

The US Social Forum: Creating an Alternative World

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The first US Social Forum occurred this past week, meeting in Atlanta, Georgia from June 27th to July 1st. Approximately ten thousand people participated in hundreds of events addressing all kinds of issues, concerns, strategies, and visions. Immigration rights and Gulf Coast rebuilding were obviously major topics. Indigenous rights, movement building, and US imperialism received much attention. And issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender (particularly transgender) were very notable. These are all important and necessary for creating a different, more humane United States. But from my personal perspective, the US Social Forum cut across issues and highlighted something else: the possibility of creating an alternative world within the already existing world.

The slogan, "Another World is Possible!" probably seems cliché by now. We are all too familiar with this ear-popping phrase and its evocation of local-and-global justice. But is another world really possible? Does this phrase really point to something different? Are we really capable of creating something new, fresh, and exciting? After attending the US Social Forum, I say yes, yes, and yes.

It was on the third day of the Forum when it hit me: this Forum points to something different. But in that moment I also realized something else — that changing the entire world is probably not possible. The world seems too big, too complex, and too far away to change entirely. But creating an alternative world within the already existing world does seem possible. My realization is not really new or original. Plenty of people have made similar arguments throughout the ages: We are capable of creating our own separate world, of creating a fully functioning alternative society, of creating an autonomous community within a larger community. The US Social Forum affirms this possibility and that's why it was so powerful for me personally. It allowed me to sense the future, to see the alternative, to touch the intangible.

In the span of a few days, thousands of people from across the country came together under a common goal — to discuss the state of the world and strategize for change. But this common goal did not erase or negate our diversity. While we talked, shared, and communicated with one another, we also argued and debated. Forum operations were often criticized, workshops got heated, and one prominent organizer was even cream-pied (for something she allegedly did eight years ago). All this unity/and/friction highlights our individual and collective ties. We are individuals with particular biases, concerns, needs, wants, and visions. But we are also part of a collective, bound together by an inter-communal vision of a better day: a day when the world is no longer controlled by war, profit, competition, occupation, exploitation, narrow minded "isms," top-down paternalisms, and deeply ingrained fears of a truly open, planetary existence.

The US Social Forum stands in contradistinction to such unpleasantries. We seek to usurp this empire of empires and implant new realities. Sure, we all have our own agendas and our own ideas about the best approach. But there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it seems natural to the human species. Our personal experiences cultivate our personal concerns. But our individual views do not have to compete with one another. We can stand side by side and co-exist peacefully ... even as we argue. We can have dialogue and debate. And we can even help one another achieve our goals and dreams. There is political space for all of us.

That's the message of the US Social Forum: we are capable of creating mutually shared space even as we disagree over the specifics of our politics. Rather than having one world, we can have many worlds. And these many worlds can link up, crisscross, and create networks of people, places, ideas, and ways of life. In doing so, we give birth to a twenty-first century, global alternative. Does this change the whole world entirely? No, not necessarily. But does it create an active, self-creating world of participatory values and agendas? Yes, and this new world can exist (antagonistically) within the already existing world.

The US Social Forum occurred in Atlanta amongst all the capitalism, consumerism, apathy, indifference, and personal and cultural tensions of any major city. But it occurred nonetheless, and successfully so. We came together amidst the world we are against and still affirmed not only our vision but also our ability to create an alternative reality. For five days we systematically practiced our values of open, inclusive, participatory democracy. The Forum was far from perfect. But such imperfection is part of the twenty-first century alternative. We no longer look for a perfect world. Instead, we actively move toward a better world, one in which each individual is given the opportunity to contribute to our collective creation. That was achieved (however imperfectly) in Atlanta.

I realize that my description may suffer from romanticization. But a vision without romance is lifeless, hopeless, and boring. I also realize that my description is not very instructive. What else needs to be done? What more must we do? What's the next step? Such questions are far too complicated for this brief essay. But I can say this: I know what I experienced and I know that I'm hopeful about the future. In the days and years to come we will understand the US Social Forum as another episode of liberation — Zapatismo, Bolivarianism, the Battle of Seattle, Genoa, the other Forums, etc. We will then understand these brief and fleeting moments as the building blocks of our newly created world of interconnected participatory democracies. We will then realize that the future was already created and it only took time for it to become reality.

P.S.

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