

HOW OPEN ? THE CHALLENGE OF DOGMA

THE FORUM AS LOGO, THE FORUM AS RELIGION : SCEPTICISM OF THE INTELLECT, OPTIMISM OF THE WILL

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During the third world meeting of the WSF in Porto Alegre in January 2003, a new initiative named 'WSFItself' organised a workshop on power relations within the World Social Forum. An exercise during the workshop required participants to imagine the kinds of policies that could be adopted that would kill — or certainly, cripple — the Forum. In its words, the 'toxics.' The idea was to reveal, through this exercise in intense negativism, what needed to *not* be done. But as a participant, I gradually became aware that the exercise gave me an insight into some of what is, in fact, already taking place but is not being 'read' given the positivist lenses through which we normally tend to see the world around us, including the Forum.²

In some senses, this essay is a continuation of that exercise, of trying to *read* the Forum. I have written this essay because even as I celebrate the fact of the Forum and what it is doing and might be capable of, I also believe that there are several tendencies taking shape within it that are deeply negative and contradictory to its very spirit. Most centrally, they include the Forum becoming a commodity and a brand name and its motto a logo and the beginning of a kind of worldwide franchising; and an increasing struggle for control of the Forum. In large part this is happening because the very success of the WSF as an enterprise has, as Roberto Bissio put it, "created a power (and a value) around the logo, whether we like it or not. And this has to be recognised and acknowledged, since denial of reality would become manipulative."³

But the list goes deeper. Even if, in principle, it should be possible to address (and arrest) these trends, they are accompanied by other more structural factors. These include the related fact that the actually existing Forum is not the 'open space' that it is said to be, but is instead highly structured and, in several dimensions, exclusive. Among other features, the Forum — though declaring itself 'open' — is in reality 'open' only to particular sections: to those who already agree with certain policy formulations, which largely limits it to those who can broadly be said to be on 'the left', and beyond this, increasingly, to those who are willing to declare in writing their adherence to the given policy formulations. The Forum also discriminates against individuals, as I explain subsequently. All this adds up to a rising dogmatism and an organisational fundamentalism that is a hallmark of old politics.

In short, we are already witnessing the crystallisation and rise not only of corporatism but also of *orthodoxy* and *dogma*, which I suggest constitutes a fundamental challenge to the future of the WSF. The WSF is showing distinct signs of behaving like a tightly controlled corporation, a movement, or an organised religion — not an open space. This is reflected by, among other things, a growing discourse of 'we' and 'they' in the WSF International Council and its counterpart bodies at national levels, such as the WSF India Organising Committee. The leadership of the Forum at both these levels is also becoming increasingly strict, drawing increasingly sharp boundaries, and along with this, denying the existence of grey areas in issues. It is, therefore, in effect, closing entry to and exchange with the vast majority of people who have not yet fully made up their minds about all issues. The Forum is therefore gradually becoming a place *only* for gatherings of the committed and converted.

All this is not good news for those of us who believe in openness and in the possibilities of other ways of doing things. Going back to the approach of the WSFItself workshop, even if these

trends do not as yet spell its death, I feel they are reason enough to suggest that we urgently and deeply look at what is happening in the WSF as it attempts to globalise itself in a highly volatile world context and especially since it is at a crucial stage of unfolding and self-realisation.

Even though I am deeply worried about what I see taking place in the Forum today, I still hold to my earlier argument that the crystallisation of the WSF is one of the more significant developments of the past many decades, and perhaps of the past century.⁴ I therefore believe that all of us who share some or all of this position, need to urgently look at what needs to be done.

In this article, I attempt to both analyse what I see happening and also make some suggestions for a more creative future. In particular, I propose that the Forum must recognise the fact of grey areas and open itself to those who are concerned about the empires it has chosen to challenge but may not yet have clear positions on them. To the opposite of weakening it, this can be one of its most significant contributions in today's world of growing fundamentalism.

The Forum needs also to explicitly recognise that individuals play myriad roles in social life and transformation, and that modes of civil and political association are changing; and it must abandon the discriminatory policies it has institutionalised against them. Its central historical role must remain to encourage and enable free and open debate and not to overtly or covertly build a world movement of organisations of The Left. Those who are today concerned about the possibilities of movements taking over the Forum are, in fact, only moving in what in generic terms is the *same* direction, but via a different path; and the growing and almost knee-jerk reactions of some among the leadership to criticism and opposition, are only leading the Forum to lose its soul.

Fundamentals

I believe the primary significance of the Forum lies in the *political culture* it represents and is attempting to explore, and that its main contribution is in *political-strategic* terms. The Forum, as argued by those who initiated it, is not an organisation or a movement, nor a world federation, but a *space* — and to boot, a relatively non-directed space, from and within which movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and find space to take forward their work and their visions, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally.⁵ Literally, a free space, for free thought, where people can dream of other worlds, individually and collectively and struggle to forge ways of achieving their dreams, or to use Marx's term, a 'space for human self development.'

The original organisers of the Forum saw their task as being not the building of movement, or the coordination of opinion and position, but simply as the building of space — literally and metaphorically — where free exchange is possible, and making it available as widely as possible. This is most resonantly expressed in the Forum's Charter of Principles.⁶ A principal architect of the Forum has recently issued an interesting note reflecting on 'the Forum as space, the Forum as movement,' and has come out strongly against seeing the Forum — the space — as being primarily occupied by movements.⁷

The real 'success' of the Forum is that it is making possible a scale of talking across boundaries — of cross-fertilisation — that has rarely been even dreamt of before, and contributing to building a culture of open debate across conventional walls and boundaries. The real 'alternative' it offers is showing that it is possible to create, and to sustain, a non-directed space. In my understanding, helping to *bridge* old politics and the new — in different countries and historical contexts at the same time in history — is arguably one of the most crucial but most difficult challenges for the Forum, and quite possibly also one of its historically most important.⁸

In principle, the concept of the Forum challenges us to think and to act freely. But it therefore also demands that we keep the space free of control, defend that freedom and the space, and also, importantly, ourselves resist the temptation to control it. The Forum, as it takes place, is thus a challenge not only to mainstream, orthodox, and conservative thinking and practice, but also to all those organisations and initiatives that claim to be working in terms of 'alternatives.' It implies, and requires, new cultures of politics.

But this is precisely one of the areas where it is already showing signs of imploding.

The External Challenge

The WSF has grown a great deal over its first three years since Porto Alegre in Brazil in January 2001. It has moved from being a major annual event each January in Porto Alegre, timed to polemically challenge the annual World *Economic* Forum held at Davos, Switzerland, to being an efflorescence and celebration across the world that has now gone far beyond the question of challenging neoliberal globalisation alone.⁹ And in terms of numbers, the Forum has grown impressively — from 25–30,000 at the first world meeting to 50–60,000 at the second, to 100,000 at the third.

