

Network politics -

Organizing, openness and structure in Gothenburg Social Forum-process 2003-2005

Author: Niklas Hansson, PhD Department of Ethnology, Gothenburg Sweden

English summary:

Chapter one contains a presentation of the dissertation and its purpose, which is to examine the production of network politics - using the Gothenburg Social Forum-process as an example. January 2001 saw the first World Social Forum (WSF) being held in Porto Alegre, Brazil on the same day as the World Economic Forum (WEF) was held in Davos, Switzerland. While the WEF has been arranged since 1971 as a global meeting place for government officials, bankers, company directors and key persons of the mass media, the WSF was the starting point of the World Social Forum-process, a “grass-root counter-event” to the WEF. It gathered groups from around the world to Porto Alegre where talks were held and experience, knowledge and strategies were exchanged. Under the slogan “*Another World is Possible*”, forums were opened as self-organizing meeting places.

The study’s central themes are introduced: decision-making, exclusions and boundaries, control and power aspects, the relationship between information- and communication technologies and political networks, and finally negotiations between different ideological and political interests.

Chapter two, the background of Forum-politics, outlines the historical terms of the social forum process and its political context. A number of events that influenced the political landscape, from which the forum process evolved, are brought to light. Ideas, events and practices connected with the background and characteristics of Social Forums are discussed. The WSF process was launched through the completion of the WSF Charter of Principles in 2001. Political predecessors of the first WSF are presented, the South American political context and its relationship to European and Swedish political mobilizations are tied together. The almost mythical events of EU-summit in Gothenburg in June 2001, opened Gothenburg and Sweden to the global justice movement which at that time in earnest stepped forward as a visible political force.

Chapter three is entitled *material, research methodology, previous research and theory* and presents the dissertation’s empirical material. Ethnographic field studies of local organizational processes constitute the basis for the analysis. The position of the researcher in relationship to choice of subject and his/her role in the research process is discussed. Central themes and theoretical concepts are presented. The international research field *social movement research* is introduced as the theoretical context of the dissertation. The study is positioned within Ethnology and previous research regarding social movements. Using assemblage theory as provided by distinguished philosopher Manuel DeLanda, I formulate the theory on which the analysis is founded and the social forum process is described as a dynamic network of heterogeneous actors: a self-organizing system. The overlying

concepts of the study are *territorialization* and *coding*, both derived from DeLanda's assemblage theory.

Chapter four describes how the forum model spread to Gothenburg and which organizations that were originally involved. The diffusion of the social forum model and the interconnection of a number of heterogenous organizations remain in focus during the first part of the chapter. This process, on the one hand, unified the local political production by gathering different groups in a common project directed against "neoliberal globalization". On the other hand, the forum process spread to organizations with no form of centralized control. The second part of the chapter introduces the concept "movement culture" (political culture) which describes political tendencies among the interconnected organizations. A schematic overview of the organizations initially participating in the GSF is presented. An analysis of the initial mobilizing forces, the spreading of the GSF idea and the inspiration for the local GSF is presented, as well as a general picture of the ideological and political interests that were involved in the formation of the political direction of the GSF.

Chapter five, *network politics offline*, focuses on decision-making processes. Here, the evolution of the decision-making structure of the forum process is examined – its routines and its meeting function, enabling participants to gather, lay plans and make common decisions. The meetings meant that the GSF network repeatedly isolated itself within Gothenburg (both socially and physically) and made possible a more unified interaction of a network of organizations in a common process of preparation. A decision-making structure is described with its positions, roles, regulating instruments and time aspects. The chapter ends with a reflection on the GSF as a collective, able to make joint decisions and to speak "with one voice". An ability which in turn was dependent on the forms of decision-making and consensus building as well as the inclusion of heterogeneous political and ideological interests. Making decisions was a necessary step in the GSF process in order for work to proceed.

