5 argued that, even though discursive materials coming out of the forum sometimes suggested a movement in formation, this is not a phenomena best considered using theories of social mobilization. This leaves us with a significant question: if the MPF is not a social movement, then how does it behave? Is it an open space? What is its socio-spatial logic? In order to answer this question, we need to consider the constitution of the event, and in this chapter I do so by allowing an account to emerge from the insider perspectives of the people who populated the MPF. As explained in Chapter 3, the goal of an insider perspective is to “…understand these movements as the collective embodiments of certain practices that express the ideas, beliefs, wishes and hopes of a constituency of people” (2006, 124).

In what follows, I first extend a theoretical framework developed during the process of analyzing interview data. This framework draws on cultural geography and constructivist history to consider how forum spaces are both produced by and producing of the embodied experiences of their participants. The chapter goes on to explain the operationalization of this framework according to categories that arose from interview data, and I then apply the framework to analyze interview results. What comes out of this analysis is a picture of a complex space populated by a variety of actors each of whom carries different objectives into the space, experiences it differently, and offers different accounts of the forum.

Based on this analysis, the chapter ultimately concludes that the MPF is a space best characterized by disjuncture, and that this has significant implications for its socio-spatial logic, as well as for its political practices. This finding offers an answer to question of whether the MPF is an ‘open’ space, and raises the question of how the space is managed. These findings set
the groundwork for the ‘outsider account’ presented in Chapter 7, which offers an explanation of the mechanisms at work within the MPF and how they produce the space given a particular geographical and historical context.

1 An Insider Perspective on the Constitution of the MPF

Grounded research is meant to prioritize the experience of individuals in the production of theoretical accounts of social phenomena. Spaces like the MPF are constituted through thousands of complex interactions between myriad individuals. With this in mind, one interviewee pointed out that any given MPF was not just a single event; it was, instead, an opportunity to celebrate ‘mil mini foros’ (a thousand mini-forums) in the one-on-one conversations that took place between participants (interview #3). The internet is affording some researchers the opportunity to study the constitution of social spaces through the examination of recorded conversations, however in the un-recorded world we continue to be stymied by the combined barriers of complexity and dispersion. The grounded theory solution is to work ethnographically, conduct a sampling of interviews, and allow categories to emerge. I have no choice but to do the same, but I do so with a certain sense of discomfort, knowing that whatever I conclude here, there are individuals who experienced the MPF in radically different ways. Recognizing this, the hope is that the categories that I found in the data reflect patterns that did, in fact, emerge within forum spaces, and enable me to say something relevant about the history, constitution and significance of the MPF.

After reflecting on interview data, and considering various theoretical approaches, I found two frameworks that proved helpful for understanding the MPF as a geographically and historically constituted event. The work of humanist geographers Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1996) and Edward Soja (1989, 1996) provide a useful set of spatial concepts for examining the
constitution of spaces for networking. They distinguish between spatial practice (the perceived, empirical, visible organization of material space), representation of space (how space is conceptualized, abstracted, socially constructed and politically contested) and spaces of representation (how space is subjectively experienced by its ‘users’). By extension, using the work of historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot, history could be thought of as a ‘space’ that is ‘written’ by the confluence of structurally situated agents who experience events through the historically and geographically situated set of capacities afforded them as actors, and a particular purpose as subjects within historical processes (Trouillot 1995, 23). Together, the works of these three authors constitute a site for theorizing at the interstices of “realism” and “relativism” by focusing on the production of space/history rather than the nature of space/history. Through this approach, we can understand forums as spaces that are both produced by, and producing of the embodied experience of their participants, thus complementing the constitutive approach laid out in Chapter 3. In particular, there is recognition here of the relationship between ‘collective meaning’ and ‘previously existing material reality’ (Adler 2002, 98), as well as scope for uncovering the variety and varying importance of ideas circulating with regards to the MPF (Klotz and Lynch 2006, 357).

This model has been operationalized in Table 4 (below) as a basis for presenting the data gathered from interviews. The two left hand columns draw on Trouillot’s notions of agent (structural position) and subject (objectives of historical subjects). In other words, the MPF is the result of a confluence of subjects each producing the space according to their capabilities and their structural position, and should be understood as such. The two right hand columns present ‘spaces of representation’ (experience) and ‘representations of space’ (characterization) respectively. These two columns draw out the difference between what actors experienced in forum spaces as they came into contact with each other, and how they characterized the space in
interviews. I have chosen to set aside the remaining two categories which cover the capabilities of actors to accomplish their objectives, and the bearing of physical space on the constitution of the MPF. The former is addresses implicitly in the experiences and characterizations of interviewees. The latter is not addressed systematically as it would over-complicate the analysis, but it is considered in passing where relevant, for example with regards to questions of financing, travel and time.

While each participant experienced the MPF uniquely depending on their agency, capabilities and subjectivity, it is possible to differentiate between three broad groups complicit in the constitution of the space. These groups reflect categories that were used by interviewees as they discussed the event, and one interviewee in particular identified the three groups as 1) the ‘international bureaucracy’ of personalities and organizations that ‘lead’ forum processes through their discourses and actions, 2) the ‘social coordinators’ who engage in organizing spaces, and 3) the participants who attend social forums (interview #104). While I am conscious of privileging structural position in organizing interview data, I do so with the comfort of knowing that this scheme reflects the experience of interviewees. In particular, the fact that some interviewees criticized the space for taking on these organizational characteristics lends credence to the account (interview #106).

With the term ‘leader’ I am signifying those well-placed individuals whose words and actions have a significant bearing on the activities of a large group of individuals within a particular sector of the left. These individuals may be involved in political parties, or have ties to political parties, but are known more as the intellectual force behind a social movement, a labour union, an NGO network or the like. They have a stake in the direction taken by the wider left, and as such, become involved in efforts to shape significant events. Leaders headed up regional networks or national referents, and populated the Comité Mesoamericano, once it was formed.
These individuals did not typically take on the job of organizing or facilitating events, however. This fell to the tier of organizers, technically proficient individuals with the institutional base, organizational skills, salary and connections necessary to make a large event possible. Often these individuals were based in NGOs that had the benefit of donor financing.

The final group consists of participants. This is a highly heterogeneous group, including actors ranging from local community organizers lacking formal education but with a direct connection to realities ‘on the ground,’ to urban, educated, salaried, middle class technocrats from social justice organizations. While many participants came from NGOs or established social movements, as the MPF matured it put more emphasis on including representatives from the grassroots. Practical concerns made this a difficult objective from the start; civil society actors at the community level often work on a volunteer basis in their free time, and cannot afford to take a week off from work to attend a regional meeting. Two grassroots activists that represented local urban communities described the difficulty for many people in attending forum events:

The expenditures—I personally took US$10 for 8 days—I couldn’t even buy a souvenir from the country. (interview #14)

When it comes to participating, it is difficult for the people. It’s difficult because of what we talked about—their economic situation—because they need to dedicate themselves to their community, because really who helps them to be involved in this is the community and not the NGOs … So they would rather be supporting their people. As a result, when we have sent some compañeros, they have had to help each other out, or the organization looks for a way to support them, but normally it is very difficult to participate in the system of discussions that they propose. Yes we have participated, but we have left things aside, and this is also something that we are criticized for by the bases: the people that we owe ourselves to criticize us, and in the long run, for what? (interview #13)

Another interviewee explained that for many in the union movement, it would be impossible to be away from their jobs for a week, as they could simply not afford to forgo their income; their family would not be able to eat that week as a result (interview #32). Some women also talked about the emotional and logistical difficulty of leaving their children and husbands behind for a week (for example, interview #40). Many participants in the Costa Rican forum had never
attended an event of this kind before; some had never left their country before, many had limited formal education and came from marginalized communities.

Table 4: Constitution of the MPF

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Position of Agents</th>
<th>Objectives of Historical Subjects</th>
<th>Experience within the Space</th>
<th>Characterization of the Space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leaders</td>
<td>Mobilize people;</td>
<td>Highly political:</td>
<td>Publicly: Mesoamerican movement in formation, OR, space to reflect on and/or enact the left; space of mysticism, OR, thematic gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Galvanize “left” vis-à-vis a cause (PPP, ALCA, CAFTA, neoliberalism, globalization, patriarchy); Stake a claim on the space</td>
<td>who’s who, what do they promote, who are they affiliated with, what’s their position?</td>
<td>Privately: casting blame; offering interpretations; PR work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizers</td>
<td>Run “successful” event;</td>
<td>Frequently difficult:</td>
<td>Objectives and impact unclear; coordination fraught with difficulties; looking for meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ensure “guests” have positive experience</td>
<td>too many variables, unclear objectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Find solutions to immediate problems; Learn; Meet others and network; Solidarity and mobilization; Travel/see foreign reality</td>
<td>Foreign; Hopeful; Disappointing; Chaotic; Daunting; Uplifting; Arcane; Educational;</td>
<td>Moral booster; All talk no action; Revolutionary tourism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summing up this discussion, Table 4 presents the operationalization of variables drawn from the Lefebvre-Soja-Trouillot framework discussed above. The starting distinction between agents in different structural positions (which emerged from research data) has been entered in the left hand column. The rest of the table sums up the analysis that emerged when interview data from individuals in different structural positions were considered in light of their objectives, experiences and characterizations. This data is detailed in the following two sections. First I consider the objectives that agents carried into the forum events. This is followed by a lengthy consideration of the ways in which interviewees experienced and characterized forum spaces.
2 Analysis of Objectives

As historical subjects participating in the constitution of the MPF, leaders, organizers and participants talked about different types of objectives, both for their attendance at a meeting of the MPF and of the MPF itself.

Organizers, for example, were concerned about running a successful event as measured against clear criteria, and making sure that their foreign guests would have a positive experience.

Here is a sample of an interview with a key organizer of the fifth Forum, demonstrating the types of issues that these individuals took care of:

We started by forming a Commission of Content and Methodology … We were orienting the process of the Commission that elaborated the documents about content and methodology to present them to the General Coordinating Commission of the Fifth Forum and to the International Committee where finally these basic documents were approved. We had to organize other support. For example, in order to orient all the working tables and sub-tables—there was a group of some 1300 people, they came from popular organizations, very few NGOs—we had to train a group of 80 facilitators that had to go through two workshops to analyze the documents about content and methodology, apply them to their corresponding round table, and organize that table. We created another commission for the final report. The accounts that were included were from each round table and were concentrated by the Commission for Synthesis to produce the report from the fifth forum, but also the final position of the fifth forum—the declaration at the final march. We organized more or less like this. (interview #92)

This individual described the goal of the forum as ‘enabling community organization’ and in the following text you can read the results-style evaluation that is offered of the fifth forum, as comparisons are drawn with previous forums:

The first two [forums] were characterized by participation by many academics, NGOs while the social/popular movements were left waiting. This was the characteristic of Xelaju—that the movements were to be the actors of the forums and this concern was carried to the third forum in Nicaragua where there was a rupture and from there the social movements became agents of social transformation [agenciaron] the forum. By the fourth [forum] in Tegucigalpa it was still filled with magisterial lectures, so for the Forum of El Salvador a change was made in the methodology because what we wanted was that the people had a political dialogue between themselves while taking into consideration the thematically organized pre-forums which is where they elaborated a specific theme and each one brought that position into the larger forum—a political position elaborated ahead of time. So, since all the sectors get mixed and circulate given the round table where they want to be, the important thing was the political dimension. The people in the fifth forum felt that they had the opportunity to make their positions heard, to express what they felt and to be content with the resolutions that came out of the round tables, to feel identified with the positions that came out of the round tables. There were practically no magisterial talks. (Interview #92)
The relationship between forum objectives and personal objectives among organizers was complex. These individuals would typically work closely with leaders in the national organizing committee to establish the goals and methodology for a given forum event. But at the same time, organizers typically came from NGOs that specialized in a particular topic, and were responsible for facilitating their respective thematic round table at the forum event. Thus they also carried personal and organization objectives into the space, given ongoing agendas within a sector, or historical relationships with actors working on particular issues in the region.

Participants, meanwhile, attended forums with a range of personal and organization objectives, and their views on the purpose of the MPF were also highly varied. There were a handful of themes that came up repeatedly in interviews. Over and over again, participants talked about how they sought to learn from each other, find solutions to immediate problems in their community or sector, network with others working on similar issues, see how things were done in another country, and/or demonstrate their solidarity to the larger cause. The following conversation with three individuals who participated in the Costa Rican forum is typical of what interviewees would say when asked what the expected of the forum before attending:

Katherine: What did you expect from the forum before going?
1) … to have a broader knowledge of the issues—the real magnitude of the problem—to be able to transmit this to all my colleagues, the experience and the knowledge, afterwards. To have relations with other spaces. Through the space that we participate in [locally] we have created an Internet space to share and retro-aliment. To learn from the experiences of everyone …
2) … to meet with other homologous organizations, to see not just at the level of the country, but also the impact at a regional level. We need to coordinate, put ourselves in tune with what’s happening, search for alternatives. We arrived at the forum to exchange experiences, to build relations and cooperation, to share experiences and studies. The spaces of the Mesoamerican Forum are much broader. It’s like a family—in the organization we’re like a family, with different perspectives, but we know each other. But when we break out of the family we encounter other realities, diversity. This allows us to get feedback and to reflect.
3) Before going to the forum, my perspective was to learn more about the problems that we have at the local level. One realizes that the issues are large and regional. Relating to compañeros from other countries is very important because one realizes that the work requires greater effort. (interview #74)
Having said this, some participants admitted to having little clarity about the objectives or format of the forum before attending. Take for example the following conversation with some participants from the Costa Rican forum:

Katherine: What did you expect from the forum before going [to Costa Rica]?
1) Given what they said, I more or less had little clarity.
2) I had a bit of contact with some organizations that had organized the forum in El Salvador. I obtained a copy of the Salvador report. I heard the history. When they gave us the invitation it was through a friend from Nicaragua—from the organizers of the round table of the Social Forum in Nicaragua—because we didn’t know the referents in El Salvador. They [Nicaragua] gave us the opportunity to participate [with our organization].

Katherine: Did you have an opportunity to learn about the forum or prepare before going?
1) I don’t think so. The invitation arrived with the round tables where you could participate. First we had to select who would go, and then organize so that each would go to a different round table, depending on their practice, etc.

Katherine: So what did you expect of the event before going?
2) As an association, to have contact with people from other countries, have conversations that would help us to grow politically, organizationally, ideologically—how to work with organizations outside of the country. The perspective that I had about the forum—that it worked to unify forces in all of Central America—that was for me one of the things I aimed for.
1) For me, a space where one could exchange experiences and know more in depth about how the process of popular and social struggle was—because you didn’t necessarily need to be from the far left to go—to know what was happening in Mesoamerica. The idea was also a space for those people who carry the inheritance of the original inhabitants of Mesoamerica—a space to say what they think—to retake this experience and incorporate it into our practice. (Interview #76)

Beyond the specific learning or networking aspirations of participants, individuals had very different ideas about the actual objectives of the event. As the above quotes demonstrate, some interviewees expected no more than to learn about broader issues so that they would be better prepared to serve their local communities. Other participants, however, were expecting to attend an event with much more concrete goals as this quote demonstrates:

I knew what I was going to. To carry out joint actions with the other organizations—this was the objective of the Forum—because we have problem here with PPP, and it’s like that in all the countries of Central America. There they were going to define the actions. As a base organization we expected that resolution there. (Interview #28)

This lack of clarity and agreement about forum objectives is not surprising, given that the event’s leaders were also vague on the purpose of the forum. It became clear during interviewing that forum participants often carried discourses about the purpose of the MPF that reflected the beliefs of the leaders who had mobilized them to participate in the event. This is an
important point, which I will return to in Chapter 7. For the time being it is worth noting that leaders themselves had very different ideas about the objectives of the MPF. For example, when asked what the ideal MPF would be like, the leader of the Costa Rican section said:

It would be how it is: a space that brings together diverse national leaders and the bases of social movements to understand that they aren’t alone in the fight. The existence of the event, the mere exchange of experiences, and that they know that the fight has a regional character, that the fight for land in Nicaragua is part of the larger fight against the FTA, is important. There used to be magisterial conferences with academics for a thousand people. Now it’s a discussion. (Interview #5).

However a leader from El Salvador candidly admitted that:

The big problem with the forums is that their functional operative hasn’t had any strategic results. How does a large regional discussion translate into concrete actions in the countries and in the region? I see it as important that we get together, and that we tell each other about our advances and our problems, and we have a vision in perspective of what is happening in the region. But it is not enough. This conversation started in El Salvador: forums for what? What is the political sense of the Forums? Are they replicas of the World Social Forum – but then what lessons are there? It is necessary to see that in Mesoamerica a social movement is emerging and that this is the manner of expressing it. But is there really interest in forming political consensus to intercede in politics in the region? (Interview #69)

Still other leaders were adamant that the MPF had the objective of forming a cohesive political subject with a unified agenda and clear lines of action. Where this had not been achieved in the past, it needed to be made the central objective of the MPF (Interview #54; participant observation).

To complicate matters, leaders also carried a variety of personal or organizational objectives for the space. This was made clear in the discussion of the first two forums presented in Chapter 5. While the HSA saw the forum as a means to mobilize connections with ‘the base,’ other leaders within the space considered it to be an expression of radical democracy (interview #106). In later years, particularly after the announcement of the CAFTA agreement, the forum was often treated as a means to strengthen movements at the national level. The MPF bore a direct relationship with the creation of national social movements such as the MPR-13 in El Salvador and the Mesa Global in Guatemala. The PPP or CAFTA provided a clear agenda for mobilization, while a trip to the forum provided a variety of resources: education, a sense of
solidarity, and incentives. Meanwhile, as the MPF grew in size and significance, it became important for movements to be represented in the space, and leaders wanted to ensure that their people were in attendance. For example, the regional Encuentro de Mujeres had to lobby hard to achieve official recognition within forum spaces, and leaders within this space worked thereafter to promote their anti-patriarchy agenda (as described in Chapter 5) (Interview #98). Finally, the objectives of leaders did not necessarily accord with official public discourses about the space, nor the objectives of organizers or participants. In one dramatic example, a leader who had helped organize the Guatemalan MPF explained that he saw the open space methodology of social forums as a means to undermine the dominance of certain ideological positions within the Guatemalan left, and allow for the emergence of a new left-leaning coalition (interview #35).

So all together, the constituents of the MPF disagreed on the objectives of the space, and also had a wide variety of objectives for the space. The official debates over forum objectives presented in Chapter 5 were mirrored in the accounts of interviewees, but it is worth noting that participants frequently mirrored the opinions of leaders within their sector when discussing what they understood to be the objectives of the event. Meanwhile, individuals had a variety of different objectives for the space depending on their structural position. There was evidence to suggest that leaders within the spaces of the MPF understood the objectives to which participants put the space, and made use of this knowledge for mobilization.

3 Analysis of Experiences and Characterizations of the MPF

Having explored the objectives of different actors for the Forum, we can begin to consider the space produced by the complex interactions of the integrants of the MPF. This section will show that different actors experienced the space in significantly different ways, and that this resulted in significantly different characterizations of the MPF.
3.1 Participants

Despite the financial and logistical difficulties involved in attending forums, participants shared many positive stories. They talked about a broad range of experiences: cross-cultural contact, networking, and learning from panels or discussions. Often interviewees starting with an account of the over-land trip to the forum itself:

One of the things that most stood out was the trip that we took … the compañeros went by land 30 hours there and 30 back. I went with them in the bus. The first impact was the impression of what globalization meant for the communities: more misery and more destruction of human quality. In each place that we passed a border, we saw all the people who lack resources—children stood out—that I am sure did not have what to eat, much less where to go to school—but the first thing they say to you is [in English] ‘give me one doller.’ It pains you because—begging—and for what? For one doller? That was the first impact of the Forum. For me it started on the 12th, when we encountered this double reality that one knows by intuition, but that made me feel the profanity. (interview #15)

Many other individuals commented on how the forum provided opportunities for learning, and opened new horizons. These experiences were typically attributed to the experiences of cross-cultural contact and participation afforded by the forum. Here is a sampling of these types of comments:

(24) Working closely with people from different groups was so amazing because I could see what the movement is like. It was my first experience, and for me it was something I’ll never be able to live again because of it—because there I realized how we really are—that if the government did something and the movement says something, it’s not the same to hear everyone as to hear that the shout is the same throughout the region.

(25) You are filled up with experiences. […] You open yourself up to all the information there is—everything that it means to be participating. Since the armed conflict, there is a great fear around some themes, actions, so what happens with the Mesoamericans is that this changes. I’m not the only one that has these fears—there are many others. It’s not just about information, but about culture as well—you return a little more open to other ways of thinking. You realize that you might be in the right where your country is concerned, but for another country, perhaps not. So you learn to analyze situations more—the news that happens, events—you become a little more—I don’t know if analytical—when I refer to ‘open’ I want to say that you begin to listen more to other things.

