The Central American Left at a Cross-road: The Mesoamerican People's Forum as a Complex, Contested Space

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Introduction

The most important political phenomenon to affect Central America in the past few years has been the negotiation and signing of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that parallel political phenomena in the region have been studied and explained in light of the CAFTA. The Mesoamerican People's Forum (MPF), a regional inter-sectoral and transnational meeting space for left leaning political actors that met annually between 2001 and 2005, has been a case in point. Some authors and activists have viewed it as a social movement that arose in response to CAFTA, and as such, applied elements of social movement theorizing to explain the functioning and import of the space (Spalding 2007, 97). But in this paper I will argue that these theories fail to do justice to the MPF. While the CAFTA negotiations certainly had an important impact on the space, the MPF had roots that reached back into the 1990s, and therefore pre-existed the CAFTA negotiations. Furthermore, the application of social movement theories to the MPF suggests a consensuated mobilization where none every truly emerged. Rather the MPF brought together grassroots actors, NGOs, donors, social movements, party representatives and citizens involved in all aspect of social justice work including feminists, labour, campesinos, youths, indigenous peoples, and environmentalists. Finally, social movement theories fail to do justice to the political interactions which took place in this space, and the implications of these for the left in Central America. Taking all of this together, then, in this paper I will show that the MPF and its role in ongoing changes in the Central American left can be better understood through the application of complexity theory.

Works on the "new 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 America Latina* 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* 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 Status, its unfortunately strategic position as an export processing zone (Robinson 2003), and its comparatively late and difficult adoption of democracy (Smith 2005). Both *Globalization de las resistencias* and *Los Movimientos Sociales del Siglo XXI*, a collection of works on social movements in Mesoamerica coordinated by Ricardo Martinez Martinez (Jorale and Arfila, 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).

This small lit review suggests that more work needs to be done to understand ongoing processes within the Central American left. I would also argue that new frameworks are required to understand what is taking place within the region's left. In particular, most works written about Central American civil society during the 1990s did so within the framework of democratization, but globalization is a bigger concern for the Central American left today. In this regard, various factors have given Central America's non-party left reason to contemplate new modes of organizing, particularly at the regional level. The Comite Consultivo

(Consultative Committee) of the Sistema de Integracion Centroamericana (SICA) and associated regional civil society networks collapsed towards the end of the 1990s, eliminating this as an effective space for regional civil society political activity (Monge Granados 1999, 48-55). Secondly, many social justice actors in the region have come to realize that their participation in weak democratic structures and spaces for regional integration made them complicit with the larger process of economic restructuring taking place in Central America (Robinson 2003, 225-230). Third, the fallout of Hurricane Mitch gave civil society actors an opportunity to experiment with different modes of organizing at the regional level (Bradshaw, Linneker and Zuniga 2002 for details, especially 252-257 and Box 10.2; Torres 2002, 129-132). Finally, the nearby Zapatista Liberation Army (ZLN) also influenced views on organizing in the region (see for example Marcos 2001). When President Fox formally announced Plan Puebla Panama in 2001, left-leaning actors in the region pursued a new type of regional initiative: the first MPF was held in Chiapas in May of that year.

Existing theoretical frameworks lack sufficient scope to explain the MPF as a space, or the implications of this phenomenon in the region, or for the Central American left. As mentioned above, the MPF is not a social movement as such, but rather a social forum, similar to the World Social Forum (WSF). While it may have exhibited some characteristics of social movement mobilization, it never achieved the full expression of this political form. And although groups that practice locally based resistance to globalization participated in the MPF, the globalization-from-below framework provides limited scope for explaining the internal functioning of the MPF or its contributions to changes taking place within the wider left. The same goes for transnational social movement theory (Tarrow 1998; Tarrow 2001; Diani 2006; Della Porta 2007). Similarly, the transnational advocacy network (TAN) or boomerang framework might describe the activities or aspirations of some groups that participate in the MPF, but fails to capture the event as a whole. Finally, while the MPF might be called an expression of GCS, this idea has been discredited (Baker 2002, 932; Munck 2002) and also falls short of explaining this regional phenomenon.

The shortcomings of existing frameworks have led some authors to suggest that the tenants of complexity theory provide a useful framework for explaining the unique qualities of similar anti-globalization spaces such as the WSF (Escobar 2004; Chesters and Welsh 2005). However, complexity theory has to date been applied in a very metaphorical sense in these works (see for example Urry 2005). These works are problematic because they use complexity theory to argue that 'self-organizing' social movement spaces are immune to control either from the outside by state-sponsored forces, or from the inside by ideological forces (Chesters and Welsh 2005). I agree that complexity theory provides scope for explaining the MPF, but a more grounded examination of the phenomena demonstrates that power is, in fact, very much at issue within these transnational forum spaces. This suggests that complexity theory needs to be applied much more carefully to explanations of the anti-globalization movement, and also that it needs to be adjusted to take into account the practices of power that permeate left-leaning spaces for dialogue and organization.

In what follows I first explore complexity theory as a theoretical framework, and then apply it to the case of the MPF, paying particular attention to practices of power within the Central American left. First I argue that the idea of complex adaptive systems provides a good framework for understanding the processes that characterize the MPF. I then go on to explore the idea of self-organized criticality as a means to explain the formation of the Comite Mesoamericano, a regional committee that began to guide the MPF process after the

announcement of the CAFTA. In the conclusions I reflect on what the results suggest for how we think about the left in Central America today.

Complexity Theory and Power

There is no doubt that the MPF and similar anti-globalization activities such as the World Social Forum constitute *complicated* objects of study. "Even when focusing narrowly on the annual event," Conway argues, "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," (2004, footnote 2). Forums are meetings of individuals and groups that come from different geographical locations, have differing ideological stances and often diverge in their political agendas. They are often networked together in complicated ways either horizontally or vertically, through social connections, pre-existing hierarchies, formalized coalition structures, or ideological or cultural coincidence. Furthermore, forums are transnational (or in some cases translocal), which raises the question of how to study a space that exists in and of itself, but is also influenced by its environment in significant ways. Often these influences are carried to forum events by the participants, who bring with them the multiplicity of cultural, historical and political factors that make up each of their distinct local realities. Finally, there is the challenge of dealing with a 'transient' or 'ambulating' setting. While there is a clear institutional and discursive thread which links one WSF to the next, for example, each event takes place in a different location, is organized by a different group of people, and brings new attendees.

Is *complexity theory* a useful tool to illuminate forum processes, either in-and-of themselves, or as phenomena with impacts? Many biographers of the anti-globalization movement seem to think so. Drawing on complexity theory, de Landa's idea of meshworks, and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of rhizome networks, Escobar argues that, "in cyberspace and complexity we find a viable and at least potentially meaningful model of social life… This model is based on self-organisation, non-hierarchy, and complex adaptive behavior on the part of agents, a model that contrasts sharply with the dominant model of capitalism and modernity, particularly in their incarnation as neoliberal globilisation" (2004, 353). Chesters and Welsh (2005) similarly draw on Deleuze and Guattari to argue that such complex spaces cannot be controlled either from the outside by state-sponsored forces, or from the inside by ideological forces. This vision can be contrasted with that of Rioufol (2004) who 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. Different again is the work of Khan (2004) on imagined communities. He wonders how and whether chance meetings as a WSF event can result in enduring connections, and more to the point, in the negotiation of difference.

