

The dilemmas of open space: the future of the WSF

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The World Social Forum (WSF) seeks to bring together, in its own words, all those who oppose “neo-liberal globalisation” and “imperialism in all its forms”. It hopes to serve as their common meeting-ground. It has adopted as its principal mode of operation the concept of the “open space”. This concept is highly original; it is also quite controversial among the participants of the WSF itself. We need to explore the origins of this concept of the “open space” and the reasons why it arouses so much fervour—both of those who are favourable to it and of those who are quite uneasy about it. And we need to explore the dilemmas the concept poses to the viability of the WSF itself.

The story starts a long time ago. The year 1848 was a turning-point in the history of modes of opposition to the existing world-system. It was a year of two kinds of revolution. There was the social revolution in France, the first serious attempt by a movement which claimed a base in the urban working class to obtain political power. It was a serious attempt, but a political failure. It actually lasted only four months, and led in a convoluted manner to the seizure of power by Napoleon’s nephew, who in 1852 proclaimed himself Emperor of France, and ruled for two decades. This failure of a social revolution led to a re-evaluation of political

strategies all across the political spectrum of Europe—from right to centre to the left.

The second revolution, or rather series of revolutions, was the attempt to proclaim national, popular sovereignty in a number of European countries—most notably Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Poland. Historians came to speak of 1848 as the “springtime of the nations”. These revolutions too were failures, in the sense that in none of these countries did the

groups leading the revolutionary activities achieve (at least in any immediate term) political power. Their failures too led also to a re-evaluation of political strategies.

Out of the failures of 1848 came a real impetus for the two kinds of movements—what came to be called the social movements and the national movements—to develop a political strategy based first and foremost on long-term organisation (as opposed to sporadic and “spontaneous” political action). These movements

faced new and more efficacious opponents. The liberal centre had been frightened by what had happened in 1848 and made two shifts in its long-term strategy. It toned down its post-1789 conflict with the conservatives in the interests of presenting a common front against the more radical groups.

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But it also began to develop tactics that would appease some of the complaints put forward by the radicals without doing anything that would basically threaten the institutions of the world-system. The conservative right also changed its politics. It too had been frightened by the strength of the radical forces, and decided that its rigid opposition to all change might have been counterproductive. It therefore began to be seduced by the argument of the liberal centre that timely, but non-threatening, concessions had merit as a political tactic.

The result was that, after an initial post-1848 period of acute repression of antisystemic forces, the major governments moved towards a politics of measured concessions. These new policies were in fact largely implemented not by the liberal centre whose idea they had been but by those who came to be called the “enlightened conservatives”—notably, Disraeli, Napoleon III, and Bismarck. In response, the weak, but slowly growing, antisystemic organisations engaged in a major internal debate about long-term strategy. The key question was the attitude these movements should assume in relation to the state machineries.

Within both types of movements, there were those who insisted that, at least in the medium term, the state machineries were going to remain important, and that therefore acquiring state power was a necessary prerequisite to any kind of social transformation. Within the social movement, this was the position of the Marxists, and within the national movement, this was the position of the political nationalists. On the other side of the debate were those who were sceptical of any participation whatsoever in state operations (voting, running for office, accepting positions in the government). This group saw such participation as futile, diverting, and coopting. Within the social movement, this was the position of the anarchists, and within the national movement this was the position of the cultural nationalists. They saw their locus of action outside of, and most often against, the state.

The short version of subsequent world political history is that this debate within the movements was essentially won by those who argued in favour of taking power within the states. The policy was summed up in the so-called two-step strategy: first obtain state power,

then transform the world. And while such a strategy might have seemed to observers in 1860 a bit quixotic, the fact is that, a century later between 1945 and 1968, the first step of the two-step strategy turned out to be spectacularly successful throughout the world. In virtually every country, the antisystemic movements came to state power. A third of the world was governed by Communist parties. A second third of the world, the pan-European world, saw social-democratic parties (or their equivalents) come to power. To be sure, in these states, it was so-called alternating power, but they exercised this power in a situation in which the conservative opposition had accepted the basic idea of the social-democrats, the welfare state, and were merely arguing about its extensiveness. And the final third of the world, the South, saw national liberation movements come to power in most of Asia and Africa, and populist movements in Latin America.

