Activist Encounters at the World Social Forum: Nationalism and Sovereignty in an Internationalized Event

Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle

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2 Activist encounters at the World Social Forum

Nationalism and sovereignty in an internationalized event

Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle

Abstract

Expressions of nationalism and defense of sovereignty were many at the World Social Forum in Dakar. In this historically international and internationalist event, nationalist symbols and slogans – Brazilian flags, Palestinian *keffiyeh*, T-shirt “Guinea is back,” Congolese hymns – seem to be ordinary activist repertoires as long as they are not contested by other groups of participants. Why and how do nationalism and sovereignty become legitimate repertoires of internationalized activist claims? Our main hypothesis is that the World Social Forum is a delocalized place of encounters where people often gather around basic national ties as well as around some common causes based on “working misunderstandings” (M. Sahlins). Disconnected from their own territories, these claims benefit from this distance and match the diverse expectations of the participants: nationalist intellectuals from the South, anti-imperialist activists from the North, and politicians from everywhere invest nationalist symbols and discourses for their own purposes and along their own schemes.

Flags, costumes, songs – national symbols are plentiful at World Social Forums, in their grand marches, the crowds amassed in front of podiums and the workshops. “Country tents” are mounted in the middle of activist stands, where “compatriot” militants gather among themselves – Congolese, Brazilians, or Moroccans.¹ In Dakar in 2011, those symbols sometimes accompanied fiery nationalist speeches (concerning the Western Sahara or Ivory Coast, which was in crisis at the time), generating controversies over the legitimacy of such issues at an alter-globalist site. At the meeting of the International Council of the WSF to assess the Dakar event just after it ended, Gus Massiah, one of the movement’s historic figures, denounced

¹ I would like to thank the whole research team for sharing information, observations, and analysis throughout the survey as well as the participants at the conference “Enquêteur sur (et dans) des événements militants internationaux”, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, April 13, 2012

the violence displayed over the issue of the Western Sahara and asked that “tents” for national delegations be prohibited at future forums. He also condemned the presence of political leaders, now a routine occurrence, which in his view is contrary to the “spirit” of the WSF. Nationalists and state representatives would thus no longer be welcome at WSFs. What accounts for the profusion of nationalist symbols, practices, and discourses and the controversies they engender in a cosmopolitan forum aspiring to carry on the legacy of internationalism?

By nationalist symbols, discourses, and practices, I mean the traditional forms of sociability of the citizens from the same country, as well as the activation of national stereotypes in “encounters” with others and, of course, nationalist claims. The latter are sometimes accompanied by sovereignty claims, defending states and leaders of the global South and celebrating the nation-state. I argue here that the proliferation of these nationalist and sovereigntist registers refers not only to an ideological discourse that is more or less debated within the open space of the alter-global movement, but also to the specific social dynamics of this type of internationalist “event” which is first and foremost a space of cosmopolitan encounters. It is these encounters, both familiar and novel, that dictate the production of nationalist discourses, which are discourses on oneself for oneself and for others. The study of “long-distance nationalism” by Benedict Anderson begins with an evocative statement made by a British politician and thinker in the 1860s: “Exile is the nursery for nationalism,” indicating the extent to which nationalisms have historically depended on leaders in exile and travel has revealed and promoted the feeling of national identity (Anderson, 1998: 59). In this case, nationalist causes are shaped by processes of internationalization within the WSF and reconfigured by its space: geographical distance euphemizes and lends them enchantment and, at the same time, they are strongly determined by the prevailing social and political dynamics in the national space concerned. To see how nationalist discourse is produced via this internationalizing process, we must view the WSF as a space of encounters and examine the social interactions that take place within it.

The WSF has already been studied as both a cosmopolitan and colonial “contact zone” (Alvarez et al., 2008; Chase Dunn et al., 2009; Conway, 2011, 2012; Pommerolle and Siméant, 2011). These research works mainly analyze the structurally asymmetrical relationships between participants from the North and the South. Their purpose is to highlight the material and symbolic inequalities within a space intended to combat them and note whether those with the fewest resources are able to make their voices

heard. Without denying these asymmetrical relationships, in this chapter I will focus instead on the productivity of encounters between participants who share certain alter-globalization codes but sometimes have divergent expectations and perceptions of such an event. I maintain that these misunderstandings are precisely what enable them to unite around common causes, particularly nationalist causes supported by some and unfamiliar to others. WSF participants from diverse backgrounds come together to join in shared activist practices, even if their objectives and expectations are different. The concept of the “working misunderstanding,” first employed to think about “colonial encounters” (Bayart, 1993; Marshall, 1981) and other postcolonial situations such as tourism (Chablotz, 2007; Doquet, 2005), is useful for analyzing these cosmopolitan activist encounters. It provides a unified way to think about unequal positions, how stereotypes are activated in international contexts and the diverging and even contradictory expectations and interests and converging practices that form the core of such encounters and the assessment of alter-global events. Such a forum can therefore be grasped as an event in itself, producing new interactions and practices, and also as a projection of local social worlds.