(40) I never used to think about travelling far because of my husband and children, but since I went I now feel courage that they are now becoming more independent, so they no longer see me as enslaved to them. In this case, when the opportunity of the meeting came up, I told my husband about the event. When we went to Honduras, I didn’t know whether to go or not. They told me to go, and in the end I went, because my husband told me that it was a great experience for me. I felt tied down, like I didn’t have time, but now I don’t ask permission for anything.

(28) I didn’t ‘grow up’ with these things—in the forum or anything—but yes it has helped me a lot in my formation, in my job. My knowledge has broadened a little more. I only studied primary
school, but being in these spaces develops your capacity, to participate for example. The forums have impacted me a great deal. When I was in El Salvador they said to me, it falls to you to read the proposal before everyone. I had never done such a thing, but I did it in that moment.

(31) At a personal level it impacted me because when you go outside your country, they see you as having more knowledge, its true. When you are enclosed in your country and you don’t know other countries or realities, when you only hear about it, it’s not the same as going there. So, for me, it was very important and after that, I organized a protest because I had travelled, saw another reality, discussed with the Mesoamericans, and that animated me to continue the fight.

(60) It was a dream. We realized that there are people in all the countries that share the same ideas. That we’re capable of doing many things in many ways, and that through art you can change the panorama, that you can have an impact. […] It has impacted me a great deal in the sense that … well, as a friend told me, it’s too bad that in our country there almost isn’t support—they close the doors because of what you think. I hope that I have returned here with a new perspective. And yes, it was like that: I came home impacted. The people I met were so original. In other countries there are people that share the same things. On returning I came home impacted to share the results. The poetry group wanted to participate. Sincerely, it has been of great benefit.

(73) It has helped me because despite the inconveniences, the experiences of other people push you to learn more. When I go to the communities or when someone asks me something, I try to answer to the best of my ability. Our political formation is not from a university, but in the exchanges and in the work that we do. Here too I go to different workshops on economy, politics, popular methodologies and this helps to enrich what I have. Yes, I like it, because I almost don’t have much for my own life; I have to make these spaces for myself, because I like it.

Beyond these expressions of learning, several participants remarked on the cultural ceremonies, closing ceremony and protest marches. Several people mentioned these as the highlights of the trip, an experience that was very moving, and which generated great solidarity towards ‘the movement’ (interview #25 for example).

Against the weight of positive experiences, however, interviewees shared many complaints, frustrations and doubts about the MPF. They frequently flagged the arcane nature of spaces dominated by ‘academic’ speakers or presenters, and complained of insufficient organization or unclear objectives. Many interviewees also admitted that the impact of the events was limited, saying over and over again that the networks they hoped to form rarely amounted to much, and that there was little follow-up on the commitments made during the forums. In addition, there were complaints about the ‘corrupt’ manner through which participants were selected, pointing to possible instances of clientelism. As a result, some participants found the space chaotic, daunting, distant from their daily reality, and ultimately a
bit disappointing. They characterized the event as “all talk, no action,” amounting to “nothing more than revolutionary tourism,” as the following quotes evidence:

(15) After the forum, Oscar Arias won the election in Costa Rica, so where are we at? A forum is held, and then 2 or 3 days later, a neoliberal leader wins the elections. Are we working, I ask? I’m not questioning the forum, but rather the foundation of the Forum, because if we go to the forums and we don’t put into practice what we’ve analyzed and discussed, then what are we doing?

(55) We need to differentiate the personal issue, that you go and are motivated, from another thing, which is a movement in the country. How much did the forum actually help to potentiate activities?

(78) For me, the forum … a week is very little time to discuss these themes, overall when not everyone has read much on these themes. They are very complex problems that have many facets. Not just understanding the problem, but also conversing about how to carry out the fight against, for example, the anti-terrorist laws. It is very difficult to concretize in anything. They are spaces for getting to know a couple of people, exchanging, seeing another reality, and that’s it.

(74) In two words: revolutionary tourism. In the round table where I was, yes there were people that practiced the arts, but the level of the discussion was very poor. We were 2 or 3 people talking about how the political subject would be in Central America. Some people took advantage of the space to perform in the evening or something like that—people with no revolutionary practice. They just needed to be in a round table to justify being there, to eat lunch. The organizational history, activities of the people, were very limited. People that almost don’t involve themselves in anything—people from El Salvador that I was surprised to see them there, because they have very little conviction. It was a meeting to see old friends.

Meanwhile, we got the sensation that we almost didn’t have a right to be there and opine because there were people that had been at the last 2 or 3 forums that ‘had the right’. … Does this space really serve to unify Mesoamerica given the real necessities of the region? Or is it a space to meet and make new friends? Its OK to have a space, but it needs to be oriented differently. It needs to start with a big discussion about its base, its foundation.

This last quote is particularly interesting given its recognition of the history that the forum began to generate around itself. During research, several people commented on the phenomenon of repeat attendees who became ‘forum experts.’ These experts sometimes dominated discussion, informed newer participants or organizers about how things should be done, or told others that certain ideas were off the agenda because of conversations that had taken place in previous years.

Repeat attendees, meanwhile, were frustrated about having to ‘re-create the wheel’ (a phrase I heard repeatedly) each time the forum took place. They wanted to see progress from one event to another. Similarly, some interviews talked about how the forum began to generate expectations among participants, that something might change in the region, or at least that the CAFTA might be blocked. By moving the movement to the transnational level, and generating a
historical trajectory, the MPF appeared larger, more permanent, and more extensive than it really was, and certainly much more substantive than it was in its various national contexts. This meant that in the end, participants were expecting large impacts, and were ultimately disappointed when they were not achieved (interview #89).

What is most striking from all of these accounts, both positive and negative, is that participants did not talk about the space as if it belonged to them, one that they had a stake in organizing, or that they could shape in ways that suited them. They did not encounter it as a self-organizing space or bottom-up space, attributes that are often given to open-space processes, like the one by Chesters and Welch discussed in Chapter 3, or the accounts of open source software production that helped inspire open spaces as a methodology for the GJM (as discussed in Chapter 1). Rather participants saw the MPF as an event to which they were invited, a spectacle that they would take in, a conversation they would contribute to. In interview after interview, participants would describe how they were invited to the space, and how they were exposed to new ideas or people, how they came home motivated by encounters or ceremonies. When complaints were voiced by interviewees, it was often with reference to the ‘they’ or the ‘them’ who were responsible for the event, as in the following example:

(64) In reality, in these types of forums, my impression is that they discuss and discuss, talk and talk, but it comes to nothing. They make declarations, accords, but nothing is implemented. They make efforts to coordinate but in the end nobody agrees. And afterwards, nobody knows what was done in the forum.

To be fair, the last sentence of this quote is very revealing. It is true that access to information about the forums was very difficult for a series of reasons: coordination of the forum moved from country to country, websites were mounted for the duration of the event and then disbanded, final reports often did not find their way into the hands of participants. But, nonetheless, the idea of revolutionary tourism—a term that seemed to be circulating, as it came up in several interviews—is very apt: participants would visit the space, take in its sites, and
perhaps take home a small memento, but leave the environment essentially as they had found it.\textsuperscript{1} Except in a few specific instances, participants for the most part did not encounter the space as risky or threatening; rather they talked about it as being enriching and productive, or not, depending on their objectives and expectations. Despite their complaints, when I asked interviewees if, given the chance, they would attend another forum event, they would always say yes, often quite fervently. Attendees enjoyed the event immensely, seeing it as a morale booster and a learning opportunity.

3.2 Organizers

Organizers, on the other hand, offered a more ‘bureaucratic’ characterization of their experience with the MPF, lamenting the unclear objectives and uncontrolled variables (especially the number and provenance of participants) of this unwieldy space. In interviews they would share the details of facilitation methods, meetings to coordinate events, and organizational mishaps that took place during the event itself. In the case of the Costa Rican forum, for example, the organization of the event did not go smoothly, and as the following quote expresses, this was the cause of some anxiety for organizers:

\begin{quote}
In general, the organization of the Forum here was problematic. […] There were weekly coordination meetings and in theory there were commissions for financing, methodology, logistics, all that. […] The coordination of methodology was delayed a great deal, so we formed a parallel coordination. We had a group of various organizations working on various themes. […] Eventually, about 15 days before the forum, when it was nearly on top of us, the Comité Mesoamericano and the methodology coordination gave some signs of life and a document appeared. But we were very worried because there was a whole conversation about how Costa Rica is always a bad host. […] If the forum was going to be in Costa Rica we wanted to have good people, that the work would be productive, and that everything would turn out well. And a little for this reason, we decided that if there wasn’t a methodology, we would work on something ourselves. (interview #97)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} Many, but certainly not all… There were accounts of subversion within the MPF, particularly when organizers considered suspending the closing march at the sixth MPF in Costa Rica. Here participants protested loudly and managed to change the course of events, a fact that was recounted with pride.
Other organizers commented on the difficulty of leading or participating in a discussion that included experts and non-experts, people from various countries, people of varying ages and levels of experience, and, as the Forums matured, the above-mentioned mix of ‘forum experts’ with forum novices.

The problem is the structure and the objective. We went to the Forum in Honduras two years ago and we directed one of the round tables. The people that participated—very heterogeneous, students, gentlemen from municipalities, unionists, etc. It’s not such a problem, given the structure we gave to the workshop, around contents. But at the level of people’s problems, they were very diverse. […] In our case, since there was such a diverse group, we didn’t feel that we could define actions. […] It’s very nice to gather people, and they come out stronger, but I’m not clear on the objective. If they are looking for a plan of action, then the people at the level of directors need to be there, the people that can make decisions, and that have a larger vision, not too local a vision. […] If the objective is to gather people from the bases to learn about experiences and get nourished, and feel stronger, then the forum needs to be conceived of in this way. There need to be small, medium and large spaces for sharing to find this objective of exchange. If the objective is for the people from the bases to be informed about specific themes, then it needs to be structured around contents according to the educational levels of the groups. […] I feel that the forum isn’t taken advantage of. It is a huge effort. It’s so hybrid, what it tries to achieve. The forum is judged in terms of the number of people that arrive, and if the final declaration is solid or not. (interview #67)

As this quote evidences, the Forum had to deal with emergent tensions as it moved towards including more grassroots actors and additional sectors. In particular, a division emerged between specialists who were more interested in debating conceptual issues and community-level actors preoccupied with immediate issues. In one interview, this was characterized as the difference between ‘academics’ who wanted to debate the definition of transgenic seeds, and community leaders who were seeking answers about how to sell their produce given changes taking place in the marketplace as a result of transgenic crop production (interview #106). There is an important relationship between these two debates, but the immediate objectives of these two groups are completely different.

Altogether, organizers tended to use their interview space as an opportunity to search for meaning given the difficult organization and unclear impact of the MPF. They would question the utility of particular methods and lament the lack of objectives for their work. They asked repeatedly why so much facilitation was required if it was not leading to some clear goal.
Overall, ironically, organizers seemed to be searching for ‘closure,’ for some measure of validation about their contribution to the forum process, or for some basis on which to justify future participation in such activities.

3.3 Leaders

Leaders, finally, experienced the MPF as a highly political space given both ongoing debate about the objective (and methodology) of the MPF (as discussed in Chapter 5 and section 2 above), as well as their own personal or organizational objectives for the space. As one interviewee explained:

(68) In the social political relations it isn’t so easy because of the quantities of interests that move in the spaces. It is within this logic that we have to orient ourselves. It means that we need to coexist and trace some lines of action. What is clear is that in the midst of a diversity of positions the battle against the FTA, PPP, neoliberalism, globalization is a common slogan. This helps you to be able to articulate.

Leaders characterized the event in different ways, commensurate with their particular political bearing: as a social movement in formation, as a space to learn and articulate networks, or as a cultural space with spiritual or transformational properties. They also took advantage of the interview space to promote particular interpretations of the event, often vilifying, dismissing or characterizing other players, or justifying their own position or actions in the context of the MPF.

For example, one leader referred to rivals within the space using this language:

(54) Here the people aren’t interested in process – how do you eat that? Do you think that if the people didn’t have a clear valuation of the FTA that we could mobilization them? No. They wouldn’t move. Here, as a result, education is very important. With this as the main job, one of the fundamental areas is mobilization. Here we uncover a difference. There are other organizations with a position of resistance, but their principle strategy is focused more in research and analysis and communication. They have very good strengths in this sense, but they don’t have capacity to mobilize.

The implication here is that the later group lacks legitimacy due to the types of activities it chooses to focus on. These characterizations were frequently phrased in terms of who belonged
to the ‘real’ left, and therefore belonged at forum events, versus those who had sold out by forming NGOs and therefore corresponded to the ‘right’.

While interviews revealed much about how leaders experienced and characterized the MPF, the political tensions within the spaces of the forum were most clearly demonstrated through participant observation, the experience of trying to organize interviews, and the reaction of key players to my project. It was through the effort of trying to coordinate activities with the various individuals that made up the MPF that I began to comprehend the political positions which circulated in the space, and the ways in which social networks were organized to maintain these positions.

In the meetings I observed, leaders valued news about the political situation in neighboring countries, often discussing and weighing the political activities and aspirations of their foreign homologues, often with reference to internal organizational or ideological competitions. For example, while I was in the region, discussions were ongoing about the possibility of holding the next Americas Forum in Central America. Leaders were maneuvering to see if it could be held in their country, and regardless of the country, to see if they could have a prominent role in organizing the event. At the same time, efforts were underway to keep certain individuals from being involved in the organization of the event, as it was felt that they would push the agenda in an unfavorable direction. In another case, leaders engaged in discussions about whether, when and where to hold a meeting of the Comité Mesoamericano. One individual confided concern that local organizers were taking advantage of the CM to give legitimacy to a separate local process and that leaders from other countries would fail to attend if they sensed the meeting had a separate pretext. These sorts of activities and debates made it clear that political leaders were keenly interested in knowing the positions and activities of their homologues in other jurisdictions, and that it was vital for them to be able to maneuver these
political waters. These debates arose within discussions about the organization of forum events, and it was clear that they would also color debates within forums themselves.

The experience of trying to organize interviews with forum participants was also instructional. An obvious starting point for field research was the national MPF referent, but as a result, individuals in positions of power were active in guiding my field research. They sometimes used this power to block access to information while suggesting who I should speak with, monitoring my progress and asking me what I planned to say about the MPF and then telling me what interpretation they thought I should represent. In Guatemala, for example, the national referent, the *Mesa Global*, would not share lists of who had participated in the forum citing privacy as a reason, refused to share any documentation, saying that this should be at the discretion of movement leaders, and blocked access to meetings. In one case I was at an interview when a representative from the *Mesa Global* called the interviewee about a meeting later that same day. On hanging up the phone, the interviewee told me who had called, and said I should come to the meeting. When I demurred, suspecting I would be unwelcome, and indicating that I would need a clear invitation, he offered to call the national referent on my behalf. As I sat there listening to the phone conversation, it became apparent that I would not be welcome at the meeting. Embarrassed, and admitting that did he not see why I should not attend, the interviewee told me that the meeting was apparently closed to “non-members” of the *Mesa Global*.

When another leader within the *Mesa Global* learned of my difficulties, he joked that I was suffering the effects of internal movement politics. He then offered to put me in touch with people from *his* networks of MPF participants. I was now at the mercy of his selection process, and as I interviewed his contacts, I became suspicious that they were being coached on what to say, or at least warned in advance of what my questions would be. In one case, for example, an
interviewee asked if I would be asking the same questions of him, as I had of his colleagues. This suggested that perhaps interviewees had sought advice from movement leaders on what they should tell me. This sensation was verified when I travelled to the rural areas of Guatemala. Here interviewees spoke about how the movement leaders in the capital tried to control movement spaces and dominate the agenda. Rural activists sought to decentralize the movement and take power away from central leaders (interview #29). In addition, I got the distinct impression that when interviewees from other Guatemalan circles learned I was getting help from the above mentioned leader, they were reticent to speak to me, thinking that I was somehow affiliated with him. On discussing my experiences with NGO colleagues from Costa Rica who also had experience in Guatemala, they confirmed that my experiences matched their own.

Interviewing in El Salvador was also difficult, but for different reasons. Here I was able to put together a list of key organizations involved in mobilizing individuals for forum events, and eventually they even assisted me in talking to some of their members about their experiences at forum events. (To be sure, it was difficult to gain the trust of these organizations, and access to their ‘people,’ but eventually access was facilitated.) But in El Salvador I found that the actual content of the interviews was much more political. Interviewees would frequently ask me who else I had spoken to, and what they had told me, giving me the sensation that I was being pumped for information about the positions of other individuals in the sector, or perhaps my own allegiances.

This is not to say that I did not run into blockades in El Salvador, however. In one case I interviewed a prominent social movement leader and FMLN politician who gave me a very rosy picture of the social movement she was a part of (interview #59). I was later interviewing a member of that movement, who invited me to attend a meeting that was taking place later in the week (interview #80). I called ahead to the meeting to ask for permission, and the facilitator said
he thought it would be OK. But after arriving, I was asked by the movement leaders to leave; they felt that having a foreign face in the room might compromise the quality of the discussion. The participants in the meeting later contacted me, upset about the fact that their leaders had ‘thrown me out’. They invited me to one of their internal meetings, where I ran into the embarrassed FMLN politician. They proceeded to talk to me about the internal political difficulties of the movement. When a top FMLN official stood me up for an interview later that week, leaving me sitting in his waiting room for 4 hours with no explanation, I suspect I was being politically rebuffed, given the events that had occurred earlier in the week.

Finally, the reaction of interviewees to my project also revealed the highly political nature of the left in the region, with implications for the types of encounters that would happen at an MPF. During interviews, I was frequently asked about my own political orientation, whether I considered myself a member of the left, and who I was doing this research for (for example, interview #29). These were very difficult questions to answer; Canada’s left would be considered right-wing by many of the people I interviewed, and while I was (and am) sympathetic to the causes advanced by these individuals, I was always aware of the fact that they are not my causes, and that it would be insincere to suggest that they were. I was also determined to interview forum participants from across the spectrum of the left, and to try and listen openly to everything that they had to tell me. I had to work hard at keeping myself from getting entangled in local politics. It was difficult to explain that the research was not meant for anyone in particular—that I sought to produce an interpretation of events that was satisfying to me, as I engaged with larger philosophical debates about the concept of openness. The fact that interviewees found this difficult to accept speaks volumes to the closed and politicized quality of social spaces in Central America; this is not an environment in which people feel the luxury of
contemplation without immediate purpose. Rather immediate purpose both drives and impedes contemplation, and as such becomes a powerful shaper of identities and ideas.

All together, the MPF brought together leaders from different national contexts, different sectors of the left, with different visions of the objective of the forum, and with different objectives for the forum. The experience of conducting research about the MPF revealed the highly political nature of forum spaces for leaders. In addition, the experience of having to convince leaders to grant access to their networks gave me the distinct feeling that spaces were permeated with invisible boundaries, controls and power flows that marked off the boundaries between particular sectors that participate in forum spaces. The way in which leaders made use of interviews to promote their own vision for the MPF or to villanize the vision or actions of other networks demonstrated divisions that exist between various sectors of the left with the spaces of the MPF and Central America in general. From this it became clear that when leaders attend forum events, they are entering a highly politicized space in which they are keen to identify significant individuals and the agendas of potential rivals or collaborators. I was left with no doubt as to both the significance of the MPF to the bearing of the left in Central America, and also the high political stakes of the space for leaders.

But interestingly, these politics were not very apparent to forum participants. Indeed, when I presented interim research results in Costa Rica, one individual was disturbed to have his very positive memories of the event marred by the political subterfuge I revealed.

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, what can be said about the constitution – shape if you will - of the MPF? The analysis presented above demonstrates that, while certainly fraught with uncertainty, the MPF was far from an ‘open’ space in the way that the WSF is often depicted. Overall, the MPF
was a space in which logics did not coincide; there was a great deal of disjuncture between objectives, experiences and accounts, as well as between vertically and horizontally differentiated segments. For one, there was a clear disjuncture between official debates about forum objectives and the personal objectives of participants for these events. Objectives also varied according to the structural position of forum constituents. As a result of the general lack of clarity around forum objectives, 1) forum leaders experienced the space as a highly political one, 2) it became possible to make use of forum spaces to promote personal, organizational or ideological agendas, and 3) leaders viewed it as necessary to do so in order to protect their positions given the uncertainty of the space. Not surprisingly, the lack of clarity around objectives also resulted in frequent disjuncture between expectations (official or personal) and experiences. More interesting, however, is the disjuncture between how interviewees experienced the forum, and how they characterized it. In particular, note the confluence of disappointed but willing participants, with leaders who publicly engaged in campaigns to promote the particular characterization of the forum that suited their agenda, even as they worked behind the scenes to influence both the constitution and the interpretation of the space.

Far from trying to suggest that logics could or should coincide in social forums, I wish only to extend the observation that they did not. Indeed, the notion of cognitive justice would suggest that logics should not coincide except at the level of the overall character of forum events. Rather, the need here is simply to identify how the forum space was organized. Given that the MPF reflects the composition and objectives of the actors inhabiting it, and crucially, the ways in which they work to achieve these objectives, how is one to make sense of the disjuncture that characterizes this space?