But it is not just a question of numbers. This growth has to be understood in the backdrop of the world context. 9/11 took place in the same year as the first Forum and gave an impatient imperial power the opportunity to unleash its so-called ‘war against terrorism’, to link this ‘war against terrorism’ with the war for so-called ‘free trade’, and for its President to declare that “Those who are not with us are against us.” The numbers attending the Forum, which has explicitly opposed this war and this ‘free trade’, have continued to dramatically grow, in spite of — and in the face of — this threat.

Two years later, and even though now increasingly challenged in terms of moral authority, capitalist globalisation is still riding triumphant across the globe even as the economy of its heart unravels from within. To achieve and sustain this, nation-states across the world are relentlessly tightening ‘security’ and surveillance measures, supposedly in defence against those labelled terrorists but also aimed at protestors of state politics and market operations. And the self-styled leaders of the so-called ‘free world’ are meeting in increasingly remote parts of the world, walling themselves off from ordinary people, defending themselves with their militia.

Accompanying this, there are periodic signs that Europe is moving to the Right, and Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalisms are rampant in different parts of the world, intertwining with variants of economic fundamentalism. The US is in the firm grip of not just the Right but a hard Right. And in 2003 we have seen the ‘coalition of the coerced’ defiantly launch its war on Iraq in the face of world opinion, as an obvious widening of the reach of its empire.

Equally, and concurrently, other ‘coalitions of the coerced’ are also pushing hard — to bring in the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), to open all of the Americas to free trade and to bring in major changes at the WTO. If their efforts succeed, the results will represent major advances in the neoliberal project. In all this — all done in the name of freedom and liberalisation — the deep shadows of imperialism and authoritarianism are evident.¹⁰

Certain developments in India have been equally discouraging. In early 2002, India experienced a brutal anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat. Later in the same year, voters of the state returned to power, with a landslide victory, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that is widely seen as having been responsible for the communal violence, and its neo-fascist Chief Minister. In late 2003, the same party won elections in three more states in north India, routing its opponents. These remain crucial developments even if elections in the bitterly contested and brutalised state of Kashmir in late 2002 yielded a new, moderate government, and during 2003, the Congress (I), a more centrist party, won state elections in another state and also in the small state of Delhi, within which the capital is located. Although public and international reaction to the Gujarat experiment forced the BJP to move to taking a more centrist programme after the pogrom, the shadows of fascism still threaten India since its allied ‘popular’ organisations see Gujarat as a model for what should happen in the rest of the country. If this were to take place, it would have worldwide repercussions.

Against this grim scene, the developments in Brazil and in global transnational space over this past year have been encouraging. In 2002, the Brazilian presidential elections brought Lula, the leader of the Workers’ Party to the Presidency after a long campaign and four attempts. Among many other initiatives, Lula has stressed that his government’s foreign policy sees the building of relations across the South as a key element, and especially with three major countries (South Africa, India, and China).¹¹

The massive and sustained demonstrations across the North over the past few years, sometimes coordinated and sometimes country-specific, along with demonstrations in many countries of the South, and the growing sense of self-confidence of global civil movement, have also been important indications of another politics and of other possibilities. The recent toppling of the president in Bolivia by a popular movement against the exploitation of the country's oil is a dramatic suggestion that new barriers are being broken.

How does the Forum fit into all this? Most importantly perhaps, the WSF has struck at the level of *meaning* along with the struggle that is still emerging across the globe against neoliberal globalisation, it has made resonantly clear that the TINA (There Is No Alternative) dictum does not hold good, and that there *is* world wide resistance to neoliberal globalisation and its attendant depredations; and that there *are* alternatives. And, that people all over the world are now mobilising to *live* those alternatives.

The challenge for the Forum is now to envision how to relate to the extraordinarily fluid and volatile context that we today live in, and how it can most effectively realise the potential of a world transformative power that it seems to be gathering. It needs to consider what role/s it can play in translating these possibilities into real social and political alternatives; how, to use Teivo Teivainen's terminology, to remain primarily an arena, and not become a leading actor.¹² This ambiguity of identity and role has been its strength, and a secret of its magic, as is the case with many social and political actors. But it is going to have to reinvent itself, as it constantly tends to become more an actor than an arena.

An important indication of how the WSF is working to both globalise itself and to relate to the wider world situation is its decision to hold its next world meeting in India — on the opposite side of planet Earth and on the continent where imperial interests have now so decisively landed.¹³

The Internal Challenge

But aside from this major 'external' challenge, there are several *internal* challenges that also demand its attention. In an earlier version of this essay, I have argued that these include a wide range of issues — including whether there is, and should there be, only one *World Social Forum*.¹⁴ In this version, I take up only some of these issues, referring to the Forum not only in Brazil but also in India — since this is the country where the next world meeting of the Forum is to take place and that therefore constitutes a major laboratory for the alternative globalisation that it is attempting. I discuss these challenges in terms of a series of descriptive metaphors intended to highlight particular problems.

The Forum as Market, the Forum as Alienation

As many others have pointed out, despite all its other virtues, the Forum is becoming a huge, unmanageable and *alienating* event that is suffering from gigantism.¹⁵ It has become a place of a thousand events, but with too few transversal connections, and not a real meeting of minds. It is tending to become a highly competitive market place for ideas and therefore falling far short of meeting its potential. As much from the sheer numbers of events, this problem arises from the undeclared emphasis in the Forum on private, individualised, separate initiative and enterprise, and from the lack of prioritisation and premium given to the collective and to sharing, between participants, and between organisers and between participants.

In the theorisation of the Forum as 'open space', the basic but undeclared assumption is that 'another invisible hand is possible': that if people come together in a large open space, they will necessarily interact. To a substantial extent, this does seem to be happening. This 'self-organisation', individually and collectively, is increasingly seen to be the strength — and the magic — of the Forum.¹⁶

But individuals and organisations belonging to particular streams of thought and action, or coming from different cultures and language-groups, also tend to stick together, especially in large, overwhelming experiences such as the Forum, unless very major efforts are made by the organisers

to help participants to overcome the differences. One consequence is that large numbers of events are therefore in reality not 'open' to others, because of language problems. Another is that most meetings speak to themselves, and although some authors refer to the Forum as reflecting the web (with events and activities being hyperlinked to each other but in the real world), in reality most events happen autonomously with little or no 'online' exchange of content.

Although the Brazil Organising Committee has had volunteer translators and helpdesks available in many parts of the Forum and crucial information available in several languages, and from the January 2003 meeting is now also developing a post facto 'systematisation' (documentation) of events,¹⁷ there have so far been no arrangements for real-time transverse sharing of ideas, let alone discussion. The International Secretariat does not even respond to suggestions that it should consider creating a discussion space on the Forum's website. It almost seems as if this is not in the Forum's culture, as presently defined by its leadership. While there is reason to argue that this sharing best happens through spontaneous self-organised initiatives, this is no reason for not making any such provisions at all, and becomes a case in point of the emphasis in the Forum on *private enterprise* and the lack of prioritisation given to *the collective*.

