



## 15,000 Progressive Activists in Detroit: Why No Media or Respect?

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It's not surprising that the mainstream media is paying little attention to the 15,000-plus community organizers and progressive activists gathered in Detroit, Michigan this week for the second United States Social Forum. After all, the center-left political establishment isn't paying attention either.

Why is it that the Tea Party -- the right-wing edge of the conservative political sphere -- exerts a gravitational pull on the Republican party and the conservative mainstream while the United States Social Forum and the leaders and groups gathered here, who represent the left of the liberal mainstream, are disregarded as marginal and irrelevant -- that is, if they're regarded at all?

For those of you who, like the center-left political establishment, think the United States Social Forum sounds like some sort of debutante ball, allow me to explain.

In 2001, social movement leaders in Porto Alegre, Brazil, convened the first-ever World Social Forum as a space for progressive activists from around the globe to meet, learn and strategize with one another to strengthen the fight for justice, peace and equality worldwide. The World Social Forum's guiding vision is summed up in its motto: "Another World is Possible." Eventually, activists in the United States, wowed by the powerful experience of attending World Social Forums in Brazil, India and Africa and responding to calls from international activists that progressive change in the United States was critical to staunching injustice around the world, initiated the United States Social Forum. The first was held in 2007 in Atlanta, Georgia; the second this week in Detroit. Both U.S. Social Forums grew out of extensive regional and local social forum processes as well as nationwide planning committees, which were integral to the bottom-up formation of the forum

The Tea Party, which few had even heard about a year ago, is courted by prospective political candidates and established Republican leadership alike. Tea Party leaders like Sarah Palin command \$100,000 speaking fees and major news outlets write headline stories about Tea Party activists and actions. By comparison, there is not a single nationally recognized speaker on the dais at any of the United States Social Forum plenaries, no Democratic party candidates bombarding the Forum or its constituent organizations for endorsements and no mainstream liberal foundations are backing the effort.

There are three possible explanations for why the Tea Party is treated as a force to be reckoned with on the right while the Social Forum is treated as fringe. The first is compositional. While the United States Social Forum gathers a disproportionately large number of poor people and people of color, repeated polls have shown that the Tea Party is predominantly comprised of financially well-off white men. Well-to-do white males generally have greater influence on the powers that be in our society than poor people of color. Of course, from the perspective of progressive activists,

this is one reason why the Social Forum is needed, so accepting the permanence of this dynamic would be instantly self-defeating.

A second possible explanation for the Tea Party's power and prominence as compared with the Social Forum is temporal. Shiny, new things always catch our eye, including our collective political eye, more than old and seemingly tired things. The progressive/left conglomeration of organizations and ideological perspectives that comprise the United States Social Forum have, literally or metaphorically, been around in American politics for decades.

And even where that's not the case — for instance, very recent and innovative formations like the Domestic Workers Union or Right to the City Alliance — the reality is that the anti-oppression, pseudo-Marxist, liberation rhetoric they adopt often finds them lumped in with their old left brethren. On the right, although it is arguably old Moral Majority social invective married with old Club for Growth fiscal constraint, the Tea Party successfully packaged itself as a new reaction against the (also supposedly new) politics of President Obama. Even in movements, marketing matters. The left either has something new to offer but is failing to package it as such or has nothing new at all.

The third possible explanation may be the most deep and intransigent — it is psychological. Perhaps because they are largely white and well-to-do and male, perhaps because they grow out of recent political movements with very significant ambitions of power (including the Moral Majority and Club for Growth), the Tea Party is profoundly majoritarian in its rhetoric and vision. The Tea Party claims to represent mainstream America. According to the “Take America Back” platform put forth by Tea Party front organization Freedom Works, trumpeted by Fox News host Glenn Beck: “The Tea Party's common-sense agenda of fiscal conservatism now represents the very middle of the American political spectrum.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the left wing of progressive politics as represented at the Social Forum does not evidence equivalent majoritarian convictions or aspirations. The closest workshops along these lines at the United States Social Forum are in the vein of “new majority” organizing among black and brown constituencies that are rising in demographic proportion.

Most everything else can be summed up as parsing identity politics (the difference between being “gender queer” or “transgendered”) or perfecting a left analysis of issues (for instance, on how the ecological crisis is rooted in the shortcomings of capitalism). While some workshops focus on building policy campaigns or electoral campaigns that might necessarily mean recruiting more middle-of-the-road, mainstream constituencies, what is palpably absent — in workshop proposals and hallway conversations — is any overarching belief that the assembled grassroots movements already legitimately represent the mainstream of America.

Mainstream liberals, especially in Washington, have bought into the false dichotomy that there is a necessary trade-off between seeking political power versus sticking to one's ideological beliefs. The Democratic party, the Obama administration and many Washington-based advocacy organizations have picked the side of political pragmatism. It would appear that the left wing of the left has also bought into this false dichotomy and chosen the ideology end of the imaginary see-saw. But what if more Americans agree with the Social Forum crowd than the DNC? Perhaps even a governing majority? In November 2009, a BBC poll found that 63 percent of Americans felt that capitalism in its current form wasn't working for them. What if

the Social Forum crowd claimed to represent that 63 percent — and then some?

In his argument for hegemony as a left-wing aspiration, Antonio Gramsci wrote that before actually winning power, a political movement must believe it can win power and have a vision for how to use it. Yet the psychological failure to claim hegemonic aspirations — let alone make significant progress toward realizing majoritarian power — can be linked to what another left philosopher, Frantz Fanon, dubbed the psychology of oppression. Communities so accustomed to personal and political marginalization have a hard time even imagining themselves as the ones wielding power as opposed to those over whom power is being wielded. Such hopelessness focuses a movement inward, leading to the kind of internecine fights around identity politics and issue positions that frequently divide the left. This explains United States Social Forum workshops like “The Struggle for Single Payer in the Time of Obamacare,” piling onto the conservative attack on liberal policy in the name of left-wing ideological purity.

Without a doubt, it is easier to fight for the preservation of the political past — even if it’s a revised, overly rosy past in the case of the Tea Party and its supporters — than advance a new, progressive vision that critiques and contrasts with the status quo. And the publicity showered on the Tea Party by Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and others blows a certain wind at the back of right-wing ideas storming the mainstream media. Then again, the Social Forum motto grows directly out of the slogan put forward by neo-liberal economists and politicians who, to make the case for economic globalization when it was a relatively new concept, insisted “There is no alternative.”

But perhaps, learning from the hegemonic aspirations of the economic and social right, the motto of the Social Forum left should also be “There is no alternative” — arguing that the progressive vision for a transformed and better future is, indeed, inevitable. Sure there are plenty of cultural and structural barriers that incline the left to be marginalized and, thus, languish in internal process. Nonetheless, one cannot help but wonder how the United States Social Forum and the left in general would be different if convinced they represent the majority of Americans and deserve real, ruling power.

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