As I considered these findings during field work, I began to discuss the nature of the MPF with some interviewees. One individual explained that social spaces are oriented by a
particular \textit{enactment} of the common good, where the common good is a mosaic that we are always moving towards even as it shifts and morphs. It follows that forum spaces need to be understood as existing in dialectical relation to the actors that populate them, and as such, any changes in their patterns of “\textit{ser y quehacer}” (being and becoming) require cultural transformation (interview #89). This, then, raises the question of how societies go about imagining, defining, choosing between and enacting their definition of the common good, as well as the stakes involved in the process of arriving at that definition. Change will involve challenges to established norms and identities, and thus transnational processes of meaning making with bearing on the direction of the left will have important implications for the foundations of the different movements, networks and agendas that make up the left.

But will this change necessarily embody a shift towards a particular valuation of “the good?” Given what we learned in Chapter 4 about state-society relations in Central America, we should question whether this will necessarily be the case. At the World Social Forum the search for a new ‘north’ (i.e. an alternative to the neoliberal globalization that is perceived to be the current definition of the common good) is discussed under the banner of ‘Another World is Possible.’ But the very political nature of the debate over alternatives in Central America raises important questions about the tension between the struggle over alternatives, and alternatives to struggle. As one very skeptical interviewee pointed out, using an English word to emphasize the point, social forums are ultimately ‘\textit{happenings}’--they are a political apparatus in which, “leaders fight for things.” He went on to explain that insofar as they contribute to changing “the initial identifications of the system for self-production of identity” then “seen like this, yes, they are important” (interview #104). But he could see little other possibility for substantive change coming out of forum spaces. Similarly, as Rapley argues, the anti-globalization movement can be interpreted as a repudiation of development meta-narratives and embrace of the particular,
but: “It is a non sequitur that resistance to the hegemony of the state, or global capitalism, or the developmentalist project, is necessarily a resistance to domination and oppression. …resistance to authority may be a progressive struggle; but it may also be just old-fashioned resistance to change” (Rapley 2007, 189; citing Brass 1995).

How then should we think about the processes of ‘being and becoming’ taking place within the MPF? In her work on the networked production of transnational communities, Clarke observes the following paradox:

… the spheres of authority that enable people to create normative logics are themselves organized around a hierarchy of knowledge and power that is embedded in forms of violence that lead to exclusions and devaluations. In other words, people’s exercise of religious logics and their production of a conception of community in its likeness obscures the ontological sphere in which power is negotiated. (Clarke 2004, 281)

What this suggests is that the MPF, as well as the discourses and practices it creates around itself, can serve to obscure the processes of meaning making taking place within the space. This observation is personally satisfying to me as it responds to the growing sense I developed during field work that there was a significant element of theatre to the MPF process—that it was in reality a political battle field masquerading as a mobilization against neoliberal globalization in general, and during its middle years, the CAFTA agreement in particular. Clarke continues her thought thus:

That is why identity alone … cannot be the sole object of study in the study of agency and power. Instead, in recognizing the product of religious nationalism, for example, we need to examine both the redemptive form and inherent violence of institutions and the way that people produce and call on particular institutions to engage in the production and reproduction of power and alternate possibilities. (ibid)

When it comes to spaces such as the MPF, the highly motivating experience for participants is significant, because the ‘religion’ of the space is being taken up even as its tenets are being formed. We need to be aware of how the very institution of meaning making that is the MPF obscures the agency and power at work therein. That is to say, we need to pay attention to the ways in which the practices and discourses that circulate in these spaces make possible or
undermine the possibility for cognitive justice and social change. And we also need to pay attention to the relationship between these processes and the larger political-economic context in which they are taking place.

It is to these questions that I will turn in Chapter 7, where I will explore the reasons behind the high political stakes within social movement spaces at the present moment in Central America, as well as the mechanisms that drive the processes taking place within the MPF.
Chapter 7
Constitutive Forces:
An Outsider View of the MPF

This chapter brings together arguments presented so far into an explanation of the processes taking place within the MPF. To review, Chapter 4 showed how the MPF represented a search for new forms of organizing at the transnational level in Central America given the demise of the SICA as a space through which the left could intercede in decision making related to processes of global economic integration in the region, and changing patterns of mediation between state and society reflective of the region’s political economy. Chapter 5 then argued that, although the MPF was a space in which left-leaning actors were engaged in a search for new and different forms of organization, it did not make sense to think of the MPF as a unified and purposeful social movement. While there was a great deal of debate within the MPF about the possibility of forming a political subject, there was disagreement about what this might look like or what its aims might be. Ultimately the most consistent thing that can be said of the event is that it fosters dialogue, debate and networking.

With this in mind, Chapter 6 asked if such an event was necessarily ‘open.’ Using the insider perspective of forum participants, this chapter demonstrated that the MPF was experienced in very different ways depending on the structural position, objectives and experiences of its constituents. This analysis showed that the MPF was not an open space, but rather a space characterized by a great deal of disjuncture between objectives, experiences and accounts, as well as by political uncertainty for leaders, especially given the ongoing discussions within the MPF about possible new directions for the Central American left. As a result, I argued that the MPF could be better characterized as a political playing field with implications for the normative and identitary foundations of the various movements, networks and
organizations participating in the space, and for the character of mediation between state and society given the particular political economy of the region in this time period.

With this in mind, how should we understand the processes taking place in and through the MPF? This chapter takes up where Chapter 6 left off by answering questions raised in Chapter 3: How were mobilization, uncertainty and identity managed within the MPF process, and what does this reveal about the practices of power (and specific mechanisms) at work within the space? What impact has this had on cognitive justice and on development in the region? Maiguashca suggests studying these issues by focusing on: “the power relations that give rise to as well as act upon and within social movements.” This allows for the study of, “the multiple forms that power relations can take (gender, race, class, sexuality) and the complex, mutually reinforcing modes by which power is exercised (material, discursive, ideological)” (2006, 125).

From her work I draw out three lines of inquiry which together form an outsider analysis of the mechanisms shaping the spaces of the MPF. First, the inclusions and exclusions of the forum space can be uncovered by studying the trajectories, activities or identities that are valued within particular left-leaning spaces, or the MPF as a whole. Second, it is necessary to uncover key sites of power and their interconnections in order to understand how these values are enacted with the MPF. Here it is important to consider the ways in which valued identities, trajectories or activities reinforce power relations and/or the structures of power, as discussed at the end of Chapter 6. Finally, the impact of these processes on the broader social context can be studied by

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Note that my framework differs slightly from what Maiguashca recommends. The borders we draw between insider and outsider perspectives are slightly different. Specifically she treats political subjectivity as a standpoint concept (in which social movements are ‘subjects of agency’), and therefore subjectivity is a given. As she says, “...while the insider perspective encourages us to follow the feminist lead and be more curious about the origins and nature of our political subjectivity, the outsider’s perspective reminds us that feminists are correct when they refuse to take solidarity for granted and to assume that ‘progressive’ discourses necessarily lead to a politics of inclusion” (2006, 125). Not starting from the assumption that social forums are social movements, I see political subjectivity as both a standpoint concept and also variable with other forces (as per Chapter 6), and so I am addressing it within an outsider analysis. For me inclusion does not simply mean taking people as they are, it can also be about mobilizing people into particular moulds. I believe these practices need to be identified, and I consider this to be an expression of solidarity.
examining how valued identities, activities or trajectories advantage some groups and
disadvantage others. I take up each of these questions in turn in the following text.

1 Valued Identities, Trajectories and Activities

For the Central American left the challenge of imagining clear political alternatives
within the current political and economic context has been a difficult one. The left was relatively
weak as a result of being shut out of decision-making processes, as an effect of public responses
to the changing political and economic scenario, and due to its own growing need to reconnect
with its bases through new systems of legitimation (as discussed in Chapter 4). The need for
change gave rise to reflection among civil society actors in Central America. If the SICA was no
longer a viable mechanism through which to intercede in decision making about Central
America’s political and economic future, then where did the ‘real’ centers of power lie? If
governments were unresponsive to the concerns of social justice movements, dismissive and
even repressive towards them, then what would be the best options for affecting change
processes? What did the relative failure of the left to intercede in policy processes during the 1990s imply for the sector? These questions raise fundamental issues about how the left should
organize and to what ends. What sorts of ideological or policy alternatives should guide the left,
and how could the left best function organizationally within the new political context? In short,
on what basis and through what processes should the Central American left form its collective
political subjectivity?

While it would be wrong to suggest that there was consensus within the left as to how
these questions should be answered, there was an overwhelming sense that the processes
affecting the region were being applied to the whole of Central America by forces outside of the
region. This caused left-leaning actors to conclude that only by coming together at a regional level would they be able to effectively challenge the forces shaping their political-economy. Of beneficial coincidence to leaders, a transnational meeting like the MPF would also facilitate the rebuilding of the left in the region. It would provide a means for leaders within various sectors of the left to mobilize and articulate grassroots actors, thereby generating new energy. At the same time the meetings would offer a strategically large show of force, given the weakness of some sectors of the left. Crucially, the space would also allow for the left to consider its responses to questions of strategy and agenda, and the appropriate system of legitimation on which to rebuild as it responded to the difficulties faced by the region. It is this question, of “legitimacy for what?” that informs the tensions that permeated the MPF.

In terms of ideological or policy alternatives, Marti I Puig writes that the Central American left has faced the challenge of offering a purposeful agenda that addresses three elements: “that it be reasonable, capable of being seen as an alternative in power, and finally that it be transformative” (1998, 104; tm). But would such an alternative be closer to the social democratic policies of Lula in Brazil, the 21st Century Socialism of Chavez in Venezuela, or the nationalistic and ethnic politics of Morales in Bolivia? Unfortunately, the answer is not a simple

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2 Let me emphasize once again that political tensions within the space were not the specific result of the free trade agreements that the MPF was mobilizing against during part of its history. Rather they were a response to the political shifts that were taking place within the broader left, as actors accommodated themselves to changes in the larger political and economic terrain. I emphasize the point because many authors focus exclusively on tensions that emerged around this process, given the prominence of CAFTA in Central America during the years of its negotiation. For example Villalona argues that, “The FTA put governments into conflict with the social organizations and parties that rejected it, and generated contradictions between some business sectors” (2006, 11; tm) and that this “unleashed a battle that involved almost every political and social sector” (ibid, 10). While this is certainly accurate observation, in my reading, as a highly significant space for left-wing organizing in Central America during the period, the MPF was more importantly a window through which to express broader and longer-term shifts within the left, and also a vehicle by which to advance or protect differing agendas.

3 The need for a regional response to regional pressures was expressed repeatedly in interviews (for example, #23, #36, #46, #48, #55, #62, #64, #67.) Take for example this quote: “There are some elements in Central America that think in the logic of the region. The armed conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador, weigh on us. As a result of those conflicts, we were left with some strong parties such as the Sandanista Front. But as it turns out these forces don’t create much room for debate. Meanwhile we have become aware of the impact that the 20 years of neoliberal policies have had in these countries, and the new regional social phenomenon of migration, poverty, citizen insecurity. There is a need to contextualize all of this, and it is along that path that you can go looking for explanations for why we have Forums. (Interview #54)
one. The economic scenario in Central America presents a different set of possible alternatives from those of its southern neighbors. And beyond a simple choice of alternative political agendas, there is also the question of their realization—a difficult issue in a context marked by fragile states, insecurity and escapism. So while everyone might agree that child poverty should be ended in the region, given Central America’s position in the global economy, the truculence of the region’s elites, and its historical relationship with North America (including Mexico), the questions of just what types of actions will be necessary to create fundamental change, and how the left should organize itself, always loom behind any statement of alternatives.

These debates took on even greater importance as a result of Latin America’s ‘left turn’ which shifted the terrain for Central America’s civil society actors. More than the simple election of left-leaning leaders in South America, the ‘left turn’ represents a rejection of the ‘Third Way’ agenda that marked the effective parameters of opposition politics during the 1990s (Anton & Vallbe 2002, 47-49; Saxe-Fernandez 2004), and a search for new and different agendas. As two interviewees explained:

I think that it is also linked to advances that the South American process has had – the World Social Forum, the Americas Social Forum, the indigenous movement, the movement of the Sin Tierra – people who are transforming, proposing things, doing things. This influence is a scenario that makes you question yourself. What are we doing? How are we doing it? There is a jump from Mexico to the Southern Cone, but Central America remains little visibilized, and this presents challenges for confronting these things. These influences have pressed on all of us that are participating in these spaces that question what we’re doing and what we’re going to do. (Interview #51/2)

These changes made it possible to imagine the election of a left-wing leader in the region, and indeed Daniel Ortega of the FSLN was brought to power in Nicaragua in 2006. But the nature of Ortega’s electoral victory (Kampwirth 2008) and the new regime’s authoritarian practices

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4 This was made particularly apparent to me on observing a talk given by FMLN intellectual father Salvador Sánchez Cerén (alias Leonel Gonzalez) to a group of social movement actors in November 2006. On discussing the electoral strategy of the FMLN he emphasized the importance of the Latin American situation, saying that the election of leftist leaders in South America was motivating the people to support the FMLN, and that other nations were watching the situation in El Salvador to see if the FMLN could be brought to power. To achieve this he felt that the party needed to search for ways to engage new groups and extend its circle of alliances, for example with small and medium business interests.
(Burbach 2009) have served to reinforce the search for new mediating practices within the Central American left. This has raised questions: what agendas would a left-leaning leader put forth? What agendas should the broader left support? How should the left interact with the state in the changing political context?

All together, the positions of actors circulating within the spaces of the MPF not only reflected the changing political and economic scenario in the region, but they were also multiple, deeply held, and related in complex ways. In what follows I identify three tendencies that mark out the panorama, but I do this recognizing that I am presenting thin characterizations of the complexity of organizational networks and views held by actors in the region. The first is the tendency towards a re-radicalization of the Central American left and the rejection of associational politics. The second shift has come from professional NGOs that are seeking new foundations for legitimacy given the changing context in the region. Finally I discuss the difficult position for identity-base movements in the region. Ultimately what this section suggests is that Central American civil society has come to be characterized by a plurality of mediating institutions each with different visions of an alternative future. But these institutions are all operating within a difficult and uncertain political context, so the values determining activities, trajectories and identities are shaped by questions of organizational maintenance, uncertainty and insecurity.

1.1 Re-Radicalization of the Left

One of the most visible reactions to the reemergence of oligarchic and authoritarian tendencies in Central America has been a re-radicalization of the left. As they have come to

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5 Support for this observation can be found in Almeida’s recent work on protest waves in El Salvador, in which he uses longitudinal data to correlate acts of state-sponsored repression to the radicalization of civil organizations under conditions of electoral democracy (Almeida 2008).
reject the ‘third way’ of the 1990s, groups that tend towards radicalism have resurrected a long tradition of Marxist, and in particular, Gramscian analysis in Central American left-leaning politics (Liss 1991). Academics capture the mood through texts like this one:

At the global level, all social agents find themselves before three great historical projects among which they must choose their future: neoliberalism, developmentalism, also known as Bolivarianism or Keynesianism, and the Socialism of the 21st Century. For popular movements and parties regional democratic development is only possible, if and when leaders and bases desire, through the participatory democracy of 21st Century Socialism. *El pulgarcito* [the little flea], as Central America is affectionately known, has, as a consequence, only two possible future scenarios: integrate itself into the neocolonial-Monroeist axis coming from North America and passing through Colombia and Peru to Chile, or adhering to the Regional Power Block that Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba and the popular movements try to forge in the battle for the Second Independence of the Grand Patria (Dieterich 2007, 293; *tm*).

Some interviewees, meanwhile, argued that a true revolutionary political proposal would hold to orthodox Marxist-Leninist principles of organizing. For example, the potential of the MPF to form a political subject was talked about in these terms:

… the political subject did not have ‘character’ … the aim was to see a revolutionary political proposal. Clearly it is difficult to construct this when facing a multi-class, amorphous, we-don’t-even-know-what-sector-of-classes-belong, convocation. There were proletarians, petit bourgeois, from social democrats to communists. (interview #89; *tm*)

I was also frequently informed during interviews with individuals of a more radical persuasion that ‘you are either with us or against us,’ a phrase which recalls militant forms of mobilization typical of Central America’s revolutionary years.

This shift towards radicalism has led some among the left to retroactively interpret the SICA as an apparatus of elites, and the NGOs that moved within such spaces for governance, as part of the ruling apparatus. Indeed, for many in the region, the agenda of associational politics promoted by international donors during the 1990s was just the latest in a string of imperialist strategies. In the interviews conducted as part of this study, professionalized or ‘civic’ NGOs were frequently labeled ‘right wing,’ which can be interpreted as a leftist characterization of their middle class, social democratic values (to be discussed below). The following quote demonstrates these tensions:
Generally, professional groups and NGOs dedicated to academic work tend to scorn the work of campesino groups, unions and other social organizations. However, on revising [the latter’s] documents one notes their correct valuation of the FTA in terms of its contents and possible impacts. Their analysis is well-founded and sustains irrefutable statistical data. (Villalona, 2006, 86; *tm*)

Some interviewees would go so far as to suggest that the NGOs established during the 1990s were a guise to create and/or maintain a relatively more conservative (i.e. less radical) middle class that would legitimize and buoy up the region’s newly formed democracies.⁶

Given that the radicalized left does not view official spaces for decision-making as a viable means to create change—at least as they currently operate in Central America—social mobilization and protest have emerged as important strategies to voice opposition to ongoing changes in the region. Indeed, dissention at the third MPF in Nicaragua between groups supporting incidencia and those supporting resistencia against the CAFTA exemplified growing frustration within the left, as well as the increasing support for processes of resistance. A variety of new expressions of the left emerged in response to the CAFTA process, and these actors saw in the MPF an opportunity to mobilize against the economic and political changes taking place in the region:

The battle against the FTA allowed the articulation of large social movements in each country and at the regional scale. In Guatemala the Mesa Global emerged, in Honduras, the Coordinadora Nacional de Resistencia Popular; in El Salvador the MPR-12 and the Bloque Popular para la Democracia Real; in Nicaragua, the Civil Coordinator, and in Costa Rica, Encuentro Popular. Spaces for sectoral concentration were also created, for unions, cooperative organizations, networks of NGOs and others that fought against the FTA. These movements brought together many sectors and organizations and coordinated diverse activities. (Villalona 2006, 85; *tm*)

The Salvadoran Movimiento Popular de Resistencia Doce de Octubre (Popular Resistance Movement October 12 or MPR-12) is a particularly interesting example, formed in response to

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⁶ It has been difficult for grassroots social movements in the region to work along-side professionalized NGO organizations. Where NGOs have learned to provide technical ‘accompanyment’ to social movements, they have been more broadly accepted, but where they attempt to sell their services, establish agendas, or lead processes, factions have tended to emerge. See Kowalchuk (2003) for an example of the types of tensions that have tended to emerge between formalized organizations and the social bases they represent, not just between NGOs and local communities, but also between SMOs and their membership. Note that this has been further complicated by the agendas set by global civil society. When taken up within the anti-globalization movement, donors, NGOs and a business-like orientation are often associated with the ‘imperialist’ problem.
the call for *resistencia* voiced during the Nicaraguan MPF. The MPR-12 is named after the region-wide mobilization against the FTA on October 12, 2002 that aimed to shut down transportation infrastructure throughout Central America. This mobilization, conceived at the Nicaraguan forum, was one of the few clear outputs of a meeting of the MPF. The Salvadoran MPR-12 coalition brings together several *campesino* and rural development organizations that came together around their common rejection of the CAFTA agreement.

But since protest is alternately ignored and suppressed by the structures of governance in the region, collaboration with left-leaning political parties has also come to be viewed as a viable option for change by civil society. During the 1990s, the left-wing parties that emerged during the peace process experienced a certain amount of disorganization and internal turmoil in both the institutional and policy spheres as they transitioned into democratic electoral politics. Between this and the reorientation of civil society described in Chapter 4, social movements and NGOs cultivated a high level of autonomy from the party left, learned tactics for affecting politics in a democratic context, and began to politically leverage their relationships with electoral politics. But growing frustration with governance in the region has caused increasing collaboration between certain segments of the left and political parties, a tendency spurred on by the electoral successes of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. Having said this, the political economy of the region has taught radical groups to approach such collaborations with caution.7

This tendency has met with resistance from other segments of the left in El Salvador and throughout Central America. For many social justice actors in the region, participation by party representatives in forum events raises the potential for vanguardism within the forum.