Although there are some signs that this might be changing, these tendencies have been only accentuated by the tendency of the organisers and their close advisers, both in Brazil and India, made up of a small number of people, to *control* things: by making opaque closed-door decisions about key organisational issues, by reserving what it considers 'sensitive' roles to its own members (such as who takes part in roundtable discussions with political parties), and thereby tending to act as a vanguard and politburo.¹⁸ Equally, as Naomi Klein and others have pointed out, the Forum is also increasingly coming to be dominated by 'big events' and big names.¹⁹ All these factors play their own roles in emphasising a certain culture that 'separates out' participants and produces an alienating experience, tending to make the events discrete and isolated rather than a meeting of minds that the Forum has the potential of being.

The Forum as Event, not World Process

This problem of alienation, disintegration, and commodification is also reproducing itself at world scale. The WSF started off as an event in January 2001. Inspired by its success, the organisers — the Brazil Organising Committee (BOC) — had the foresight to say, in the Charter of Principles they drafted for the Forum just three months later in April 2001, that "The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localised in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that 'another world is possible,' *it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.*"²⁰ And when the BOC formed the International Council (IC) shortly afterwards in June 2001, it had the vision to see that the main purpose of the Council was to "take the Forum to the world level."²¹ Consistent with this vision, the IC decided at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2002, to give a call for the organisation of what it called 'regional' and 'thematic' fora, from 2002 onwards.

A series of such meetings have now taken place — the Asian Social Forum, the first and second European Social Forums, the World Social Thematic Forum on Democracy, Human Rights, War, Drug Trafficking (held in Colombia), and others. But while it is good to see and understand this flowering as a manifestation of the globalisation of the WSF, each event — each 'Forum' — is taking place in an isolated way, virtually unrelated to the Fora that have already taken place or that are going to take place, other than looking ahead in a general way to the next 'world' social forum, or past to the last. Although this again seems to be changing in small ways through the 'systematisation' process, among others, as well as the working groups that the International Council is increasingly working through, between events — there seems as yet all too little or no exchange of experience, of strategy, of information, and no larger culture of being an international political process. The dominant impression that remains is therefore that the WSF is basically a giant meeting that takes place every January.

A small but encouraging sign in this area has been a shift in the Forum's language, and therefore perhaps, its self-perception. As opposed to before, when the term 'the World Social Forum' was reserved exclusively for the event each January, the International Secretariat is now referring to *all* WSF-related meetings as 'World Social Forums' in the plural, which is what some of us have been calling them for the past two years. But this remains a long way from achieving a large composite vision of the whole, and of its politics. If the leaders of the Forum have this vision, they are keeping it to themselves.

Even more negative than the actual lack of connection is the consequent implicit *denial* and *disintegration* of the political culture that the Forum in principle represents, and of a creative interpretation of this culture. One of the most important roles that the Forum is playing is providing a space where old movement and new movement, as well as other actors not necessarily in movement, can meet and speak. The task of the WSF as actor — here, as manifested in the International Secretariat and the International Council — therefore needs to be one of moving past organising big events to one of joining the struggle for forging a new vocabulary and grammar of world politics and of looking beyond the Forum as a *world event* to seeing it as a *world process*.

The Forum as Temple

How open is the Forum? Or, is the Forum, in fact, already highly mediated and structured at a number of levels, and further demarcated and gradually closed down, as happens in religion as it gets institutionalised?

The Forum's Charter of Principles says, "The meetings of the WSF are *always open to all those who wish to take part in them*, except organisations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action." (Clause 11, emphasis mine) In this section, I am concerned not with the second part of this clause but with the first, the assertion of openness.

Similarly, William Fisher and Thomas Ponniah (editors of the first major English language book on the World Social Forum)²² say:

"What is the WSF all about? It's not a social movement in and of itself. It's an open forum, and in that there's a commitment to its openness, to the participatory nature of it, to *open democracy*. That's the key convergence."²³

This is therefore the fundamental working assumption of participants at the Forum, the idea that it is best known for, the idea that spreads, and the idea that many researchers and observers (including this writer) most celebrate it for: the culture of openness. But it is precisely because this is such a fundamental aspect of what the Forum is about — and importantly, is *perceived* to be about and also what new politics is about, that we need to look at this question in some detail.

In his thought-provoking recent paper that I have already referred to, Chico Whitaker has compared the open space to a 'square' (presumably *praça* in Portuguese) clarifying that this is "an open but not a neutral space", and is open (only) to those "that oppose neoliberalism... For this reason, in order to join the square, one must agree with its Charter of Principles."²⁴

Samir Amin, one of the founders of the 'Anti-Davos meeting' in January 2000 and also one of the members of the WSF International Council, emphatically underlines this when he says that it is "... *not a forum that is open to everybody*. It has a charter to which participating organisations *must adhere*. They *must make it clear* that they are opposed to neoliberalism, not necessarily to capitalism. They *must also be opposed* to militarisation of globalisation ■ not necessarily imperialism, which means much more."²⁵

It is clear from this that the architects of the Forum have themselves never intended that the Forum should be *fully* open. Notwithstanding the formal provision in Clause 11 of the Charter, in reality, it is *only* open to those who have clear positions on certain issues and who 'agree' with the organisers. And important voices within the Forum's leadership are also clear that those who take part must 'adhere' to the rules they have set. The provision of 'openness' is thus reduced more to flourish than reality.

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Exploring Whitaker's metaphor a little further, we also need to recognise that no space that is created by someone ever exists by itself, uncontrolled. Just as all squares and *praças* have historically been and still are produced by someone — religious institutions, a feudal power, a landowner, and more recently, an institution of state or the market (and sometimes but rarely, of popular power) — so has the 'open space' that is the Forum. In this case, the 'square' that is the Forum has been created by the BOC, and is maintained by the IC.

Similarly, just as institutions have rules of their own, in the case of the WSF the Charter of Principles are the rules. More local interpretations provide even more specific rules, such as the 'WSF *India* Policy Statement' that was generated in India during 2002, modifying the Charter of Principles somewhat to suit local conditions.²⁶ These rules specify who is and is not welcome in the space, and either openly or covertly suggest the use of force to ensure that the rules are observed. For the most part it is hoped that people entering the space will observe the rules and that force will not be required.

Over time however, this can become problematic for the organisers. The debate presently going on within the WSF about the role and possible dominance of social movements is a case in point, and it is this that has led Chico Whitaker to produce his recent note, as above, which specifically cautions against the Forum being 'turned into' a movement.