Complexity theory is attractive to theorists of the anti-globalization movement because it provides an explanation of process over outcomes, and therefore captures the non-consensuated and fluid nature of social forums. As Urry explains it:

> Large-scale patterns or properties emerge from, but are not reducible to, the micro-
> dynamics of particular phenomena. Thus gases are not uniform entities but comprise a

seething confusion of atoms with the interactions, obeying the laws of quantum mechanics, more important than the elements themselves. The laws governing gases derive not from the behaviour of each individual atom but from their statistical relational patterning; as Bohm put it, it is the dance not the dancers that are key. (Urry 2005, 238)

Urry goes on to suggest that the global should not be understood in terms of categories or nested hierarchies—he calls this 'reductionist globalization'—but rather, in terms of "many systems of connections or circulations that effect relationality at multiple and varied materialities and distance." In his words:

> …there is not so much a reductionist but a complex relationality (or global complexity). This involves a wide array of systems, of networked or circulating relationships implicated within different overlapping and increasingly convergent mobile, material worlds or hybrids. The global, then, is comprised of various systems, operating at various levels or scales, and each constitutes the environment for the other. (Urry 2005; 245)

Urry and I ultimately part company, however. His work, like that of Chesters, Welsh and Escobar, makes a fresh and interesting break from existing explanations of similar phenomena, however in applying complexity theory metaphorically, it is insufficiently sociological and overly generalized in its depiction of events on the ground. Urry also assumes that complex relationality will be imbued with classical power structures dividing "elites" from those who "resist elites." I am more concerned with the exercise of power in general, without making *a priori* assumptions about who holds the upper hand or where these practices take place.

Could complexity theory help to answer my particular concerns? Complexity theory is a set of frameworks that can be used to explain systems (social, economic, biological, etc.) that exhibit openness (interaction with their environment), self-organization (spontaneous creation of a globally coherent pattern out of local interactions), emergence (higher level properties are both the result of and have causal effects on their parts), and non-linearity. Because systems with these characteristics are emergent, they are sometimes referred to as complex adaptive systems (CAS) meaning that they are always adapting to their surroundings as the parts respond to stimuli from either their environment or system interactions (Holland 1992). In social systems, CAS are thought to be made up of agents that constantly develop and update schema or 'internal rule models' in response to their environment or the actions of fellow actors in the same system (Holland 1995). As a result, "control of a CAS tends to be highly dispersed and decentralized. If there is to be any coherent behavior in the system, it has to arise from competition and cooperation among the agents themselves. The overall behavior of the system is the result of a huge number of decisions made every moment by many individual agents" (Waldrop 1992).

Yet there are difficulties with complexity theory for explaining social phenomena. The first is that 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 interactions (Brunck 2001). In this case, the behavior of the overall system is no longer the result of decisions made by individual agents, but rather the result of rules imposed by a small number of agents who have some level of control over the behavior of individual actors, and therefore the system as a whole. And yet, as we know, leaders seldom have full control over their followers—social systems exhibit both self-organized and organized properties.

In complexity theory, the stability that comes about as a result of patterned regularity is called self-organized criticality (SOC). This is the idea that the sensitivity of linkages between the parts of a system increases with the total number of linkages in the system. As Brunck 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). Even though social systems may appear organized, they may still exhibit unpredictability through their sensitivity to small changes. But, as Brunck also explains, in social systems actors can sometimes successfully anticipate and 'dampen' the effects of micro-level instabilities. He 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, on the other hand, provides an explanation focused on internal 'dampening' processes. In his 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 *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)

He goes on to explain that in social systems individuals are bombarded with information. They interpret this information with reference to their own character (life experience, values, etc.) as well as cultural and social norms shared by certain groups in society. 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" (ibid).

What does this suggest about the practice of power in complex, open spaces? First it suggests that any given system will exhibit particular relations of power between the various actors within it. These relations of power will give certain actors <u>power over</u> other actors, both because of their position within the emerged system, and 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. Take for instance the social institution of authority. Both as a social institution, and as an attribute bestowed upon a single individual, the relation of authority emerges over time, giving an actor various types of power over other actors. This allows them to shape the overall system in ways that perpetuate the very institutions that grant them power in the first place. However, all actors within the system have the <u>power to</u> transform the dominant system of authority by challenging the foundations on which it is based. The system is stable insofar as the relationship of power remains stable—people in positions of authority monitor the system while other individuals in the system continue to bestow authority on their leaders. But given the complexity of any social system, as Marx famously pointed out, the outcomes of any challenges to the system (those micro-level fluctuations) cannot be predicted.

These SOC practices of power assume, however, 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 social interactions take place between a constantly shifting roster of individuals who come from different spaces, as we see take place in social forums? Are relationships of power rendered obsolete? This is essentially what Chesters and Welsh (2005) argue about the anti-globalization movement, but I disagree. Relationships may be more fluid and shifting, but I would argue that power is still very much in evidence.

Networking is the principle activity of social forums such as the MPF. As I see it, there are both instrumental and affective benefits to the networking (Horst and Miller 2005), but there are also significant risks (Vargas 2003). The experience of 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 it can destabilize existing agendas, organizational strategies or subjectivities. The actors that participate in these transnational spaces are bound by the relations of power that they experience at home. In fact, these transnational spaces can be thought of as a collision of various emerged systems. This leads me to believe that in order to accrue the benefits of networking, while limiting the risks inherent therein, these types of flexible spaces *must* reflect a novel exercise of power.

This raises the question of how people might exercise influence within open, transnational spaces for networking. How might people in positions of authority within emerged systems work to dampen the effects of external shocks experienced through networking across systems, while still ensuring the benefits of these interactions? I want to track the strategies that are used to exercise power within relationships that take place in complex, transnational, open spaces. It is here that I expect to find agency and the practice of politics in global processes. I expect that in these spaces the exercise of power is decentred, and is carried out through *facilitation* of networked flows rather than through the centralized *management* of structured relationships that is possible is more fixes spaces. This 'influence-through-facilitation' leverages the channeling of processes and flows rather than the maintenance of disciplinary structures, however this form of influence is much less determined than the control exercised in hierarchical organizations (see for example: Boudreau 2007; Routledge et al. 2007; Gustafsson-Larsson et al. 2007; Swan and Scarbrough 2005).[1] Disciplinary structures work with reference to a clear set of parameters, whether they be a territory or a category. Facilitation of processes and flows starts not from a unifying parameter but from one of many specific agendas, and as such it can only influence outcomes, not determine them. This amounts to the exercise of control without order.

The second problem with the application of complexity theory to social phenomena lies with the identification of 'emergences' or even 'systems' themselves. Wight points out that human actors participate in many systems simultaneously, making it difficult to identify the sources of influence on any given system (2008, 14). Furthermore, a typical social system will exhibit various 'emergent levels' and a variety of interacting feedback loops. And because open systems are also in interaction with their environment, it can be difficult to identify their boundaries. One answer to this dilemma is to focus on the processes of construction which lead to the emergence of a space. In this way, the delimitation of a space is not done abstractly, but

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[1] Boudreau (2007) says: "A new political space rarely rises spontaneously, without people actively seeking to create/open it. There are, in other words, interests behind these political restructuring processes, guiding a series of (often uncoordinated yet converging) actions. The translation of interests into actions requires strategizing. It is in this moment of strategizing that instruments are chosen. Instrumentalizing means choosing tools that will enable the implementation of a goal."

through observation of constituent processes. Borders are the result of internal processes rather than arbitrary theoretical assertions and systems become "verbs not nouns, as they are sites of struggle and relational effects that reproduce themselves" (Henry et al. 2004; 850).