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7 Alliances have not always worked according to plan; as Petras argues, the effects of US imperialism in Latin America have driven some left-leaning parties to radicalize their positions, while centre-left parties have become more conservative in their orientation (Petras 2002). So, for example, while radicalized social movements have found common ground with the FMLN in El Salvador, the experience of social movements with the FSLN in Nicaragua has not been as positive.
movement, or the possibility that forum spaces could be appropriated to advance un-democratic agendas. Over time, however, parties did become involved as observers in the MPF process, but under particular conditions. For example, while the FMLN and its social base, the Bloque Popular, were prevented from participating in early MPFs (interview #73), the MPR-12 grew to favour greater participation in the forum by these groups (interview #50). The MPR-12 has gained respect by maintaining an educated autonomy from the FMLN, while steering party policy to meet the needs of local people. As is explained in the MPR-12’s “April 2, 2002 Proclamation,” “Our fight is day-to-day with the pueblo; beyond electoral processes, we desire structural, economic, social and political changes that permit improvement in the conditions and quality of life of all Salvadorans” (ibid 47). We can read in this statement, and in the relationship between the MPLN and the MPR-12, both a studied autonomy, but also a willingness to support change through undemocratic means, if necessary.

The current political economy of Central America can be read as complicit with the radicalization of certain sectors of the left, but also with the patterns of legitimation and favored activities, trajectories and identities within this group. On the one hand these groups offer

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8 Speaking about El Salvador’s FMLN, one interview explained that “The Front has had … a very fundamentalist, ideological, religious posture, and this influences the movement. […] [The party] takes advantage of these types of spaces, but in a very misplaced way. They tend to contaminate the spaces, more like. For example, regarding the FTA with the EU we received a card from a deputy from the Front saying that it was important to support the candidacy of Chavez … but what does that have to do with anything? They don’t understand the agenda of civil society. Civil society shouldn’t be contaminated by the party agenda” (interview #77).

9 The final report from the Nicaraguan forum notes that “The national coordination had decided not to mix the party activities of the FSLN with the working dynamic of the Forum, nonetheless, one of the [participating] sectors unilaterally decided to invite the secretariat of the FSLN to the closing of the event, which generated problems of mistrust with other participants and friction with said party” (page 8). And yet, in the introductory remarks to the fourth MPF in Honduras, the coordinator from the Nicaraguan forum thanked the FMLN, FSLN, AMM of Costa Rica and URNG of Guatemala for observing that event. A representative from Venezuela had also been present as well as a delegation from the PUD of Honduras. By the time I was conducting research in 2006, Latin America’s turn to the left was well under way, and some interviewees were surprised to learn that anyone had ever questioned the participation of political parties in the MPF. Indeed, some indicated that they saw the MPF as a means to mobilize electoral support for left-leaning parties (participant observation), and at one event I witnessed the presentation of a cheque to an emerging national movement by a Venezuelan official.

10 The Bloque Popular is a social movement organization directly connected to the party. It is mobilized in political rallies and allows the party to maintain a formal connection with the social base formed during the years of the civil war.
populist discourses designed to embrace the widest possible range of supporters. For example, the MPR-12 pledges to “protest and fight against exclusionary globalization that seeks to subjugate our country to new forms of colonialism which favor the big transnationals through the signing and approval of free trade agreements and the FTAA” (Movimiento Popular de Resistencia 12 de Octubre 2003, 46; tm). They go on to list as objectives basic human rights and dignity, national sovereignty, autonomous development of communities, and reactivation of agriculture within the national economy. At the heart of these discourses is indignation about the injustice that has been done against ‘the pueblo’ and a call for citizens to come together in vertically organized participatory processes of mobilization to voice their concerns and organize protest events. In particular, the radical left is looking to extend its reach beyond the traditional proletariat—peasants, campesinos, and youths—to embrace the street workers, migrant and maquila workers, street vendors and pirates of computer software and music that have emerged with the globalization of local economies (participant observation of Foro de Sao Paulo meeting lead-up; interview #50).

It is on the basis of these activities and trajectories that leaders within radical movements seek to build a legitimate claim to represent the injustices of grassroots communities. And yet, at the same time, protest activity in Guatemala and El Salvador has met with criminalization and suppression over the past few years (see for example Wallach 2007), and the organizations of the radical left have learned to maintain their autonomy vis-à-vis other actors and political parties, lest their legitimacy and/or their autonomy be challenged through collaborative efforts. What results is a plurality of radical movements, organizations and networks, each claiming legitimacy based on their relationship with the grassroots. They may work together, but they will also protect their autonomy. A strong relationship with a grassroots community offers individual leaders a power base and a measure of security within an uncertain political context.
1.2 Reorientation of Associational Politics

The combined influences of a re-radicalized left, growing collaboration with political parties, and political and economic changes have led to a range of responses by professionalized civil society organizations. The organizational cultures and agendas that took root during the 1990s will not disappear overnight, but NGOs are being challenged to transform themselves. Created in the 1990s in a time of democratization, associational politics and neoliberal reform, these organizations have created a legacy of educated, middle-class social justice advocates who form part of Central America’s relatively small middle class. Today these actors face challenges to their middle class economic standing and social-democratic political aspirations. Their positions of authority and legitimacy as knowledgeable representatives of ‘civil society’ have been challenged, spaces for effective participation in decision making have disappeared, and funding has also become much scarcer.11 This has given rise to an often disarticulated search for continued legitimacy and relevancy, as well as the means to protect personal, organizational and political gains achieved in earlier periods.12

The MPF became a space through which some professionalized NGOs engaged in efforts to shore up, protect or re-negotiate their legitimacy within the broader left. One strategy has been to seek greater collaboration with regional and global networks that provide access to regional debates, as well as funding to continue local advocacy and research. There are clear links, for example, between certain organizations participating in the MPF and other Latin

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11 Overall, this situation is intimately tied to the exhaustion of the associational model of civil society in the region as discussed in chapter 4 (Pearce 1998; McIlwaine 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001; Macdonald 1997; Kowalchuk 2003; Bebbington 2004; Robinson 2003; Edelman 2003; Aldaba et al. 2000). See also the discussion of funding issues included in section 3 part d (ii) of Mitlin et al. (2007, 1709) entitled ‘The poverty reduction agenda and related shifts in NGO financing.’

12 As Mitlin, Hickey and Bebbington note, in general, the NGO sector “…has been seeking to find a new role to enable survival, and does not appear to be concerning itself with higher order questions. It is perhaps a frustration with this as much as anything that encourages us to ask again whether and how NGOs might re-engage with their founding project of offering genuine ‘alternatives’” (2007, 1700). This is also true of Central American organizations.
American spaces for left-wing strategizing such as the World Forum for Alternatives and the Hemispheric Social Alliance (as discussed in Chapter 5). In addition, the MPF has been the beneficiary of funding from several international NGOs such as Oxfam (interviews #49, #57, #105 #114; see Appendix 3). Mitlin et al. argue that support for political activities such as social forums reflects the greater weight that some NGOs are giving to advocacy in the face of globalization and “recognition that in the face of such powerful forces, local level project interventions cannot constitute alternatives of any significance or durability, and that changes to policy and wider norms are required if viable alternatives are to be built.” (2007, 1710).

Where these types of linkages prove beneficial to the more radical groups discussed above, they have been tolerated and even celebrated. But where they have overshadowed or collided with the desires or agendas of local or radical groups, they have not. For example, as described in Chapter 5, the Hemispheric Social Alliance’s position in the MPF was challenged at the Nicaraguan forum. In another case, one interviewee expressed anger at the relationship drawn between the MPF and larger regional and global forums: “The MPF is our effort. It is a local effort that we created. They [the Americas Forum] are trying to come in here and take advantage of our space to promote their agendas, but they have nothing to do with us” (Interview #7; also participant observation). Finally, the incidencia/resistencia debate which took place at

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On this note, let me briefly address a common response to social forums that I believe to be a poor understanding of these processes. During conversations about my research, I have often been asked whether MPF organizers received money from donors to conduct these events. On replying that yes, donor money is used to run the events, my interlocutors have suggested that donor financing was the simple and only true reason for both the event, and any perversity encountered therein. It was also suggested to me that, in such a context, openness of any kind would be patently impossible. I find this type of explanation to be highly reductionist. Yes, the ‘solidarity’ of some individuals circulating within the Central American left deserves scrutiny, and yes, it is certainly the case that leaders within the Central American left do battle with each other over access to resources. But it is not as if they just sit on those resources when they get access to them. The relevant question is why leaders want access to (or control over) resources in the first place, and what they do with them subsequently. I do not mean to suggest that leaders are above suspicion; on the contrary, all evidence suggests that they work hard to protect their personal interests. But they must do so within a particular context of legitimacy, which in the ideal would work to ensure that the interests of leaders serve the interests of their followers in the long run. But whether or not this holds true, the point is to both distinguish, and uncover the relationships between specific agendas, and the larger systemic forces within which these agendas are pursued.
the Nicaragua forum was divided along grassroots/NGO lines. While many NGOs favored policy advocacy, the balance of organizations at the forum came down on the side of resistance.\footnote{So strong was the rejection of any type of policy advocacy, that when the IDB convened public consultations about the CAFTA negotiations many sectors of the left elected to abstain from the process (Spalding 2004).} \footnote{The outcome of the incidencia/resistencia debate was particularly contentious given that several of the organizers of the Nicaraguan forum belonged to SAPRIN (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network), an important regional network of professional NGOs financed by the World Bank. NGOs that favored advocacy work were marginalized within the MPF process, as well as within their national contexts. The advocacy camp decided to form a new regional network called CID: Comercio, Integracion y Desarrollo Sostenible (Commerce, Integration and Sustainable Development), which participated in the “quarto a lado” (room next door – ironically called the “quarto oscuro” or dark room by some) of the CAFTA negotiations. They ultimately discovered that they could have no effect on the outcomes of the FTA, rejected the process and joined the ranks of other protesters. But these organizations remained widely discredited within the Central American left, even suffering acts of public malice. In one case an email was circulated falsely accusing an NGO from the SAPRIN network of working for the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB). The episode also resulted in a split within the Salvadoran left, and the creation of a new network called Sinti Techan made up of NGOs that wished to distance themselves from the SAPRIN and CID networks.}

A second, alternative strategy for building legitimacy and relevancy has been to seek new engagements with the grassroots (Aldaba et al. 2000; Pearce 2001; Mitlin et al 2007). In particular, many NGOs in the region help local people create real local alternatives to the livelihood and consumption offerings (maquilas and mass marketed goods respectively) of global commodity chains. Micro-lending schemes are a common means through which to offer this type of support. They are meant to help local people reduce their reliance on global markets or non-responsive governments. These activities also offer a remedy to the larger problem of escapism that plagues the region.

The tendency of professionalized NGOs to seek legitimacy in work with local groups often causes friction with grassroots organizations that have adopted a radical position vis-à-vis the current political and economic conjuncture. One interviewee pointed out, for example:

There are organizations that acquire financing through participation in these forums. There are some that because they go to the WSF manage to acquire funding for counterpart organizations. As a result, an organization without presence in the country might all of a sudden have $100,000 for the transport of 100 people. But base organizations that do popular work in the streets at times can only send 1 leader because they don’t have the money. It seems to me that this deforms the concept of the Forum because you’d think that those who are at the forefront of these spaces are the organizations that have real presence at the national level and that have a clear definition of popular mobilization and that exercise some sort of advocacy in the public policies of their country and have some level of recognition at the national level such that they can extend themselves at the regional level. (Interview #63, tm)
Particularly in sectors where strong representation exists among grassroots actors, as is the case with campesino or indigenous movements, leaders complain that NGOs appropriate established social networks, or challenge the authority of network members.

In response, professionalized NGOs have been reconsidering how they employ knowledge to legitimize their position. Where in the past their technical knowledge of specific issues allowed them to claim to represent certain agendas on the behalf of communities, the trend now is to mobilize that knowledge to accompany and facilitate the processes of aggrieved communities. While I was doing field work it struck me that professionalized NGOs were adopting a sort of ‘legal-aid’ framework, in which they advise their ‘clients’ from a position of authority on the recommended course of action, but ultimately decisions lay in the hands of the ‘client.’ Indeed, many NGOs in the region actually work on a fee-for-service model, sometimes with the outside support of international donors or government institutions (interview pre#2, 5-10; observation). This situation means that professionalized NGOs need to connect with local communities in order to justify (and pay for) their existence, and this has led to greater efforts to organize collaborations between local communities and knowledgeable professionals in issue areas such as conservation (mining, forestry or water management) and community economic development. It also means that NGOs may come into competition with each other in the pursuit of these ‘contracts’.

These partnerships can be beneficial, but they also have political implications. Relationships between professional, middle class NGOs and grassroots actors are often troubled by deep and often very personal questions of political orientation. The educated, urban, middle class individuals that ‘grew up’ in donor-funded civic organizations established during the period of democratization often carry a different set of political values from the grassroots actors they work with (Mitlin et al 2007, 1711). NGO professionals are often strong supporters of liberal
freedoms and democratic process, so where 'popular sectors' embrace Chavez unquestionably for his efforts to improve the situation of poor people, the professional left questions his methods even as they applaud his accomplishments. The following quote demonstrates this tendency:

Nothing guarantees that the left we have is going to do a good job. Look at the Sandanistas in Nicaragua. There is nothing that guarantees that the Front [FMLN] is going to do a good job. […] I’m not going to support a Forum because it’s on the left. I’m going to support it because it has people, programs, interesting parties. When someone like Chavez speaks out against the European Union it creates sympathy. But this does not mean that Chavez can’t be corrupt. I’m not going to support Chavez because he is Chavez, but because he does a good job. Citizens need to have a personality and their own agenda regarding political parties. The problem [in El Salvador] is that civil society considers it the most important thing for the Front to win, so let’s all support the Front, because this is going to resolve every problem. I don’t enter into that logic.

(interview #77; tm)

In addition, middle class social justice advocates tend to adopt a softer interpretation of globalization and capitalism. There is a tendency to read the Central American milieu as resulting not from the actions of local elites, but also from transformative processes that are changing the global logic of accumulation. As a result, these individuals are more sympathetic to efforts to ameliorate rather than to transform the foundations of the local economy. Take for example the following quote:

…in Nicaragua there was a conversation about maquiladoras in which the proposal was to close the factories. A union representative stands up and says that they can’t be closed because the people who work there would die of hunger. But when you say, ‘I want people to have the right to go to the bathroom or for maternity leave’ the reply from the forums is, ‘You want to ‘maquillar’ [put cosmetics (i.e. lipstick) on] the system. I respond that, yes, it doesn’t change the system, but what should we do while we wait for the revolution? They aren’t big changes, but if they change the lives of a few people? It seems unjust to us—they can’t have the right to scorn these small changes. (77; tm)

Here there is the suggestion that social justice advocates want access to spaces of decision making as a means to create change on the fringes of policy-making, without questioning the larger political agenda.16 Thus, for these actors, there are two conflicting agendas: maintaining (or constructing) the institutions of liberal democracy while also maintaining their legitimacy and

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16 The political differences go even deeper than this. In intimate conversations, friends who work for NGOs in El Salvador and Costa Rica admitted fear about the radicalization of the left in Central America. They are concerned that the democratic gains of the 1990s may fall away, and, reflecting on history, worry that radical tendencies could lead the region into a new era of conflict. Beyond the threat of unrest, there is also deep concern about how change might affect the middleclass standing of professional social justice advocates.
salary by working with groups that may see the benefit in undermining democratic institutions in the interests of redistribution!

Needless to say, the positions of professionalized NGOs are viewed with suspicion by the more radical elements of the left, who observe that even in the social democracies of the first world there are people living in poverty (participant observation). This raises a question of whether professionalized left-leaning *adjuncts* can be objective or impartial in the services they provide to grassroots communities. We can begin to see how the differing positions of radical and professionalized strands of the left come into conflict with each other in spaces such as social forums. This is more than just a war of words; it can also turn into a battle over the hearts and minds of the people as various groups target the legitimizing *poder de convocatoria* (following) of grassroots communities, and work to advocate particular visions of a future for the region through the construction of a collective political subject. We can also see how, just as within the more radical networks described above, NGOs have their own vision of an alternative future for Central America, but they also form a plurality of voices for the realization of that future. Meanwhile, in a context marked by political change, reduced funding and challenges to the foundations for associational legitimacy, these organizations often find themselves competition as the work to develop new development models and new connections with the grassroots, thereby protecting the gains made during earlier periods.

### 1.3 Reconciling Identity-Based Positions

Both the radicalized and the professionalized left can be contrasted with a third tendency which is to organize around identity concerns and new strategies for constructing the left through historical analysis and self-reflection. Perhaps not surprisingly, the groups most interested in this type of work have traditionally been excluded from positions of power within
the left, and take issue with the philosophical foundations of Marxism and liberalism, neither of which adequately accounts for difference (see for example the work of Luciak 2001). These include feminists, the nascent ecumenical movement, indigenous movements, and some portions of the campesino movement. Here I will focus specifically on the feminist and indigenous movements, each in turn.

The Central American feminist movement places heavy emphasis on the empowerment of individual women so that they can challenge patriarchy from their personal experience, standpoint or position. For example, in a reflection on the MPF process Hernández writes of the Central American feminist movement that:

> It is necessary to realize analysis from the very position of identity since feminism is a style of life, a philosophy that requires more than just feminist conduct, because feminism is a process, a construction that goes on realizing itself through the acknowledgement of its own history. As a result, it is important to exteriorize the rebellion of women and work on the appraisal of this rebellion. Women should understand that this is not the product of their madness but rather of their intelligence. Also, feminism is not the only road to follow but it is not a process that is followed automatically, rather it must be worked on. (Hernández 2006, 9)

The movement, as such, comes together around individuals with vastly different personal concerns, but which share a desire to challenge the various practices that oppress them (each differently) as a result of their gender. When significant portions of the movement coincide in a strategic agenda, then they will come together to pressure for recognition from, or change by, the dominant institutions of power as expressed through either capital the state or social conduct (interview #pre9). With this in mind, the movement saw participation in the MPF as a very important objective of their work. Insofar as Central America’s negotiation with global capital shaped the region, and the MPF shaped the negotiation of Central America’s left-leaning leadership with that process, then it was a highly strategic space through which to influence the forces shaping women’s experience in the region. At the fourth MPF in Honduras, a group of 90 delegates headed up a ‘sectoral round table’ called Women Before the Neoliberal Model. This initiative led to the formation of “Mesoamericanas in Resistance,” a regional space for feminists,
which organized the first “Mesoamerican Encounter for Women,” held immediately prior to the fifth MPF in El Salvador (interview #98).

The Mesoamericanas network has a relatively decentralized organizational structure that brings together women from across the region, as well as from the various strands of feminist thinking. In this case the authority and legitimacy of the space results from its diversity, inclusivity, focus on empowerment and respect for otherness. The group pursued a dual agenda with regards to the MPF. The first was a strategic agenda to ensure both equal representation of women, and dedicated spaces for feminists within the spaces of the MPF. They argued that while everyone participating in the MPF is a labourer, the union movement controlled dedicated spaces within the forum (ibid). Following this logic, everyone participating in the MPF had a gender, but the feminist movement deserved special status. The second, related agenda was to ensure that the MPF adopted an anti-patriarchal agenda, in addition to economic agendas, which were taken as a ‘given.’ This reflected the ongoing work of Central American feminists to draw out the relationship between patriarchy and economy, and to ensure that any consideration of political, social or economic ‘alternatives’ would include considerations of gender. This also reflected the desire of feminists to challenge the cultural practices of the left itself and bring about change from the inside (interviews #40, #44, #45, #56, #58, #98).

But recall from Chapter 4 that the Mesoamericanas ultimately withdrew from the MPF when their anti-patriarchal interpretation of the event was rejected during the sixth forum in Costa Rica at the end of 2005. This episode unleashed dissention within the feminist movement. Given Central America’s tendency towards associational politics during the 1990s, much of the feminist movement had established itself within this model. Given donor influences, feminist organizations frequently adopted the liberal discourses and agendas of feminist movements from other regions. When the leadership of the Mesoamericanas withdrew from the MPF, they were
accused of pursuing a Northern feminist agenda that had little to do with the realities facing the majority of Central American women. In interviews, the leaders of the movement were characterized as being from NGOs, of dividing the movement, or of failing to respect the desire of ordinary women to work alongside, rather than at cross-purposes to, their husbands, brothers, and sons, in the effort to bring about change (interview #28, for example). The episode brought to the fore issues of power and agenda within the feminist movement, and placed heavy strains on the ideal of an identity-based movement.

Central America’s indigenous movements have faced similar difficulties, but in contrast to the feminist movement, the cultural elements of Central America’s indigenous movements have not been well represented within the MPF.\textsuperscript{17} Indigenous identity-based movements in Central America have focused on confronting exclusionary social and political institutions established through processes of colonization. As such, they are oriented towards the maintenance of language and traditional practices, and advocate for the recognition of unique rights to protect cultural heritage (Bastos and Camus 2003; Cojti 2005; Brett 2006). But identity-based indigenous movements in Central America have historically had a difficult relationship with other strands of the left, particularly in Guatemala, where the ‘indigenous awakening’ was precipitated by the revolutionary activities of repressed ‘white’ labour activists and culminated in the scorched earth campaign of General Rios Montt, a genocide which took the lives of thousands of rural indigenous peoples in that country. Since democratization in that country, therefore, indigenous movements have worked to generate autonomy, and develop agendas that better reflect the specific concerns of indigenous people, as well as to situate ethnic

\textsuperscript{17} This become especially clear to me during a presentation of interim findings in Guatemala. One attendee pointed out an ‘error’ in my presentation saying that I had overlooked the inclusion of an indigenous round table at the Costa Rican forum. The official (and indigenous) representative of the MPF in Guatemala insisted that I was correct. They debated the finding and ultimately could come to no agreement on this score. I was never able to verify whether there was an indigenous round-table or not, not even during interviews with the Costa Rican organizers of the Costa Rican event. If such a meeting took place, it is unlikely it was very sizable or significant.
concerns within Guatemala’s national identity during its process of democratization (see for example the work of Cojti 2007).

