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## **The 2003 European Social Forum: Where next for the anti-capitalist movement?**

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It is Paris in late Autumn 2003. It is the European Social Forum (ESF), the very epicentre of the new anti-capitalism. Here is where the future of European resistance to global neoliberalism is being forged. I take myself off to an exciting sounding session – one of forty or so to choose from at this particular hour on the last full day. This one is encouragingly entitled ‘Cultural Action by and for Young People as a Tool to Transform Society’. I follow a gaggle of fashionably grungy Italian *disobedienti* into a marquee. So many have come to hear so few (we are about 600 inside). One can cut the sense of expectation with a *baguette*. But wait: this doesn’t look so promising. Down at the front sit three middle aged men in full M&S ‘casual’ garb. For the next forty minutes, excitement gives way to tedium, as one by one the speakers tell us how various French *Maries* (town halls) help ‘youth’ to articulate itself in these difficult times. We are told that rock bands regularly receive subsidies from them; that they hold seminars on social exclusion; that marginalised groups are able to use the facilities of the *Marie* to hold meetings and so forth. They tell us about the exhibitions of photos they hold, and how members of the community are invited to talk to ‘youth’ about how it can overcome obstacles to self-advancement. It goes on. I look around the room. People are frowning, though they seem too overcome by this well-meaning, if over-bearing *discours* to know whether to yawn, yell or leave. I leave. On the way out I encounter a ‘Russian Marxist’. He tells me that these are ‘nice people’, but he has ‘come to find revolution’. I nod in sympathy. We are in the wrong place.

Cut back two days earlier. There is a session on the ‘The World Social Forum from Porto Alegre to Mumbai: Dynamics and Ambitions of the Social Forums Movement’. It features one of the founders of the World Social Forum (WSF), Bernard Cassen. Cassen is delivering a plea for the politicisation of the WSF process so that it might, well, *do* something, *achieve* something, *be* something. His view is that the social forum process needs to constitute itself formally as a political movement, with a manifesto, permanent offices, elected representatives, indeed the full garb political scientists associate with organisational ‘maturity’.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that this is an unfashionable view with the audience and with the other members of the panel, who luxuriate in the anarchic disaggregation of the Social Forum. By the end of the session he can be seen cradling his head in his hands, dreaming perhaps of setting up (yet) another organisation that might be able to confront the corporate dominance of the planet. As the audience and participants move cheerily off, he by contrast looks weary. After three years of intense involvement with the social forum process, he does not look like someone who is looking forward to being involved for another three.

I may have been unlucky. I may have misjudged the nature of the sessions I chose to attend or not. I may have taken away an unrepresentative impression of the ESF. But I cannot recall any session filling me with puzzlement about the social forum process and what it ‘represents’. Thinking that the social forum would be at the very least be ‘political’, at the end of three days I could not point at anything that would make the avatars of contemporary capitalism more worried than usual. A cartoon in *Le Monde* on the Friday of the Forum said it all. It showed a group of executives sitting round a table. One of them asks: ‘What are we going to do about the

*alter-mondialistes*'? Another replies: 'We can always sell them stuff'. Indeed they can, and they will. What has gone wrong here – if it has?

### **The Social Forums: How? Why?**

For those not completely *au fait* with the social forum 'process', some background is required. The WSF was the brainchild of *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the Brazilian Worker's Party (PT) led by 'Lula' da Silva, formerly leader of the opposition, now President of the country. The idea was to provide an alternative to the World Economic Forum (WEF), which normally meets in Davos, Switzerland. The WEF is a private, corporate only affair that draws the big companies along for discussions on 'world affairs' – for which read 'lobbying' on behalf of corporate interests. The idea of the WSF was to provide an alternative forum, one that gives voice to 'global civil society' (Cassen, 2003). By the normal standards of institutional development the WSF has been an enormous success. The first WSF in 2001 was a rather hastily put together affair, but by the 2003 event it had become slick and heavily mediated, providing a platform for some of the best known figures on the anti-capitalist 'circuit' (Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Walden Bello, etc). It also gave rise more or less spontaneously to the idea of continental, regional, national and indeed local 'social forums'. The idea would be to create a vast interlocking network of activists that would be 'horizontal', democratic and participatory.

