

Making another world possible?

The European Social Forum

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The European Social Forum (ESF) has been inspired by the global slogan 'Another world is possible', expressing the need to create alternatives from out of the resistance to neoliberalism. Since its inception in 2002, the ESF has provided an opportunity to debate methods and strategies for turning that slogan into reality. Nevertheless the organizational process itself has become a site of conflicting political philosophies about progressive social change.

At issue is how 'another world' can be made possible and thus how to shape the aims of the ESF. Although such conflict could be creative and instructive, it has largely marginalized alternative futures from the ESF itself. How did this happen? Such conflicts have been integral to Social Forum events and they were intensified in the preparations for the London event this year.

Anti-capitalist movement as network mobilization

The now-familiar slogan 'Another world is possible' countered the fatalistic attitude that 'There is no alternative'. Such an attitude had constrained even many people antagonistic to the neoliberal project in the 1990s. The new slogan helped bring together those who struggle for a different world in the here-and-now, not simply 'after the revolution'. It emerged from the somewhat misnamed movement of 'counter-globalization', later called 'anti-capitalist' or 'social justice'. The more recent phrase, 'a networked movement of movements', emphasizes new social actors creating new links and practices.

This development has many antecedents, starting from the global circulation of struggles against structural adjustment policies in the 1980s. The 1994 Zapatista uprising catalysed new global networks of resistance and communication, especially through the two Intercontinental Encuentros against Neoliberalism and for Humanity. These were held in Chiapas in 1996 and Spain in 1997 under the motto 'A World that Contains Many Worlds'. The next year some participants founded People's Global Action against Free Trade and the WTO, strongly based in mass organizations of the global South.

These mobilizations gave global impetus to methods such as affinity groups, horizontal networks and consensus process. For example, each small group appoints a delegate to a spokescouncil, which then discusses proposals in a consensus process; disagreements are respectfully discussed and then accommodated by modifying the original proposal in order to gain wider agreement. Although the movement has included coalitions (for example, based on formal delegates from NGOs and trade unions), its power has depended upon creative mobilization of horizontal networks acting in complementary ways. Alternative methods and futures are developed within the movement, not simply discussed as ideal scenarios for some later time.

Such methods facilitated many successful protests – against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1997–98, the Geneva 1998 WTO meeting, the Seattle 1999 WTO meeting and the Prague 2000 IMF–World Bank meeting, which had to shut down early. Some Leftists finally discovered something new happening in 1999, though the anti-capitalist movement began long before then. The Seattle protests were novel mainly in demonstrating that global activist networks could converge and cooperate on a large-scale horizontal basis. Such methods were also taken up in mobilizations against EU and G8 summits.

Activist networks have sought novel ways to link struggles across issues and space. Such approaches are expressed by mottos such as ‘Our resistance is as global as capital’ and ‘Everything is connected to everything else’. Likewise, ‘No Issue is Single’ emphasises that capitalist exploitation links all aspects of our lives, so that successful resistance depends upon encompassing apparently ‘different’ issues. ‘One No, Many Yeses’, a motto from the Zapatistas, expresses the potential strength of an anti-capitalist movement which includes plural visions of a different society.

To extend such visions and links, activists started to establish new political forms called popular assemblies in Latin America and social forums in Italy. Disparate resistances to neoliberalism found ways to cooperate despite their differences in viewpoint and political culture. By 2003 social forums in the UK had drawn several hundred activists to launch events in Manchester and London. Stereotypical position-mongering gave way to serious strategic discussion, especially regarding ways to deal with political differences and ways to link struggles.¹

An open place?

The World Social Forum (WSF) took its lead from those initiatives and methods of the anti-capitalist movement, especially the Encuentros and local social forums. According to the WSF Charter of Principles, a social forum is

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism...

The World Social Forum will always be a forum open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging of the organizations and movements that decide to participate in it, as well as the diversity of genders, ethnicities, cultures, generations and physical capacities, providing they abide by this Charter of Principles. Neither party representations nor military organizations shall participate in the Forum.

After the first WSF in 2001, the Charter optimistically announced that the WSF ‘becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it’. At the same time, it warned, the WSF ‘does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings’. Nevertheless the organizational process was soon turned into a locus of power by individuals effectively representing parties, while pre-empting anti-capitalist alternatives in theory and practice.

For the 2002 Porto Alegre WSF, the Brazilian Workers Party controlled the organizing committee in ways which excluded many activists from decisions and relegated them to menial tasks. In response, many grassroots groups established their own parallel event (for example, through a Youth Camp), while denouncing the official WSF. At the 2003 Porto Alegre event the WSF organizers marginalized an entire stream of sessions on ‘Life after Capitalism’. At the 2001 WSF, the key word had been ‘new’ – new ideas, methods, faces – in recognition that the Left’s traditional methods had failed. By 2003 the key words had become ‘big’ – enormous rallies cheering speakers.²

For the 2003 WSF in Mumbai, the process was captured by party cadres early on. A stereotypical Left culture dominated the process in many ways: through links with parties, paid activists taking on key roles and slogans of resistance, and little talk of alternatives beyond party policies. As a participant lamented, the preparatory process was ‘entrepreneurial and managerial’, yet many people assumed that the WSF was promoting ‘alternatives’ simply by opposing economic globalization.³

More than a rally?