This, of course, works best in cases where the phenomena at hand is already 'emerged.' Wight point out that:

> In complex open systems, often the only way to determine what happened, and why, is to sit back and watch the process unfold. The idea of sitting back and watching, however, is the empiricist fallacy; in order to watch we are going to have to have some idea of what it is we are looking for, and we cannot look for everything at once. Reducing complexity is one of the functions of theory. … In building representations of open systems, we are forced to leave things out, and since the effects of these omissions are non-linear, we cannot predict their magnitude. All theories, insofar as they attempt to isolate and identify the key components and patterns of interaction between elements, achieve their aims through abstraction. The process of abstraction is necessarily reductionist." (2008, 21)

Some historical institutionalists have produced accounts of how political practices become regularized, however underlying these accounts is a latent assumption that interactions *will* become regularized, or at least that these are the cases worth studying. But such assumptions are problematic in a world of networking and open spaces. The networks are always there, interaction is always happening, but structures do not always emerge—are not always reified. Yet we cannot assume a lack of structure equates with a lack of constitutive processes. In particular, I am concerned about the tendency to assume the consensuated nature of discourse— to focus only on the structures that get formed to the exclusion of the ideas that remain ovular. Recently there has been recognition in the literature that we must study not only successful networks, but also "failed" ones (Riles 2000). But even here, research has focused on explaining why regularized network *organizations* fall apart (Edelman 2005). It is much harder and problematic to identify and study cases of regularities which never come to be (although work is progressing in this realm: see Carpenter 2007).

Nonetheless, the project at hand focuses on an emerged phenomenon—the MPF—so a framework is needed to study the processes that produce an emerged system. Lefebvre (1991, 1996) and Soja (1989, 1996) provide a useful set of concepts for examining these processes.[2] They distinguish between *spatial practice* (the material organization of space – or how networks are structured), *representation of space* (how space is conceptualized, socially constructed and politically contested – or the content of network processes and flows) and *spaces of representation* (the intersubjective relationship between human agency, and real and conceptual social spaces – or the relationship between the agency of network nodes, and the structure, processes and flows of networks). Following Portugali, these categories represent different forms of information compression that result from the social production of space and place (2006; 659-660). In effect, in producing spaces, actors are engaged in the self-same process of abstraction that Wight is concerned with. In-so-far as the openness of a space is a function of the character and organization of relationships within it, then this model provides an appropriate framework for grappling with political practices that characterize emergence.

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[2] In a separate work I have thought through in detail the relationship between network and spatial concepts, but I do not have room to reproduce this discussion here. See Reilly 2007; Barnes and Reilly 2007; Routledge et al. 2007.

The MPF as a Complex Adaptive System

The MPF emerged in 2001 and convened 6 main forum events as well as various smaller national and thematic events associated to varying degrees with the MPF (see Appendices 1 and 2 for lists of MPF events and related details). The meetings were just that – meetings – albeit very large ones. The CAS framework provides a good explanation for each of these events, particularly since a different group of people organized each meeting in a different Central American country. Each MPF was organized by a coalition committee from the host country that was responsible both for financing (with donor funds) and organizing the event. Groups that specialized in particular themes (environment) or campaigns (damns) typically took responsibility for organizing and promoting particular aspects of the event. At the same time, in order to give the event a clear purpose and internal continuity the organizers would engage in dialogue about how to interpret the national and regional *coyuntura* (context) as well as the place of the left within this context. The intended structure and content of each event would *emerge* through the interactions of these various groups during the planning phase.

The meetings themselves would represent a second moment of interaction, this time between participants from across the left and the region. It was not uncommon for the event to diverge significantly from the intentions of national organizers once the participants came together, bringing with them their variously informed ideas and agendas – their 'internal rule models'. Because they brought together such a wide swath of the left, the meetings provide an excellent indicator of dynamic changes taking place within the left in the region during the first half of the decade. In this sense, CAS can be applied a second time, here to the constantly emerging discourse of the left itself, which also feedback to inform the composition and organization of the left and its discourses, and as such, future MPF events. As the MPF emerges and changes over time, the calls for mobilization grow stronger, and there is a gradual rejection of the idea of participation or advocacy in policy making.

The first MPF, *The People are First Before Globalization*, held in Chiapas, Mexico in May 2001, was a response to the formal announcement of PPP and the larger discussion around its implications for Mesoamerica. This and the second MPF, held in northern Guatemala in November 2001, were more 'academic' in their orientation, featuring heavy participation by NGOs and an emphasis on presentations by experts. They brought together a variety of actors, including social movements from either side of the Mexico-Guatemala border, as well as more 'professional' civil society organizations. While participants came together around what they perceived to be a shared threat, their opinions on how to respond differed greatly, as evidenced by the variety of presentations reprinted in the *memoria* from this meeting (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2001a).

Perhaps as a reflection of the more ambiguous nature of this meeting, the declaration of the first Forum called for "ample spaces for participation, information, consultation and public debate between civil society and instances of government" and also highlighted the need to "develop and strengthen all forms of resistance against the imposition of projects that have nothing to do with our reality and customs, as well as to support and encourage the consturction of productive community alternatives" (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2001a; *translation mine*). The declaration from the second forum makes no mention of consultation with governments, but has a stronger sense of agenda. It focuses instead on the need to construct, "a Mesoamerican collective action network, oriented both to PPP as well as to the effect of FTA [free trade

agreements] and the FTAA [free trade area of the Americas],” and expressed its “rejection of imposed globalization” (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2001b; *translation mine*).

By the third MPF, held in Nicaragua in 2002, George Bush had visited San Salvador to formally announce the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). This announcement represented a significant external shock on the MPF process, bringing simmering questions about the nature of the Central American left to a head. The third MPF is most remembered for a debate that took place between those who wanted to carry out a process of policy *advocacy* in order influence the CAFTA negotiations, and those who believed that *resistance* was the only answer[3]. The debate was particularly contentious given that some members of SAPRIN (Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network), an important regional network of NGOs, were heavily involved in coordinating the forum. While SAPRIN favored policy advocacy, the forum came down on the side of resistance, a result which evidenced growing support for popular organizing in the region. The more professional civil society organizations which supported an advocacy approach were marginalized from the MPF process. They went on to form a new regional network called CID: *Comercio, Integracion y Desarrollo Sostenible* (Commerce, Integration and Sustainable Development). CID participated in the “*quarto a lado*” (room next door – ironically called the “*quarto oscuro*” or dark room by some) of the CAFTA negotiations, produced several technical documents, and worked to influence the wording of some of the CAFTA treaties.

The declaration of the third forum asserts that “the principle problem that popular organizations are up against in their purpose and in the formation of alternatives is the dominant capitalist system as a form of political, economic, social and cultural organization. As such, we end up at the absolute rejection of the same, as well as payment of external debt.” It goes on to pronounce that the “PPP is not negotiable in any instance and we promote non-participation in consultative processes promoted by organizations implicated in its formation and application,” and to call for “days of mobilization and fixed struggle on the 12th of October as a demonstration of our rejection of PPP and FTAA, making this effort coincide with distinct expressions of struggle in a day of Mesoamerican resistance” (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2002; *translation mine*). Taking up this banner, the fourth MPF, held in Tegulcigalpa, Honduras in 2003, was called *Por la autodeterminación y la resistencia de los pueblos* (For the autodetermination and resistance of the pueblos). If it wasn't already, with the announcement of the CAFTA, the MPF became the preeminent space for the anti/alter globalization movement in Mesoamerica, and a very important meeting space for 'the left' in the region. It also became a space through which the left expressed a series of internal changes that were being played out in light of the CAFTA negotiations.