To explore national and nationalist practices more specifically in this context, I also refer to research on social relationships within internationalized spaces (international institutions or transnational networks). The few sociological studies we have pertaining to the diplomatic profession emphasize the need to consider international space as a social space in which the expectations of several social (and professional) circles are intertwined (Ambrosetti, 2010; Barnett, 1998; Buchet de Neuilly, 2009; Kingston de Leusse, 1998): those of direct interlocutors (the people with whom one negotiates), those in the national delegation and those at the national headquarters. The diplomat’s task is to play on these different expectations in an ongoing process of constructing what is all too often taken for granted: “the national interest.” This understanding of international space can be transposed to the WSF. The participants construct a discourse and adopt practices they deem suited to their multiple audiences and interlocutors, their own convictions and those to whom they will be held accountable for their activities. The nationalist discourses formulated at the WSF, whether in favor of decolonizing the Western Sahara (presented as the “last African colony”²) or demanding “Neither military intervention

2 This expression was the title of a workshop listed in the program of the WSF in Dakar, but finally canceled after rather violent conflicts erupted at the start of the workshop.

nor secession, but rather negotiated solutions” in Ivory Coast, are forged at the point where these diverse constraints come together: the intersection of anti-imperialist discourse (the crucible of alter-globalization), pacifism and a taste for “militant exoticism” and activism on the part of participants from the North. Sometimes such discourse takes on nationalist issues and registers that are by no means consensual at these forums (particularly regarding sovereignty and violence) and arouse heated debate. The relationship between internationalized social practices and the nation-state is also at the heart of thinking about how international organizations work and how the state relates to international civil servants (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999; Haas, 1992). Contrary to realist and functionalist theories, the (historical) sociology of international organizations shows that the strength or weakness of relationships between national and international spaces depends on the political situation and how institutionalized the international organization has become as much as on the leeway and ability of experts and international civil servants to negotiate with their national government. These studies demonstrate very clearly that loyalty to the nation-state does not dissolve in the international space of these institutions. What is particularly interesting in our case is that it does not dissolve in activist international spaces either: the ordinary forms of sociability in international situations even help to blur the boundary line between state and non-state sectors.

The eleventh WSF generated an unusual amount of controversy over nationalism and the role of states, due especially to the visibility of nationalist discourses (Saharawi and Moroccan, Ivorian, Venezuelan). I have therefore decided to explore the social processes at work at this internationalized event that account for the abundance of such practices and discourse.

2.1 Internationalized nationalism and sovereignty

The relationships of social forum participants with their home countries and governments are not simple or homogeneous. As a meeting place and an experience of expatriation for non-Senegalese participants, the Forum encouraged national sociabilities that challenged the opposition between state and social movement and cemented some forms of national identification. On the other hand, there was much less consensus regarding sovereignty claims, revealing a more ambivalent North-South divide concerning nationalist claims, as we shall see.

Expatriate sociabilities and ordinary nationalism

Being uprooted from their countries of origin often allows expatriates to bond very quickly, a phenomenon intensified by the more or less brief length of these social relationships (Wagner, 2007). The feeling of sharing the same values brings people even closer to their compatriots at social forums, as it does during humanitarian missions (Dauvin and Siméant, 2002). Along with the experience of cosmopolitan encounters, powerful national sociabilities are maintained in a more or less organized way, which helps to reproduce “ordinary nationalism” (Martigny, 2010) but at a distance. The gatherings of compatriots at the WSF in Dakar varied significantly, depending first on whether these national practices were decided and planned beforehand or improvised on site; whether they brought together people who traveled as a group (and stayed together) or individuals who normally lived far apart; and whether or not they included public authorities. The latter appeared to play an active role in organizing and supervising the national sociabilities and their presence helped to blur the boundaries between the state and “social movements,” despite constant challenges from the alter-global movement.

Many participants came in national “delegations”. One of them – the French CRID (Research and Information Centre for Development) – even proudly proclaimed itself the “biggest delegation” at the WSF. The Venezuelans clearly formed a delegation: during the opening march they paraded behind a huge flag and portraits of Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan president; they often took part as a group in workshops and ultimately flew home together, dressed in identical athletic outfits decked out in their national colors (obviously benefiting from a diplomatic privilege negotiated with the Senegalese government).³ Above all, they seemed to be totally loyal to the Chávez regime.⁴ The Brazilians also seemed to have come as a group with funding from Petrobras, the Brazilian national oil company.⁵ The French participants were grouped together with the CRID; they shared the same housing and all their activities outside the Forum were planned from breakfast meetings to evening gatherings. The organization of participants into national groups also seems to have applied to

3 Observations at Dakar Airport, February 11, 2011.

4 The five Venezuelans interviewed during the survey were members of a branch of Chávez’ party and indicated an event linked to the political itinerary of the president as their “first mobilization.” All five of them voted for the party in power in the last national elections.