The WSF inspired the first European Social Forum, held in November 2002 in Florence, which drew 60,000 people – more than twice the number the organizers had expected. It has become known for launching the global protest against the expected US–UK attack on Iraq on 15 February 2003. As a process, the first ESF had considerable scope for activists to shape the event. The city council and trade unions committed resources early on, seeking no major influence over the content. However, partly because of its lecture format and enormous turnout, the ESF felt like a ‘three-day rally’, some commented.

The second ESF, held the next year in Paris, was more controlled by party cadres. When a French network of local social forums requested a meeting space, for example, their request was denied, though eventually they found a defunct church and expanded a Europe-wide network of such forums. The main opportunity for coordinating actions, the Assembly of Social Movements, on the Sunday morning, centred on statements which bore little relation to strategic debates during the overall event. Indeed, the final declaration was largely written beforehand by an invitation-only small working group.

Also beforehand, a secret group had formulated a bid to host the 2004 ESF in London. This bid generated suspicion and even hostility in Britain, for several reasons: failure to consult the movement set a bad precedent for any democratic and transparent procedures. The bid was led by party cadres – Socialist Workers Party (SWP) members masquerading as Globalize Resistance and Socialist Action members in the leadership of CND. The SWP leadership publicly attacked local social forums as ‘unrepresentative’ on the grounds that they were not based on a delegate-coalition structure. These methods and agendas contradicted WSF principles. Moreover, it was thought that an ESF in Britain in 2004 would dissipate energies from local projects and protests, while further dividing the anti-capitalist movement in the country, given widespread distrust towards those who were leading the bid.

As a result, a network of UK activists (especially from the Manchester and London Social Forums) launched a series of petitions criticizing the bid. When the ESF European assembly nevertheless accepted the bid, activists here then attempted to ‘Democratize the ESF’. They set out criteria for a democratic process, as minimum conditions for the event to go ahead in London. Many activists were being insulted and belittled at the London preparatory meetings, on grounds that they were not official delegates of organizations. They proposed that anyone should be able to participate.

Demands for a democratic process gained great support at Europe-wide assemblies but were difficult to implement back in Britain. The main organizers often demanded acceptance of specific proposals – saying that otherwise the Greater London Authority or trade unions would not contribute funds. Control of resources, along with a claim to speak for others, operated as political blackmail. Such manoeuvres precluded discussion on the content and process, let alone on how the ESF could help to create ‘another world’.

After several weeks of being denounced as ‘wreckers’, critics started to call themselves ‘the horizontals’, as distinct from ‘the verticals’ who were controlling the preparatory process. Such terms expressed divergent political models or cultures.



Conflict of cultures

According to a prevalent model of Left politics, the main task is mass mobilization as spectacle. People must be ‘mobilized’ to attend rallies, to engage in cheerleading for struggles, to shout slogans, and the rest. In this way, the people can be persuaded to support predetermined political demands, by gaining endorsements from official representatives. Speakers pose only those questions whose answers they already know. Practical alternatives to capitalist forms can be debated now, but their realization must wait, for ‘socialism’ or ‘the revolution’. Logistical requirements can be treated simply as technical–instrumental tasks for delegation to specialists, even contracted out to private companies. Spectacular mobilizations provide an ideal arena for selling party newspapers and recruiting members.

According to a different perspective, the anti-capitalist movement provides opportunities to create horizontal networks, to inspire creativity, to express new aspirations, and thus to mobilize practical alternatives. We move forward while asking questions about where we are going and how (a paraphrase of the Zapatistas’ motto, *camminando preguntar*). From this perspective, the ESF process should maximize opportunities for political exchange among individual participants, thus leading to participatory collective action.⁴ Logistical tasks provide an opportunity to develop collective skills, livelihoods and dignity of activists, especially for a layer of flexibilized or marginalized workers.

Horizontals developed proposals for implementing their vision through the ESF preparatory process. For example, web designers proposed websites which would facilitate interaction. Indymedia collectives proposed Nomad, a low-cost DIY technology for transmitting simultaneous translation. However, their efforts were marginalized by the main organizers, paradoxically, in the name of ‘efficiency’. Although some outsourcing would have been necessary, the briefs for such contracts were controlled by GLA staff. Likewise, when the ESF employed officer workers, they were managed by GLA staff.

As a result, the official ESF demobilized potential resources from anti-capitalist movements, in contrast to the familiar resource-mobilization of activist networks. The organizers became even more dependent upon scarce financial donations from trade unions and the GLA. Organizing the ESF was reduced to a managerial and entrepreneurial task.

These divergent political cultures have been analysed by Vincenzo Ruggiero, an Italian sociologist based in the UK:

Such vertical organizations have characteristics of economic enterprises and bureaucracies. Their concept of mobilization is linked with the professional efficiency that their leaders promote. The growth of the organization coincides with a greater strength of its leadership and the overall anonymous strength of its membership. As partners of an economic-type consortium, the membership provide an indirect resource, whose role is less to influence decisions than to strengthen the leadership's capacity to implement them. The verticals require a delegated participation which gives the leadership a symbolic support (and often a financial one) and strengthens their bargaining power, both public and private. Transparency and democracy will come in the future but only if they are renounced in the present. Another world may be possible, but only as a future reward for current deprivation.