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[3] As a brief aside, note that this division between advocacy and resistance does *not* mirror the anti/alter globalization division (Milani, Carlos R. S. and Laniado 2006)). Anti-globalization actors are opposed to globalization, while proponents of the 'alter' position feel that globalization is inevitable or even desirable, as long as it takes place through an alternative framework. At the global level, alter-globalization actors propose such policies as the Tobin Tax. Both of these groups would fall in the resistance camp in Central America, as both resistance to globalization and the search for alternative forms of globalization are on the agenda at the MPF. The groups that have proposed policy advocacy in the Central American context would belong to a third group, which might be called “amended-globalization” actors. These groups are more pragmatic in that they seek to make adjustments to the policies on the table, within the policy frameworks of the day. The hope is that these amendments will help to mitigate any of the negative impacts of globalization, and accentuate any positive ones. It is an approach which anti/alter globalization activists associate with the “neoliberalism-with-a-human-face” line of thinking.

The MPF and Self-Organized Criticality

The CAFTA precipitated major changes in the Central American left, around issues which had been in the air for some time. By the end of the 1990s, disillusionment with the democratic project had set in, but more importantly, many social justice actors in the region came to realize that their participation in weak democratic structures and spaces for regional integration made them complicit with the larger process of economic restructuring taking place in Central America (Robinson 2003, 25-30). This in turn began to challenge the set of power relations on which associationalism was based during the 1990s. In particular, the experience of various regional networks with CC-SICA, the civil society branch of the regional integration project, drove home the limited potential for change in these official processes. These experiences also highlighted significant weaknesses within regional networks, such as their tendency towards verticalism and their weak accountability to local actors (Monge Granados 1999, 48-55; Edelman 2003). The regional civil society collaborations that took place in the wake of Hurricane Mitch towards the end of the 1990s gave the region's actors an opportunity to experiment with new modes of organizing at the regional level (Bradshaw, Linneker and Zuniga 2002 for details, especially 252-257 and Box 10.2; Torres 2002, 129-132). Meanwhile the nearby activities of the Zapatista Liberation Army (ZLN) provided inspiration for new approaches (Marcos 2001). The call to action that was the fight against CAFTA brought these issues to the surface creating an opening for change in dominant discourses and forms of organization within the broader left. This opening found expression in the meetings of the MPF, turning it into a political playing field on which actors either worked to shore up existing structures, or create new ones.

The notion of relations of power maintained through SOC provides an excellent framework for thinking about what transpired next in the history of the MPF. During the 1990s, professionalized NGOs gained a great deal of authority and legitimacy in Central America as agents of democratization. This was based on their knowledge, access to donor resources and endorsement by external actors, and was also a condition of their supposed role as official representatives in decision making processes. By the turn of the millennium, however, professionalized NGOs and the discourses surrounding them were being questioned and criticized on many fronts, challenging the stability of the associational system. This was no exception in Central America where NGOs have been accused of being a-political or subject to co-optation (Pearce 1998; McIlwaine 1998; Howell and Pearce 2001, 172), outsourcers of a dwindling state bureaucracy during periods of structural adjustment (Pearce 1998, 177); and lacking in transparency, accountability and representation (Macdonald 1997; Kowalchuk 2003; McIlwaine 1998; Bebbington 2004). Regional NGO networks similarly came to be questioned (Robinson 2003, 230; Edeman 2003). As donors began to withdraw funding from the region towards the end of the decade many of these NGOs and their networks collapsed (Aldaba et al. 2000). Protest against CAFTA negotiations provided an impetus to develop new logics for organization, and this began to erode the systems that had emerged within the left during the earlier decade.

In the wake of changing bases for authority, Central American NGOs have strived to reorient their work, establish new identities, and form working relationships with grassroots or social movement actors (Aldaba et al. 2000; Pearce 2001). But for much of the left, NGOs established in the 1990s were just the latest in a string of imperialist strategies. Professionalized NGOs are frequently characterized as 'right wing' in their orientation (interviews by author),

which can be interpreted as a leftist characterization of their middle class, social democratic values. Some would even 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. Meanwhile, there has been a certain reanimation of grassroots social movement mobilization in the region. It has been difficult for grassroots actors to work along-side professionalized organizations. Where NGOs have learned to provide technical 'accompaniment' 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[4]. This is particularly the case in the anti-globalization movement, where donors, NGOs and a business-like orientation are often associated with the 'imperialist' problem.

While there has clearly been a shift in the basis of legitimacy and authority within the Central American left, it is difficult to identify the new ideational foundations for organization in the region, in part because further research is needed, but also because different groups have different ideas about the activities and discourses that merit these attributes. New basis for organizing are emerging through the many processes taking place in the region today. Having said this, the foundations for authority and legitimacy will likely be established vis-à-vis globalization (rather than the democratization of the former period), and in particular, the alternatives to globalization that they offer at the local level, given that this is an overriding concern for the left at present.

Changes in the basis for organization within the Central American left have eroded the basis of support for some emerged systems, but they have also provided important opportunities for new basis for authority to emerge. The SAPRIN initiative discussed above is a perfect example of a system of authority which came to be challenged during this period. Having lost its legitimacy, it was marginalized from the MPF process, and while the members decided to form the CID network to influence the CAFTA process, they ultimately discovered that they could have no effect on the outcomes of the FTA. In the end CID rejected the FTA process and joined the ranks of other protesters. The organizations associated with SAPRIN and CID have been widely discredited within the Central American left, at times through acts of public malice. In one case an email was circulated falsely accusing a SAPRIN-related NGO of working for the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB). Meanwhile when the IDB convened public consultations about the CAFTA negotiations many sectors of the left elected to abstain from the process (Spalding 2004). Ultimately the basis for SAPRIN / CID's authority and legitimacy within the Central American left crumbled. This had important implications for the organization of the left at the national level. For example, the leader of SAPRIN, FUNDE, was a very important player on the Central American scene as well as in the Salvadoran left until 2002. FUNDE was the Salvadoran convener for the MPF, and worked closely with the Humbolt Centre in Nicaragua to organize the third MPF. In the wake of the Nicaraguan MPF several Salvadoran NGOs distanced themselves from FUNDE to form the Sinti Techan network, a group which took a much more activist tact towards the CAFTA negotiations. FUNDE was marginalized and discredited within the Salvadoran left.

Meanwhile new expressions of the left were responding to the new impetus for organization, one which rejected the associational bent of 1990's organizing. Apart from the

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[4] 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.

