

RESPONSES TO MIDTERM EXAM ESSAYS

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Essay Statistics:

Essay 1: 12 people answered

Essay 4: 7 people answered

Essay 5: 15 people answered

Collected Responses to Set of Essays

The following are my collected responses to your essays. I decided that instead of writing little bits of comments at the end of each essay, I would collect my thoughts and type in my responses as I was reading. Then I would organize them into fuller more elaborate collected/collective responses for all to read. I also decided to give each person all three of my collected responses regardless of which two essay questions each person answered. For me, the exam wasn't only about testing the knowledge you've retained and the analysis you've developed, but about constructing an additional space for dialogue around issues we are all thinking about given a common set of readings. The dialogue we are having around the essay questions is what is important to me. So below is my dialogue with your exam essays. I didn't write polished essays by any means, but they are a collection of thoughts sponsored by program conversations drawn from your exams. Please feel free to respond back to my comments however you choose. As we review the program and reread some of our texts and continue to think about movement building, it's my hope that over the last few weeks of the quarter we will continue to consider these questions that might roughly be grouped around USSF topics of consciousness, vision, and strategy.

Essay #1

Question: *The Seattle WTO protests are cited by numerous authors as critical to the formation of the current "anti-globalization" movement. Utilizing your knowledge of the Smith, Teeple and della Porta and referencing their texts, analyze the significance of the Seattle protests in terms of the "subterranean fire", the "decline of social reform" and the "globalization from below."*

Key to the question for me: analyzing the significance of Seattle as a key point in the process of building movements for economic liberation in the context of neoliberalism ("decline of social reform"), the labor movement ("subterranean fire") and the collection of movements roughly called global justice movement ("globalization from below").

Foremost, I feel its important to understand "Seattle" not only as the few days of protest as we often hear and talk about it, but to see it as a node in a process. The collective and collected responses that had been bubbling up against so called "free trade" (and against capitalism and imperialism generally) in pockets across the world and across the US. The months and months of planning, networking and organizing prior to the protests. The relationships that were formed in the midst of struggle and repression. The ongoing work and sharing of knowledge and experiences that emerged from the event and its planning that would influence movements around the country and world... from indymedia to "turtles and teamsters together at last."

The vast changes in the structure of the capitalist system from the Accord / KWS to neoliberalism / an "ownership society" as outlined in Teeple and Leite create the conditions that people throughout these movements are organizing around. Before these most recent policy changes were implemented, the capitalist system had developed a temporary stability based on one hand on bribes, on another on military force, but also by the obstacle of the socialist countries. Though these didn't live up to their ideals they did create a force that global capital had to reckon with. Capital must expand, must seek new profits and investment opportunities. Neoliberalism represents the restructuring of the global economy given new conditions and the emerging needs of capital. These needs have involved extracting concessions from workers, changing the function of the state and expanding global trade. In the time since Seattle,

Neoliberalism is deeper and more widespread. There is a “global war against violent extremism” (an ironic phrase by Rumsfeld). And new movements have emerged.

Important also to remember (as many of you point out) that Seattle wasn't the beginning; but as the question says it was “critical to the formation” of growing movement. Prior to Seattle there were similar responses to capitalism generally and globalization/neoliberalism specifically: the Zapatistas in Mexico, People Power I and II in the Philippines, debt uprisings throughout Africa and the Middle East, the Caracazo rebellion in Venezuela, the growth of Brazil's Landless Workers Movement, the wave of simultaneous HUD housing takeovers in cities throughout the US on May 1, 1990, etc.

This question also immediately calls up comparisons between Seattle '99 and Atlanta '07. della Porta discusses the need for a clear and identifiable enemy. The enemy for Seattle was most notably the WTO. della Porta also discusses the need for a clear goal: people organized to stop the WTO negotiations in Seattle. For Atlanta it's different; there is not one identifiable enemy for most, though for some it is neoliberalism or even the capitalist system itself. But the process and the social motion are similar. Perhaps Atlanta can be the continuation of Seattle. Seattle helped get things out in the open (raised consciousness), and helped expose some of the problems. Though there were alternatives presented in Seattle, this is not what people remember about it. We remember seeing the force of the state brutal and naked; we remember the shutting down. We remember that the global economic institutions can be stopped. Hope grows from here. Because of the nature of the event the focus was on what people were against. Atlanta and the WSF process generally (as well as the parallel process initiated by Mumbai Resistance and the International League of Peoples Struggles, etc.) have the potential and will hopefully give the opportunity to focus on what people are for (vision) and how to get there (strategy). I am very interested in seeing to what extent this will emerge, especially on the day dedicated to vision.

Essay #4

Question: *The relationship of social forums to social movements is a central question in our program. We've studied the WSF and its I.C. organizational members and the US Social Forum and its NPC. Referencing texts, lectures, strategy games and videos, what ideas would you use to guide the organization and outcomes of the USSF in Atlanta.*

Key to the question for me: “What might we use to guide the organization and outcomes of the USSF?” In other words in what ways do we use the process of the USSF before, during and after to maximize its impact?