In short, the antisystemic movements had indeed obtained state power. The problem was that the movements seemed unable to implement effectively the second step, transforming the world. This is the essential explanation of the world revolution of 1968. In country after country—in all three zones of the world-system—there were uprisings of various sorts. One common feature of all these uprisings was the accusation of the revolutionaries against the “Old Left”: you promised social transformation when you came to power; you have not delivered on your promise. The world, they said, remains deeply inegalitarian, worldwide and within our countries; our political systems are not really democratic; there exists a privileged caste (a *nomenklatura*) within our regimes. Far less has changed than you said would change.

The various uprisings of 1968 (really 1966–1970) were all put down. But the disillusionment that had bred them would not be erased. The subsequent three decades saw the downfall, one by one, of most of the regimes that had been put into power in the heyday of the antisystemic movements. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was merely the symbolic apex of this rejection of the “Old Left” regimes. The problem after 1968 for the world’s antisystemic forces was how to reconstruct themselves, and most particularly how to revise their historic political strategy.

There were at least three different kinds of revised strategies that were tried in the subsequent thirty years. The first was the multiple “Maoisms”. These groups emerged virtually everywhere. They were “Maoist” in the sense that they took the Chinese Cultural Revolution as a sort of model of their action. They criticised the “Old Left” for having failed to be sufficiently revolutionary, at the very least for having allowed themselves to be co-opted into the system, at the most of having betrayed their followers. Most of these movements splintered into many factious sects, and fell apart. They were then seriously undermined by the collapse of the Cultural Revolution in China itself. Nowhere did such movements achieve the political strength that the Old Left had shown in many parts of the world in the period 1945–1968.

The second revised strategy was that which came to be called the “New Left”. This is a label that is often used to cover the new more militant feminist movements, the various Green movements, the assertive movements representing ethnic minorities or indigenous populations, those organised to pursue the rights of persons whose sexual preferences are different from the traditional heterosexual norms, and those who defend the rights of persons who had been previously considered “disabled” in one way or another.

This is a variegated assemblage. What united these movements were three complaints about the Old Left which they all shared. First, they argued the urgency of political changes which the Old Left had previously thought secondary or considered to concern problems that would be (easily) solved after the main “revolution” had succeeded. The New Left movements argued that the kind of issues they raised were just as important and immediate as those which had been traditionally supported by the social movement (the rights of industrial workers) or the national movement (the rights of oppressed nationalities).

The second thing that the New Left movements had in common was their objection to the centralising tendencies of the Old Left movements which, previously, had always insisted that, if special groups within the state were to be organised, it should only be as affiliates of the main Old Left movement, such as a women’s or

youth auxiliary. The Old Left movements had always argued that organising such movements separately was divisive and harmful to the “main” struggle that they incarnated.

The third objection of the New Left movements was to the state-oriented strategy of the Old Left. New Left movements were divided between those who felt that they should proclaim anew the position of the earlier opponents of the Old Left (the anarchist / cultural nationalist segments) and denounce any orientation to state activity, and those who merely asserted that the state-oriented strategy was exaggerated, or omitted issues with which they were particularly concerned.

It was this last debate that ultimately undid the “newness” of the New Left position. The story is best illustrated by the historic debate between the *Realos* and the *Fundis* that took place in the 1980s within the German Green movement, one of the most powerful expressions of a New Left movement. What happened is that the German Greens replicated the late nineteenth-century debate of the social movements on the issue of orientation to state action. The so-called *Realos* took a position analogous to that of the Marxists, and the so-called *Fundis* took one analogous to that of the anarchists. And once again, the state-oriented faction won. But thereupon, the biggest single difference between the New Left and the Old Left disappeared, especially since the surviving Old Left organisations had essentially given way on the first two objections of the New Left movements.