MPF itself, the various national level social movements that were formed in response to the CAFTA negotiations are an obvious example:

> 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; *translation mine*)

A particularly interesting case is that of the MPR-12 social movement, which was formed in direct response to the Nicaraguan forum. The movement is named after the region-wide mobilization against the FTA that took place on October 12, 2002. It was active in shutting down transportation facilities in El Salvador on that day. The MPR-12 harkens back to more traditional forms of mobilization, basing its authority and legitimacy on close affiliations to the social bases of Salvadoran society, working with them to find alternatives to neoliberal economic policy. But unlike social movements of the past that maintained a vertical relationship with party structures, the MPR-12 has gained respect by maintaining an educated autonomy from the FMLN which it uses to steer policy-making towards the objectives of local people. Regional actors have also emerged as a direct result of the forum process, the *Encuentro de Mujeres* (Meeting of Women), a regional network of women's organizations, being a prime example. This network features a relatively decentralized organizational structure which brings together women from across the region, and also from all the various strands of feminist thinking. In this case the authority and legitimacy of the space is a result of its diversity, inclusivity, focus on empowerment and respect for otherness. The network sees their relatively flexible and horizontal organizational structure as not only an alternative to the hierarchical practices that typify capitalist systems, but also a necessity for organizing in an age of global communication and travel.

Formation of the Comite Mesoamericano

As the MPF became a key site of interaction for the various sectors of the left, and a major site of strategizing regarding CAFTA, key actors began to view this critical space as both a strategic resource and a potential threat to the stability of their SOC systems. An institutional arrangement called the *Comite Mesoamericano* (CM) was established in Honduras to regulate interactions between the key players. On its face the CM was meant to coordinate the formation of a regional social movement to protest neoliberal globalization, but in practice it was a highly political institution through which actors negotiated their collaboration.

The various rounds of CAFTA negotiations were about half over when the Honduras forum took place, so free trade formed an important subject of conversation, and the Central American left had become preoccupied with organizing its resistance. The new agenda for action had a significant impact on the MPF. For example, a close look at the topics discussed at each forum shows an important shift from thematic issues to strategic concerns such as militarization and communication at the Honduras forum (see Appendix 2). Also, in the year between the Nicaraguan and Honduran events, the various national-level social movements listed

above, and a few more besides, had had an opportunity to form (see Appendix 3). The Honduras forum was the first major opportunity they had to meet on the regional stage.

Whereas in the past participation in the forums had been fairly open to whomever was interested in attending, the leaders of the national anti-CAFTA movements took charge of mobilizing participants from their countries to attend the event. This did not mean that other actors were barred from attending, but it did mean that space within the official delegation became a highly political issue. In countries where several different anti-CAFTA expressions had emerged this led to internal conflicts between local groups that fought 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. They 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 grudgingly 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.

To complicate matters further, the composition of actors at the Honduras forum was different. For the first time separate *mesas* were established for women, indigenous or afro-descendent communities, and youths. 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 actually the design of the forum organizers. The early forums had been heavily influenced by the powerful Central American campesino movement. Note, for example, that the first Mesoamerican Meeting of Campesinos was held just days before the first Mesoamerican People's Forum, also in Chiapas (see Appendix 1). 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 the *mesa* for *Women Against the Neoliberal Model*, for example, fought the local organizers for permission to form a separate space at the event (interview by author). They felt that they should have a dedicated space to discuss globalization from a feminist perspective, just as, for example, the union movement had a dedicated space to discuss globalization from a labour perspective. When the organizers of the Honduras forum later published their report about the event, feminist organizers were quick to point out that women were grossly underrepresented in the list of participants. 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.

Given that the organizers believed a regional social movement to be in formation, the declaration of the Honduras forum stressed the need to create a more permanent process of resistance in the region: "With a purposeful vision, in the IV Mesoamerican Forum we affirm the need to construct a Mesoamerican political *sujeto* [masculine subject] and *sujeta* [feminine subject], which should be multicultural and inclusive, with a responsibility to forward our alternatives for the common good of the pueblos …" (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2004). This became a major topic of conversation at the fifth forum in El Salvador, and formed the main 'official' rational for the formation of a CM. 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 (thought at this point what exactly was meant by "political subject" remained very unclear, and discussion about this issue was placed on the agenda for the El Salvador and Costa Rica forums);
- 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 local) concerns;
- ensuring the inclusivity of the MPF by overseeing the activities of national organizing committees, and providing a recourse for groups that are marginalized from the process;
- overseeing the use of donor funds by the national organizing committee; and,
- evaluating the results of each forum.

The CM also served the more immediate purpose of soothing tensions between MPR-12 and Sinti Techan, the two groups that would be co-organizing the very important fifth MPF. El Salvador was a strategic location in which to hold the event, given that this country is a strong-hold for American liberalism in Central America, and was likely to be the first country to sign on to the CAFTA. If the trade negotiations could be stalled here, they would likely be stopped altogether.

Figure 1: The Structure of the Comite Mesoamericano in its Ideal Conception
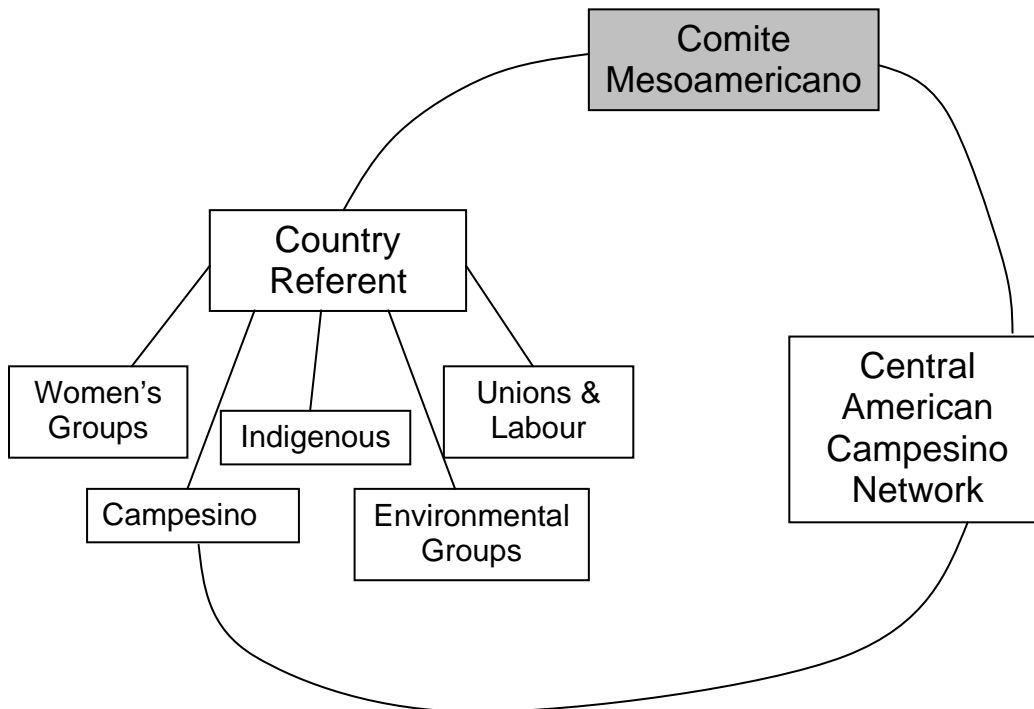

In its conceptual 'ideal' the CM was a sort of matrix organization with two representatives from a national level organization that represented the broadest possible expression of the left, as well as two representatives from each regional level thematic network. National referents were meant to send one man and one woman to each meeting of the Comite.