It's important to me that the USSF contribute to movement building and isn't simply a gathering of people who will get together and not do anything afterward. I'm sure in some ways it will be both. In that situation when it's mixed—like all situations—I don't want to be a consumerist and simply complain to management that my burger is medium when I ordered medium rare. I would want to build and build on the things I thought were useful. If there are things getting in the way of building on the useful I can organize with others to change them. But I would want my focus and energy on taking advantage of the opportunity presented and doing everything I could to emphasize, highlight, pull out and strengthen the positive and useful stuff that contains transformative potential.

One thing in thinking about movement building is thinking about what movement building is. Defining it? What does it mean to take part in building a movement? What is a movement? There is nothing pure or rule bound in this. It's about analysis. It's about getting people together. It's about making plans. It's about acting together.

There was a line in the film *At the River I Stand*, “The strike had become a movement.” I kept thinking

that this was a significant moment, but what was it that made it a movement. I guess first of all its people in motion who are part of something and who are pulled in by the gravity of the motion formed by people propelled forward together in common purpose and action. The movement building there was around a particular set of conditions for black workers in the sanitation division of the city. They faced poor working conditions. They were sparked into motion by the deaths of two fellow workers. And it seemed these working conditions were common to other black workers and their families who could relate to this struggle and identify with its cause. There was a definable enemy and the “meaning work” was clear given the conditions and the reaction of the mayor and city council. This was boosted when two different national movements were able to converge, labor and civil rights.

Given that, I think there are different stages of movement building and different levels upon which to build. There is the old Agitate, Mobilize, Organize approach: rile people up based on their grievances; get together in motion around a concrete target, identifiable enemy, and achievable goal; then build and sustain the ongoing motion with education and commitment. But of course there’s more to it. I do think that education at all levels is important to movement building.

We have a couple of other historic and current examples that we’ve looked at together and that we can draw from: the labor movement (Smith), the civil rights movement (Olson), the alterglobalization movement (Leite, della Porta), and also the poor peoples movement (Baptist, KWRU films, and Rodriguez), women’s movement (Olson). We also have movement our own knowledge and experience we can draw on. A few that come to my mind are the independent media movement, immigrant rights movement, anti-war/peace and justice movement. There is a long list of ongoing movements that folks in the class are part of or know about. And we are about to look at the movement for justice being built by survivors of Katrina.

It seems that the intention of the USSF is to contribute to movement building in the US. It’s a stated goal of the forum in Atlanta and I think it’s organized to facilitate this. The guiding ideas for the three days of workshops are consciousness, vision, and strategy. These sound like movement building blocks to me.

I don’t think the forum is the movement, but really a place where folks involved can learn from each other about the aspects of the movement they are involved in and think about ways of collaborating, cooperating, and sharing. It will be a place to listen and to speak, learn and teach, lead and follow. But in some ways there will also be competition and power moves. The orgs have to compete for funds, space and members. Think of instances of “raiding” that Smith talks about in the labor movement. Movements here are forming in a competitive environment and various groups and sectors have to compete with each other for survival. And those in power who want to control and contain movements will do what they can to encourage competition, rivalries and jealousies and to nurture differences and divisions. Civil rights movement we have been reading about shows various examples of this. A key question is in the midst of all this how do movements do the right thing as often as possible and maintain patient and respectful solidarity?

This is a massive project and I think one thing about movement building is finding commonalities while respecting, appreciating and celebrating differences. I think the commonalities are based on what human beings need today in this country. Food, housing, meaningful work, quality education, bodily safety, healthcare, nonpolluted and noncarcinogenic environment, etc. For me this is crucial and I don’t know if I see this yet at the social forum in a planned and conscious way. But I do think that organizing around and under the leadership of those with the least in this society--in a sense literally bottom up can take us in the right direction.

Another aspect of movement building is analysis, or studying as scientifically as possible what’s going

on, who's who, where power is, where things are going, etc. Then based on that analysis movement builders can help give birth to the movement. I don't know if movement builders can create a movement on ideas alone. I think there's an aspect of it that is part of the conditions and the changes in the conditions that shake things up and contribute to the surge in movements. Analysis would then take consideration of both subjective conditions (what people are thinking and feeling) & objective conditions (what is happening politically and economically). Such analysis helps you think about where to build, how to build, and where the vulnerabilities are.

We see converging at the USSF various movements from around the country. Can these be tributaries that flow into the growing river of movements? For more on this metaphor see *There is a River* by Vincent Harding.