5 See Chapter 7 by Isaline Bergamaschi, Tania Navarro, and Héloïse Nez in this book.

a portion of Moroccan attendees, who were financed by the government and whose presence was obviously intended to destabilize the Saharawi militants. The homogeneity of this delegation was a subject of debate and was not confirmed by the answers of the Moroccan participants interviewed during our survey.⁶

Participants with fewer organizational resources met at the Forum and organized joint activities for specific purposes, such as the Cameroonians in Nairobi in 2007, who gathered under the same flag for the opening ceremony. This was even more evident in the case of Congolese from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who came together under the “Congolese” tent in Nairobi and in Dakar. Those who frequented the tent expressed the desire for an opportunity to get together “among compatriots”, away from the centrifugal forces at work: those of northern donors who required their southern partners to participate in their workshops and those of the vast, chaotic Congolese political space causing dispersion, exile, and immigration. In Dakar, the nationalist symbols at the Congolese tent were highly traditional: a banner bearing a flag and the inscription “Republic of Congo” with “WSF” underneath; a map of Congo recalling the unity of the different regions and a patriotic song from the 1960s, with the eloquent title: “Our Congo will always be united.”⁷ At the social forum in Nairobi, the discourse in the Congolese workshop was similarly patriotic. It should be noted, however, that tensions and conflicts surfaced at meetings attended only by Congolese, when the participants were not seeking to represent Congo but rather to talk among themselves. Such situations arose, for example, during an evening reception organized by the Congolese at a Nairobi hotel, and at another organized by the French ambassadress to Kenya.⁸

6 Among the 29 Moroccans interviewed, twelve stated they voted for the opposition, six for the party in power; only one mentioned the Saharawi cause as his first rally and the underlying reason for his involvement. Those who seemed very active in this cause (there were five of them) were thoroughly integrated in specific associations and organizations. One Spanish-Moroccan was a member of the “Royal Consultative Council of Saharan Affairs,” another was a member of the “Forum of Support for Tindouf Separatists,” and yet another mentioned the Green March for the liberation of the Sahara (1975) as his first mobilization. The involvement of the two others was less clear.

7 “Notre Congo sera toujours uni et gardera toujours son unité [Our Congo will always be united]... Kivu, Katanga, Kasai, Kinshasa, Équateur, Orientale, Bandundu, Bas-Congo qui forment le Congo,” Video recording, February 9, 2011.

8 See the contributions of Alphonse Maindo, Nathanaël Tsotsa, and Thomas Atenga in Pommerolle and Siméant (2008b).

Nationalism and blurring the divide between the state and social movements

Incidentally, ordinary forum sociabilities disregard and even challenge commonly accepted cleavages (between social movements and the state or defenders of the South against imperialists of the North). Official and unofficial encounters between government representatives and WSF participants underscore the vagueness of boundary lines separating states from social movements and the NGO world or between civil servants and activists (they are often both simultaneously), despite the militant language used to reinforce them.⁹ National loyalties linked to the converging interests of “alter-globalists” seeking funding and state recognition and diplomats or political leaders seeking NGO support are thus also maintained at WSFs, sometimes at the expense of or along with other loyalties. For instance, after initially announcing they would not accept the invitation from the French ambassador in Senegal because their foreign “partners” were not invited, the members of CRID later changed their minds and took part in large numbers. At the embassy event, the ambassador emphasized the “French values” defended by the Forum, the proximity of alter-global ideas to those of the government, and finally, the community of interests and values of the NGO activists in attendance and the embassy: they were all working together as “development partners for the benefit of the Senegalese people.”¹⁰ The boundary was thus drawn between those who give and those who receive, between NGOs and governments in the North and the populations of the South.

The Brazilians also broke an alter-global taboo by setting up their delegation in a tent financed by Petrobras, a nationalized oil company. In this case, they were criticized more for commercializing the Forum than for demonstrating nationalism. Their large, air-conditioned tent adorned with green plants at the entrance was singled out because it reflected Petrobras’ financial power. On the other hand, there was ideological controversy over the Brazilian government model,¹¹ but the presence of officials from the country where the WSF originated went unchallenged.

The relations between official authorities and NGO representatives seem to have been marked by the relationships experienced at home between governmental and non-governmental actors. When the Cameroonian ambassador to Senegal received some ten compatriots who had come to

9 30% of Europeans and 21% of Africans surveyed are state agents.

10 Observations and audio recording, February 9, 2011.

11 See Chapter 7 by Isaline Bergamaschi, Tania Navarro, and Héloïse Nez.

take part in the WSF, he offered to give each member of the delegation 70,000 CFA francs (140 US dollars). The practice of redistribution among those claiming to be part of “civil society” is commonplace in Cameroon and always triggers debate, as it did in this instance among the delegates: some, particularly the least socialized in forum practices, were tempted to accept the offer, but in the end they all rejected it. These moments of conviviality reactivate a feeling of national affiliation, even when it is expressed by contradiction and refusal. Here again, the “long-distance nationalism” is produced through ordinary practices.