The first ESF was held in Florence last year and provided the yardstick for this year's effort. Despite complaints of being undemocratic and being in thrall to big institutional players such as the Italian trades unions and political parties, the reception of the event on seems have been largely positive. Such feelings may well be heightened in the wake of Paris which by contrast seemed beset with difficulty. Firstly there is the question of logistics. Florence was held on a single site in the middle of the city. The Paris ESF was dispersed across four sites (La Villette, Bobigny, St-Denis and Ivry-sur-Seine). Even allowing for the excellent transport links in and around Paris, it was difficult to avoid having to spend hours shuttling from one place to another (and back again). Secondly, the 'material' edge of Florence was singularly lacking in Paris. Few trade unions showed up, and those that did seemed lost in the vortex of 'citizens' groupings', Leninist parties and single-issue groups. At the much anticipated session between Alex Callinicos and Toni Negri on 'Working Class or Multitude?', which drew perhaps a thousand participants, one looked around in vain for someone who appeared even vaguely 'working class' – as opposed to part of the 'multitude'.<sup>2</sup> If there were any horny-handed 'toilers' present, then they were lost in a sea of Peruvian hand-knitted woollen hats, carefully coiffed dreads and 'combat' threads. Thirdly, the 'political' edge of Florence seemed lost in amidst the carnival-esque flavour of Paris. Many sessions were overtly apolitical or focused on spiritual healing or some other introspective process of coming to terms with the world. There were sessions on Yoga, on overcoming stress, on 'Levels of Self-Consciousness and Self-Realisation', 'Great Operas', and one intriguingly entitled 'Rivers, Water and Flying Fish Citizens'. In the meantime the anarchists and 'libertarians' had moved 'off', deciding that their interests and perspectives were better catered for at an 'alternative ESF'.

The above image illustrates the dilemma of the Social Forum process. On the evidence of the ESF it seems all too logical to draw a negative correlation between the degree to which it is 'social' and participatory and the degree to which it is able to effect a significant mobilisation. At one level this is a question of overload. As mentioned above, at any one time at the Paris ESF one could have attended one of thirty or forty sessions. At this level of disaggregation and participation it is simply impossible to get a sense of what a collective politics of resistance let alone a collective 'project' might look like. For many of course this is precisely the point: an 'alter-politics' is (or should be) a politics of disaggregation. There are so many people, so many voices, so many positions, so many minorities to encompass that it could not be otherwise without losing the losing the character of the social forum itself. In addition the forums have to be

horizontal, democratic, participatory, inclusive (etc.). In this sense they are regularly contrasted with 'verticalist' ambitions of those who want to create a party - or even better - use an *existing* party as a launch pad for an assault on power. The UK Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have been identified by direct action collectives such as Brighton based SchNEWS, as the arch-villains of the piece<sup>3</sup>; but then so too is anyone craving a 'crystallisation' of the movement of movements behind a set of demands or a shared manifesto. For 'horizontal' libertarians Cassen is one step away from those who such as Callinicos who urge 'the building of the Party'.

And so the social forum 'process' goes on in its relentless quest for yet greater inclusivity and participation. Each year (we can anticipate) there will be a larger convergence than the last. Why stop at Yoga, Great Operas and faith healing? What is to stop people holding sessions on the Atkins Diet, on scientology, or pyramid selling? Very little, it seems. As long as the social forum remains resolutely inclusive and apolitical, there is nothing to stop anyone proposing anything. Why not have McDonald's providing the food (suitably 'localised') and Nike providing the T-shirts ('ESF: Just do it!')? Isn't there some alternative to the endless, sprawling Camden Market-isation of the social forum? On the other hand, with the 2004 Social Forum scheduled to take place in London, perhaps the Camden Market analogue is entirely appropriate. Where better to promote the social forum as commodity-spectacle than at the home of the 'alter-commodity'?

### **Where next for the social forum movement?**

Let us assume for a moment that the social forum process is actually part of a global anti-capitalist movement. If so, those who are actively committed to it are faced with a choice. It can either become political (which it currently is not), or it can remain social. If it remains social, then the most that can be said for it is that it is a welcoming, heterodox space of temporary convergence. Think of it as the anti-capitalist equivalent of the Glastonbury Festival: a safe, agreeable, funky place to be for a few days before we trudge back to 'normal' life. It would be something to look forward to much as we look forward to our holidays or to some other respite from TV, stress and boredom. To be clear, this is not a value-less role, just as holidays are not value-less. On the other hand most of us don't usually think of holidays as a challenge to the logic of capitalist accumulation, and consequently neither would the social forums be thought of in such terms either. But what if, as seems to be the case, activists demand a social forum that can provide a meaningful convergence of ideas and suggestions for combating neoliberalism? What if it were *political*?

One of the problems of the current impasse is that many activists are prone to confuse political *logics* with political *strategies*. This in turn has infected the discourse on the future of the social forum in an unhelpful, indeed obstructive way. The two logics are horizontal activism or 'disorganisation' on the one side, and that of vertically organised movements or parties of a more or less democratic kind on the other. When they are democratic, parties resemble something like the German Greens; when they are authoritarian they resemble the sects or groupuscles parodied by Monty Python in *A Life of Brian*. As seems clear, the social forum process is determinedly horizontal in orientation and likely to remain so, even in the face of prominent figures who demand that it become more 'professional' (for which read: more like a vertically organised political party). But how activists are organised does not tell us much of use about what *strategy* is to be pursued for confronting entrenched power. Here, on the contrary, we seem stuck in the ancient and entirely unhelpful dichotomy between 'revolution' on the one hand and 'reform' on the other.