The discrimination that I suggest further on in this essay, against individuals, is another specific 'problem' area. As it stands, the Charter of Principles declares that organisations are the *only* legitimate users of the space, and since they also constitute the Committee that oversees the space, they are therefore in effect its owners. Individuals are there only by the grace and license of these entities, and not by right. Insofar as the Forum discriminates against and marginalises individuals, it is again not the 'open space' that it claims to be.

Aside from rules as to who is and is not welcome to use the space, are also the important questions of position, the drawing of boundaries, and the tolerance (or intolerance) of grey areas and of internal contradictions. For instance, even while declaring elsewhere that it is "open to all", Clause 1 of the Charter of Principles makes clear that the WSF is, in fact, restricted — that it is a space (only) for

"... groups and movements of civil society *that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism*, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person."²⁷

If the Forum is indeed restricted to only those who already have a clear and defined position, how can it be considered to be 'open'? How is it 'open' if it is open to some and restricted and closed to others?

This is not only a moral and ethical question, but also a deeply political and strategic one. Can the struggle against neoliberalism be won only by those — and we remain a minority — who have already taken committed positions against it? In this struggle, as in any other, is it not necessary, at the minimum, to engage with those who are less sure of their positions on the issue (likely to be the vast majority), and to try and win them over — as well as to listen to their arguments to deepen our own analysis and strategy?

And beyond this, is it not necessary in such struggle to also create opportunities to attempt to engage some among those we disagree with or even oppose? Not necessarily within the space we create, but as part of the larger struggle? The question is not only of whether 'adherence' is necessary; it is also one of *how* it is to be achieved. In other words, it is a question of the culture of politics that the Forum seeks to follow and to promote.

A related argument applies to another important, and controversial clause of the Charter of Principles regarding armed groups. As earlier noted, Clause 11 says "The meetings of the WSF are always open to all those who wish to take part in them, *except organisations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action*." I am here concerned with the second part of the Clause. There have been concrete cases where this provision has been applied — where groups who have been judged

to be of this character, and even supporters of such movements, have been denied access to the 'open space' that the Forum is said to be.²⁸

While a literal interpretation of this provision ("organisations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action") may be acceptable as a boundary for such an initiative, it is tending to be applied equally to those who allow that it might be sometimes necessary for movements to use violence. But there are clearly contexts in which this question of violence in political action is much more grey, such as in the context of national liberation, resistance against oppression, or even self-defence or defence of common property, such as forests for forest dwellers. What the Forum is therefore doing is the classic 'conflation' in human rights discourse: in its opposition to "the use of violence as a means of social control by the state" (Clause 10), it is equating this to the actions of movements and individuals, in *all* circumstances.

Again, and especially given the mission it has taken up, is it not necessary for the Forum to, at the minimum, provide space that allows exchange with such groups? And on the other hand, what is the strategic purpose of closing the Forum to such exchange? Historically, it has especially been political parties and orthodox religions that have been built like this.

This becomes all the more relevant given that the WSF Organising Committees at national and international levels have members belonging to organisations affiliated to political parties whose history and track record makes clear that they are ambivalent on this question. If this clause is going to be applied to those wanting to *participate* in the Forum, then it must equally be applied — and with greater force — to those who wish to *lead* it.

Over the past six months, the leadership of the WSF has also taken some strong policy decisions in this area that have only reinforced the status quo. In India, it has already reached the stage where those wishing to become members of the newly formed 'India General Council' must first sign a form declaring their adherence to the Forum's Charter of Principles.²⁹ This development — which seems to be hardly known (and believed) in circles beyond the Forum — might be viewed by some as being merely an aberration. I believe however, that it reflects a deep-seated culture that is coming to the surface as the menu of the now 'global' Forum being interpreted locally.

There are many instances to indicate that this is the understood political culture of the Forum. At the Asian Social Forum in January 2003 held in Hyderabad, India, for instance, at a student-organised workshop on the impact of globalisation on domestic law, one of the co-organisers and speakers began his presentation by saying that when his co-students learned that he was preparing to critically look at the advantages as well as disadvantages of globalisation for domestic law, he was warned by 'them' that he should not be doing this because it 'went against the Forum's position.'

This policy is now not restricted to India. In June 2003, even as I was revising this paper, the IC of the WSF also took a decision to precisely this same effect, requiring written declarations of adherence for all those who wish to become members of the IC. (It is presumably also retroactive, and will require all existing members of the IC to also submit such declarations.) Consistent with this, the online form for registering events at the Mumbai Forum requires those applying to declare 'Yes/No' as to whether they are willing to adhere to the Forum's Charter. This extraordinary requirement — reminiscent of the requirement of the US Government for visa applicants to declare whether or not they are members of any communist organisation — is clearly coercive in nature. (The consequence for those who have dared to say 'No' remains to be seen — and should be closely analysed by those undertaking the systemisation of the Forum.)

In short, the world (social forum) is being rendered in black and white, with no spaces for shades of grey. If this is so, what is the difference between the Forum and any other ideologically driven organisation, such as a political party or an organised religion?

In other words, there are many signs that the WSF is fast becoming a *closed* space, reserved for the committed and converted alone. And that 'the Forum' is becoming like a party or organised religion with its own leaders and priests and with its own congregation.

In a major paper earlier this year, analysing the dynamics of the Forum, Boaventura de Sousa Santos put forward the important proposition that conventional social and political processes

create 'absences', through marginalisation and exclusion, and that a 'sociology of absences' is required if one wishes to understand them in terms of their full meaning and in order to "explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as non-existent." He went on to argue that the WSF itself "is a broad exercise of the sociology of absences."³⁰ I venture however to suggest that the Forum too is creating absences by virtue of the political culture it has adopted and is practising in reality.

Indeed, notwithstanding Santos' radical analysis of the Forum, it is noticeable that that Forum is not, as yet, the arena of spontaneous choice of victims of violence, of oppression, of history. Both in India and Brazil, many of the mainstream organisations of the excluded — such as of indigenous peoples — are as yet keeping away, and many of those who come to the Forum to give testimony to their oppression and absence are those who are brought there by issue-based civil organisations. As I see it, this is happening because the Forum is an initiative that still belongs to the middle class, middle and upper caste, and male leadership of the 'civil', 'present' world.³¹ Insofar as it has taken a position against oppression and imperialism of all kinds, the possibility that it itself might well be causing 'absences' is something that the Forum perhaps needs to consider.