Nation-state, sovereignty, and North-South divisions

Beyond the encounters between NGO and government actors, opinions differ considerably on the role of the state and national governments in solving the issues raised at the Forum, depending on the national identity of the participants (determined here by continent). Interviewees from the South seem more inclined than those from the North to prefer the framework of the nation-state to guard against the effects of neoliberal globalization. This recourse to sovereignty is echoed in the more legitimist relationships between militants in the South and their governments.

In answer to the question about which level of political authority should remedy the ravages of neoliberal globalization, African interviewees were overrepresented among those in favor of “strengthening national governments;” 60% of them “agreed” or “totally agreed” with this opinion, compared with 40% of Europeans.¹² The breakdown of the European replies was the reverse of the Africans: those who “totally agreed” were underrepresented and those who “disagreed” were overrepresented.¹³ Slightly more than 60% of American interviewees (mainly South Americans in fact) agreed with this solution. The reply concerning “strengthening national governments” was the only one among the proposed choices that resulted in a real division among nationalities: the other levels and types of political authority were supported by the participants, all nationalities combined, but to different degrees: slightly more than 50% of the participants agreed or totally agreed

12 These calculations were made on the sample of interviewees, excluding the individuals that did not respond regarding their nationality and those from Asia and Oceania (these groups were too small to permit significant bivariate analysis). All the following calculations with nationality as a variable were carried out this way.

13 On the other hand, there is no observable link between the opinion concerning strengthening national governments and two other general characteristics of the persons interviewed: sex and level of diploma (having or not having obtained a college or university degree).

on strengthening regional organizations, and slightly more than 60% agreed with the idea of strengthening the United Nations. The rate of agreement is even more noticeable for non-governmental solutions: continental and international civil society or local solutions received 80% approval no matter which continent the interviewees came from. So it is indeed the question about the role of the state that differentiates European, African, and American participants, with the latter two groups unhesitatingly in favor of strengthening it.

Trust in the state or the belief that it could be a solution, which is expressed by the interviewees from the South, is echoed in their more legitimist attitude towards their own national governments. A solid link can be observed between nationality and voting for the party in power. While most interviewees said they had voted for opposition parties, the percentage varied widely depending on their continent of origin. Africans were underrepresented among those who said they voted for an opposition party and overrepresented among those who voted for a party in power or did not answer the question. Almost 70% of all interviewees who voted for a party in power in the last national election were Africans and 28% of African respondents voted for a party in power.¹⁴ The percentage of American survey respondents (i.e. mostly South Americans) who declared they voted for a party in power was even higher at 32%.¹⁵ The legitimism of the African and South American interviewees can be explained in various ways: the low rate of demonstrations in Africa by a more repressive context and a less frequently used repertoire;¹⁶ the legitimist attitudes in some Latin American countries by close ties between ruling parties and alter-global movements

14 We can perhaps help clarify the link between these two variables by noting that there is also a connection between 1) educational level and votes (those without college or university diplomas are overrepresented among interviewees who said they voted for a party in power and underrepresented among those who said they voted for an opposition party) and 2) the level of diplomas and nationality: Africans are underrepresented among those with college or university degrees (67% compared with 87% and 89% of the American and European interviewees, respectively)

15 Unlike the other two continental groups, the European interviewees are underrepresented among those who voted for a party in power and very overrepresented among those who said they voted for an opposition party: the latter represented 81% of the European interviewees.

16 Indeed, a significant link can be observed between nationality (measured by continent) and the fact of having taken part in a demonstration (an event) against one's government policy during the previous year. Africans are overrepresented among those that did not respond to the question (20%) and above all underrepresented among those that had taken part in such a demonstration (48% of the African interviewees stated they had demonstrated against their government, compared with 60% of Americans and more than 73% of Europeans). Furthermore, greater reluctance to demonstrate was reflected in a reduced tendency to demonstrate against

(Smith and Wiest, 2012). Similarly, when survey respondents defend the nation-state framework and sovereignty, they may well be referring to very different experiences of the state: a state that inspires pride and a readiness to join in its struggle in the case of Latin America¹⁷ or a state that, despite its institutional weaknesses, is still viewed as a sphere of protection by Africans. In Nairobi, too, African participants expressed the least criticism of their own leaders; they did so only in discussions among themselves and refused to allow anyone else to engage in it (Pommerolle and Siméant, 2011).

The ideas supported by a number of Africans and Americans (above all Latin Americans) in the International Council regarding alliances between the WSF and political leaders were thus consistent with the practices and opinions of the participants from those continents. The opinion voiced by Gus Massiah in the International Council of the WSF¹⁸ seems to have been in line with that of European survey respondents but it met with strong resistance from the representatives of the other two continents present at the meeting. Divergent views on this topic as on others did not keep forum participants from coming together around shared activist causes and practices, even if they meant different things to each group. That is what we are going to explore now, by observing the internationalized production of nationalist causes within the alter-global space.