In this way the thematic, national and gender interests of each participant would be represented. This ideal is represented in Figure 1. 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 Exluidos 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 CM functioned somewhat differently in practice, however. As the history of the MPF unfolded, more and different sectors began to seek out the forum as a regional anti-CAFTA and anti-globalization space. Leaders recognized that forums were an effective means to foster solidarity, enthusiasm and innovation in local networks, all of which could help to enhance the legitimacy of local organizers and agendas. They also realized its importance for ongoing debates about the configuration of 'the left' in the region. Figure 2 presents a more realistic (although hypothetical) 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.

Figure 2: More Realistic Representation of the Comite Mesoamericano
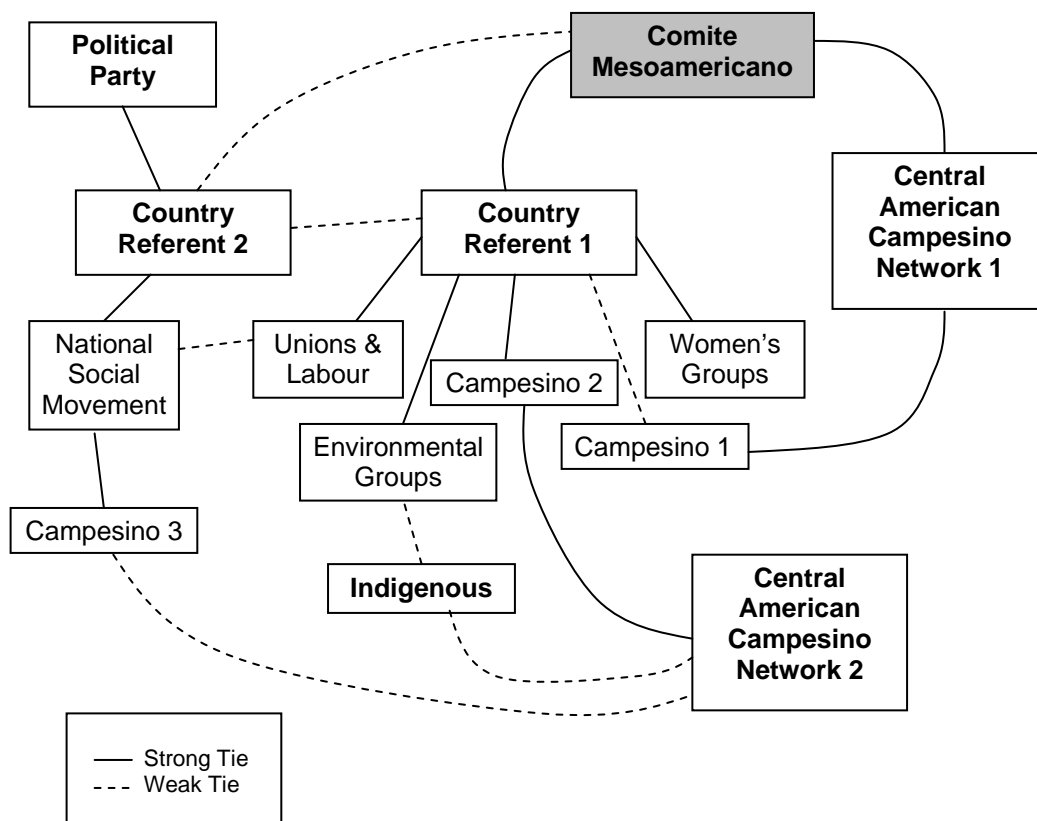
In sum, the networks that converged in the CM, and which came together at forum events, were multiple, related to each other in a variety of ways, and had different types of influence over the outcomes of processes. It was not a static group either. The CM had a shifting roster of actors who contributed variously as leaders, facilitators at events, or participants. The make-up of the CM was in constant flux for reasons beyond simple attrition (although this also plays a part). Leaders were involved in the CM over and above their regular duties, and their organization or network sometimes had to cover the cost of their travel to meetings. In practice this meant that groups would only send someone to a meeting if resources were available, an individual could travel, and they saw a clear reason to participate. So even though the CM was meant to provide some continuity between events, it was hard-pressed to do so, and it certainly struggled to coordinate an inter-sectoral social movement against the CAFTA. Instead it became one of several mechanisms that groups began to use to leverage control over the MPF, and its implications for changes occurring in the broader left.

Interactions of SOC Systems in the Comite Mesoamericano and MPF

The CM was an important mechanism through which various spaces of SOC could look after their interests. It became a sort of underwriter for funding acquired by national organizing committees from international donors to run events, and when the fifth forum in El Salvador had a budget surplus, the CM formed a means to oversee expenditures by the organizers of the sixth forum in Costa Rica. It also became a means by which national level organizers could influence the content and structure of events in other countries. Through the CM the different factions could exercise a politics of attendance, leveraging their support for the event in exchange for concessions. The politics of these maneuvers were very significant to debates occurring within the Central American left at the time.

Given the significance of the CAFTA negotiations in the region, the leaders of the national referents had a particularly high level of influence, which had the effect of bringing the MPF to the attention of left-leaning parties. Civil society actors see both benefits and difficulties to working with parties. The region's political parties have a tendency to appropriate the energy of social movements to forward their own electoral or political ends. But on the other hand there is the possibility of achieving objectives through legislative process or electoral victories. Depending on the country, the national referents offered either support or competition to party interests. In countries such as El Salvador where the FMLN is strongly established, there is a tendency to use spaces such as the MPF to mobilize support for entrenched agendas, and to limit any possibility that these spaces will undermine established patterns authority. In countries such as Guatemala, however, where the left was in shambles until very recently, spaces like the MPF provide opportunities to search for a new basis for a party. These searches have a tendency to get stuck when they run up against entrenched interests. In fact, the Guatemalan social forum was viewed by some of its organizers as an opportunity to break the authority of recalcitrant members of the left so that the slate could be wiped clean for the emergence of a single new left-wing party in that country (interview with author).

But what is particularly interesting about the national referents is that the MPF allowed them to challenge the basis of party support on a more fundamental level. National referents were not only the leaders of powerful, inter-sectoral national movements, but they had also found expression at the regional level. Leftist parties in the region find themselves between a rock and a hard place. Given that their power is based on national support, they have a disincentive to

embrace globalization of any kind. But this leaves them with no alternative but to fight a nationalistic rear-guard action against neoliberal globalization. National referents were not only mobilizing an important basis of support, but they were also, through the MPF, mobilizing a basis for regional support, and in the process challenging the model on which left-leaning parties organize themselves in Central America.

The prospect of verticalism and nationalism inherent in these processes has been a major concern for more moderate voices within the Central American left. To balance these tendencies within the MPF, a series of regional thematic networks were formed or mobilized to participate in the CM. These networks typically represented identity-based or 'new social movement' concerns such as the environment or women. They contributed to the CM by brining specific concerns to the table, as well as by mobilizing sectors that might not have access to the spaces created by the national referents. It is also worth noting that these regional networks often have important ties to larger regional networks, as well as to donors. Through their position in the CM these more moderate networks could balance the verticalism of nationally based referents.

One way that these groups took power away from the national referents was through the organization of sectoral 'Encuentros' 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 (interviews by author). If the MPF was not sufficiently inclusive, for example, an Encuentro could undermine the event by withdrawing its participation. These meetings, held immediately prior to the fifth MPF also provided sectoral constituencies 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 made sure to represent in the *mesa* about the political subject during the actual event, distributed pamphlets throughout the forum, and even managed to include their own interpretation of this discussion in the final report about the fifth MPF.