In the 1980s, a third strategy began to gain strength, centring around the issue of “human rights”. The groups that subscribed to it started from the premise that the Old Left had seriously neglected the issues of human rights in their struggle for state power, and even more in their practice following the achievement of state power, when the governments in power actually violated such rights. They sought to organise themselves as “non-governmental organisations” (NGOs), the defining feature of which was a combination of pursuing a particular limited focus, a permanent hired staff that more or less controlled the organisation, and members whose activities were primarily to contribute money and occasional direct action at the behest of the permanent staff. Amnesty International

and Greenpeace were among the pioneers of such NGOs, but today their number is legion.

The drawback of these organisations is that their large fund-raising activities led them almost inevitably into relating to potential funders (foundations, wealthy individuals) and therefore controlling, if not actually restraining, the impetuosités of their more enthusiastic members. Worse, they came to be seen in the countries of the South (the primary locus of activities by these NGOs) as one more variant of intervention in their affairs by institutions of the North (the primary home of such organisations), which followed mandates that primarily reflected views and needs in the North. While these movements have not aimed at obtaining state power, they seem to have been primarily oriented to being a political lobby trying to affect state power at all its levels (executive, legislative, and judicial).

This is the background that gave rise to what the world press has called the “anti-globalisation movement” and these days tends to call itself, in languages other than English, an *altermondialiste* movement. When did it start? Hard to say. There are three symbolic moments of this movement, all of which occurred in the Americas: the revolt of the Zapatistas (EZLN) in Chiapas in 1994, the activist protests against the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1999, and the first meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001.

The revolt of the Zapatistas was deliberately begun on the first day of operation of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), 1 January 1994. The Zapatistas emerged as the militant, organised arm of the indigenous populations of Chiapas, continuing their 500-year-long struggle for their land and their autonomy. Three features stood out about the Zapatista struggle. (1) It demanded rights for the indigenous populations; it did not seek to obtain state power in Mexico. (2) It situated its demands within the larger worldwide struggle, including of course the struggle against neo-liberal globalisation (hence the symbolic choice to launch their public defiance of Mexican authorities on the day NAFTA entered into force). (3) It sought, and obtained, very wide international support for its struggle, becoming in effect a beacon for movements elsewhere in the world.

The Seattle protest came five years later, on the occasion of what was supposed to be a crucial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). It had five defining features. (1) The protest was specifically presented as one against neo-liberal globalisation and the institutions designed to implement what had been called for a decade at least the Washington Consensus. (2) It involved direct, disruptive activity. (3) It was the fruit of an unlikely alliance between Old Left movements (such as the US trade union federation, the AFL-CIO), New Left movements (such as environmentalists), and anarchist groups. (4) The protesters were disproportionately from the USA. And whereas this might have been understandable since the protest was occurring in the United States, it showed nonetheless that *altermondialisme* could have a popular base even in the United States, and was more than a movement rooted exclusively or even primarily in the South. And (5) the protest succeeded in its immediate objective, against all odds. The WTO was effectively disrupted, and the meeting was unable to fulfil its objectives.

Seattle was followed by similar disruptive activities of world meetings elsewhere in the world, to the point that the organisers of such meetings began to choose places to meet where, for logistical or political reasons, it would be difficult to organise protests (the WTO meeting in Doha, Qatar, in 2001; the G-7 meeting in Kananaskis in the Canadian Rockies in 2002; and of course the annual meetings of the World Economic Forum in Davos). It is at this point that a shift in emphasis by the *altermondialistes* occurred, and it was decided to organise the World Social Forum as a counterfoil to the World Economic Forum of Davos. The first such meeting occurred in 2001 in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. Porto Alegre was chosen for two main reasons—a welcoming atmosphere by the local authorities and the fact that it was a city in the South, thereby ensuring a major role for the South in its deliberations. The WSF met twice more in Porto Alegre (2002 and 2003), then in Mumbai (India) in 2004. It will meet again in Porto Alegre in 2005, and it has announced that in 2007 it will meet somewhere in Africa. The number of participants has grown remarkably. While exact figures are hard to pin down, it seems to have gone from around 10,000 participants in 2001 to perhaps 100,000 in 2004.