2.2 The misunderstanding that produces nationalist commitments

Alter-global space, made up historically by, among others, organizations that originated in anticolonial and Third World struggles at least in France and elsewhere in Europe (Sommier, Fillieule, and Agrikoliansky, 2008), claims to have directly descended from these causes: the issue of a people's right to self-determination when those peoples are 'oppressed,' 'colonized,' or 'anti-imperialist' therefore has a rightful place in the World Social Forum. The nationalisms authorized to express themselves were those of the South, as evidenced by the absence of flags of northern countries at the WSF in Dakar or their removal when they were displayed,¹⁹ and by the visibility of

other targets (FMI, etc.) and less frequent use of this repertoire in general. See Chapter 3 by Johanna Siméant in this book.

17 See Chapter 7 by Isaline Bergamaschi, Tania Navarro, and Héloïse Nez.

18 See Introduction.

19 At a meeting to set up an international ATTAC network, ATTAC France was criticized for unfurling the only national banner at the opening march. It was suggested that the banner be

strictly nationalist slogans and attributes of the South: T-shirts with 'Guinea is back' or 'Ivory Coast is back' printed on the back and Brazilian flags worn like scarves or capes. In the latter case, it was unclear whether the flag was a reference to the site of the first World Social Forums, the country of the Workers' Party and its former president, Lula, or the home of a football team revered across the world. The nationalist signifier manifestly carries a positive charge, allowing each individual to invest it with his or her own militant, political, and/or sports club imagery.

Nevertheless, apart from a very small number of consensual issues, not every cause or cause supporter enjoys the same degree of legitimacy. Such legitimacy has to be re-negotiated at each forum, depending on the particular concrete interactions and confrontations that take place during the event.

In Dakar, all the participants, except for the Senegalese, were of foreign origin. Those who defend national causes at WSFs are therefore doing so *from abroad*, like the exiles that Anderson considered the main promoters of nationalisms. Being far from home makes them the sole experts and spokespersons for their cause. This allows them to construct a selective discourse, suited to an ill-informed audience eager for "good causes" to endorse during the Forum period. The distance that enables interaction with activists from diverse countries also internationalizes national causes and makes them resonate with the creed of alter-globalization.

Shared repertoires and activist enchantment

Some nationalist discourses generate broad consensus, not least because they have few spokespersons present to defend them. In Dakar, this was true of the Palestinian cause, which attracted such wide support it was virtually a metonym for alter-globalism: the Forum's grand concert was dedicated to it²⁰ and, as a French pro-Palestinian activist noted with satisfaction, there were *keffiyehs* "everywhere, in the demonstrations, on stage, etc.,"²¹ not to mention around the neck of a Senegalese attendee and hanging at the entrance to the stand run by the French association "Survie." Workshops devoted to

cut in order to remove the name of the country (observations by Hélène Baillet, quoted in this book). Furthermore, French and European flags were visible only on the brochures and posters for cooperation projects financed by these donors.

20 The concert brought together militants (like the rapper Didier Awadi) and more consensual performers like the Senegalese star Youssou N'dour who drew a wide audience.

21 Report by an activist in the civil campaign to protect the Palestinian people, available at: www.protection-palestine.org/spip.php?article10136.

the cause were less popular.²² That did not keep Palestinian speakers from addressing forum participants at the opening and closing ceremonies or the sole Palestinian identified at the International Committee meeting from being applauded – even before he spoke. The legitimacy of the Palestinian cause is simply indisputable and in fact seldom discussed at the Forum.

Other discourses generate more debate and they are produced not through the use of consensual symbols but by various expectations converging in shared activist practices. Traveling to a WSF from far away requires an individual investment that promises to be remunerated in diverse ways, especially communing in a surge of united militancy – even if the cognitive, emotional, and material interests and investments of each participant differ implicitly. Concrete encounters between activists from Latin America, Europe, and Africa take place through familiar practices commonplace in the alter-global world: lectures, exhibition stands, speeches, and occasionally petitions or demonstrations (which happened in Dakar during the opening ceremony and protest marches against migration policies). Sharing a common repertoire allows individuals to make demands as a group, even though those demands may not be understood by everyone in the same way. Ivorian nationalist activism, especially the signing of a petition *Non à toute intervention militaire en Côte d'Ivoire* (No to military intervention in Ivory Coast) passed around on the last day of the WSF, was a good example of how effective a “working misunderstanding” can be in an international event.²³ At the time, the situation in Ivory Coast was explosive: the “international community” was threatening to intervene militarily following the contested election results between the outgoing president, Laurent Gbagbo, and his challenger, Alassane Ouattara, the acknowledged winner. Despite the extremely divided situation, pro-Gbagbo militants, who were not overtly taking sides, mobilized to circulate a petition against outside intervention, emphasizing the rejection of imperialist interference.