The debate over the idea of a political subject was at the core of the fifth MPF in El Salvador. The debates around this theme have reflected tensions between more radical and more moderate streams of the left in the region. For example, the official documents from the fifth Forum in El Salvador include the introductory remarks of the political subject working group, which were given by Wim Dierckxsens, a clear follower of class-based analysis. He asserts that:

> The fight to form an alternative is developed through concrete fights against particular issues. The simple summation of specific alternatives, however, does not guarantee a change in economic logics. The fight must be inscribed in a utopia as a mobilizing project that orients the modification of economic logic in the long run. Alternatives in the long run cannot be achieved except through concrete fights in the short term that develop their long term project around the delegitimization of the current regime. (Dierckxsens in Mesoamerican People's Forum 2004, 46)

The reply from more moderate feminist voices (as presented in the synthesis from this working group) was as follows:

> Our goal is the construction of an integral subject, with social and organizational practices that form an alternative to the capitalist, patriarchal system, and redefine the familiar subjective dimension in/through spaces where the dominant relations of power are constructed. To construct, consolidate, deepen and construct [sic.] the Mesoamerican identity. A new political culture is aspired to that modifies styles of leadership and promotes diversity by constructing horizontal power relations. This is constructed from the specificity of people. (Mesoamerican People's Forum 2004, 50).

These debates came to a violent head during the sixth and final MPF held in Costa Rica in December 2005. During the *fifth* MPF, the women's sector had realized a political campaign to ensure the adoption of an anti-patriarchal stance. They were particularly active in the discussion about the political subject, as the above quote demonstrates, and took advantage of the highly facilitated and consensuated nature of the forum to achieve their goal. The sixth MPF saw the undoing of their work. This much more open and less carefully facilitated event saw the unleashing of violent disputes between proponents of class-based and identity-based visions. What is more, by the time of Costa Rican forum, the CAFTA had been signed into being everywhere except Costa Rica. Visitors to that country from the rest of the region expressed a mix of frustration and resignation, emotions that came to the surface now that the illusion of unity was no longer so important. During the meeting an altercation took place between a group of Trotskyite Salvadoran youths and a group of feminists. When a Guatemalan union organizer intervened with some well-meant but ultimately offensive comments, the feminists withdrew from the forum process and issued a declaration condemning the union organizers and the youths. The women's sector walked out of the event and issued a declaration in which they denounced, "The misogyny through aggression, discrimination, violence and exclusion against women in the development of the VI Mesoaemrican Forum" (Encuentro de Mujeres 2006).

Interestingly, as a result of this occurrence the women's movement experienced an internal dispute between its feminist leadership and class-oriented base. The event resulted in a significant rift within the Guatemalan women's movement. Peasant women lost respect for the feminists who they saw as rejecting their brothers in arms, and as representing 'Western' ideals that have little to do with the daily reality of the majority of Central American women. In their efforts to channel the dominant discourses of the left in Central America, the leaders of the women's movement actually lost legitimacy with their own constituency, forcing them to re-evaluate the foundation of their movement space.

These examples demonstrate some of the ways actors sought to influence the production of the forum space, not by taking control, but rather by channeling networked flows. A position of authority within the national referent or a regional Encuentro network gave actors both the ability and the motivation to influence of the forum space in ways that would perpetuate their own spaces and enhance their own standing. These actors could leverage spatial practices: taking advantage of forum resources to form and/or mobilize networks, developing discourses about forum practices and events, or asserting their position vis-à-vis other actors within the forum process. And yet ideational flows cannot be fully controlled, and even when there were resources to support agendas, leadership that failed to match the expectations of broader constituencies could unglue the ties that produce SOC within movement spaces.

Conclusions

All together, the MPF was much more than a social movement mobilized against the CAFTA negotiations. But neither is it a mobilization 'at the edge of chaos' as some authors have suggested. This serves as a reminder that complexity theory is a tool that recognizes the importance of processes within social systems. But the recognition of process should not be equated with a *reification* of process. Power and structure are still there, but perhaps they are expressed differently given the transnational nature of the space. This suggests that if we are to gain a greater understanding of processes unfolding within the Central American left, then we

need to look at both those processes as well as the structure and practices of power which are shaping them and being shaped by them.

For the actors that make up the Central American left, there was a lot at stake in this space, depending on their internal rule models and the particular corner of the left they belonged to. Actors become enmeshed in particular relations of power at the local level in which a given set of logics produces a dominant structure of authority and legitimacy. These structures interact with the internal rule models of individual actors, shaping the ideas and actions of local actors both at the local level, and when they participate in transnational spaces. But for leaders in particular, the MPF offered both opportunities and threats. As existing systems of power relations were challenged, and new relations sought to assert themselves, the various actors involved in this process looked for ways to ensure that they would reap the benefits of exposing their constituencies to the MPF while avoiding the potential risks to the relatively stable relations they had worked to establish. Meanwhile participants were affected at times by their experiences in forum events, at times to the detriment of national movements, and certainly always with internal effects on systems established at the national levels.

These battles over the construction of each forum space are about both discourse (how the left is understood) and resources (how the spaces are actually organized), as well as what this means for how actors are positioned (who has access to both material resources such as donor finances and ideational resources such as authority). The way that forums are read and lived by participants depends on both a physical experience and a discursive experience that is controlled in large part by forum and movement organizers. The work of Portugali suggests that these actors use new practices of power to compress ideational and matieral/physical information in ways that ensure networked flows are beneficial (2006). It is not enough to say that events are fleeting and shifting, and therefore difficult to manipulate or control. Processes occurring at the regional level do have a significant impact on local relations of power, and actors in positions of power in Central America work hard to ensure that they are present at the right meetings so that they can influence outcomes as necessary.

These findings are suggestive for the body of works that has endeavored to explore the larger anti-globalization movement. For example, Brazilian sociologist Boaventura de Souza Santos (2006) sees the larger WSF process as a search for cognitive justice and a new 'epistemology of the South' that will form the basis for a 'critical utopia.' Mirroring the work of post-colonial scholars of social science such as Vandana Shiva (1997) and Shiv Visvanathan (1997), he argues that the WSF must base itself in alternative epistemologies (which he defines as 'what counts as knowing') and ontologies (interestingly: 'what it means to be human'). This is fundamental to countering the twinned, universalizing and hegemonic forces of neoliberal globalization and modernist approaches to science based in Western thought. He is particularly concerned about how these approaches to science discredit and obscure alternative ways of knowing, and shut down the possibility of imagining or talking about potential alternative futures. He calls for sociological investigation into how the dominant system of thought produces these 'absences,' and argues that this process will open our minds to multiple alternative ways of interpreting the present or imagining the future. Given this, de Souza Santos sees in the WSF a space that allows for, celebrates and fosters the expression and discovery of a diversity of ways of knowing, and also makes possible dynamic thinking about the future.

And yet the work presented here suggests the utopian nature of de Souza Santos vision. Hegemony is not a force that is expressed from without, but rather a social order that is embedded within human relations, including those of the broader left. Rather than pretend that

the spaces of the anti-globalization movement are diverse and beyond manipulation, it is important to recognize the political nature of social interactions, particularly insofar as these spaces foreshadow cosmopolitan political processes in a global world. Greater understanding of the processes that actors use to exert influence in these ideational spaces is important if we are to achieve the end goal, which is cognitive justice, the democratization of knowledge.