Carrefour des choix de société (the social choice crossroads), on the site of the alternative globalisation “Larzac 2003” meeting in France. Eric Cabanis/AFP

The WSF is a fuzzy structure. Early on, it adopted the principle of “open space”. The heart of this concept is that no single political stance prevails within the WSF, other than its minimal commitment to opposition to neo-liberal globalisation and imperialism in all its forms. The WSF as such passes no resolutions and organises no political activities. Organisationally, it has no official spokesperson, much less a set of officers. It does have a Secretariat in Brazil, and a Brazilian Organising Committee composed of eight popular organisations. When the WSF met in Mumbai there was also an Indian Organising Committee. And it does have an International Council with over 125 organisations that have been co-opted onto it, and which meets at least once a year (usually more often) to decide on such things as the location of meetings, and the form that such meetings will take. In addition, there have come to be continental/regional, national, and so-called thematic social forums, which are autonomously organised and which have no formal organisational link (in spite of their spiritual one) to the WSF.

Furthermore, the meetings of the WSF themselves are actually an enormous assemblage of meetings – some large “plenary” sessions, some medium-size thematic sessions, a very large number of smaller meetings organised from the grassroots (by persons who choose a theme and propose it to the organising committee, but then do all the work of inviting speakers and attracting audiences). The absence of a central hierarchy and the ability of participating organisations to run their own sessions is what is meant when one says that the World Social Forum has a horizontal rather than a vertical structure.

The WSF is not a movement. It is not even a movement of movements. It is more properly conceived as a family of movements. And this family seeks to be global. While there remain distortions in the level of participation of different parts of the world, the WSF is probably more global already than any prior historic agglomeration of antisystemic movements. In particular, the North does not have the overwhelming role in its functioning that it has always had in the past in world antisystemic structures. And a further outreach to missing groups is a top organisational priority for the WSF.

So, at one level, the WSF can be said to be an incredible success story. In a few short years,

it has grown immensely in active participation, numerically and geographically. It has managed to obtain the attention of the world media as a counterpart to the much older and far better funded World Economic Forum. It has become the central locus of antisystemic activity in the world-system. Nonetheless, there is a pervasive sense of uncertainty about its future among its most ardent supporters.

There are three main kinds of criticism that it faces. The first comes from the world centrists, some of whom have attended WSF meetings, even though they are not central to its organisation. This group feels that the WSF is not practical or concrete in its orientation. The centrists feel that the WSF should be engaged in attempts to discuss with the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the various international institutions (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the WTO) specific programmes which would in some way alleviate suffering (say from AIDS), improve the prospects of so-called sustainable development, and end poverty. This group suggests that the WSF is too immersed in sloganeering and offering public outlets to unreasonable, even dangerous, groups.

It is perfectly true that the WSF has resisted all suggestions that it proceed down the path of negotiating (behind-the-scenes) agreements with those represented at Davos. Indeed, after one initial unsatisfactory debate, the WSF has not been willing to engage in public debates with the WEF (a specific suggestion made several times). The WSF has always felt that such discussions are of marginal importance, and engaging in them would only dilute the force and impact of the WSF as a world structure. The WSF is an open space, but only for those who are explicitly opposed to neo-liberal globalisation and imperialism in all its forms. It is very doubtful that one could find many participants in Davos who would be willing to start from this premise.

A more significant criticism of the WSF has come from various groups that are heirs of the Old Left. For example, at Mumbai, a group of organisations, mostly from India but some from elsewhere, organised a sort of counter-forum, on the premise that the WSF had been basically subordinated to Western NGOs and was “objectively” a counter-revolutionary structure. This group refused to participate in the WSF. There

are also some, within the WSF itself, who share this view, if perhaps in a more diluted form.

The criticisms of this group are multiple. The WSF says another world is possible; it should say that socialism is the objective. The WSF is an open forum; therefore it is nothing but a talk fest. It doesn't engage in action; therefore it is inherently inefficacious. It accepts money from foundations and NGOs; hence, it has sold out. It does not permit political parties to participate; hence it leaves out key groups. It does not permit groups engaged in violence to participate; but violence is legitimate for oppressed groups who have no alternative.