Wearing brightly colored T-shirts bearing the messages mentioned earlier, several dozen Senegalese students from the university, recruited for the day by their sociology professor, stopped participants along the campus lanes. The petition, which insisted on the need to guarantee peace in Ivory Coast and avoid any violence or international involvement

22 Observations from workshops on the flotilla to Gaza and the Russell Tribunal on Palestine, February 8, 2011 (Isabelle Sommier).

23 This reflection was suggested by Johanna Siméant at the seminar of the Dakar WSF research group.

(particularly by the French), called on “people of culture and science in Africa, the West and the World” to join a more or less prestigious group of signatories, without any explicit reference to a political party. A few of those names might have alerted the signers, had they not been uninformed and/or only too happy to take part concretely in a struggle against imperialism and in favor of peace.²⁴ The initial signatories included Calixthe Beyala, a French-Cameroonian writer who was very involved with the Gbagbo camp; at the bottom of the distributed text, the list of speakers at workshops to be held the same day were just as clearly politically oriented – but they were unknown to the general public.²⁵ Ivorian websites were thus able to announce: “More than 6,000 democrats signed a petition for the cause of peace in Ivory Coast.”²⁶

At the Forum, the visible promoters of the Ivorian – in fact pro-Gbagbo – “cause” played on the general misunderstanding and distance from the actual situation by qualifying the terms of the conflict and providing unverifiable “proofs” of the rightness of their cause. Using the same wording as the petition, the Ivorian representative who spoke at the opening ceremony of the Forum after the representatives of Egypt and Tunisia, asserted his refusal to see Ivory Coast become “the prey of imperialists, war makers and arms dealers.” He spoke of young people, the African intelligentsia, a possible reunification between North and South, and ended with a few statements redolent of the nationalism expressed by the nationalist leader and first Ivorian president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny: “(...) Let us fraternize, let us rediscover our role as the engine of the economy, of development and of a higher standard of living for Africa in general (...).”²⁷ The call for Ivorian fraternity was much less peaceful and far more radical in the workshops organized on the last day of the Forum. In a tent crowded mostly with students, the atmosphere was tense as “patriotic” militants spoke one after another in a loop, defending the Gbagbo camp without ever attacking their adversaries head-on. They distributed proofs of their just cause in the form of reconstructed reports of the presidential election on November 28, 2010 showing the “fraudulent total” and “real total” of votes received by the candidates in certain regions. Speaking at a distance of

24 Among them, the author of these lines... and at least two colleagues!

25 Among those present was Geneviève Bro Grebe, coordinator of the women patriots who was arrested a few weeks later by the French and Ivorian authorities, along with Laurent Gbagbo.

26 Cf. Fernand Dindé's blog and the Radio Djibi TV website: www.djibitv.com/photo/8365/Plus+6000+d%C3%A9mocrates+pour+la+paix+en+C%C3%B4te+d%E2%80%99Ivoire (accessed on April 4, 2013).

27 Audio recording, February 6, 2011.

several thousand kilometers from where the conflict was taking place,²⁸ with no one to contradict them, the activists did not shy away from providing material evidence to bolster their discourse. While the WSF participants were not necessarily fooled about the hidden agenda of these nationalist delegations,²⁹ they were nevertheless thrilled, by signing a petition and meeting militants, to have first-hand contact with local causes and see the embodiment of struggles they were familiar with – and supported – often from afar. Such encounters became a kind of enchantment, facilitated by the misunderstanding maintained by each of the protagonists.³⁰ Similarly, the enthusiasm over Egyptian or Tunisian participants, observed on several occasions, was genuine, and for many participants, the joy of experiencing together the fall of the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (which took place during the event) apparently remains one of their most cherished memories of the Forum.³¹ This empathy for revolutions in the making and the causes of the South thus enables promoters of nationalist causes to interact with sympathizers around objects produced by and for this internationalized space, a sort of euphemized, internationalized nationalism.

Reciprocal legitimizing

The internationalized space of the Forum is also a place where nationalist causes can attract outside support and join forces with other causes. Testifying to a sort of universality or at least to recognition from outside the country, this international connection allows nationalist causes to shed their overly local connotations (isolationism, exclusion of others) and adopt the internationalist register that fuels alter-global discourse. In Dakar, as at

28 The opinions of the workshop participants were far from unanimous and the discussions were heated, particularly between the Senegalese and Ivorian organizers. Similarly, at the Assembly of Social Movements, a speaker who introduced himself as an Ivorian, reminded the audience that the “socialism” various speakers were calling for could also be claimed by a president designated as a murderer (he was referring to Laurent Gbagbo, member of a socialist party). Finally, the political preferences of the ten Ivorian respondents to the questionnaire were quite varied: five said they voted for an opposition party and two for the party in power; four said they belonged to a party in the ruling coalition, one to an opposition party.

29 At a meeting of ATTAC International, the participants suggested avoiding the topic of Ivory Coast, after observing the partiality of the Ivorians who were present (observations by Hélène Baillet, February 10, 2011).