Indigenous organizations in Guatemala have also often pursued their work through the establishment of donor-funded NGOs, so they too have gotten caught up in the associational politics of the 1990s. At the turn of the millennium, these organizations were experiencing an internal crisis. COPMAGUA (the Coordinadora de Organizaciones del Pueblo Maya de Guatemala or Guatemalan Coordinator of Organizations of the Mayan Community), the central coordinating organization for Guatemala’s indigenous movement, collapsed in 2002. In the wake of this episode, the elite segments of Guatemalan indigenous movements began to pursue political agendas, drawing inspiration from the success of Morales in Bolivia. Rigoberta Menchu, for example, has become involved in electoral politics and ran as a candidate in Guatemala’s 2008 national elections. Indigenous groups have also pursued larger regional spaces as a means for advancing indigenous issues, such as the third Continental Summit of Indigenous Communities of the Abya Yala in 2008, and the third Americas forum in 2008, both held in Guatemala. All together, many leaders within Guatemala’s indigenous movements had their attention focused elsewhere, and did not participate actively within the MPF.

As a result, indigenous individuals have most often participated in the MPF through spaces created by other, more materially motivated movements, following the example of the Zapatistas. Due to Mexico’s history of clientelistic politics, associational politics was never established as a form of political incorporation, as it was in Central America during the 1990s. As a result, the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico had the potential to evolve as a grassroots movement of indigenous campesinos that blended both cultural and redistributive demands, without the influence of either professional organizations or left-wing leaders. Part of what makes the Zapatista movement unique is that it has been able to knit together a broad-based
movement representing a range of concerns, including feminist concerns. When the second MPF was held in northern Guatemala, this blending of indigenous and *campesino* identity—the *mistica* of the Zapatista movement—was introduced into the MPF through cultural activities during the opening and closing ceremonies (interviews #8, #106).

As the history of the MPF unfolded, however, the *mistica* of the Zapatista movement was overshadowed by the protagonism of leftist leaders and the framing activities of Central America’s NGOs (interview #106). Indigenous peoples began to be included in the MPF not as carriers of identitary agendas, but as members of movements representing material concerns. For some indigenous groups this did not present a problem. While indigenous *leaders* have been focused on cultural issues, (and feminists have been focused on gender relations) indigenous peasants (including indigenous women) are also concerned with more immediate material needs, and this has made them sympathetic to the radical agenda described above. Many peasants and indigenous people in the region continued to participate in the MPF as proponents of these agendas. Other groups, however, began to feel that perhaps their contributions were being capitalized on symbolically but not substantially, and eventually some indigenous groups and *campesino* movements decided to remove themselves from the space (interview #106; Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, folio). As a result, the MPF really never managed to mobilize the core of the culturally oriented or identity-based indigenous movements in Central America, and as its history progressed, the representation of indigenous cultural concerns within the space was greatly diminished.

In sum, both feminist and indigenous identity-based movements have found it difficult to reconcile the foundations of their legitimacy with the objectives of the broader Central American left. Advancing identitary movements is particularly tricky in Central America given the political and economic context of the region. The ‘pure’ identities of the feminist, indigenous or
religious movements ask integrants to define themselves narrowly on the basis of cultural concerns in a context that is deeply marked by material or political injustices. Meanwhile, leaders of cultural movements must often use political tactics to protect spaces dedicated to identity-based concerns against the pressures of radical or associational politics in the region. Together, these factors expose the leaders of cultural movements to criticism from those who believe that cultural work serves to fracture the movement and undermine its ability to resolve what some perceive to be more pressing injustices. Proponents of culture reply that until identity-based grievances are resolved, the left will never be able to advance beyond coalition politics and offer a real alternative for the region. Indeed, proponents of this position argue that it is through processes of self-reflection and negotiation that a real alternative can be created. Ultimately, therefore, the identity-based position is very threatening to other segments of the left in Central America. Beyond challenging them to reconsider the logic by which they organize themselves, the proposed remedy threatens to ‘liberate’ the bases on which they depend from their differing systems of legitimation by engaging them in processes of reflection and negotiation.

1.4 Summing Up: Clashing Values within the MPF

The most prominent example of an identity valued within the MPF is that of the *Mesoamericano/a*, “the women and men of the corn, those of the colour of the earth” as they are described in an early forum document (FMP 2001a). Drawing on the Zapatista movement, these are the mostly rural, indigenous *campesinos* and laborers of Mayan heritage that straddle the Mexico-Guatemala border and reach into Honduras. This imagery evoked the land tenure and food security concerns of relatively traditional families in the region. It became the core identity for the MPF, even after the CAFTA was announced in 2002 and the MPF started to take place in
countries with little Mayan heritage (Nicaragua, El Salvador, Costa Rica), and became focused on fighting a battle that had little to do with the Zapatistas. As the forum drifted further and further from its roots, the concept of *Mesoamericano/a* became a vessel filled according to the needs of its user, forming a site of struggle within the history of the MPF.

Different strands of the left began to interpret the idea of being Mesoamerican in different ways. For groups addressing material concerns, Mesoamerica was the name given to the impending trade corridor that would link southern Mexico to Central America (interview #7 for example). The integrants of this group needed to participate in the MPF because the economic negotiations affecting the region would create a single economic region that would affect laborers in similar ways. For identity groups, on the other hand, being Mesoamerican meant recalling the Mayan heritage of the original peoples of the region and questioning the ways in which the colonial heritage and neoliberal economic and political tendencies that have affected the region have pervaded the agendas and organizational culture of the left (interview #76). Associational groups, meanwhile, would look at this concept more technically, as a tool for mobilization, or a geographical reference point (interview #97, #99). So right away it becomes obvious that key terms are interpreted in ways that serve the agendas of particular groups within the forum space. This section has demonstrated the range of thinking within the MPF, as well as the deep points of tension between these positions.

Meanwhile, regardless of their vision, all left-wing leaders understood an urgent need for a regional space that would offer an opportunity to mobilize supporters, while also projecting the image of a regionally united front against the political-economic changes taking place in the region. At the same time there were significant tensions within the space between groups with very different notions of a future direction for the Central American left. These tensions were exacerbated by several historical factors including, on the one hand, reduced spaces for
participation and effective protest within the region, and on the other, the growing sense of the possibility for, and desirability of, an electoral alternative for the left in Central America, especially given the turn to the left in South American politics (Chapter 4). The PPP and CAFTA served to further heighten tensions both by creating a focal point around which to organize forum events, as well as by creating a heightened sense of urgency as various sectors worked to organize and put forth alternatives to the change processes already underway.

The combination of pressures for unity and pressures for disjuncture within the MPF can be understood in the following terms. First, there was a tension between the perceived need to fight processes of political and economic change from a position of regional unity, and the growing pressure to work from the local to mobilize movements on the basis of differing systems of legitimation. As was discussed above, forces structuring the politics and economy of the region affect it as a whole, but the political and economic responses to these processes are specific. This was why the SICA ultimately failed (as was discussed in Chapter 4). This dynamic similarly affects the Central American left causing it to come together in protest, but driving it apart in the construction of alternatives. The second, and related tension, revolved around the need to mobilize people within particular agendas. While forums served to animate people and to strengthen the left, the “unmoorings” created by networking within transnational spaces challenged the desire of leaders to construct or maintain systems of legitimation that are built around particular ideological or policy alternatives, but which also operate within an uncertain and insecure political environment. In a political context marked by fragile states, weak institutions and strong challenges to official powers, the practices of mediation between state and society must necessarily be different. For leaders within the Central American left, this has meant building around themselves a system of legitimation and basis of support that provides a measure of security and a means of powering. Ultimately this means that the project of
constructing a collective political subject is fraught with difficulties that tend towards undermining the cognitive justice of individual participants (as will be explored further below).

This explains why the discourse of the forum leaned towards ideas of radical democracy even while accounts of the forum suggested disjuncture within its spaces (see Chapter 6). When it became clear that there were different positions regarding the conception of legitimacy and central agenda that would be used in mobilization and realization of alternatives, the various agendas represented within the space came into conflict, and this caused leaders to experience the space much differently from either organizers or participants.\(^{18}\) This means that rather than following a strategy of mobilizing people into the left by exposing them to the many new ideas available at a transnational event, or of embracing uncertainty and allowing identities to mingle and emerge within forum spaces, leaders within the MPF were much more likely to use the forum as a means to empower their people within the context of established agendas, even as they worked to shore up the banks of their particular corner of the left. I will now turn to the question of how permissions and authentications were established within the MPF to suit these ends, as well as the means by which power brokers within the space set about establishing these guidelines.

2 Key Sites of Power for the Enactment of Values within the MPF

It is one thing to say that there were tensions between different perspectives represented within the spaces of the MPF, but quite another to say that these tensions had an impact on the quality of meeting spaces. In this section I will consider the institutions and mechanisms at work within the spaces of the MPF to establish and enforce permissions and authentications. I will

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\(^{18}\) As one interviewee explained, “It worries me because honestly, we have organized activities at the regional level against the FTA … but in the moment that the question of structures emerges - ah - the first thing that is going to happen is that there will be a fight for who will arrive at the head, who is going to lead.” (interview #33; also #55)
argue that it was through these means that the values discussed above were advanced and/or protected. I will also try to show how the maintenance of these values served to reinforce power relations and structures of power within the space.

Practices evolved within the history of the MPF to ensure that particular interpretations of key identities, such as the Mesoamerican one discussed above, were upheld by individuals or groups participating in the forum. We have already encountered a key mechanism through which this was done. A final declaration was issued at the end of each event, as well as an official report of the event. \(^\text{19}\) This practice worked to perpetuate the MPF as a space by establishing general permissions and authentications for the sorts of actors who might feel welcome at a meeting of anti-globalization activists. Note, as has been shown elsewhere, that these permissions and authentications were not always clear. Ambiguities abounded in both written records and interviews. Were representatives of political parties welcome in the space or not (participant observation - meeting of CM in Panama)? Should the MFP resist the CAFTA agreement or engage in policy advocacy to influence its texts (Chapter 5)? Were NGOs part of the ‘left’ and therefore welcome in the space, or not? Was the MPF a political subject in formation, a social movement, or a meeting space? Was the MPF formally affiliated with the WSF, as some members of the Comité Mesoamericano confidently assured me in interviews (Interview #5), or was it a separate and unlinked endeavor, as others just as confidently asserted (Interview #7)? This ambiguity even affected the naming of the event. It was variously called the Mesoamerican People’s Forum, the Mesoamerican Social Forum, the Mesoamerican Forum, or the People’s Forum, and indeed, the name changed over time in official documentation as well.

\(^\text{19}\) For example, interviewee #67 raised the following concern: “Forums are judged in terms of the number of people who arrive and if the final pronouncement is solid or not. Yes the final pronouncement is important - for example, it shows how forums are evolving, for example the changes in advocacy with regards to the FTA can be measured through pronouncements. But who is driving the contents of these pronouncements? A tiny group that has been analyzing the whole process.”
The ambiguity of these documents reflects the delicate balance of positions between the leaders who participated in the *Comité Mesoamericano* (CM). The CM was established at the fourth forum in Honduras to regulate interactions between key players (Interviews #4, #50). During this time the MPF became subsumed in the CAFTA debates that dominated political organizing throughout Central America during the period of the negotiations (Chapter 5). For example, a close look at the topics discussed at each forum shows a gradual shift from thematic issues such as water and dams to strategic concerns such as the threat of militarization to social movements and the need of better communication systems within the left (see Appendix 2). Also, in the year between the Nicaraguan and Honduran events, a series of national-level social movements were formed in response to the CAFTA threat (Villalona 2006). These movements typically became the national referents of the MPF, and many of their integrants were the very same groups that advocated the formation of a regional political subject through which they could wage serious resistance to the CAFTA process. Also recall that political parties observed the third MPF in Nicaragua were identified as official observers of the Honduras event (Chapter 5).

At the same time, new actors made themselves heard within the decision-making spaces of the MPF in the time between the Nicaraguan and Honduran forums. For the first time in Honduras separate round tables were established for women and indigenous or afro-descendent communities. While it might at first appear that this was a strategy to mobilize additional left-leaning elements in the battle against CAFTA, this was not the design of the forum organizers. The forum organizers would have preferred to integrate identity-based groups into the larger forum process in order to avoid the potential for divisions within what they thought to be an emergent regional social movement. But things did not turn out quite as planned. The coordinators of a round table for *Women Against the Neoliberal Model*, for example, fought organizers for permission to form a separate space at the event (interview #98). They began to
form an agenda for advocacy within the MPF itself, fighting for both a space to discuss women and gender in addition to equal representation of women at the broader MPF.\textsuperscript{20} Members of the associational sphere, meanwhile, tended to be present in the forum to the extent that they either worked on issues directly related to the work of the anti-globalization movement, worked with members of the anti-globalization movement, or were involved in the organization of forum events. Some organizations also held parallel informational or educational events during social forums.

The Honduras forum was the first occasion in which the leaders of the national anti-CAFTA movements (the national referents) took charge of selecting participants from their countries to attend the event (see Appendix 3). The national referent for each country received a participant quota, paid for by the host country, typically between 150 and 200 spaces, and was charged with deciding how to divide up these spaces between itself and the various groups making up the anti-globalization movement at the national level and regional levels. This system was a source of enormous grief in the history of the MPF. The MPF is not technically a closed event; anyone can show up if they have the resources to pay for their travel. However, it is closed to those who cannot travel without outside support, which is true for the vast majority of the people who would be interested in attending (interview #12). This meant that space within the official delegation became a highly political issue.\textsuperscript{21} National referents were not always as representative as they could have been, selection criteria were not always clear, and many interviewees felt that spaces were sometimes awarded for clientelistic or partisan reasons. There

\textsuperscript{20} As one interviewee commented, “The women needed spaces through which to know themselves and from with to work on leadership so that they could carry out advocacy in the mixed spaces and in the exterior as well.” (Interview #79)

\textsuperscript{21} For example one interviewee said, “In this country there are distance, certain problems that we have not been able to solve, such as how to go [to a forum] as a unified delegation. We always go as separate individuals. One is the Sinti Techan network and the other is the MPR-12 which is also part of the Civil Society Forum. These are the two national referents. We go to the MPF separately and with divide the quote into separate spaces. (Interview #92)
was almost always some group which felt purposefully excluded from the Forum process (for example, interview #57). To complicate matters, regional networks might find that their people could attend as part of the official delegation for one country, but not another.

This raised the question of who exactly should be included in the forum. Who could be considered a member of the ‘left’ and who could be considered a representative of ‘the people’? As one interviewee put it:

> There is a need to define what is left and who makes up the left. The Forum -- there are many people who do not seem to be of the left. Is it the left that is mistaken, or do we really not know what the left is? There is a structure, a base, a way of acting, etc. But the left, what is it? It can be anyone. You say you’re from the Left? Review your practice. What does it mean to be on the left today? (Interview #76)

In the early days of the Forum, the focus was on sectors and issues most obviously related to, or affected by, globalization. As such, there was no question that union and farming groups belonged at the table, and they have been there throughout the process. But the right of identity-based groups, NGOs or political parties was not always clear and disputes abounded. The problem of participant selection also highlighted just how important it was for people from different sectors of the left to be represented within the national delegation, or otherwise participate in forum spaces. There was a great desire among all interviewees to be represented within this regional space, and interviewees often talked about the need to represent their views within the spaces of the MPF against the force of other agendas. Nowhere was this more apparent than with the feminists, given their argument that there should be a space for gender issues in addition to equal representation of women within forum spaces. The issue of participant selection and the fact that it rested with national referents suggests that gate keeping practices were sometimes employed as one mechanism to guide the make-up of actors participating in forum events.

The CM offered a second level of control—a sort of regional counterweight—to processes of participant selection and coordination happening at the national level. In its
conceptual ‘ideal,’ as described in Chapter 5, the CM was a sort of matrix organization with two representatives from a national level organization in each country (the ‘National Referent’) that encompassed the broadest possible expression of the left, as well as two representatives from each regional level thematic network. National referents were meant to send one man and one woman to each meeting of the Comité. In this way the thematic, national and gender interests of each participant would be represented in a democratic fashion. But in practice, given tensions between leaders from different stands of the left, the CM was not so much a dialogue as it was the institution through which key actors negotiated their collaboration in the realization of MPF.

Figure 6: Representation of the Comité Mesoamericano in Practice
events. Figure 5 presents a mock up of the chains of representation in the CM demonstrating the types of anomalies that characterized the governance of the Forum, including:

- Multiple national referents, sometimes with difficult relationships between them
- Marginalization of, or auto-exclusion by certain groups
- Multiple regional networks with differing bases at the national levels
- Influence by ‘third parties,’ such as political parties. Supra-regional groups such as the World Social Forum and Americas Forum have also had a strong influence on the CM.
- Ties of different strengths and character between actors.

So, for example, in countries where several different anti-CAFTA expressions had emerged there were conflicts over who would be the official MPF referent. The national referent would have power over the allocation of the travel money made available by the host country to what were now being called “national delegations.” In El Salvador in particular a rift emerged between the MPR-12 (Popular Resistance Movement 12th of October) social movement which had formed out of the Nicaraguan forum, and the Sinti Techan network, which comprised NGOs that had broken away from the Salvadoran head of the SAPRIN network (see footnote 14 above). These two groups ended up splitting the participant quota and forming two separate delegations. When it was agreed that the fifth forum would take place in El Salvador, they agreed to work together to organize the event. Later on a third Salvadoran group, the Bloque Popular of the FMLN, began to also compete for space within forum circles. In both event organization and the formation of national delegations, these two groups received input from the CM who ensured that a sufficient number of spots were made available to organizations that did not align themselves with any of these networks, and to individuals who came to the forum by way of regional networks.
Given these tensions, the CM provided leaders with a focal point for efforts to promote their various agendas. For example, leaders could leverage coalitions to balance the centralization of power in the CM and to counter the agendas of national referents. One way that regionally organized coalitions took power away from the national referents was through the organization of sectoral ‘Encuentros’ (literally, encounters) parallel to the realization of the fifth MPF in El Salvador in 2004. The leaders of these spaces reportedly leveraged their base to acquire certain concessions from the MPF. If the MPF and its national referents were not sufficiently inclusive, for example, an Encuentro could undermine the event by withdrawing its participation. Furthermore, these meetings, held immediately prior to the fifth MPF also provided sectoral coalitions an opportunity to develop an agenda and discourse that would be carried to the wider event. For example, since the fifth MPF featured an important discussion about the nature of the Central American left as a political subject, the Encuentro de Mujeres focused on developing a strategy to ensure the inclusion of its voice in the debate. They were present in the round table about the political subject during the actual event, distributed pamphlets throughout the forum to promote their anti-patriarchy platform, and even managed to include their own interpretation of this discussion in the final report about the fifth MPF. This example demonstrates how coalitions became a further strategy used to guide the permissions and authentications shaping the forum space.

By the time of the sixth MPF to be held in Costa Rica, the various integrants of the CM had decided that if (an as yet conceptually undefined) political subject were to emerge at the regional level in Central America, and if participants were to take better advantage of the journey to the forum event, then it was necessary to create greater continuity between meetings. One of the major ways in which this was to be achieved was through the realization of national preparatory meetings by the national referents before the Costa Rican forum (Interview #5, #7,
#50, Meeting of CM in Panama). This proposal was interesting for a few reasons. For one thing, it created a nationally-based counter-weight to the emerging power of the regionally based Encuentros within the spaces of the MPF. Secondly, this program agreed with groups organized around national agendas, such as the formation of a national social movement or political power. In both Guatemala and Panama, for example, this work coincided with efforts to form national social movements, the MICS-P in Guatemala and FRENDESOS in Panama. But perhaps the most interesting thing about this effort was the refusal of many local groups to participate. Instead of unified national meetings ahead of the Costa Rica forum, many groups, often those more clearly involved in the Encuentros, elected to hold their own sectoral preparatory meetings (for example interview #45; also #18). Here there was clear evidence of differences of opinion on how people should be prepared for the MPF, and to what ends.