Essay #5

Question: *Luis J. Rodriguez recited a poem in which he used the phrase, "toil allowed to rot", referring to displaced, dislocated and unwanted workers that are constituting a new "social class." In his writings, he mentioned the need for art, spirituality, rituals, elders and purpose to stem the violence in society. If you were to construct a social movement to stem the violence in society, how would you use these concepts in its creation.*

The key word for me in question 5 is "HOW." Rephrasing it we get: How would I include art, spirituality, rituals, elders and purpose to stem violence, construct a social movement, and build a new society?

Many folks answered this question by talking about why these things were important or trying to show they were important. Based on the way the question is worded I think we can assume art, spirituality, rituals, elders and purpose are important, but we have to figure out HOW to use these in building and maintaining a movement. Luis shows in his art, his life and in his movement building work HOW he has learned to go about doing it. But the question for each of us is in a sense a very personal one. I have to admit that many of my answers to the question how are further refinements of that question into other hows. I am comfortable with that, though I try to offer a few concrete ideas that aren't just questions or at least give a sense of direction or purpose.

For me, part of the HOW is building on good things that already exist. What CLR James called "finding the future in the present." Build on what's here—water good seeds and help them thrive. We don't have to build everything new. Some things existing now can be evolved into core parts of egalitarian cooperative social relations. The 1st step is considering what parts we keep, what parts are beautiful, visionary, & life affirming.

What rituals do we have? What art? What spirituality? What elders? What purposes? What of those do we want to keep? How might we twist those to further and more fully enable equality, class empowerment, deeper analysis, full inclusion, ending oppressions based on race, gender and sexuality that help enable exploitation, etc.?

A few examples: Some rituals (some particular to this place, and some more general to the US): potlucks, graduations, holidays, sports, songs, forms of collective entertainment, like sharing songs, procession of the species, and even the pet parade. Some art: music, poetry, aerosol art, dance, sports (yes they can be an art too). Channeling anger and energy into motivation, discipline and creativity. A good ritual that might channel our spiritualities and need for expression could also give purpose to meetings might be to draw or sing or rap or dance or act out regularly as we do our work. What if this were a weekly part of meetings or gatherings? One reaction I have to my own idea is that this sounds kind of cheesy or hokey

and I don't think I'd be the only one to react that way nor would it be the only reaction. But how might we leave the cynicism/fear and replace it with sincerity/courage? How might it come from those involved? Better yet how is already coming from those involved?

Elders are all around us. In what ways do we shove them away? In what ways do we shove other generations away? How might we stop the shoving? A social movement needs to embrace multiple generations—no doubt, but again how? Youth and elders and those in between can appreciate the wisdom-knowledge-experience of each other, but this may take time and lots of effort. This means teaching and learning patience, respect and appreciation. That is an active process and has to be part of the space that is made and the alliances/coalitions that are built. Many of us are already doing this work. How do we invite others to it and how do we expand it?

Another part of the how is also letting wither away the destructive rituals, purposes, forms of art, bad habits and patterns, etc that we have developed in survival mode. There is so much addiction that this system causes, encourages, and amplifies. This addictive energy could be freed up through art and spirituality, sports and community. This means making more space for healing and reconciliation through forms of expression and community building. Recognizing addiction is where this starts and working to find healthy replacements.

In movement building a key thing that art, spirituality, ritual, etc. is important for is “meaning work”: building and expressing a collective identity that also communicates purpose. Movements can consciously employ art, spirituality, ritual, etc. as not just art for art's sake or only for self-expression, but for collective meaning and collective expression.

One of the highest art forms (most experienced, makes the most money, gets the most attention) in capitalist culture is the commercial. In it you get thirty seconds to sell a product or really to sell a need, or to sell a desire or to sell insecurity. Imagine if all that talent and cash (or even just one tenth of it) went to teaching us something new about the world, or encouraged us to become more empathetic, instead of more selfish. Or went in to helping us think through some of our major problems. The other ninety percent of the money and talent that goes into ads could go into actually solving some of people's problems.

I also think of the connection between “the new class” and the violence and social disruption that is going on. I think Luis Rodriguez's work is about making connections between the new class and the violence that is inherently part of the formation of this class and that the new class is caught up in. How to bring in art to enable the consciousness necessary for the new class to fully recognize its power and potential to create a new society, I believe is THE challenge before movements today. Our tendency might be to say that that is them over there; those people are the new class; over here we're middle class or working class or whatever. But I think in some way that many of us have a deeper connection to the new class than we might think or we might be closer to it than we might think. If the opportunities to be part of the middle class or even the working class shrink, and as work that we might do is done by computers and robotics, perhaps our relationship to the new class is not so clear. I don't think “the new class” is a discrete group of people, but more a state of being for many of us as the economy continues to change and transform.

The question I keep coming to as I read each essay is: What is one thing you talk about in your essay that you are not yet doing, but that you could be doing, that you WILL DO??? This is the most essential aspect of HOW...what will I do to bring in these aspects to movement building in a conscious and conscientious way?