30 On the enchantment of the tourist encounter maintained by these multiple misunderstandings, see Chabloz, 2007.

31 These historic moments were recalled several times at the International Committee meeting, and considered to have significantly “politicized” the forum.

the Nairobi WSF, international recognition was achieved by “africanizing” nationalist causes or claiming they were identical to those of other African participants. Though there was widespread agreement on the Palestinian cause, it was nevertheless regularly tied to the struggles of Africa and Africans as the title of a workshop organized by a University of Dakar teacher indicates: “Africa-Palestine, let us resist together.”³² Academics helped in large part to link (African) nationalist causes to each other, among them Malick Ndiaye, a professor who coordinated the Ivory Coast workshops, and two Ivorian professors who were outspoken defenders of the Western Sahara cause (i.e. the Moroccan side). The political and NGO affiliations of these two individuals highlight the kind of relationships – by no means fortuitous – that are forged at these international events. Both men belonged to a pro-Gbagbo political party and one of them mentioned the patriotic youth demonstrations in 2002 as his first mobilization experience. They came to Dakar on behalf of (and funded by) the Friends of the Moroccan Sahara Association.³³ One of them gave a manifestly pro-Moroccan talk on the Western Sahara at a workshop officially devoted to “the trade union movement in the face of the crisis of capitalism” but visibly on the side of the Moroccan nationalist cause.³⁴ Defending the integrity of African territories and state sovereignty, he praised the Moroccan model of Saharawi territorial development: “When you fly over Laayoune [the main city of the region], the area is so lit up it looks like New York,” he said at the workshop. The previous day, he had taken part in setting up the “World Federation of Friends of the Western Sahara” and was elected its president. These pan-African nationalist networks are reminiscent of the ones created by the independence movements in the 1950s; in reality, they are closer to the pro-government, pro-sovereignty tendency that developed after independence than to the radical movements, which were soon supplanted following the end of colonization.

32 In Nairobi, at a workshop on “Memories of struggle,” a Palestinian delegate who had spoken on the stage at the opening ceremony stigmatized Israel by evoking the Falachas, the Ethiopian Jews who, she said, had been taken by force to Israel and now suffered real discrimination in that state where “racism is a central concept” and which, again according to her, “rejects black blood.” Observations by the author, January 21, 2007.

33 Apart from these shared characteristics, the two men had very different profiles: one was a young evangelist who had always lived in Ivory Coast, whereas the other was older, a Muslim, and had often spent time abroad.

34 Workshop on the Democratic Organization of Labor – Morocco, “The trade union movement in the face of the effects of the crisis of capitalism,” Faculty of Medicine, Amphitheatre 2, UCAD, February 9, 2011, observed by Raphaël Botiveau.

As we saw with the Ivorian petition, the participants from the North are asked to support a given cause. Their support is conditioned, however, and may be disqualified in the debates opposing nationalist militants of the South. International legitimacy is not automatically granted and has to be negotiated at the time of each interaction, in accordance with various attributes. For example, a Spanish EU parliamentary representative, who defended the Saharawi cause in Dakar, was accused by the National Council of Moroccans of Senegal of violating international law, attacking Moroccan sovereignty³⁵ and engaging in “paternalistic behavior.”³⁶ He was also accused of interference and partiality by another Spaniard, who introduced himself as “President of the Association of Moroccan-Spanish Friendship.” He had dual citizenship and was living in Laayoune, and therefore considered himself more legitimately positioned to talk about the cause and defend “negotiated solutions” (the position of the Moroccan government).³⁷

The limits of misunderstanding

The principle of the WSF as an open forum guaranteeing free speech explains why it is so easy for causes to develop and thrive at these events, even if based on misunderstandings. Yet such causes cease to be “operational” when one of the groups involved thinks that the rules of the Forum have been flouted. In the end, nationalist controversies, like all the others, are an occasion to uphold what are considered the basic principles of the Forum and a struggle over who has the legitimacy to defend them (Haeringer and Pommerolle, 2012).

The eruptions of physical violence between Saharawi and Moroccan participants were the most visible transgressions of the accepted standards of debate within a social forum. These intense debates emerged in Dakar because of its geographical proximity with Morocco and the involvement of both governmental-supported delegations and Saharawi activists. In that sense these interactions were exceptional but express well the importation of national causes in an internationalized context and the limits of its efficiency. These violent debates occurred during a workshop organized

35 Press release dated February 9, 2011, collected at the WSF.

36 Comments of Spanish and Mexican interpreters after the workshop in which this European parliamentarian had spoken (Observations: Lisbeth Gasca Agudelo, February 7, 2011).