This question has now moved into a new dimension. WSF India took a resolution at its last National Consultation in April 2003, expressing its opposition to what we in India and South Asia term 'fundamentalism' (extremism), caste discrimination, communalism, patriarchy, war and militarism, as well as to neoliberal globalisation.³² As a direct consequence of this Resolution, the WSF India Organising Committee adopted and proposed all these five as 'axes' for the world meeting it is organising in Mumbai in January 2004.³³

Apparently after considerable debate at its recent meeting in Miami in June 2003 about the arguable cultural particularity of some of these formulations, the IC gave the go-ahead to WSF India to use these themes for the world meeting. In principle therefore, and even if all these new formulations have not yet been formally incorporated into the WSF Charter of Principles, the IC has in one sense taken the first step of accepting this much-widened vocabulary as the *Forum's* vocabulary: for the world meeting in Mumbai will, after all, be seen as 'The World Social Forum' speaking, not just WSF India. And this much-widened vocabulary will now enter world language in an important way.

There are different ways of looking at this development, however. On the one hand, from the point of view of progressive movements in India, South Asia, and many parts of Asia, certainly, and possibly also more widely, this widening of the vocabulary of the WSF constitutes a major advance. Sections of the Dalit movement in India for example, have struggled hard to bring caste onto the international agenda, and succeeded in doing so through the Durban conference on Racism, Xenophobia, and Other Forums of Discrimination. For the issue to now be accepted at another world initiative such as the WSF is therefore another major step forward. Similarly, for all those fighting religious and national fundamentalism and for all those fighting patriarchy — even if women's groups have succeeded in bringing patriarchy to the world stage much earlier.

The big question however, is whether the (present) leadership of the WSF will be willing to formally include these new issues — by including them in its Charter of Principles. Aside from the question of ruling out debate with those who hold different opinions, the Charter of Principles as it presently stands takes a position only on the question of neoliberalism and imperialism. In terms of world politics, the WSF Charter of Principles focuses on these because the initiative was conceived, born, and given shape to during the time of the rise of global civil action against the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions, following Seattle in November 1999.

But since that time, new questions have emerged on the world scene, such as war. So far, the Brazil Organising Committee/International Secretariat and the IC have shown themselves to be remarkably quick in terms of embracing the question of war and militarisation, by centre-staging these in the agenda of the Forum, although they have not yet formally modified the Charter of Principles accordingly. On the other hand, the questions of religious nationalism, communalism, caste, and patriarchy have not yet entered the Forum's vocabulary despite their having been specifically articulated in IC meetings and elsewhere.³⁴

This non-acceptance till date could be seen as being nothing more than a reflection of dominance in the Council by organisations and their representatives from regions where these issues are not strong — the first three, in any case. The acceptance of the wider spectrum at the 2003 Miami meeting is a first step. But it is still far short of organisationally embracing this wider agenda. As with the UN, where the government of India vigorously fought the inclusion of caste on the agenda of the Durban Conference even though the constitution of the country graphically recognises the evil of casteism, it is always possible that there is going to be resistance to the inclusion of this wider agenda, perhaps even from surprising circles. The Council's willingness to handle these essentially cultural issues will therefore also be an important indicator of the degree to which the Forum is an open space.

On the other hand lies the question of strategy — and of the ironic possibility that accepting this wider agenda might work to make the Forum an even more exclusive space. As above, if the WSF is truly to be a world initiative, then it is only appropriate that it embraces this wider, more comprehensive agenda. But if the wider agenda is accepted into the Charter, then — to paraphrase the Forum's present principle in this area as given above — the WSF will become a space for:

“... groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to ... imperialist globalisation, militarism, patriarchy, communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), and casteism and racism (oppression, exclusion and discrimination based on descent and work), and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person.”

This in turn, will mean that all those who wish to take part in the Forum, and more specifically, to play any role in the decision-making bodies of the Forum, will therefore need from then on to declare their opposition to all of the above — and in writing. This is now no longer a hypothetical possibility. WSF India already requires all those wishing to join its 'India General Council' to declare adherence to this full spectrum.³⁵

But these are presently the declared and emerging rules of engagement, in and of the Forum. It is evident that they are tending towards making the Forum turn in on itself and become more exclusive and intolerant, and perhaps becoming only increasingly so as attempts are made by the owners and managers of the Forum to bring order to and control the use of the space. The exigencies of building a world enterprise are likely to only add to these pressures.

The Forum as Real Estate

There is one further dimension of 'openness' — or closure — that demands discussion by itself: the question of the openness of the Forum to *individuals*. Notwithstanding the Forum's assertion and reputation of being 'open,' participants in the WSF meetings held in Porto Alegre have so far been divided into two broad categories: organisational representatives, who have been classified when registering as 'delegates,' and individuals, who have been classified as 'Observers' (or 'Hearers'). This is also more or less the proposal for the WSF world meeting in 2004, in Mumbai.³⁶

This division is also reflected in the organisational structure of the Forum. I do not know the rules for the organising committee for the European Social Forum, but the WSF India Committees and the WSF International Council are made up exclusively of the first 'class.' (I am, of course, using the term 'class' a little loosely and figuratively.)

The situation in India has not always been like this, however. During its first year, 2003, the organisational structure in India specifically provided space for individuals,³⁷ and given the orthodoxy that has subsequently enveloped the question, this can be seen to have been a significant experiment. It was revised only in early 2003 to exclude individuals, with a proposal to a national consultation held in New Delhi in February 2003. The proponents of this change specifically drew legitimacy for this from the composition of the IC and the emphasis that the BOC/ IS places on organisations and organisational representatives.³⁸

But in insisting upon this formula, are the organisers of the Forum only creating divisive social relations, and thereby again, in effect, acting towards closing down the 'open' space? And

insofar as we today live in an age where classical 'organisations' are increasingly being replaced by virtual organisations and networks — where people are increasingly *not* belonging to organisations but preferring to work as individuals, perhaps loosely affiliated to one another — is this approach also following obsolete organisational theory and strategy ?

It is a fact that the Forum's Charter of Principles as it stands, provides space only for organisations and not individuals:

“The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world...”

(There is an interesting and possibly important hidden issue here. As Teivo Teivainen has pointed out to me, in the original of the WSF Charter of Principles, in Portuguese, the term *entidade* is used at the place where in the English version, the term 'organisation' appears — and not the word *organização* that was, of course, also available to the authors. *Entidade* means 'entity,' which in English literally means 'being', *not necessarily* 'organisation,' let alone formal organisation, though the term often tends to be used that way. Only the organisers of the Forum can explain what they had in mind in their original draft, and what sections they wanted to signal and include (and exclude). But since the English version of the Charter of Principles — which is equally an 'official' version of the document uses the term 'organisation,' I will continue with my argument.³⁹

While the Forum is declared to be an 'open space', in reality, the organisers have therefore created two 'classes' for access to and use of the space. There are some who have the legitimacy to participate (and are given a designation that recognises this), and there are others who are only meant to 'observe' and to 'hear', and (implicitly anyway) to otherwise not participate. In actual practice and as implied even in the term, the rule about 'Observers' is not completely exclusive. It 'only' means that they do not have full privileges, such as (in Porto Alegre) being eligible to have translation headsets, or the right of access to all meetings. And they are given identity plaques – to be hung around their necks - of a different colour, so that they can be easily identified. The underlying principle is clear: *individuals belong to another category.*

The proportions between the two 'classes' at the Forums also reflect the classic condition of social division: the privileged are always the (small) minority and the other class always the (large) majority. In the first Forum there were apparently something like 4,000 delegates and some 16,000 'hearers.' This proportion has apparently been repeated each time.⁴⁰ As always, it is the section to which the minority belong that has created the Forum and now owns and manages it.