Many groups used workshops or briefing and debriefing sessions to prepare delegates for forum events. As discussed in Chapter 6, the MPF began to include more and more people from the bases as it matured. But interviewees reported that these individuals often found the event overwhelming and disorienting. What is more, it was very costly to send individuals to forum events. So leaders within particular sectors began to coach local delegates ahead of forum events, and accompany them during the MPF, to ensure that their participation would be ‘productive.’ These same delegates would be debriefed upon their return to their home country, or asked to report on their experiences to local groups with whom they worked. This was an activity oriented towards mobilization and identity formation of new actors into a particular vision of the left. I observed this process being carried out by various groups in both Guatemala and El Salvador. Typically processes of identity formation and mobilization would be ongoing with a local community. Promising individuals from among the larger group would be selected
for participation in the regional social forum, and would perhaps report back to their peers about their experience on returning home (interviews #40; #74; #83-86, for example).

In other cases, I encountered this sort of activity within organizations, or within regional networks, but with the intention of setting strategic agendas vis-à-vis forum events. In one case, for example, young staff members from a Guatemalan NGO explained how a delegation of about 20 people from their organization attended the Costa Rican forum. Before going, the group met to discuss the history and purpose of the social forum, and to developed a strategy to ‘tackle’ the event. They divided up among the various round tables, and then met each day during the event to discuss what they had learned. Upon returning to Guatemala they had a debriefing session, and then presented their overall ‘findings’ to the other members of their organization (interview #22; also interviews #76; #93; participant observation). Since these were individuals already active within formalized sectors of the left, in this case briefing and debriefing was not meant to mobilize their participation, but rather to make sure that they were ‘on message.’ Debriefing provided a means to interpret, absorb or mitigate any new or contradictory information gathered during forum events. These practices of ‘network management’ allowed forum participants flexibility for networking while attending a social forum, but conditioned loyalty to a particular network in the long run.

Finally, there was one other practice the evolved in the course of the MPF that provided a mechanism to control permissions and authentications. This was a discursive practice that could be used to narrow debate when the terms of discussion were favourable, or widening parameters when they were not. This practice took place at the macro, meso and micro levels within forum spaces. At the macro level, for example, the organizing committee of the Salvadoran forum trained some 75 facilitators to manage dialogue at the fifth forum, particularly around the formation of a regional political subject. Coincidentally, the Salvadoran left is rigid in its
organization, and Salvadoran delegates have been among those most in favour of forming a regional political subject. Meanwhile, the organizers of the subsequent Costa Rican forum established a much more flexible methodology reflective of the more social democratic tendencies of the left in that country, which pushed the forum away from its course towards the formation of a political subject. At the meso level, the practice of holding meetings prior to forum events allowed groups to establish political agendas that they would carry into forum spaces. Where they were in support of a particular value, activity or trajectory, they would drive the debate towards a narrower conclusion, but where not in support, they would force a continuance, hence widening out the parameters of discussion. Finally, at the micro level, repeat attendees would call on ‘decisions’ made at previous forums when they felt that new delegates were re-creating the wheel (interview #3). This is a practice subject to the selective memory of delegates. When in agreement with a previous decision, use it to shut down further conversation so that new items or more specific agendas can come to the fore. When in disagreement, allow the discussion to arise again, this time, perhaps, with new outcomes.

The discussion presented in this section illustrates some of the ways actors sought to influence the production of the forum space, not by taking control, but rather by channeling networked flows. I have identified, all together, five mechanisms: network management (allowing flexibility for networking while conditioning loyalty to a particular network), gate keeping (influencing who attends), identity formation (training local delegates in a particular ideological position before events), coalition formation (building relationships with allies across borders), and manipulating the openness of debate (narrowing debate when terms are in one’s favour, forcing a continuance or widening parameters when they are not). These processes were carried out through three key structures including the CM, national referents and regional Encuentros.
A position of influence within the national referent or a regional Encuentro allowed leaders to exercise power or broker relationships, and this gave them both the ability and the motivation to influence the forum space in ways that would perpetuate their own processes of legitimization, to enhance their own standing, and to promote a particular vision alternatives for the Central American left. In particular, they gained influence over who could attend the MPF, and leverage spatial practices: taking advantage of forum resources to form and/or mobilize networks, develop discourses about forum practices and events, or assert their position vis-à-vis other actors within the forum process. Spaces created in advance of forum events allowed organizers to set agendas and manage debates, allowing them to narrow debates when terms were in their favour, and to force a continuance or widen the parameters when they were not. Finally, these powers allowed them to manage the borders of networks by promoting valued identities, activities or trajectories. All of these mechanisms allowed leaders to shore up the borders of their organizational, network or movement spaces.

To conclude, there is one further question to be answered, which is how the values, identities or trajectories that these leaders worked to protect could reinforce relations of power taking place within the MPF. When I asked people in interviews about the cause of political competition within the MPF, they would frequently mention the long-standing problem of ‘liderazgos’ (literally leadership, but often invoked with a tongue-in-cheek ‘delusions of grandeur’ connotation) or ‘protagonismo’ (meaning literally protagonism - wanting to be the star of the show) within the Central American left (interviews #6, #12, #15, #33, #36, #41, #55, #58, #69, #70, #89, #100). When there are many problems, few middle class jobs, and few channels through which to influence decision-making, it can feel like there is only enough time, money and energy to achieve one goal, and leaders want to offer the solution that will bring about change. Their ability to do so rides on continued support from a following so that they can
attract resources and convince others to follow their path. The result is a vicious circle that both reinforces hierarchies and divides, and ensures that particular values are maintained.

What I have suggested here is that the MPF is a collision of these different networked hierarchies. At the top of each hierarchy you have leaders who require legitimation of both their person and their agenda to retain their position of authority within the CM, a national referent or a regional *Encuentro*. At the bottom of these hierarchies you find individuals who are being mobilized into one or another vision of the left, and then maintained within that position. Hopefully each leader and as many of her followers as possible were allowed to attend a forum as a member of a national delegation. This would enhance the position of the leader within the forum event, but also serve as a mechanism of mobilization for that leader in the longer term. The forum could be further leveraged to this end through identity formation as a tool of mobilization. The possibility for mobilizing people into the spaces of the MPF could be enhanced through coalition politics. Finally, any erosion of the bases or their support for the structures of legitimation or power within a particular network, organization or group could be avoided through network management and management of the openness of debates. All of these practices served to protect the system of legitimation on which a particular group, movement, network or organization is founded, but this in turn served to reinforce the divisions between different groups, forming barriers between different interpretations of who belongs within the MPF (permissions), or the correct path for the left ( authentications). The result was competition, uncertainty and insecurity for leaders within the spaces of the MPF, and a tendency towards populist structures of power within the Central American left.
3 Impacts on Cognitive Justice

The first section of this chapter considered the trajectories, activities or identities valued within the MPF and within different left-leaning spaces in Central America, drawing out the tensions between different alternatives. The second section uncovered the structures and mechanisms that could be used to reinforce relations of power within the spaces of the MPF that could be used to promote or protect these differing visions. In this section, finally, I will consider the question of how the experience of the MPF has impacted the potential for cognitive justice within the Central American left. As a reminder, cognitive justice is the potential for people to become subjects of their own historical processes.

In the early phases of this project, I was fascinated with the associations that were being made between notions of empowerment and the idea of openness. Early ethnographic or case study works about open source software production, for example, highlighted the ways in which this organizational model empowered ‘users’ by giving them free access to the source code so that they could contribute in whatever way they saw fit to the further advancement of the project. The suggestion was that this open organizational model could be applied in other ambits to similar effect (Mulgan et al. 2005; Milan 2005). I struggled to draw out the relationship between openness and development, between openness and social forums, and had several conversations with people I met during field work about these ideas. Many of these discussions influenced what I am about the present, but one conversation guided my thinking in particular. On discussing my thoughts informally with an indigenous activist and researcher in Guatemala, he asserted that, while empowerment was part of the answer to creating change, it is not the full solution (interview #10). As we talked, we together sketched out the relationships presented in Table 5, below.
Table 5: Enacting Values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Learning As</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Be</td>
<td>Training/Capdev</td>
<td>Dependence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do</td>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>Independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Exist</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What this discussion and the resulting table suggested was that beyond becoming something by assimilating information, and beyond being motivated to do something as a result of heightened awareness, people also need to coexist, and this requires contact and exchange. In addition to dependence and independence, there is also interdependence, and all three are elements of creating change within a society. What is at issue here is the establishment of conditions under which communication and collaboration can lead to encounters, explorations and innovations through which people become the subjects of their own historical processes. Rather than empowering people to mobilize within groups to create changes, this is about facilitating the types networking interactions that offer small opportunities for innovation and change at the margins. In complex societies, these small changes can eventually lead to cascades of change that bring about larger shifts in our social organization. The question is how to induce conditions for dialogue (and remove conditions which undermine the same) that enable people to discover and recognize the potential for innovations, to be open to that change, and to capitalize on the possibility.

This discussion suggested an analytical framework for understanding politics within open spaces for networking, such as those that characterize the Central American left (which was presented in Chapter 3). Are people mobilized into the MPF as subjects of training, subjects of empowerment into a political agenda, or subjects of their own historical change process? Certainly every individual experience would be different, and yet we can draw out some general conclusions about the processes most prevalent within the MPF given its history, structure and mechanisms.
My Guatemalan colleague indicated that the Central American left is adept at training and empowerment. This is not surprising given that development interventions in the region have long focused on this type of work. But, he said, the Central American left is only just exploring the possibility of open networking as a means to understand alternative points of view, engage in exchanges, and open up to the possibility for change. A conversation that had taken place during advance field work further substantiated this finding. During field work I was hosted by two organizations, one in El Salvador and one in Costa Rica, both heavily engaged in work related to social networking, and both familiar with the open source and open networking models mentioned above. Both organizations were built on an open collaborative model in which each integrant was expected to pursue their own work and mobilize their own resources, towards the general goal of social betterment (however that might be defined). My Salvadoran colleague, in particular, was intellectually driven by what he was learning from friends in the Central American feminist movement (further detailed in Interview #pre9). Here both intellectual and practical work was being done to facilitate open spaces for cognitive justice (Interview #pre2).

Having said this, he lamented the possibility for realizing these sorts of activities within the broader left. Given the reality of politics in Central America, there is very little possibility for open networking of the kind that would foster cognitive justice as I have defined it. In working to solidify particular logics of legitimation within given social networks, the Central America left has a history of mobilizing people through the promise of empowerment and eventual independence. An organizational model built on the idea of communication and collaboration not only extends the possibility of challenging existing leaderships and undermining existing systems of legitimation, but it offers a model in which the role for leaders is greatly reduced. In the process of containing networked flows in ways that would extend
particular systems of legitimation, leaders within the MPF have been enabling the empowerment and mobilization of individuals within the context of a particular agenda, while shutting down possibilities for communication and collaboration that could ultimately lead to greater interdependence and new foundations for the left in the region.

I think that we must recognize these practices despite a tipping point that might exist within social movement processes. This is the tension between the objective of empowering individuals to represent an identity, and bridging with or opening up to individuals or social movements that uphold different logics of organization. On discussing the relevance of identity to the MPF, one interviewee explained that an “inflexible discourse of a movement is part of the affirmation of one’s self” so movements often form “very closed affirmations while in the process of forming identities” (Interview #106; participant observation). Once these identities are established, the movement enters cautiously into dialogue with actors of alternate positions, working to construct bridges between the two positions. As a result, while establishing legitimacy on the basis of cultural heritage, action frame or identity, movements must constantly negotiate the problem of strength through group autonomy versus permission for exploration, hybridity or innovation.

Some might argue that these processes are a necessary first step, and that once people become sufficiently ‘trained’ or ‘empowered’ they will naturally become secure in their own identity. But this thinking overlooks a number of factors, such as the tension that exists between arriving at independent opinions while working to upholding a political agenda, the possibility that learning can take place through independent efforts, or the possibility that alternatives emerge at the margins of social processes rather than at and through their core. There is a sort of tyranny of permanent crisis within the Central American left that makes it necessary to ensure resources are never wasted on failures or exploration. But far from ensuring that wasted
resources or failed efforts take place, it serves to justify the continued intervention by leaders and the legitimation of power structures built around particular visions of the future.

To be clear, this is not to say that members of the Central American left are not aware of their own history and idiosyncrasies. There is plenty of reflection within the Central American left on the trade-offs that exist between various ways of contributing to a better future in the region. There are also many efforts to ameliorate perceived shortcomings within spaces like the MPF, the larger left, or the society in general. What I am reflecting on here is the macro-tendencies of the MPF as a specific space. Here I arrive at a second theme which is that of collective identity within the Central American left, and two related concerns. The first concern has to do with the possibility for identity formation and norm or identity adaptation at the individual level. The second is related to the possibility for cultural change within the MPF at the macro level.

While participation in an MPF may have a strong impact on some individuals, people’s ‘internal rule models’ are shaped by a lifetime of experiences. Forums can best be thought of as events that may serve to ‘unmoore’ established ideas, or introduce new ones, leading individuals to question and/or challenge the ideas that have shaped their thinking until that point. The question then becomes how willing and able are they to review and reject existing thinking and/or accept and internalize new concepts? Some people within the spaces may be flexible to a fault in their thinking, whereas others may be very inflexible in their thinking. Structures and mechanisms within the MPF, meanwhile, are designed around leader’s interests in certain kinds of flexibility and certain kinds of inflexibility. It may be acceptable, for example, to learn new ways of doing the same tasks, but not to question the desirability of dedicating resources to that task. This, in turn, will reflect that agendas, norms and identities that hold together a particular group, movement or network.
Taking this all together, while some individuals may experience a social forum as a life-changing experience, it is equally true that they may not serve to destabilize the core agenda of an established group. There may, meanwhile, be groups within forum spaces that challenge the valued activities, trajectories or identities of individuals or groups within the space, and others that work hard to police their borders and regulate the thinking of their integrants. In total, the possibility for change within and through the spaces of the MPF is *negotiated* and these processes need to be made visible so that the participants within these processes can make critical decisions about their own contributions to social change. The question is not really whether the MPF can decide on a common action frame or identity. Rather than looking as a social forum as an instance of collective identity, the point is to understand the circumstances under which identities are guarded or not. What sorts of processes enable individuals to be self-regulating in their processes of identity formation? What sorts of conditions will result in less uncertainty and border policing for leaders? What sorts of organizational practices would undermine the mechanisms of border policing described above? These are some of the questions that can be asked not only to better understand possibilities for cognitive justice, but also to begin to offer recommendations for achieving it.

4 Conclusions

Shoring up the banks of agendas through the structures and mechanisms discussed in this chapter is a way of preventing change from taking place and protecting islands of security for people who are well positioned in established institutions of the Central American left. The practices of power taking place within the MPF prevented the interactions in the space from being consequential by undermining the possibility that the space could come up with, or even come to constitute, real alternatives for the left. Instead, the MPF became enflamed by coalition
politics, which were in turn fanned by the pressures for innovation and renovation within the left, and the possibility that these could come to inform policy within consequential spaces. Rather than fostering change, this led only to reinforce existing tendencies within the Central American left. When there are many different views of future alternatives, and in particular, when the political, social and economic situation means that there will be few windows onto the achievement of those alternatives, then we can understand politics as a process of strategic interaction in which the leaderships of different positions must constantly balance the desire to forward their own agenda against the risk of eroding the foundations of their own security. Thus the very conditions in which open spaces are launched limit the possibility for openness as well as for change.

In closing, note how the discourses of the MPF served to obscure this negotiation of power. There is a need to maintain a balance between the theatre of mobilization, on the one hand, and the potential for threats to the foundations of legitimacy in different spaces of the left. In other words, leaders needed to ensure that forum spaces would maintain or promote the legitimacy of their position vis-à-vis a shifting definition of the left in the region, or at least inflict only limited or productive challenges. The CM and other institutional channels gave left-wing leaders various means by which to protect the legitimacy of their ‘emerged’ position during a moment of profound change. But this did not mean that the complex interactions occurring within the MPF could not challenge those positions and erode the basis on which emerged structures were built. Open spaces create an illusion of unity and diversity that allows legitimation of new practices of power to take place. They create the guise of openness and participation, but without transparency or accountability. Complexity becomes subterfuge.
In this study I have considered the social processes of the Mesoamerican People’s Forum (MPF) in terms of their contributions to development. This is apt given that the MPF constitutes a response to Central America’s ongoing processes of democratization and adjustments to global trading patterns. The central message of this dissertation is that we should not look at spaces such as the MPF as ‘open’ or ‘closed’ but rather in terms of power flows. To repeat a phrase from the introduction, openness is neither the condition nor the objective of the game, but rather a pawn strategically deployed or retracted in the course of game play. Keeping this in mind, we can examine the ways in which networked flows that shape outcomes. For example, the left is often associated with ‘the people’ and assumed to be a force for social justice. But when the focus is power flows, then the various groups that make up the left (parties, NGOs, individuals, etc.) are all mediating between state and society. It then becomes possible to examine political spaces and how each actor is shaping those spaces to suit particular ends.

With this in mind, I argued that the MPF is a transnational networked space made up of actors rooted in both local contexts and regional thematic networks, and that it is a political playing field on which the leaders of different segments of the left contest political agendas and definitions of development amongst themselves, even as they work to benefit from the legitimating potential of forum meetings. Thus, while both academic works about social forums and discourses circulating about the MPF in Central America suggest that it is open to a range of actors and brings them together within a horizontal space, I highlighted the uncertainty experienced by leaders within the transnational and open spaces of social forums, and the resulting power dynamics within the space. Uncertainty resulted from the possibility that interactions occurring within forum spaces could negatively impact stabilized relations of power.
within established groups at the local or regional levels. The efforts of leaders to limit their uncertainty affected the ‘shape’ of the MPF, the way it was experienced by participants, and the impacts of the process.

This is not to say that individual participants did not benefit from participation in the MPF, or that every participant experienced the space in the same way. It is to say, however, that the experiences of forum participants were being shaped in important ways by event organizers and leaders from different pockets of the left. Individuals in positions of power within the spaces of the MPF engaged in a series of practices (network management, gate keeping, identity formation, coalition formation and manipulating the openness of debate) to shore up the borders of their own social movements or thematic networks. This served to protect structures of legitimation, which in turn responded to particular visions of the correct path for the Central American left, as well as local political realities. As a result, groups participating in the MPF were organized around the protection of group identity rather than the promotion of truly open networking with other participants at the forum.

These dynamics took place within a particular historical context marked by the re-insertion of Central American markets into global commodity chains through the reorganization of the SICA and the negotiation of the CAFTA agreement. The collapse of the SICA as a ‘north’ for the associational sphere and transnational networks of civil society organizations in Central America created the possibility for dispersion in civil society activities and agendas. But the rise of the new Latin American left, plus changing patterns of state-society mediation within an uncertain political context in Central America, gave rise to divides within the left as actors sought to understand the changing political and economic reality, debated new models and political agendas, and worked to build up and protect their power bases. Thus leaders within the Central American left found it convenient to come together in contesting policies affecting the
region as a whole, but they diverged in their responses to these changes. Coincidentally, the MPF offered a convenient platform for mobilization within a much debilitated Central American left. Regional meetings created the illusion of much greater popular support for social movements in the region than might exist in a particular national context, even as they served to reassert structures of legitimation within the left. Thus leaders had strong incentives to bring together their divergent social movements within one regional space, despite the inherent risks and diverging agendas.

Did these processes have a positive impact on cognitive justice? In other words, did the MPF facilitate open networking and contribute to conditions in which participants would act as the subjects of their own histories rather than the agents of political agendas? The study’s findings suggest that where the positions (both in occupational and ideological terms) of key brokers are threatened, perhaps because political, social and economic conditions mean that there will be few windows onto the achievement of development alternatives, or because there are entrenched and competing views on what those alternatives should be, then leaders will be more inclined to establish islands of security around established agendas and identities. This will serve to undermine any attempts to foster open networking. When this happens, social forums become a means through which leaders can mobilize agents into a particular political agenda, rather than a means to promote cognitive justice through the promotion of networking in which individuals act as subjects of their own change processes. Insofar as the experience of attending a social forum helped individuals to assume a proactive role in their own historical trajectory then this was a contribution to cognitive justice. But where people attended the spaces as agents of a particular political perspective and/or found themselves beholden to a particular relation of power within their more permanent spaces of mobilization at home, then there was much less
possibility that participation in a social forum could contribute to open encounters, innovations in thinking, and ultimately small changes at the margins.

What this suggests, all together, is that the possibility for social change is related to the possibility for complex adaptation, which is in turn regulated by brokers in positions of power within social networks. Their efforts have a bearing on the flexibility or inflexibility of social norms, identities and relationships, and in turn the allocation of cognitive justice within social spaces. Some will understandably respond to this argument by suggesting that, in the face of indifferent governments, uncertainty or competition, it is necessary to shore up the banks of identities and ideologies if change is to take place. It is certainly true that unwavering commitment to a cause can contribute to the achievement of policy objectives, electoral victories or cultural recognition. But, there is a cost incurred by achieving an end through loyalty to the cause. For one thing, we should ask whether such processes are true contributions to the sort of development that enables people to assert control over their own realities. Viewed as real-life academies, such processes provide little practical foundation for independent actions in support of continued advancement or new projects once the victory has been won. And although there are times when policy or electoral gains can enable changes that will facilitate greater autonomy in the long run, there is always the risk that leadership will be compromised by its own agendas. Finally, an all-for-one approach often means that victories are won at the cost of specific agendas, leaving some supporters disappointed when they realize that their contributions to the cause have not generated the anticipated benefits. Thus I am suspicious of the argument that change needs to be mediated, militant or structural and more inclined to believe that fundamental change happens through processes that trickle up from below.