By contrast, the horizontals draw their strength from the participatory intensity of their members and from the breadth of networks which their activities inform. In such movements, their very existence depends on the decisions, values and lifestyles adopted by those who participate. Non-delegated actions shape and consolidate their choices, values and lifestyles. Such movements take shape while trying out practices; their participants' identity is not pre-set but rather is shaped through actions. Liberation is simultaneous with action: to change the world and to change life are co-existing aims.⁵

Although such a conflict of political cultures may be inevitable, the fundamental problem has been a monocultural domination. This can be illustrated by four examples: star speakers, thematic priorities, publicity text, and session formats.

At the European assembly in December 2003, amid a power struggle over whether or how the ESF would go ahead in London the next year, an entire session was spent discussing an 'urgent' item: a proposal to invite a list of international speakers. Proponents gave two reasons: because the speakers might be booked up far in advance, and because such famous names would help 'to tell the people of London what the ESF is about'. Although few participants objected to the specific names, many resented the proposal because it was shaping the ESF as a spectacle, favouring some political perspectives and pre-empting alternatives. The proponents apparently could not hear those concerns.

To set the main themes of the ESF 2004, a Programme Working Group was formed from delegates from around Europe, who soon encountered first-hand the UK-level difficulties. For example many European delegates emphasized the future of the EU as a key focus for strategic debate, yet the UK verticals belittled such issues as having little interest in Britain. Afterwards Italian delegates made the following comment:

the more powerful groups in the British delegation... attempted to impose their own themes, 'axes' and 'titles', were constantly unwilling to enter into real dialogue, tried to impose their own way, were often arrogant or used blackmail, repeatedly refusing to accept decisions and titles which had already been decided hours before.... In general terms, the work is still affected by the provincialism of the British contingent and their distance from the rest of Europe: they believe the matters they are dealing with in their 'province' are of universal importance; and the whole thing is aggravated by their incapacity or unwillingness to discuss things.⁶

In the UK publicity leaflet published in July, international Social Forums were promoted as self-congratulatory spectacle: 'The ESF emerged from the spectacular success of the WSF... The ESF is a festival of resistance ... celebrating the global movement.'

More fundamentally, the standard session format provides little scope for direct human interactions. Proposals for more imaginative formats were dismissed by the main organizers. Eventually they received nearly 1,000 proposals, which had to be reduced to approximately 120, given the scarce facilities available. Many proposals were merged by their proposers by contacting related groups. Perhaps this process extended Europe-wide networks, though creative exchange was limited by intense competition for facilities and speaker slots.

Recognizing such limitations early on, by spring 2004 numerous activists had decided to create self-organized, autonomous spaces in which the WSF principles could be more readily implemented. No registration fees were charged at some venues. These initiatives adopted various slogans: 'Alternative ESF', 'Beyond ESF', 'Life despite Capitalism'. The latter title was consciously contrasted to 'Life after Capitalism', with its stereotypical dichotomy of before/after. In parallel with these initiatives, some horizontals persevered in attending the official ESF meetings, to pursue opportunities for alternative methods. What does this mean for future prospects? Special efforts will be needed if future Social Forum events are to help show how 'another world is possible' in practice.

Notes

1. See Massimo de Angelis, 'The 1st London Social Forum: What We Have Achieved', www.londonsocialforum.org.
2. See Peter Waterman, 'First Reflections on the 3rd World Social Forum, February 2003', <http://hub-project.org/news/2003/02/69.php>, also www.antenna.nl/~waterman; Naomi Klein, 'What Happened to the New Left? The WSF 2003', February 2003, <http://hubproject.org/news/2003/02/69.php>.
3. Jai Sen, 'The Long March to Another World: Porto Alegre – Hyderabad – Porto Alegre – Two, Three, Many New Social Forums?', <http://www.tni.org>; also in Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar and Peter Waterman, eds, *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, 2003, www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html.
4. See Phil McLeish, 'The Promise of the European Social Forum', November 2003, www.commoner.org.uk/01-12groundzero.htm.
5. Vincenzo Ruggiero, 'Orizzontali e verticali', *Carta d'Identità* 15, April 2004, pp. 46–9.
6. Italian delegation, 10th June report on the ESF Programme Group meeting in Paris, 29–30 May 2004, by Gianfranco Benzi, Piero Bernocchi, Maurizio Biosi, Alessandra Mecozzi and Franco Russo, trans. Massimo de Angelis, <http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=HorizontalDocumentIndex>, see under Collective Memory of the Process.

Other websites

Encuentro 1997, www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3849/encounter2dx.html.
 ESF official site, www.fse-esf.org.
 ESF horizontals and autonomous spaces, www.esf2004.net.
 Indymedia, www.indymedia.org.uk, with a directory of affiliates worldwide.
 People's Global Action, www.agp.org.
 WSF, www.consultafsm.org.br.

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