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Appendix 1: Chronological List of Social Forums and Related Events

MPFs and Related Events	Other Regional Events	Significant Elections	Trade Summits / Integration
1999			
	November 30, 1999: Battle in Seattle at WTO Ministerial Conference (Seattle Round)	February 2, 1999: Hugo Rafael Chavez assumes Presidency of Venezuela	
2000			
	December 2000: ZLN marches on Mexico City to meet newly elected President Fox	March 11, 2000: Ricardo Lagos Escobar (social democrat) Chile December 1, 2000: President Fox Elected in Mexico	
2001			
May 3-5, 2001: First Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, Tapachula, Mexico **May 12-13, 2001: First FMP, Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico** **November 22-24, 2001: Second FMP, Xelaju, Guatemala**	January 25-30, 2001: First WSF, Porto Alegre, Brazil		March 12, 2001: Fox Announces PPP April 20 - 22, 2001: Third Summit of the Americas, Quebec City June 15, 2001: PPP officially launched December 2001: Financial Crisis in Argentina
2002			
July 14-15, 2002: Second Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, Managua, Nicaragua **July 16-18, 2002: Third FMP, Managua, Nicaragua** October 12, 2002: Mesoamerican Action against PPP and CAFTA	January 31 – February 5, 2002: Second WSF, Porto Alegre, Brazil		January 2002: GW Bush announces CAFTA and congress grants fast-track for negotiations
2003			
July 17-20, 2003: Second Foro Mesoamericano Against Dams: La Esperanza, Honduras July 19-21, 2003: Third Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, Tegucigalpa **July 21-24, 2003: Fourth FMP, Tegucigalpa, Honduras**	January 23-28, 2003: Third WSF, Porto Alegre, Brazil	January 1, 2003: Luiz Ignacio Lula of the PT Assumes Presidency of Brazil	CAFTA Talks: 1) Jan. 27-30, 2003: San Jose, Costa Rica 2) Feb. 24-28, 2003: Cincinnati, U.S. 3) Mar. 31- April 4, 2003: San Salvador 4) May 12-16, 2003: Guatemala 5) June 16-20, 2003: Honduras 6) July 28-Aug. 1, 2003: U.S. 7) Sept. 8-12, 2003: Manauga, Nicaragua 8) October 20-24, 2003: U.S. 9) December 8-12, 2003: Washington

MPFs and Related Events	Other Regional Events	Significant Elections	Trade Summits / Integration
			December 17, 2003: CAFTA negotiations result in agreements with El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua
2004			
July 15-17, 2004: Third Encuentro Mesoamericano Against Dams: El Salvador July 16-18, 2004: Fourth Encuentro Indigena and Campesino, San Salvador July 16-18, 2004: First Encuentro Mesoamericano de Mujeres, San Salvador **July 19-21, 2004: Fifth FMP: San Salvador, El Salvador**	January 16-21, 2004: Fourth WSF, Mumbai, India July 25-40, 2004: First FSA, Quito Ecuador		January 12-13, 2004: Special Summit of the Americas in Monterrey Mexico January 25, 2004: CAFTA neogitations result in agreement with Costa Rica March 15, 2004: trade representatives from the US, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, sign CAFTA at the OAS in Washington December 2004: El Salvador Ratifies CAFTA
2005			
November 4-6, 2005: Second Encuentro Mesoamericano de Mujeres, Guatemala December 2-4, 2005: Third Encuentro Mesoamericano de Pueblas Indigenas, San Miguel Ixtahuacan **December 2005: Sixth FMP: San Jose, Costa Rica**	January 26-31, 2005: Fifth WSF, Porto Alegre, Brazil November 4, 2005: Fifth Summit of the Americas, Mar del Plata Argentina	March 1, 2005: Tabaré Vázquez (centre-left FA) Assumes Presidency of Uruguay	March 2005: Honduras Ratifies CAFTA March 2005: Guatemala Ratifies CAFTA June 30, 2005: US Senate Approves CAFTA July 27, 2005: US House of Representatives approves CAFTA August 2, 2005: GW Bush signs CAFTA into law October, 2004: Nicaragua Ratifies CAFTA
2006			
November 17-20, 2006: Fifth Encuentro Mesoamericano Campesino, Chiapas, Mexico	January 2006: Sixth WSF in Caracas, Venezuela, Bamako, Mali and Karachi, Pakistan. Caracas meeting is also the Second FSA.	January 22, 2006: Evo Morales (MAS) Bolivia March 11, 2006: Michelle Bachelet (moderate socialist) Assumes Presidency of Chile	March 1, 2006: El Salvador implements CAFTA April 1, 2006: Honduras and Nicaragua implement CAFTA July 1, 2006: Guatemala implements CAFTA
2007			
July 2007: IV Encuentro Mesoamericano Against Dams, El Salvador November: Fifth Encuentro Campesino Mesoamericano, Managua, Nicaragua,	January 2007: Seventh WSF, Nairobi, Kenya	January 10, 2007: Daniel Ortega (FSLN) Nicaragua January 15, 2007: Rafael Correa (left leaning) Ecuador	October 7, 2007: Costa Ricans back CAFTA in national referendum
2008			
	January 26, 2008: WSF Day of Action **October, 2008: Third FMA, Guatemala**		

Appendix 2: Detailed Depiction of Mesoamerican People's Forum Events

	Location and Date	Organizers	Mesas (Fora)	Attendance	Funding
I	*Information, Analysis and Proposals from Mesoamerican Social and Civil Organizations: "El Pueblo is First Before Globalization"* <u>Tapachula</u>, 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* <u>Xelaju</u>, 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* <u>Managua</u>, 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	Organizing Committee: Bloque Popular,	1) Privatization 2) Militarization 3) Economic Solidarity 4) Investment and Commerce versus	1495 Individuals from 467 Organizations	AFSC, Agricultural Mission, CARITAS Italy, Christian Aid, Comite Nacional Laboral, Diakonia

	Location and Date	Organizers	Mesas (Fora)	Attendance	Funding
	July 21-24, 2003 http://4foro mesoamericano.com	CUTH, COPINH, Red COMAL, COCOCH, Via Campesina, COMPAH and PTH	Labour and Environmental Rights 5) Rights of Indigenous and Afro-descendent Communities 6) Food Sovereignty 7) Women Against the Neoliberal Model 8) Youth and Construction of New Socioeconomic Models 9) OMC and IDB 10) Communication		Switzerland, Boell Foundation, IBIS Denmark, ICCO Holland, NOVIB, Oxfam International, Trocaire
V	*Constructing Popular Power for Auto-Determination* San Salvador, El Salvador, July 19-21, 2004 http://www.sitiocompa.org/compa/agendasocial/mesoamericano5-conv.htm	Sinti Techan and MPR-12	• Militarization and Democratization • Labour Rights • Food Sovereignty • Privatization of Basic Services • Instruments of Neoliberalism • Debate about the Political Subject • Youth • Indigenous Communities • Women • Environment • Alternative Communication	1300 (official count)	
VI	San Jose, Costa Rica www.encuentropopular.org/…	Encuentro Popular	Communication Labour/Unions (run by Nicaraguan Miguel Ruiz) Culture Youth Ecumenica Women Vivienda Economia Solidaria (Campesinos) Environment (Soberania Aliamentaria) Indígena?		

Appendix 3: Key MPF Actors through Time (Grey indicates the country which hosted the Forum that year.)

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