These findings and the way in which they were uncovered can be contrasted with other research on the GJM presented in the early part of this study. Existing research on social forums
and transnational social justice initiatives has not done a very good job of capturing the internal dynamics of these spaces. This is because authors have treated social forums as mechanisms of structural change that move societies from one condition to another. Authors have also tended to study these spaces through participation in social forums, rather than as students of their constitution. As a result, authors have sometimes gotten embroiled in debates taking place within forum spaces, debates that have to do with the type of collective political subject that will result from transnational forum meetings. Together, these two things have caused many authors of social forum processes to offer discourses about what the forum should be, rather than observations about their behavior. In this study I have argued for a constitutive approach to social forums which allowed me to examine the processes of the MPF within its geographical and historical context. I have tried to show the value of such an exercise for understanding the impact of a particular social forum process on local development, as well as its connections to larger historical processes. In what remains of this final chapter I will take a step back to consider the implications of this arguments, as well as to discuss directions for further research.

1 Implications

1.1 Implications for Development Thinking and Research

Postdevelopment challenged us to rethink development altogether. But maybe those in the field of development studies who remain modernists at heart can find a way not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to retain modernism while abandoning high modernism, and to study the tactics but not the strategy of postdevelopment. --John Rapley 2007, 200

As theorists of development have sought to move past the paralysis of post-development positions, we have seen the emergence of a family of agent-centered takes on development, often referred to as development from below approaches. These approaches emerge out of earlier critiques of the modernization and dependency schools, both of which saw development as
something that was carried out by an expert on the behalf of ‘recipients.’ The role of the expert in executing development-as-structural-change came into question in the 1980s. Norman Long, for example, demonstrated that development interventions failed to take into consideration the contribution of micro-scale social processes during project planning and implementation (Long et. al 1992). The failure of many development interventions resulted from the elimination of key variables and over-simplification of complex realities during planning processes. Long challenged theorists and practitioners to consider the contributions of local ‘actors’ to development. The result of this shift has been “…the relative eclipse of interventionist development theory [with] the effect of shifting development theory back towards the mainstream of social theoretic enquiry; centrally, the preoccupation with making sense of complex change” (Preston 1996, 327). Agent-centered approaches were further advanced by Amartya Sen’s argument that development is a process of expanding the real freedoms of people (1999). Thus, as we move beyond post-development thinking, there has been a general consensus that greater attention must be focused on the role of local actors in the development process.

There has not been much agreement, however, on how to think about the relationship between local actors and development processes. Three different schools of thought can be identified within the après-post-development literature. Peet and Hartwick have focused on political institutions, arguing that development requires direct popular control over resources and institutions through the practice of radical democracy (2009). They make a strong argument for ‘critical modernism,’ which is the idea that the failings of development result from the incomplete realization of enlightenment institutions, rather than fundamental failings of rationality or modernity. The Porto Alegre experiment with participatory budgeting is a great example of development strategy within this critical modernist tradition (Novy & Leubolt 2005).
Bebbington (2000), meanwhile, has been a leading proponent of the livelihoods approach to development which argues that local actors use a variety of complex strategies to make a living, and that these may include taking advantage of the benefits of neoliberal economic reforms. In this approach the focus is on processes of adaptation to change, leaving to one side the question of whether specific political arrangements such as neoliberalism or democracy are good or bad for development. The Grameen Bank micro-lending strategy is an excellent example of development strategy within the livelihoods framework. A third group of scholars, including Escobar, Ziai and Agostino (each in Ziai 2007) believe that the modernist project is fundamentally flawed and that solutions to environmental degradation, poverty and inequality require a clean break with enlightenment institutions and ideals. Only when we break free of the emotional and intellectual enclosure of modernism will we be able to conceive of real alternatives to the current crisis. The World Social Forum itself is often elicited as an example of development strategy within this critical utopia tradition.

What the findings of this dissertation suggest is the need to move beyond parochialism between agent-centered approaches to development, and also the need to adjust our thinking about the role of people in the development process. First, what the case of the MPF demonstrates is that development is not about livelihoods or radical democracy or critical utopias. While proponents of each position may debate the justifications for different approaches to development, each is ultimately aimed at offering hope that development can be achieved through the energy of local people. But the politics of hope is a tricky thing. It is not hard to see why discourses of hope must be operationalized in real world contexts lest they become the ‘redemptive form’ hiding the ‘inherent violence’ of political institutions (Clarke 2004, 281). The MPF handily demonstrates the potential pitfalls of the politics of hope. De Vries (2007) has suggested that the seeds of utopia will be found in the disjuncture between the official promises
of development institutions and the failed realization of development projects. But he certainly was not thinking of the unfulfilled promises of social forums when presenting this argument! (His very theoretical offering does not situate movements within any given historical context, such as the Central American reality in which movements are made up of power centers mediating between state and society.) Interviewees in the present study expressed strong disappointment with the failed outcomes and unrealized promises of MPF process, while leaders continued to cast blame on elites, modernity, neoliberalism or globalization. We cannot overlook the unethical or counterproductive potential of spaces such as the MPF to cause disillusionment and recast it as subjugation. Each of the positions described above (livelihoods, radical democracy, and critical utopias) is susceptible to exhaustion, corruption or colonization by entrenched interests. When the politics of hope are put into practice, there must be constant vigilance to ensure that enabling policies continue to serve the broader interest.

What I am suggesting is that there needs to be a shift from the question of how to generate hope, or (what is the same), how to create the conditions for development, to the more important issue of ensuring that the possibility for hope is retained in the execution of development initiatives. Another way of saying this is that we have recognized (in theory if not in practice) the possibility for and desirability of a variety of response to the problems of development or the ills of neoliberal globalization. Now we need to consider the conditions which facilitate ‘openness’ and cognitive justice such that this diversity of responses can be realized. The question is how to do so. One answer lies in the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Critical utopian scholars have claimed him for their own (Agostino 2007; Escobar 2007; Gibson-Graham 2007) and use his work to ground the emancipatory agenda of the World Social Forum. But what I take from Santos is a more fundamental argument of relevance to all three agent-centered approaches. What his work suggests is the need to move away from thinking of
people as the agents of particular agendas (whether their own or those of someone else) and towards thinking of them as the subjects of their own history.

To my mind, Santos’ work represents an evolution of Long’s earlier contributions. Long recognized the desirability of empowering local actors, but also highlighted the ‘paradox of empowerment’ (as discussed in Chapter 3), saying, “…it is difficult to deny the connotations it carries of an ‘injection of power’ from outside aimed at changing the balance of forces. It is not surprising therefore that, when applied, empowerment strategies encounter roughly the same kinds of dilemma as any other intervention program” (ibid 1992, 275). In contrast, Santos does not seem to have empowerment in mind as such. Rather he would like to see the creation of spaces and valuation of processes that allow people to enact social processes. Thus, where Long opened the eyes of the development community to the role of local agents in the implementation of development interventions, de Sousa Santos argues that development is a social process that needs to be assumed by the subjects of history (also Gallardo 2006). This is not to say that agency is replaced by subjectivity. Rather, as the work of Trouillot (1995) presented in Chapter 6 suggests, we need to recognize people as complex historical actors who are simultaneously subjects, actors and agents. The issue where cognitive justice is concerned is to enable people to express their agency in whatever way they see fit, such that they assume a role in social processes. This is about more than providing people with the resources they require as actors. It is also about recognizing people as historical subjects.

This argument has important implications for development research. What role can research play in ensuring cognitive justice? How should it tackle the problem of studying social processes in a way that supports cognitive justice? Such an approach would need to be capable of uncovering the processes that shape possibilities for cognitive justice, but it would need to be able to do so without contributing to conceptual enclosure. I have argued that such an approach
would be pragmatic, focusing on the rules, mechanisms or practices that determine how people shape and interpret their reality, and grounded, in the sense that the character and location of these rules, mechanisms or practices would be uncovered during field work, rather than presumed ahead of time. I also argued that critical realism provides an appropriate philosophical grounding for such work since in this approach the findings of pragmatic, grounded work can serve as a foundation for debates on how to improve cognitive justice. In this sense, critical realism is not the tool of empire (as some post-development scholars might suggest), but rather the tool of enhanced understanding. Critical realism becomes a means by which to monitor interactions within open spaces from the standpoint of participants, and to analyze whether networking is supportive of cognitive justice. That is to say, critical realism allows participants in forum spaces to analyze whether networked flows allow a multitude of subjectivities to come together around an agenda, or whether they are structured such that a hierarchy of agendas and agents take precedence over individual responses. Realism (at least in this case) does not suppress hope or enclose futures. Realism is a tool for ensuring hope through open networking. Development research, then, is not about judging agendas or offering policy advice, but rather about holding up a mirror to contexts and processes such that people can reflect on their own practice.

The argument presented here has important implications for how to think about development, empowerment and openness in a world of networked flows. The objective of this study was not to ask whether or not the MPF is open. One could easily enough pick a set of parameters for ‘openness,’ measure the activities of a particular forum space, and make a declaration about the openness of the space. In fact, this has already been done (Pleyers 2004). But that type of project rather misses the point, not least because the results or such a study would be themselves closed in nature. As such, a major implication of this study is that openness
is not, nor can it be, an open and shut case. It is, rather, a dynamic concept, and should be dealt with in this way. Each social forum will be unique, and different individuals will experience forum events differently, but we can study and identify conditions and mechanisms that will influence the tenor of the meetings. These factors will in turn influence the ways in which people experience a given event, and the contributions a meeting will have to processes of social change and development.

This suggests that we need to think of modernity not as a fixed condition or force, but rather as a layer added on to any given historically and geographically specific context. Yes, the institutions of modernity sometimes are a subjugating force, and social movements sometimes do arise out of the contradictions of the modernist project. But rather than jumping to the conclusion that a particular theory applies in a given case, there is a need to analyze each situation and act accordingly. We should not let theory become discourse, but rather use it appropriately (like a tool kit) to understand specific realities. Secondly this suggests that the ‘StarWars’ story line of good versus evil is a very thin foundation for thinking about historical change. That is to say, we should not assume the ‘left’ is necessarily a force for ‘liberation’ or for ‘good’ working against the ‘right’ which is necessary a force for subjugation. Rather, enlightenment thinking and modernist institutions extend into any social space, including the spaces of the left (Schuurman 1993). In this sense, what will transform ‘modernity’ is not a historical shift, but rather the reinsertion, recreation and recombination of the legacies of modernity through multiple acts in specific contexts within a networked world.

The objective, then, is not to release individuals from the intellectual and emotional enclosure of modernity per se, but rather to enhance cognitive justice through the application of critical realism such that people can become the subjects of their own history. By this, then, I mean to say that development is a process through which people take responsibility for and
become able to articulate and enact their unique standpoint within the context of a particular set of political, economic and social arrangements. Thus, we cannot assume that the MPF or any other space for social mobilization is necessarily liberating. Rather, we should ask whether that space helps people to become autonomous, to have cognitive justice, so they can better understand their local reality, whatever that may be, and critique, supersede, transform or take advantage of modernity as they see fit. Thus the role of social movements in political processes of development is temporary and strategic, recognizing the right of people to be entrepreneurial and instrumental in their development trajectories.

1.2 Implications for Thinking about Global Processes

The material presented above about development and change can be situated within a broader discussion on the question of how to study and understand global processes. To review, Harris (2002)\(^1\) divides theorists of globalization into three camps: the skeptics or traditionalists who argue that globalization has not constituted a challenge to existing institutions; the globalists who argue for the inevitability of globalization and its effects; and the transformationalists who see globalization as a change process with variable effects. In the introduction to this work I explained how early studies on globalization tended to focus on forces outside of the state acting on states or national economies (for example: Frobel, Heinrichs and Kreye 1980; Hirst and Thompson 1999; McMichael 1996). This has come to be called the ‘globalization from above’ literature to signal the focus on forces emanating from outside or above that state. Later works (Portes 1997; Bergeron 2001; Escobar 2001) argued that greater attention needed to be paid to ‘globalization from below.’ This later body of research addresses responses to economic integration, state transformation and social impacts at the level of individuals (for example works

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\(^1\) He is drawing on Sklair 2000, Held et al. 1999, and Munck 2002.
on migration and identity) and organizations (for example social movements). Thus, for example, Della Porta et al.’s (2006) work on transnational social movements is entitled *Globalization from Below: Transnational Activists and Protect Networks*. The various works considered in the second chapter of this dissertation fall within this broad designation.

What this dissertation has argued is that research on social forums within the globalization from below perspective has tended to conduct its analysis on the basis of a ‘globalist’ set of assumptions. Recall that for Goodman, “Debates about the politics of globalization centre on conflicting interpretations of the dominant sources of power in globalizing late-modern society” (Goodman 2002 xv). With this in mind, the various approaches to studying globalization from below reviewed in Chapter 2 can all be ascribed to a globalist perspective. That is to say, they all start from the presumption that globalization either has taken place or is inevitable. The constitutive approach presented in Chapter 3, however, provides a means of studying the forces of globalization from below using a transformationalist perspective. This approach responds to recent recognition that the GJM should not be called an anti-globalization movement when it is, itself, global in scope. Rather it must necessarily be studied as a transformative force, since by its very nature it is complicit in changing social, political and economic patterns in an increasingly integrated world.

Considerable work has been done to understand the transformations resulting from globalization, however much of this work has focused on the nodes, connections and flows of global networks (Barnes and Reilly 2007). Take for example the very challenge from Nagar and colleagues presented earlier in this work. Their mandate was the study how “global flows … connect and affect specific social and spatial formations” (2002, 276). While a picture of global flows is a useful thing to have, greater attention should be paid to just what these network images signify. In her ethnographic study of Fijian women’s organizations participating in the Fourth
World UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, for example, Riles demonstrates how the notion of networks has come to carry far too much weight in the globalization literature. In particular, many authors assumed that where there are networks so to must there be transformation. The central insight of her work is, in her own words,

… that the effectiveness of the Network is generated by the Network’s self-description. As we have seen, the naming of a Network is the existence of a Network, and the existence of a Network is synonymous with Action on its behalf. The Network is analysis (the missing ‘link’), and it supersedes reality; in other words, one need not show a link once one pronounces the existence of a network (2001, 172).

Reflecting on the ASOCODE network, one of the SICA-affiliated networks that operated in Central America during the 1990s, Edelman expands on Riles’ work as follows:

Unlike electrical engineering diagrams, which typically indicate resistance to flows, formal network organigrams imply agile and unobstructed movement of information between nodes or focal points. The network’s representation of itself erases political, historical and personal forces that might, in practice, impede the networking process (2003, 6).

These critiques give rise to an additional criticism, which is that networks are referred to (as well as used) with little consideration of how they are being invoked (and to what effect). Thus, as Henry et al. point out, “The term network has become one of the hallmarks of the development industry and is central to its discourses and self-image. It is impossible to find a development agency that does not claim to be involved in some type of network” (2004, 839). They go on to say that, “Although the label ‘networks’ currently pervades discourses about the relationships between organizations in development, there has been surprisingly little research or theorization of them in this context” (ibid, 840). Looking back at the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, there was a tendency within all of the ‘globalist’ literature on social forums to assume the quality and nature of networks within the GJM. Networks are just assumed to be there, to somehow link together the actors of the left, with little reflection given to the quality or nature of those links.

How can we get around the problem of studying networks without assuming networks? In this study the solution was to study spaces instead, and within those spaces, to look at
networking, and in particular, the forces shaping networking. Taking this approach, the study of globalization becomes the study of the processes that (re)shape flows, as well as of the resulting patterns, and how these serve to advantage or disadvantage different actors. It also becomes the study of the contexts in which those processes take place. By way of an analogy, what I am proposing is to prioritize the study of shores, banks, marsh grasses and tree roots, so that we can understand how they shape water flows, within the wider context of the river-basin. Or as Cohen put it, this is about studying the technical standards and protocols that shape information flows within and across networks / embodied spaces (2007, 251).²

In this way, the study has shown openness to be a dynamic concept that needs to be studied pragmatically. Even though we may look at the world through a constructivist lens, seeing it as produced and flexible rather than structured and mechanistic, we should not assume that discourses, norms or identities are mostly flexible or mostly inflexible. Rather we should look at that flexibility as itself subject to social forces that speed up, slow down or redirect the production of our social reality. This is also tied up in how complexity is applied as a mechanism of stability and change. Complexity is a corollary of openness and it too is a dynamic condition subject to manipulation. Together these observations respond to the demand

² Overall, the approach amounts to the study of governance. Drawing on Powell’s (1990) distinctions between networks, markets and hierarchies, Podolny and Page argue that what ultimately sets networks apart are their governance structures. They define a network to be, “…any collection of actors (N> 2) that pursue repeated, enduring exchange relations with one another and, at the same time, lack a legitimate organizational authority to arbitrate and resolve disputes that may arise during the exchange. In a pure market, relations are not enduring, but episodic, formed only for the purpose of a well-specified transfer of goods and resources and ending after the transfer. In hierarchies, relations may endure for longer than a brief episode, but a clearly recognized, legitimate authority exists to resolve disputes that arise among actors.” (1998, 59; emphasis in original) The findings presented in this study gently nudge the definition of networks presented by these authors. The MPF developed only tenuous authority structures, and they certainly were not designed to arbitrate in any but the most significant networking exchanges taking place within the space. Meanwhile, while networking was shaped by outside interventions, these were not necessarily carried out by clearly recognized authorities. And yet, the study clearly demonstrates that well-situated actors use a variety of processes to shape the ‘ungoverned’ interactions taking place within networked spaces. Many of the transformative processes studied under the rubric of globalization from below take place in networked spaces; what this approach offers, then, is a means through which to study the forces generating stability and change under conditions of globalization. In the specific context of state failure and global integration--which is arguably the case in Central America--this approach provides an insight into just what forces are governing and how they are asserting their influence. Finally, this approach provides a means to study how the changing political context is benefiting or disadvantaging particular groups.
for research frameworks that straddle the border between international relations and comparative politics (Landman 2003, 248-251; Finnemore and Sikkink 2001; Orenstein and Schmitz 2006).

Taking this approach, then, we can get a better understanding of how actors are constituted by and constitutive of their reality, and as such, how globalization is transforming a particular reality. In this study I have looked at the relations of power and political contexts that determine who shapes networked flows and how they are doing so. These then are the forces that structure networking within open spaces. If we consider the processes at work within social forums, where political wrangling is taking place to define the collective political subjectivity of a group around a common political project, then this approach to networking may, in fact, offer an inroads into current debates on globalization. That is to say, this may offer a means by which to begin defining and or verifying a ‘reference point for globalization’ (Rosenberg 2005; Albert 2007).

2 Extensions and Applicability

2.1 Limitations and Extensions

There are several things that could be done to improve the scope or depth of this study. To begin, the findings of the study are clearly marked by the limitations of field work. The majority of interviews were drawn from El Salvador and Guatemala, and these were conducted predominantly with individuals who attended the sixth MPF in Costa Rica. Having said this, participation in a meeting of the Comité Mesoamericano, plus consideration of historical documents ameliorated these limitations to a certain extent. It is also true that I have never attended a social forum. Historical circumstances plus the constraints of distance and time prevented me from participating in an event. In the eyes of some, this will be a major limitation, but I would argue it is one of the study’s greatest strengths. As discussed in the research design
portion of Chapter 3, analysis of history, interviews and documentation allowed me to focus on the forces constituting the social forum, and to avoid being blinded by the event itself. Nonetheless, the findings of this study must be considered in light of this truth.

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind the nature of this study. When the research started, social forums were a new phenomenon, and very little research had been conducted into their history, functioning or impacts. Early works focused on characterizing these events based on the experience of attending a social forum. As a result, this study is an initial attempt to develop grounded theory about social forums. Thus, while we can probe the veracity of data or the quality of interpretation, it is important to keep in mind that the theoretical offerings presented here have not yet been tested. George and Bennett point out that “…researchers are frequently advised not to develop a theory from evidence and then test it against the same evidence…” (2005, 111). This is because there is no way of using facts to verify a theory that was designed to accommodate those facts. If I were to conduct additional research on the participation by Hondurans and Nicaraguans in the MPF, this would provide me with an opportunity to test my theory against new data. And indeed, this would be a logical next step in the advancement of understanding about social forums.

In addition, as an initial inquiry into social forums, this study has resulted in an unspecified theory. I have suggested some of the factors that should be considered in the study of social forums, how relationships at work within social forums can impact their character, as well as some of the mechanisms that might be used moderate the openness of these events. While these are useful observations, they would be greatly improved through additional research into the conditions under which these mechanisms might be used or lead to the closure of spaces for open networking. This research could be conducted through more specific comparative
analysis of meetings taking place in different historical moments of the MPF, or of similar social forum events that have taken place in different regions.