In effect, the Forum privileges those who represent organisations, and thereby organisations themselves; and the minority, made up of organisational representatives, has created a space that is reserved primarily for itself, has bestowed special privileges on its members, and has consciously given reduced privileges to the section that provides the majority of participants. This is certainly not an unfamiliar situation. The problem is that it is the *WSF* that is doing this.

By contrast, this division was absent at the Youth Camp at Porto Alegre, where the difference between 'organisational representatives' and 'individuals' was apparently ignored.⁴¹

According to one of the architects of the Forum, the thinking behind this discrimination is 'to push organised people to come [forward] and to avoid transforming the Forum into a traditional congress.' This also means that if the organisers of the Forum are asked what participants do with all that happens at the Forum — and why the Forum itself is not taking a lead, as conventional organisations do — they can say that the participants are already organised, and therefore in a position to take things forward. Beyond this, the thinking behind not having individuals on committees is that the committees should be made up only of organisations fighting neoliberalism — since 'who do individuals represent ?' In short, organisations of any kind 'represent' society, and therefore are and should be the vanguard of change in society. The formation of the IC as it stands essentially reflects this wider thinking, and as I say, this thinking has now come to also dominate thinking in India as well, after a brief one year when we thought more freely.

I suggest that this marginalisation of individuals is a reflection and manifestation of two closely related forces: a deep belief in the primacy of organisations (and especially of movements) in

social change, and a subliminal reassertion of property relations — here, in terms of the ownership of the open space that the Forum is meant to be.

In terms of the latter, the unstated and undeclared structure of the Forum is that organisations — which are seen and projected as the agents and vanguard of social transformation — *are* the owners of the space that is the Forum. This is never openly said, but is the underlying theory and reality. But I suggest that it is precisely this attitude and unstated ideology that underlies the struggle and debate that continues and is sharpening in the Forum, regarding understanding the Forum as space or seeing it as movement.⁴² Because the Forum is now real estate.

In terms of the former, the primacy of organisations, even while recognising the importance of organisations in social processes, we need to be willing to recognise and acknowledge the significance of the many roles that individuals play, perhaps especially in civil organisations more than any other. To start with, many such organisations, are in fact, built around particular individuals, and even if those individuals claim to be representing ‘their’ organisations, they often actually act largely as proprietors, representing their own interests as much as those of their organisations and its members. So the distinction between organisational representatives and individuals is often a little thin.

Civil organisations also generally practice some degree of voluntarism on the part of those working in them (and are even called ‘voluntary organisations’ in India and in some other parts of the world). Beyond this, in this day and age, we know that the vast majority of people in most societies across the world (industrialised, post-industrial, ‘developing’ and so-called ‘transitional’) do not belong to formal organisations, and are, to the contrary, increasingly associating informally and often only temporarily, such as through myriad networks. This has historically been the case because the majority of sections have been forced to remain ‘unorganised’, but is increasingly now the case for those who could, in principle, be within organisations but who prefer a higher form of being organised, of living and acting autarchically. In such a situation, and at such a time in history, can we still argue that formally organised, permanent organisations are and should be the vanguard of society? In short, do we believe that organisations represent the only vehicle for the self-development of human potential and of the social individual?⁴³

We need to ask ourselves these questions even if we may personally know of cases where ‘observers’ have seen through this structure at the Forum, and even if registered as individuals, have otherwise taken full and equal part both within the Forum and in the follow-up activities.⁴⁴ The issue is not whether individuals can get through the fences; the issue is *why* the fences are there.

In doing this, it is useful to also recognise that most existing forms of civil organisation emerged during the 19th century in the course of the industrial revolution in, what is now the North, and that they are based on modes and relations of organisation that belong to the social and economic relations and communication possibilities of *that* age. In the hugely different world we now live in, we need to recognise that new modes of association and organisation are taking shape — such as networks, where individuals are participants, not members; in other words, where social relations and ‘property relations’ are different.⁴⁵ And indeed, we need to struggle to conceive of and forge new modes which reflect reality today, especially that of cyberspace.

In some ways, it can be said that the history of organisational development — in general, and also those with emancipatory and transformative goals — has been one of simultaneously developing and articulating both individual and collective social identities (class, caste, ethnicity, language, race, and gender, and more recently, sexual preference), and through this, of cultures and structures of authentic representation. This history, and this process — the struggle — are of profound importance. But especially in today’s conditions, this is intersecting with another trajectory, of much more highly *individualised* emancipation and empowerment, and of the building of virtual identities and cultures, of ‘imagined communities’ (to use and extend Benedict Anderson’s phrase).⁴⁶ As Naomi Klein, among others, has pointed out, the global civil movement that is today still emerging in many ways mirrors and models itself on the net. Whether it does so consciously or not is not the question:

“Although many have observed that the recent mass protests would have been impossible without the internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. Thanks to the net, mobilisations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy; forced consensus and laboured manifestoes are fading into the background, replaced instead by a culture of constant, loosely structured and sometimes compulsive information-swapping. What emerged on the streets of Seattle and Washington was an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralised, interlinked pathways of the internet - the internet come to life.”⁴⁷

But as I see it, these two trajectories — of formal, permanent, and putatively representative *organisation*, and informal and transient *association* — are to some extent working with different purposes, and the Forum is an arena where the two paths (can) cross. Even while, as I have argued above and elsewhere, the Forum has a vital role to play in providing a space for different modes of movement to meet and to dialogue, what is crucial for our analysis here is that the WSF itself is a part of this new phenomenon - of transient association. (Even though the Forum is usually thought of in terms of singular physical event/s, the actual reality of the Forum is that for the 350 other days of the year it exists more in virtual space, co-existing with all the other modes of virtual ‘organisation’). So we need to resolve and reconcile these two different ‘memberships’, constituencies and realities that make up the actually existing Forum — and most crucially, we need to not insist that the rules of one trajectory must be the rules of the whole.