In chapter six the ground rules for interaction within the GSF-process is described. Early on the World Social Forum process developed certain guidelines or management theories regarding future development of the newly initiated forum process and the Forums Charter of Principles became the most valued component. The local Gothenburg Social Forum-network of organizations translated the document, embedded it for functioning within the local political context. Negotiations between organizations participating in the GSF-process are analyzed and the content of the locally translated Charter of Principles is described as a product of a *framing process*. The concept of framing processes is usually used in social movement's theory to describe the internal processes whereby actors negotiates and disputes various frames of action. I expand the concept of framing processes as to include various external actors, such as mass media, playing parts in the dynamics of frame-construction. The outcome is a document negotiated between local political actors, mass media framings of the global justice movement's protests against the Gothenburg EU-summit in 2001, and debates within the overall World Social Forum-process. The concept of *protocol*, developed by cultural theorist Alexander Galloway, is used for describing GSF's ground rules articulated in the local social forum's charter of principles.

Chapter seven focused on the concept of *information*, as a material with a certain dynamic potential, and the GSF-process is analyzed via its coupling together of information technologies and social networks. Communication technology greatly reduced the necessity of face-to-face interaction within the GSF-network. Rules for information- and communication flows within production of political information is analyzed as coding-processes within the GSF-assemblage, whereas information technologies blurred GSF's borders and made the information content within the GSF-process more heterogeneous. Within the terminology of assemblage theory these processes are termed coding-processes and (de) territorialization-processes, respectively. I discuss properties of transparency, the "ethics of sharing information" and the concepts of meaning versus information, as ingredients contributing to and withholding the communicational structure of the GSF-process and a global flow of information. E-mail lists and information flows are described as important parts of current social movement networks. The everyday practices of distributing, organizing and excluding information is a somewhat under-researched part of network politics and is highlighted in this chapter. Finally, sociologist Manuel Castells theorem of a global space of flows, Canadian media theorist Marshal McLuhans media theory, and information theory is brought together in the analysis of GSF as a socio-technological assemblage.

In *chapter eight*, somewhat comparable to chapter six, negotiations between political organizations and ideological-political interests within the GSF-process are analyzed. Selection processes for overall themes and mottos used as points of convergence is described. These mottos, "*a Just Gothenburg in a Just World*" and "*Privatizations and its effects*", showed to have local-global resonances oscillating between a large number of reference points: local, national and international political actors and categories were conjoined during negotiations for selecting overall mottos holding potentials for mobilizing not-yet enrolled organizations. Social Movement researcher Charles Tilly's concepts of movement repertoire, program, identity, and standing are used for further elaboration on the function of these mottos within the GSF-process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the concept of "technologies of protest" - techniques for distributing flyers, posters etcetera - and the relationship between the GSF-network, the city of Gothenburg and some of the places used for distribution. Tactics as well as time is discussed as important factors affecting information distribution.

In *chapter nine* I plunge into the internal dynamics of the GSF-process and the methodology within the social forum-process known as the merger process. Before the actual forum events all of the participating organizations start to merge in order to fill in the political content during forum events. During this process the forum-organizers acted out the function of becoming a "broker". The methodology of merger process is used for combining materials (political content) without uniting or directing the forum-process from "above". The workgroup's coordinating and tinkering with program materials is highlighted as a decentralized combinatory work process, and the chapter ends with a discussion concerning the hegemonic position of the intentional, political actor within social movement's theory. Also, the network organization is depicted as rejecting notions of a predisposed unity or community.

In *chapter ten, Network politics: workgroups and network control*, GSF:s internal coordination- and organization structure and selection mechanisms for central positions within the organizations workgroup is described. Leadership, control, and power aspects within network organization is illustrated. The actual work of organizers, value of organizations skills, and authority within the decentralized GSF-network - and potentials and problems that are inherent in such a process - is discussed. The chapter ends with an abstraction of a network power diagram – the diagram of soft control.

Chapter eleven focuses on the Local Social Forum event in October 2005. Local Social Forums can be understood as venues of emergence within the global justice movement and political sites in early 21th century where organizations and individuals are mobilized and exchange views, experiences and strategies and pursue further joint workings. But, they are also places for inspiration and critique. Chapter eleven tells a tale about me taking part in some of the activities during the Gothenburg Social Forum event in October 2005, describing some of the seminars, discussions and processes from within the forum, and ends in a concluding reflection concerning characteristics of network organization, network politics, and network control.

In chapter twelve, the last chapter, I summarize the main conclusions of the thesis.