Quite how such a simplistic distinction survived into the analysis of twentieth century political radicalism let alone that of the twenty-first is anyone's guess; but the reality is that the anti-capitalist movement cannot be meaningfully constituted on the basis of the validity of either term. If it is to be radical and political then it has to think of itself and be thought of as 'transformative', as working to confront and change the present in the name of 'another world'. The reality is that people's views differ on what that better world is. As the social forum testifies,

there are myriad visions of how the world is to become a better, cleaner, safer healthier, and, yes, even more spiritual place. It is for this reason that to maintain anything like the inclusivity we see at the social forums 'horizontal' is a basic requirement of the movement if it is to remain true to the spirit that has animated the social forum process so far (political parties were banned from the first WSF, for example). On the other hand, the fact that it is horizontal does not make it transformative. It makes it *inclusive*. To make it transformative it would need to support, promote, nurture forms of activism that directly confront the ever-intensifying concentration of power in the hands of the elites. It needs to be reassembled as a place that spawns activism, not just a carnival that pays witness to it. It needs to foster, encourage and make possible the multiplication of forms of resistance that challenge power, exclusion and representation at all levels – not just locally, but nationally and globally. From this point of view a politicised social forum would facilitate *political* action through generating alliances, affinities and associations that aim at querying, contesting and confronting entrenched power. It would promote convergences that remained consistent with the horizontal and network nature of contemporary activism, but convergences that were not merely 'euphoric', that dissipate the moment the carnival packs up. It needs convergences that will endure, grow and multiply and remultiply in unpredictable ways – as well as in ways familiar to radical activism. Those engaged in the social forum process need to remember what it is there for, what activists want from it, what hopes they have for it. But above all, the social forums needs to engage and re-engage with the enemy: neoliberal capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

So at one level Cassen is right. The social forum has in a sense grown away from its rationale, which was to provide an alternative space for thinking the capitalist 'after'. Where, however, 'horizontal' activists are right is that this needs to be done from the inside out, and without threatening or undermining the autonomy of its constituent parts through the erection of some professionalised movement-structure. The social forum cannot in this sense *be* the anti-capitalist movement: how could it be without immediately alienating the various molecules that compose it, each with its own vision, its own notional Good Life to promote? What the social forum can do is *facilitate* the elaboration of alternatives and alliances. Those who care about it can insist that it is a political laboratory for the creation of innovative, imaginative and engaging answers to the demanding questions people bring to it – not just a catch-all celebration of alternative lifestyles and identities of the kind it threatens to become. As Slavoj Žižek (1997) notes, the multiplication of lifestyles and identities ('inclusivity') is *not* itself a threat to capitalism: far from it. It makes capitalism seem like the very ground of toleration and benevolence ('I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmon-eee').

In these terms it has to be insisted that the (dreaded) 'crystallisation' of political demands, even if only in a crudely negative register ('*Ya Basta!*'; 'Down with NAFTA'; 'Abolish Debt'; 'Blair Out') is *not* a threat to anti-capitalism or to the social forum process. It is *the very condition* upon which alliance, association and affinity are made possible and can make sense. From this point of view an anti-capitalist social forum should at least aim at the *generation* of an anti-capitalist politics through fostering initiatives to confront and transform the structure of existing society. It may be a 'minor' politics; it may be in the form of temporary and shifting coalescences. It will certainly be one that will require the vanities and posturing not only of well-equipped groups, but also of more discrete and 'virtuous' entities to be put to one side, at least temporarily and if necessary for 'strategic' reasons. It will also require a major effort to reconnect with those who seem in danger of being left behind: trade unions, 'single issue' activists, indeed the very many ordinary people who demonstrate an interest in the radical critique of elite politics (the six million purchasers of *Stupid White Men* and *No Logo* for a start). But without having as a principal objective the generation of a transformative politics the social forum merely condemns itself to containment as 'carnival' and regurgitation as parodic commodity. 'ESF: Just do it!'

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cassen's role in the birth of the WSF and views on its future are outlined in Cassen, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Callinicos is one of the leading figures of the SWP. His views are summarised in Callinicos (2003) and Callinicos (2002). Toni Negri is a leading Italian autonomist thinker and, with Michael Hardt, author of Empire, a much discussed theoretical work on the nature of global capitalism and the possibility of resistance to it (Hardt and Negri, 2000). The positions of each are briefly summarised in Tormey (2004), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> SchNEWS accused Globalise Resistance, one of the principal anti-capitalist 'umbrella' groups in the UK of being a SWP front. See their pamphlet *Monopolise Resistance* which is available for download from their website [www.schnews.co.uk](http://www.schnews.co.uk).

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the different 'logics' of anti-capitalist politics see Tormey (2004), chapter five. For a more detailed account of how the social forum process could generate a radically transformative politics of the kind being described here, see McLeish (2004).

## References

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