In formal terms, although the Forum’s Charter of Principles declares that it “intends neither to be a body representing world civil society” [Clause 5], the reality today is that in many ways, this is *precisely* how the International Council is structured, with old rules of formation, and where movement organisations, which overtly ‘represent’ large masses of people, are increasingly privileged. Once again, though without declaring this to be the case, ‘the Forum’ today is trapped within a vision of seeing itself as an ‘organisation’, and there are now also strong calls for it to move towards creating a more federative structure for itself.⁴⁸

We need also to ask ourselves how participants actually relate to each other during the various activities at the WSF. Do we ask ourselves, before listening to someone, “Does she represent an organisation or not?” Do we make our judgement on the validity of what she is saying on this basis? Beyond this, do we differentiate between someone representing an *organisation*, as a delegated member of that organisation, and someone ‘representing’ a *network* that is usually far less structured than conventional organisations?

Finally, by excluding or marginalising individuals, the Forum is also marginalising a huge and vital section of societies all over the world and weakening the larger movement against neoliberalism, imperialism, and fundamentalisms of all kinds. This is especially so in those countries of the world which do not enjoy electoral democracy or the freedom to associate and organise, and where it is individuals who often play the most vital roles in building and protecting democracy.

This discussion is not intended either to devalorise organisations and organisational representation or to glamorise individuals and their contributions. The question is certainly not ‘organisation’ or ‘no organisation.’ The very existence and formation of organisations, as a part of the struggle for social expression, is itself a struggle against neoliberalism. But this does not take away from the roles that individuals play in all dimensions of life or the discrimination that is today practised in the Forum against individuals. We need to rethink and reconceptualise this question.

The Forum as Logo

My final point: as the Forum spreads across the world, there is a distinct possibility that it is fast becoming a commodity, a brand name, a monoculture, and its motto, ‘Another World Is Possible!’ a logo, and that the ‘regional’ and thematic events are becoming *franchised* events.⁴⁹ If this is at all the case, then the WSF is itself becoming corporatised — and is thereby contributing to the globalisation of a certain, very specific civilisation — a monoculture. This is surely deeply problematic ground for an initiative such as the WSF that overtly celebrates plurality.⁵⁰

The organisers of the Porto Alegre Forum, the BOC (now called the International Secretariat), have come up with a very particular vocabulary for the organisation of the WSF.⁵¹ Despite initial discussions within WSF India towards coming up with a more indigenous formula (and one where the various categories of events would also be easier to understand), this menu is being more or less duplicated at the Mumbai Forum. The International Secretariat continues to struggle with this formula however, sometimes creatively. It has, for instance, come up with the proposal that the conferences, which earlier used to be at the centre of the Forum and dominated the event (and where this design was replicated at, say, the Asian Social Forum), should now be at the margins, and the self-organised events should be brought organisationally to the centre.⁵² The WSF India Committee has taken this idea to heart and further reduced the proportion of events at the Forum that will be organised by the WSF itself, thereby further emphasising the self-organised events.⁵³

There is now already something of a standard formula that has also developed for peripheral events, even within three years. In Porto Alegre, there is now a World Youth Forum, a World Parliamentary Forum, a World Forum of Mayors and Local Authorities, and a World Education Forum that are held along with the WSF. There are rallies and marches, and obligatory formal parts of the menu are the colourful inauguration and closing ceremonies. It would seem that some of this formula is going to be repeated in Mumbai; certainly, there is going to be major youth meeting and also a World Parliamentary Forum, as well as opening and closing celebrations.

The problem is that since the Porto Alegre Forum is widely seen as having been ‘successful’, this menu is now being widely copied, and there is much reason to think that this *menu* is tending to become standard, as a kind of recipe for success — for replicating the richness, vigour, and flavour of Porto Alegre. There is also a good deal of unstated assumption that if a WSF-related meeting is going to be organised elsewhere — whether the world meeting or regional versions — it needs to be *like* the Porto Alegre event. And there is therefore also the difficult reality that precisely because the Forum has so far been ‘successful’, this has created a power and value to it, and so there is now struggle for control over it as it spreads. This is as true of the European Social Forum as of the Asian Social Forum.⁵⁴ The fact that the Forum has declared through its Charter that it “intends neither to be a body representing world civil society” [Clause 5], and that it “does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings” [Clause 8] cannot prevent it, if it is successful, from accumulating power.

But this is what creating a brand is all about, and why and how franchising comes about; and even if this may be somewhat exaggerating the situation, there now seems to be a distinct possibility of the Forum becoming a world chain, with a *standard* recipe, and The Forum — the event — something that comes out of a biscuit-cutter; and where particular interests start developing local control over the product. Can the day be far off when someone suggests that patenting the Forum’s motto ‘Another World Is Possible!’ just in case someone else tries using it?

The Forum is also catching. Besides the regional and thematic fora mentioned earlier, there are now city-level fora all over Brazil, in several parts of Europe and the US, and state-level fora in parts of India and surely elsewhere as well. On the one hand, it is exciting to see all this as a part of the globalisation of the WSF. At another level we have to ask ourselves: is what is taking place a spreading of the *culture* of the Forum, along with creative local reinterpretation, or is it more a reproduction of the *outer* form, the menu?

At certain levels therefore, the experiment of the globalisation of the Forum is clearly working. In many parts of the world, an impressively wide range and number of what are broadly Left, and left of centre, individuals and civil and political organisations are excited by the broad, open-ended model of ‘politics’ that the Forum appears to offer. And that there is some attempt to creatively interpret and reproduce the culture in its own contexts.

We need here to struggle with two directly related issues. First, is the historical task and potentiality of the Forum to be a space only for gatherings of the committed and the converted? And second, and as already mentioned, the reality that it now also has *power* ascribed to it and

therefore there is a struggle within the Forum to dominate and control it, even as it spreads, and indeed, precisely because it is spreading.

The Forum and the Challenge of History

Two points remain to be made. One, as I said earlier, I believe that helping to bridge old politics and the new, in different countries and historical contexts and also in transnational space but at the same time in history is one of the most crucial but most difficult challenges for the Forum, and possibly also one of its *historically* most important.⁵⁵ If we agree that the larger struggle is the war of ideas, then one can reasonably argue that the Forum must move from focussing on exchange between the converted to progressively opening up to the non-converted. It must also open itself up to those who live outside established political channels, such as migrants and refugees, and also to the huge 'uncivil societies' of the world – the historically unintended ■ who are today in the historical process of finding voices of their own by which they are challenging both states and traditional civil societies where power resides.⁵⁶ It must learn to respond meaningfully to those who keep away from it, to those who criticise it, and even to those who oppose it.

I believe it is of great concern that the Forum is not doing this, and to the contrary seems to be becoming increasingly exclusive and arrogant about those 'it' disagrees with. These are trappings of power that 'it' – here, the IC, the International Secretariat, and the various Organising Committees of regional and national Forums – need urgently to shed.

Two, I believe that the 'conservatives' in the Forum are in any case missing the wood for the trees. Try as they might, they are not going to be able to control and discipline the Forum as a whole – not in the way they are approaching the subject, at least : By creating rules, by demanding adherence, and by bringing in forms and rules to enforce their views. As Chico Whitaker of the Brazil Organising Committee so often says, the Forum (as planned, by the organisers) is always overwhelmed by the self-organised events. This, indeed, is the magic of the Forum. But the approach that those wanting to retain a certain pristine quality are taking ignores this, even violates this.