2.2 Potential Applications and Future Research

Despite these limitations, it is possible to identify several applications of the results of this research. First, the study contributes to ongoing discussion about the historical roles and limitations of all social forums. Recently there has been some suggestion that perhaps the WSF has run its course, and should either be abandoned or reformulated (Bello 2007; Whitaker 2007; Ponniah 2007; de Souza Santos 2008). A central issue in this debate has been the emergence of differences and divisions within forum spaces, as well as the emergence of forum experts who compromise the intentions of the event. While the findings presented here do not offer a remedy to these problems, they do offer an in depth account of possible underlying factors. These findings may offer insights into possible solutions, in particular measures that may undermine mechanisms designed to shore up the boundaries of groups, or enhance the possibility for networking and expressions of cognitive justice within the space. Careful consideration would be required to ensure that such measures resulted in an inclusive space rather than one more ideological division among the rest.

With this in mind, social forums need to be studied for what they are, not what the voices within these spaces are calling for, and certainly not under the assumption that they are necessarily a social movement in formation, movement of movements, or political subject. A much richer picture of the limitations and impacts of social forums can be achieved through a constitutive approach which studies these processes with reference to their historical and geographical context. In this way we can begin to uncover the unique features of these spaces in comparison to past forms of organizing, and also their role in processes of political change taking
place in a given region. For example, while the associational model of civil society that
dominated third sector activity in Central American during the 1990s favored autonomy between
political parties and non-governmental organizations, the more radicalized left on the rise in the
region today has clear connections with the electoral left. This shift has clear implications for
the functioning of forum spaces, as well as the implications of these spaces for ongoing political
change in the region.

Second, the research presented here may provide insights into the functioning of other
open spaces, and at a minimum opens up grounds for comparing open spaces under conditions of
globalization. An obvious comparison, for example, is between social forums and the Internet.
Initial works about the Internet argued that it was inherently open given the end-to-end
architecture of the computer code underlying network infrastructure. But in 1998 the key
institution overseeing this code (known as ICANN - the Internet Consortium for Assigned
Names and Numbers) was reformed such that the United States government had ultimate control
over the Internet, but which ensured minimum government intervention in its continued
evolution (Drezner 2004). The intention was to allow business to pursue both innovation and
financial gain within this space. Lacking a fundamental constitution that could establish a set of
values or principals for openness, or a regulatory system to back the end-to-end character of the
code, many argued that the Internet would be shaped in particular ways by market or political
forces (Lessig 2006; Caral 2004). Meanwhile, in response to American control over the
Internet through ICANN, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) launched the
World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process in 1998. By the time these meetings
took place in 2003 and 2005, the internet-facilitated events of September 2001 had already taken
place, research was demonstrating the ability of state actors to censor Internet content (Deibert et

3 Lessig famously argued that “We can build or architect or code cyberspace to protect values that we believe are
fundamental. Or we can build or architect or code cyberspace to allow those values to disappear.” (Code 2.0)
al. 2008), and distributed networking was challenging existing legal frameworks in areas ranging from pornography to music distribution. The WSIS process became engulfed in the question of Internet governance. The WSIS is an event of historical note not because it led to any substantive changes in the governance of the internet (it did not - see Mueller et al. 2007), but because it made clear the growing understanding that open spaces do not necessarily engender desirable or open social processes. Openness is a dynamic. Open spaces can be enclosed, shaped, or controlled in a variety of ways that have implications for both the experiences of users and their impacts on the ‘real world’. Cohen, one of the key authors leveraged in this study, was writing about the virtual world. From all of this we can conclude that there is much to learn, particularly about governance, by comparing the ways in which code and social processes shape virtual spaces with similar processes in the analog world.

Finally, the findings of this study will be of interest to students of Central American history and politics. As I finish up this study, Central America has experienced its own electoral ‘left turn’ on the heels of the larger sweep taking place in South America (Castañeda 2006). But the quality of this left turn requires careful analysis. Former revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega came to power in 2007 through a set of political compromises that rendered him more of a moderate right-wing Christian Democrat than a left-leaning social democrat. El Salvador’s FMLN has finally triumphed electorally, with Mauricio Funes coming to power in June, 2009. But it must be noted that the win was achieved through significant departure from the party’s traditional socialist agenda. Meanwhile in Honduras, President Manuel Zelaya recently suffered a coup after pursuing (arguably) illegal means (Salomon 2009) to reform the constitution such that he could run for a second term in office. The dynamics of openness have implications for how we can think about the changes taking place in Central America. In the past, oligarchy and class analysis were combined to produce accounts of Latin American politics that rode on the
assumption that the right was bad and the left was good. But the present work treats all political parties and civil society actors as institutions that mediate between the state and society. This makes it possible to examine each historical situation in the region for what it is—to examine the playing field (‘open space’) and look at how each actor is shaping those spaces to suit particular ends.

With this in mind, the constitutive approach and political economy analysis presented in this study offer new frameworks for thinking about political processes in Central America. Rather than assuming the existence and motivations of actors, a constitutive approach draws attention to the study of how actors construct themselves and their motivations. In the Central American context it pushes us to penetrate beyond discourses, such as ‘left’ and ‘right,’ and focus on changing patterns of interaction or shifting patterns of circulation in networks of power. Thus we can understand actors not just in terms of their stated objectives, but also in terms of their struggle to accommodate themselves to a changing political context. When used in conjunction with an analysis of the political economy, this approach allows for the study of how actors mediate between state and society. In the Central American context, this approach provides a means to link grounded ethnographic work (research on, for example, femicide in Guatemala, gangs in El Salvador, Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica, or maquila labour in Honduras) with regional political processes (such as the negotiation of the CAFTA agreement or the re-organization of the SICA process). In this way, processes such as migration or actors such as organized crime networks come to be seen not just academic ends in themselves, but also as a means to understand the larger political, social and economic scenario.
Epilogue

Many years ago, around the time I was working on the research proposal that set the groundwork for this dissertation, I had a conversation about academia with someone at a party. They asked why it was that Masters Degrees were awarded in specific fields - Masters of Arts, Masters of Science - while Doctors of Philosophy were awarded universally regardless of the field of study. I did not have a ready answer, but eventually came to realize that everyone gets a Doctor of Philosophy because regardless of what PhDs study, they are all engaged with the question of what we can know and how we can know it. The present work also needs to be understood in the light of these questions.

Taken at face value, the central message of this work does not strike a particularly profound cord. People who know Central America well might suggest that the project of interrogating openness in a post-conflict, polarized and weakly democratic context ranges somewhere between naïve and neo-colonial. To discover that social spaces are politicized in such a context is perhaps not all that surprising. But this work contains a deeper message having to do with how knowledge about processes of advocacy and resistance is produced, and what it gets used for, especially in a region that is deeply and historically divided by ideological struggle. This dissertation finds its voice somewhere between the dialogue about the World Social Forum hosted by Chloé Keraghel and Jai Sen in International Social Science Journal in 2004 titled ‘Explorations in Open Space,’ and Sara C. Motta’s recent publication in Latin American Politics and Society about “new forms of popular sociopolitical articulation”, in which she argues that:

… theory production is conceptualized as relational and process-driven, intimately linked to the reflective practice of communities in struggle. Theory validation is therefore premised not on its contribution to academic debates or theory verification; instead, its validity is judged in relation to its contribution to particular movement strategy and general contributions to the multiplicity of struggles for social justice. (Motta 2009, 49)
That is to say, this dissertation is not so much about whether a space is open or not, or whether openness is a laudable goal, but rather about how to engage discourses which *claim* openness, and the possibility that these claims may actually be part of a process of closure, especially in the face of methodological prescriptions such as Motta’s.

The unconventional literature review presented in Chapter 2 of this work needs to be understood in light of this framing of the issue. In Chapter 3 I explain that this work adheres to a constructivist ontology and a critical realist epistemology. My analysis of the MPF maps these epistemological and ontological commitments onto the circuits of knowledge production that I studied in the Central American context. My construction of Cosmopolitan, Culturalist and Vanguardist positions, as such, constitutes a review of the discourses being produced about social forums—discourses which pretend to be oranges when they are really apples. Then in Chapter 3, for dramatic effect, I present an orange to draw out the contrast.

It has been suggested to me that, in fact, the difference between these apples and oranges is less significant than I portend. *I* am constructing the boundary of understanding from the inside out, while others construct that boundary from the outside in. Does this make my apples and oranges literature review unfair? How can I claim to be any more ‘right’ by using an inductive, grounded, constitutive approach than others who use more deductive approaches? In fact, I do not believe it is about *being* right, or claiming to find the ultimate truth, but rather the ethical imperative to *not* accept discourses at face value, to *not* wield categories irresponsibly or a-historically.1 In this work, for example, I sought to penetrate the social processes behind the production of discourses about openness or social mobilization to show that, in fact, a different set of processes were at work, and the various labels at our disposal poorly reflected ‘what was going on.’

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1 For the record, I am much more troubled by *categories* than by *processes*. I do not like the idea that things get labeled incorrectly and that theoretical claims are made on the basis of categories that poorly reflect history.
Theoretically this puts me in a camp with Colin Wight (2007), wedged, as he is, between Kratochwil’s (2000) efforts to reassert radical constructivism, on the one hand, and Chernoff’s (2009) efforts to reassert a conventionalist approach to the study of international relations. Both radical constructivists and conventionalists choose to behave ‘as if’ the claims made in theory are true. They are concerned with how confidently we can know something, and arrive at the conclusion that it is better to avoid claiming to know all together. Taking an instrumentalist approach, Chernoff goes so far as to argue that what is actually important is the ‘cash value’ of our beliefs—whether they make action possible and successful in the real world. I find this commitment troubling. Wight also worries that this lets us off the hook—that, “getting things right is a practical, a political, and an ethical imperative,” (2007, 381) and even if we cannot achieve this goal, we should still try. In the context of research on social justice in Latin America, ‘getting things right’—or in other words, not taking things at face value—is particularly significant if we are to maintain the fine line separating us from serving either populist ambitions or blind applications of results-based management.

In taking this stance, I have raised the stakes of intellectual accountability very high. In this work I used a grounded approach to discover ‘what was going on’ and to construct an account of those findings, and I followed Ulrich in using a reflective approach to derive the validity of my claims. It has been pointed out to me, however, that it would be very difficult (if not impossible) to replicate my work, especially insofar as its basis lies in personal reflection. The usual methodological tools still apply, of course, such as triangulation, saturation and peer review. But to the extent that my account of the MPF is unique, of what value is it to attempt to penetrate discourses, since the processes behind them must lie equally in shadow? Ulrich suggests that the solution lies in dialogue while Wight argues that competing claims can be sorted out on the plain of judgmental rationalism; the hope is that veracity would emerge out of
these processes. Ideally several people would produce accounts of the same phenomenon and then enter into dialogue with each other, or a dialogue would emerge between myself and individuals involved in the MPF. But it is not clear whether, combined, these two forces would yield a different set of results; dialogue about the criteria for judgmental rationalism might well return us to exactly the same reliance of instrumentalism. So I am at an impasse.

Ultimately this difficult set of issues raises the question of what researchers can hope to get right, and what they cannot, whether there are contexts in which instrumentalism is acceptable, and whether there are contexts in which it needs to be avoided or undermined, and finally what these choices mean for the ways in which conceptual boundaries are constructed and how they are understood. In the future I hope to explore these ideas in the context of emerging debates about the nature of collective political subjectivity or political community under conditions of transformationalist globalization.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Breakdown of Interviewees

Interviewees by Gender

Male: 89
Female: 57
Total: 146

Interviewees by Country

Costa Rica: 19
El Salvador: 74
Guatemala: 51
Mexico: 2
Total: 146

Interviewees by Sector

Economy / Free Trade / Globalization - 13
Education, Media, Culture - 11
Religion - 9
Housing - 7
Unions - 11
Indigenous - 5
Gender - 16
Environment - 9
Retired People - 1
Youth - 15
Campesino / Rural Development - 17
NGO / Consultants - 11
Academics - 13
Donors - 5
Representatives of Political Parties - 2
Total: 146
## Appendix 2: Chronological List of Social Forums and Related Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MPFs and Related Events</th>
<th>Other Regional Events</th>
<th>Significant Elections</th>
<th>Trade Summits / Integration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1999</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November 30, 1999: Battle in Seattle at WTO Ministerial Conference (Seattle Round)</td>
<td>February 2, 1999: Hugo Rafael Chavez assumes Presidency of Venezuela</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2000</strong></td>
<td>December 2000: ZLN marches on Mexico City to meet newly elected President Fox</td>
<td>March 11, 2000: Ricardo Lagos Escobar, Chile</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 1, 2000: President Fox Elected in Mexico</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 12-13, 2001: First FMP, Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico</td>
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<td>April 20 - 22, 2001: Third Summit of the Americas, Quebec City</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November 22-24, 2001: Second FMP, Xela, Guatemala</td>
<td></td>
<td>June 15, 2001: PPP officially launched</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 16-18, 2002: Third FMP, Managua, Nicaragua</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October 12, 2002: Mesoamerican Action against PPP and CAFTA</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2003</strong></td>
<td>January 23-28, 2003: Third WSF, Porto Alegre, Brazil</td>
<td>January 1, 2003: Luiz Ignacio Lula of the PT Assumes Presidency of Brazil</td>
<td>CAFTA Talks:</td>
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<td>1) Jan. 27-30, 2003: San Jose, Costa Rica</td>
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<td>3) Mar. 31 - April 4, 2003: San Salvador</td>
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<td>4) May 12-16, 2003: Guatemala</td>
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<td>5) June 16-20, 2003: Honduras</td>
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<td>7) Sept. 8-12, 2003: Managua, Nicaragua</td>
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<td>8) October 20-24, 2003: U.S.</td>
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<td>9) December 8-12, 2003: Washington</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>December 17, 2003: CAFTA negotiations</td>
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<tr>
<td>MPFs and Related Events</td>
<td>Other Regional Events</td>
<td>Significant Elections</td>
<td>Trade Summits / Integration</td>
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<td><strong>2004</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2007</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2008</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>July 17-19, 2008: Seventh FMP: Managua, Nicaragua</strong></td>
<td>October, 2008: Third FMA, Guatemala</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 3: Detailed Depiction of Mesoamerican People’s Forum Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location and Date</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
<th>Mesas (Fora)</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Funding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **I** Information, Analysis and Proposals from Mesoamerican Social and Civil Organizations: “El Pueblo is First Before Globalization”  
Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, May 12-13, 2001 | ?? | - Globalization Issues  
- Impacts: Environment, Migration and Cultural Patrimony  
- Coffee Producers  
- Human Rights and Migration  
- Local Producers  
- Biodiversity and Resistance  
- Commerce and Alternative Financing | 250 representatives from 198 organizations | ?? |
| **II** Analysis, Discussion and Proposals about Plan Puebla Panama  
Xelaju, Guatemala  
November 22-24, 2002 | ?? | - Mega-projects and Indigenous communities  
- Mega-projects and Natural Resources  
- Rural Economy and Globalization  
- Local Power, Municipal Governments and Local Development  
- Just (Fair) Commerce  
- Labour Rights and Maquila  
- Economic and Social Rights and Globalization  
- Indigenous Communities and International Cooperation | More than 800 delegates from 300 organizations | ?? |
| **III** Against PPP: The Mesoamerican Movement for Popular Integration  
Managua, Nicaragua, July 16-18, 2002 | Humboldt Centre | - Economic, Social and Cultural Rights  
- Food Sovereignty  
- Maquilas and Enclave Economies  
- Impacts of Mega-Projects  
- Local Development | 800 (official count) | TROCAIRE Ireland, Oxfam International, Oxfam GB, Heks, Service Committee of Friends of Quakers, Kepa Finland, CRS, SID Denmark, MS Central America, Popular Help Norway, Ibis Denmark, Italy-Nicaragua Association, Lutheran World Action |
| **IV** For the Auto-Determination and Resistance of the Pueblos  
Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
July 21-24, 2003 | Organizing Committee: Bloque Popular, CUTH, | 1) Privatization  
2) Militarization  
3) Economic Solidarity  
4) Investment and Commerce versus Labour and Environmental Rights | 1495 Individuals from 467 Organizations | AFSC, Agricultural Mission, CARITAS Italy, Christian Aid, Comité Nacional Laboral, Diakonia Switzerland, Boell |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location and Date</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
<th>Mesas (Fora)</th>
<th>Attendance</th>
<th>Funding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://4foromesoamericano.com">http://4foromesoamericano.com</a></td>
<td>COPINH, Red COMAL, COCOCH, Via Campesina, COMPAH and PTH</td>
<td>5) Rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendent Communities</td>
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<td>Foundation, IBIS Denmark, ICCO Holland, NOVIB, Oxfam International, Trocaire</td>
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<td>6) Food Sovereignty</td>
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<td>7) Women Against the Neoliberal Model</td>
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<td>8) Youth and Construction of New Socioeconomic Models</td>
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<td>9) OMC and IDB</td>
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<td>10) Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>Sinti Techan and MPR-12</td>
<td>• Militarization and Democratization</td>
<td>1300 (official count)</td>
<td>??</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constructing Popular Power</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Labour Rights</td>
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<td>for Auto-Determination</td>
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<td>• Food Sovereignty</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Salvador, El Salvador,</td>
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<td>• Privatization of Basic Services</td>
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<td>July 19-21, 2004</td>
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<td>• Instruments of Neoliberalism</td>
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<td>• Debate about the Political Subject</td>
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<td>• Youth</td>
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<td>• Indigenous Communities</td>
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<td>• Women</td>
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<td>• Environment</td>
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<td>• Alternative Communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>Encuentro Popular</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>¿?</td>
<td>Left over Money from El Salvador, plus other funds</td>
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<tr>
<td>San Jose, Costa Rica</td>
<td></td>
<td>Labour/Unions (run by Nicaraguan Miguel Ruiz)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Culture</td>
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<td>Ecumenica</td>
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<td>Women</td>
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<td>Vivienda</td>
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<td>Economia Solidaria (Campesinos)</td>
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<td>Environment (Soberania Alimentaria)</td>
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<td>Indigena</td>
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<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>Organizing Committee consisting of: Movimiento Social</td>
<td>Derechos humanos comunicación alternativa, interculturalidad, mujer,</td>
<td>1500 expected</td>
<td>Hivos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managua, Nicaragua</td>
<td></td>
<td>diversidad sexual, ecuménica</td>
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<td><a href="http://foromesoamericano.codigosur.net/">http://foromesoamericano.codigosur.net/</a></td>
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<td>Location and Date</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nicaraguense Otro Mundo es Posible, Coordinadora Civil, Comité de Acción Global, Federacion de ONG de Nicaragua, Central Sandinista de Trabajadores Jose Benito Escobar, Coordinadora Indígena Diriamgen</td>
<td>indígena, laboral, medio ambiente, niñez y adolescencia, recursos naturales, soberanía alimentaria</td>
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</table>
### Appendix 4: Key MPF Actors through Time
(Grey indicates the country which hosted the Forum that year.)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Guatemala</th>
<th>El Salvador</th>
<th>Honduras</th>
<th>Nicaragua</th>
<th>Costa Rica</th>
<th>Panama</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I: Chiapas 2001</td>
<td>REMALC and others</td>
<td>CALD-H CIDECI ISMU</td>
<td>FUNDE</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Humboldt Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>II: Guatemala 2001</td>
<td>Rigoberta Menchu Foundation?</td>
<td>FUNDE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humboldt Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>III: Nicaragua 2002</td>
<td></td>
<td>FUNDE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humboldt Center</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV: Honduras 2003</td>
<td>REMALC</td>
<td>CONIC</td>
<td>Sinti Techan</td>
<td>Organizing Committee: Bloque Popular, CUTH, COPINH, Red COMAL, COCOCH, Via Campesina, COMPAH and PTH</td>
<td>CEI (Centro de Estudios Internacionales)</td>
<td>COMPA Nicaragua</td>
<td>Plataforma de Lucha Encuentro Popular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V: El Salvador 2004</td>
<td>REMALC</td>
<td>CONIC / Mesa Global</td>
<td>Sinti Techan MPR-12 (Bloque Popular Social)</td>
<td>Coordinadora Nacional de Resistencia Popular (the above – led by Bloque Popular)</td>
<td>Movimiento Social Nicaragüense Convergencia de los Movimientos de los Pueblos de America</td>
<td>Encuentro Popular</td>
<td>Alternativa Patriótica y Popular (APP)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI: Costa Rica 2005</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>Mesa Global (with MICSP)</td>
<td>Sinti Techan MPR-12 (Bloque Popular Social)</td>
<td>Bloque Popular</td>
<td>??</td>
<td>Encuentro Popular</td>
<td>FRENADESO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII: Nicaragua</td>
<td>AMAP</td>
<td>Mesa Global</td>
<td>Sinti Techan MPR-12</td>
<td>Bloque Popular</td>
<td>Comité Organizador</td>
<td>Encuentro Popular</td>
<td>FRENADESO</td>
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</table>


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