All the initial statements about the WSF are accurate. The inferences, shown after the semi-colons, are rejected by it. There is also the variant critique of some grassroots activists and of persons inspired by the anarchist tradition. It is almost the opposite of this Old Left criticism. It is that the WSF is, *de facto*, a new international with a hidden hierarchy who make the important decisions. But in the end this variant says the same as the Old Left variant. The leaders of the WSF are using their authority to sell out the militants.

The last set of criticisms comes from within the World Social Forum itself. In a sense, the internal critiques are watered-down versions of the outside critiques of the centrists, the hostile Old Left, and the anarchist groups. In addition, however, there are two further critiques of substance from within the WSF.

The first is that, while the idea of open space may be meritorious, after a certain while it gets boring. Year after year, the same ideas are expressed. Inevitably, people will tire of the process, and the structure will wither away. And the second is that, while the idea of a horizontal, non-hierarchical structure may be meritorious, somehow decisions, important decisions, are in fact made. Who makes them, and how? The critics say that there is insufficient transparency of the decision-making process, and therefore it verges on the undemocratic.

Finally, there is one further internal phenomenon to observe. Since there is so much room for spontaneous organisation, some organisations have met together within the framework of the world meetings. And these groups have, in their own name, adopted resolutions and planned specific political activities. But the

world media have found it difficult to distinguish these meetings from the WSF itself. So these meetings tend to undercut the concept that the WSF as such takes no political positions or action. There is an unresolved tension here.

The internal critiques have stirred up a considerable amount of debate within the World Social Forum, and within its International Council, especially at its 4–7 April 2004 meeting in Passignano sul Transimeno (Italy). This meeting led to a letter sent throughout the network of organisations participating in the WSF by the International Secretariat, which says that the WSF is planning important changes in the format of the Fifth WSF in 2005. It is worth reading this letter carefully.

The letter starts by underlining the basic intention: "While maintaining the diversity, which is typical of the WSF, we would like to transform the WSF into a space that is increasingly capable of facilitating *interlinkages* and *common actions* among different participants who come together in the WSF".

The letter outlines a process of "voluntary and self-organised" aggregation of events such that the "thematic axes" of the meetings "will emerge from the consultation (...) and not based on any decision of the International Council or the Secretariat". They propose this as a "major advance" in the open space concept. This new procedure is designed to address the criticism of insufficient internal democracy in the processes of the WSF, as well as the sense that there have been inadequate opportunities for discussions among like-minded persons because of the historically scattered nature of the meetings. We shall see in 2005 the degree to which this new procedure overcomes these difficulties.

What is perhaps at least as important as internal restructuring for the future of the WSF, however, is the evolving external context within which the WSF operates. To assess that, we must evaluate the trends within the world geopolitical structure. There exist three major cleavages today, two long-existing, and one basically new: conflicts among the major powers; the North–South conflict; and the struggle about the nature of the future world-system that may emerge from the existing structural crisis of the capitalist world-economy. They each have their own dynamic, but the trajectory of each is intimately linked with those of the other two.

The first cleavage is that among the three major centres of the accumulation of capital, the so-called Triad: the United States, western Europe, and Japan. They are in acute economic competition with each other, a competition that is growing daily. By now, the economic competition has spilled over into the political arena, and has become a major element of geopolitical instability. We have moved firmly beyond the era of US hegemony. The USA is a declining power, even in the military arena (as the Iraq guerrilla war in 2003–4 has been showing), and can no longer count on any form of automatic support from its erstwhile allies in western Europe and east Asia. Indeed quite the contrary. The USA is moving into a position where it will have to make major concessions to western Europe and east Asia if it wishes to obtain their now almost grudging support in the geopolitical arena. Within a decade, the USA may have to choose between western Europe and east Asia in trying to align itself with the likely future dominant locus of capital accumulation. This represents a sea-change in world geopolitics.

The second cleavage is the continuing cleavage between North and South. In this cleavage, the three members of the Triad constitute the North. But while they share common interests in relation to the South, their competitive struggles with each other will have some spill-over effect in the North–South struggle and will give the South, especially the stronger countries in the South (Brazil, India, China, etc.) increased bargaining power. From the point of view of the South, the major issue is whether the so-called G-20 and the so-called G-90 (that is, the stronger countries in the South and the weaker ones, economically and politically) will in fact remain significantly allied with each other, or whether they will begin to pursue separate paths, to the benefit of the North.