37 “Forum social mondial Dakar 2011: Des voix s’élèvent contre le séparatisme et le morcellement des Etats,” *Quotidien Le Matin (Bénin)*, February 14, 2011, available at: <quotidienlematin.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2719:forum-social-mondial-dakar-2011-des-voix-se-levent-contre-le-separatisme-et-le-morcellement-des-etats-&catid=9:internationale&Itemid=42>.

by the Saharawi delegation, which was finally canceled, as well as during the opening march, in a workshop on Tunisia and in front of the Moroccan tent, making this nationalist antagonism especially visible.³⁸ The fact that WSF security agents and the police were called in indicates that these interactions were out of control and the shared rules were seen to have been seriously violated.³⁹ In a more subtle way, the practices of certain “nationalist” delegations included infiltration (in the workshops, on the platforms) and sometimes hijacking or diverting the discussion. Playing on the openness of the Forum, Venezuelans and Saharawi especially took over debates that were not necessarily their own. This happened in the case of the small Saharawi delegation in Nairobi: during the “Africa Night” grand concert, they took advantage of the organizers’ inattention to bring on stage Saharawi musicians who were not on the program. In Dakar, Moroccan participants, hostile to Saharawi claims that prevailed here and there, voiced nationalist arguments in workshops devoted to other topics and blatantly ignored the Maghreb Social Forum Charter, which had prohibited the presence of national flags in anticipation of such nationalist outbursts.⁴⁰ Even more systematically, the Venezuelans were observed unilaterally taking the floor or harassing the organizers until they were given permission to speak in defense of the Bolivarian revolution and President Chávez.⁴¹

Some of these practices were viewed as overstepping acceptable standards within the WSF and a rebuke was issued to the organizers who were accused of allowing a “Moroccan delegation full of cops” to enter the Forum grounds. The accusation, made by a Moroccan participant at the International Council meeting, seems to have been shared (as demonstrated by the numerous critical reports on violence committed against the Saharawi at the WSF).⁴² It should

38 Observations by Nedjib Sidi Moussa (February 6, 2011) and William Herrera (February 7, 2011).

39 “Les femmes sahraouies exigent une sécurité,” *Flamme d’Afrique*, no. 3, February 8, 2011.

40 “Rapport d’observation sur la présence sahraouie au FSM de Dakar,” available at: <http://ddata.over-blog.com/xxxyyy/1/44/13/03/RAPPORT-SUR-LA-PRESENCE-SAHRAOUIE-FSM-2011-1-.pdf> – written by two individuals who introduced themselves as French volunteers at the WSF and reread by a person close to the Saharawi cause.

41 This was the case, for example, with a small Venezuelan delegation in a workshop of the “International Residents Coalition.” A Venezuelan speaker, visibly a member of the coalition but not introduced among the panelists on stage at the beginning of the workshop, sent multiple notes to the workshop coordinator who finally gave her 3 minutes to speak (which she said was much too little time). She then gave an ardent defense of the Bolivarian revolution and the role of the government, particularly the president, and her compatriots distributed to the entire assembly copies of an extract of the *Gaceta* official, the official journal, promulgating a law on housing, and a pamphlet entitled “El pueblo legislador” (personal observations, February 8, 2011).

42 The delegation printed a document demanding an apology from the organizing committee in the name of “freedom of expression.” Cf. “Rapport d’observation...,” *op. cit.*

perhaps be noted that in this case the speaker was a member of the CADTM (Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt), an organization highly critical of the African Social Forum and of the main IC leaders. It was therefore also a question of seizing an argument to oppose these alter-global leadership bodies. In reply, another Moroccan speaker minimized the government's presence and recommended that participants "trust the North Africans to manage this by themselves." International space allows nationalist visibility but not protests or sanctions, which fall within the national purview.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I set out to explain how nationalist and occasionally pro-sovereignty registers and practices, sometimes considered exclusive or at least territorialized, are produced in a context that purports, on the contrary, to be inclusive and transnational. In addition to revealing the extremely diverse nationalist repertoire (separatist for the Saharawi, patriotic and partisan among the Ivorian participants at the WSF, nostalgic among the Congolese, strictly symbolic among the few Palestinian attendees, etc.), I have sought to work on two main assumptions of the sociology of transnational movements and activist events. First, I have attempted to show, along with other researchers (Tarrow, 2005; Wagner, 2007), that the material conditions of internationalization and the criteria for recognition as a militant or professional are negotiated at least partly in a delimited local/national space (e.g. through the "national delegation"). Nationalist discourse within the international confines of the WSF will therefore reflect the expectations forged by the various participants in their space of national identity. Above all – and this is the second hypothesis developed here – I have underlined the internationalized process whereby a national register is produced. As Anderson demonstrated, the nationalist register emerges and is confirmed through contact with others: symbols and slogans are always the product of an adaptation to what are believed to be others' expectations or understanding. The resulting nationalist statements are vague enough to ensure the support of actors whose intentions and interests may conflict. Because of its objective to change the system while in the existing order (Teivanen, 2011), forum rules tend to create an open space where different causes can come together without forming a unified movement. This facilitates the working misunderstandings that make the Forum first and foremost a place to affirm or reaffirm a shared sense of belonging to an internationalized activist world.