Finally, there is the cleavage between the partisans of the spirit of Davos and the partisans of the spirit of Porto Alegre. This is a cleavage that is not geographic but ideological and informed by class interests. This is by far the most important of the three cleavages, albeit the one that gets least attention in the media. The problem for the partisans of the spirit of Porto Alegre is the degree to which they can avoid being swamped by the priorities of the other two cleavages, and whether they can, by their

collective action, shape the outcomes of the other two cleavages rather than being shaped by them.

The conflict between Davos and Porto Alegre is not about the virtues and vices of neo-liberal globalisation, although this is how it is often portrayed, including by the participants in both groups. It is not about capitalism as a world-system, since capitalism as a world system is in structural crisis and will disappear in the next 20–50 years. The conflict is about what will replace the capitalist world-economy as an historical system. It is about whether we shall move in the direction of a different system that maintains one crucial feature of capitalism—its hierarchical, inegalitarian, polarising nature—or of a new world system that is relatively democratic, relatively egalitarian.

This is no small question. And on neither side have the organisational and structural parameters of the new world order been developed with much clarity. At the moment, the division is one of gut sentiments, not of alternative paradigms. But in this struggle, there is no question that the only serious expression of the forces that constitute the spirit of Porto Alegre is the World Social Forum itself. And there is also no question that there is no plausible alternative to the key organisational element in this structure—the forum as open space.

What however will determine the ability of the open space to serve the objective of transforming the world in a direction that is democratic and egalitarian is whether and how the World Social Forum can develop means to yoke together an open space and real, concrete political activity. This will not be easy, and the reforms promised for WSF in 2005 are merely a beginning. I think myself that the key to a solution is to encourage and make institutional space for *multiple* political alliances and activities within the WSF, without making any one of them an activity of the WSF itself. The open space should be a space not only for the interchange of views and analyses by its participants but for an exchange concerning the fruitfulness of alternative modes of political action in the world system.

An open space is not, and was never intended to be, an umbrella for everything. The WSF brings together only those who are opposed to neo-liberal globalisation and im-

perialism in all its forms. This is a large umbrella but far from an infinite one. There are outer edges for the inclusiveness. The WSF should be an open space that not merely discusses issues and alternative forms of action, but encourages the testing of alternative forms by those who wish to test them. These forms of action can not only be different *forms* but involve different *spaces*. Some may be world-wide; some regional; some cross-sectional; some rather local. The WSF is already doing this, of course, but it should consciously integrate within its organisational structure interplay between these different activities. As long as the debate remains between comrades and not between defenders of the pure faith, such interaction can only strengthen the central role of the WSF in world transformation.

The second key element of open space is that it be truly open, that is totally transparent. There has been more obscurity in the functioning of the WSF than is desirable. More of the decision-making should be going on in a glass bowl, visible to everyone. This will serve as a constraint on those who may decide they wish to “take over” the WSF and change its basic character. This will serve as a reassurance to those who participate that we shall be building a more democratic world-system with a more democratic forum. One simple idea might be

the videotaping of all meetings of the International Council and making them available on the internet. This has the danger of encouraging speech-making but it has the virtue of allowing everyone to know what the debates are about, and encouraging their input.

So, in summary, yes to open space, provided that it is supplemented by the WSF becoming an arena that is the institutional meeting-group of multiple alliance-groups of political activities and also by a greatly increased transparency of the workings of the WSF itself.

Will this be enough to ensure the survival of the WSF and its central role in the world struggle for transformation? One cannot be sure in the least. This is a beginning-point, and one that would need to be re-evaluated in say five years. It is quite possible that, in the coming five years, either because of immediate conflicts in the world system or because of internal divisions, the World Social Forum should fall apart. I do not think this likely, but it is certainly possible. What I am certain of is that, at this point, there exists no plausible alternative to the World Social Forum as a world actor on behalf of those who struggle for the spirit of Porto Alegre or are in any way committed to the creation of a democratic, egalitarian world-system. We either make the WSF work or we go down with it.