As already mentioned, although the Forum tends to be seen (and celebrated) as a six-day wonder that takes place each year, the reality is that 'the Forum' is not limited to the real-time connections and exchanges that take place during those days. The reality today is that 'the Forum' is today more virtual than real : That its real reality is the myriad self-organised connections and exchanges that take place in cyberspace throughout the rest of the 349 days of the year (and also during those six days), seamlessly related to and a part of a much larger universe of exchange that cyberspace allows; and also the myriad other real-world meetings that all this generates. Which in many ways is surely what the Forum is all about, and the spirit it generates. But the crucial issue is that all this is outside the control of those who seek to guide the Forum.

This is the real Forum; and just as states are, till date, not capable of controlling this, though they are trying, there is also no way that anyone within the Forum is going to be able to create rules for this larger universe, put up fences for who comes in, and demand adherence. This, the real Forum, is a free space. The space that has been imagined and defined in the WSF Charter of Principles, and then manifested in the real world in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, and elsewhere, is only a small part of this wider and much larger forum. The Forum of life.

Those who wish to control and guide the WSF therefore have a historical choice: if they try to continue to control this Forum, and maybe even walk away with it if others disagree with them – as organisers classically do – then they will, in fact, take with them only a small fragment of the larger whole : just one tree in a wood that is growing richly, and proliferating wildly.

In one sense, this is a manifestation of Peter Waterman's point, that the Forum tends to *use* cyberspace, but not to *live* it. What we so far term and see as the 'virtual' has in many ways become the real (and in some senses, 'the real' virtual). We need to take stock of this and fundamentally re-think the Forum, our relationships, and the event and process that is so far called 'The Forum', in these terms and in terms of the times we live in and that are emerging. In short, we - and especially the leadership of the Forum - need to re-think the culture of politics that we bring to the Forum.

The Forum in India

Given that the first world meeting of the World Social Forum outside Brazil is to be held in India, it is useful to briefly look at the experience in this context, in the above terms.

In short, the experience in India over the first year and a half strongly confirms many of the tendencies that seem to characterise the WSF as a whole. Overall, there has been a powerful assertion of orthodoxy. In some ways, this grows out of the history of the Forum process in India, where the process — having been initiated by the Brazil Organising Committee and not by Indians — reflects an understanding that the Brazilians are the *owners* of the Forum and the Indian Organising Committee merely the *managers* for the 2004 event;⁵⁷ but in most ways, it grows out of the dominant culture of politics and social movement in India.

This includes the tendency to see the Forum as an event rather than as a process, and of factions within the Forum community in India to try to manage, control, and take over control of the space (or event) that is the Forum; and the tendency to simply manage the event rather than seeing it as an opportunity for creating and fostering new politics and a new culture of politics, and then creatively exploring this. It also includes intolerance, as evidenced in the effort by those struggling to be in control to exclude or discourage the involvement of those who they do not approve of, and also by their creating new rules — overturning the earlier explicit policy — such as the one that excludes individuals from participating in the organisational aspects of the Forum. Most recently, this has manifested itself in September 2003 in a reaction by some members of the Organising Committee to the news that others in the Committee belong to organisations indirectly associated with the 'Mumbai Resistance' initiative that is opposing the Forum. Echoing the US President after 9/11, they said, "You are either with us or against us".

Wrong. The enemy is clearly *within* us.

The exclusion of individuals from any of the Committees in WSF India from early 2003 on has been especially significant. Since India was perhaps an exception to the general WSF rule in this area, as earlier discussed, and since India was chosen to be the site of the experiment in globalising the Forum, this reversal of policy — and the hard-line policy direction that it represents — is of major world consequence.

Equally significant, has been the decision in India to have an extremely conventional, articulated — if not actually hierarchical — organisational structure for the Forum in India, consisting of not less than four levels of Committees, and an equally highly articulated sectional representation on the IWC. (The WSF India literature goes to pains to explain that the IWC is composed of organisations coming from a range of structurally oppressed social sectors — Dalits, Adivasis, students, women, workers, and so on.)⁵⁸ In this way, the world comes to be totally and absolutely described — but where then all those who do not fit in, have no place? Total definition is yet another toxic.

This arrangement is in sharp contrast to the situation in Brazil, where there were originally and remain just eight organisations that constitute the Brazil Organising Committee. In formal terms, WSF India has thus attempted much more of a 'representative' experiment. But this is directly contradictory to the spirit of the Forum's Charter of Principles (which WSF India otherwise demands adherence to), which specifies that the Forum does not try to 'represent' civil society.

Aside from the logistical and political challenges of hosting the world meeting in Mumbai,⁵⁹ the track record of some of the key members of WSF India suggests that it remains an open question as to whether those who have taken up the task of organising the world meeting will be able to resist using the Forum itself — which is meant to be an open space, and not a platform for unity — as *their* platform, as distinct from their working to provide a space *within which* or *from which* unity might be achieved.⁶⁰ The definition of the themes for the Forum Whether moreover, these forces will allow space in the Forum for others who broadly agree but may not precisely share the same vision, also remains to be seen.

The process and experience in India is significant because it has to be considered as a kind of laboratory for the WSF experiment in another globalisation; developments in India may also

offer pointers to what might be taking shape more widely in the Forum. The instance regarding the structural marginalisation of individuals has already been pointed out. Parallel to this has been the decision to insist on written adherence to the Forum's Charter of Principles — which, as shown, has now also been approved at the international level. It remains to be seen if the IC decides to also adopt an articulated, federative structure for the Forum, as some have proposed.

Is the Forum of the future? The Mumbai Forum will offer an opportunity for participants from all over the world to critically interrogate and learn from the Indian experience.

In Conclusion: From Symbol to Logo

For many, the WSF has become something of a symbol of a larger global struggle. But there are deep trends taking shape within it that suggest that it is currently going through a process of sharp involution and succumbing to forces of conventionalism and orthodoxy. On the one hand, it is showing all signs of becoming corporate, with the symbol morphing into the logo that 'the WSF' has already become. On the other, it is beginning to increasingly behave like organised religion. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but together they sharply articulate the question of whether another world is really possible, at least in this way.

Both trends seem in part to be a function of the success that the Forum has already become, and of the power and influence that is not only being ascribed to it but was, surely, sought by it. But they are also a result of 'simpler' forces — of conventional organisational dynamics and of its leadership often drawing from a known, familiar (and 'old') vocabulary of structure and management. This seems sometimes to have been a subconscious choice, and sometimes a conscious, ideological choice.

But the WSF now has to face the challenge of how to realise and creatively deploy the potential of the transformative power that it is gathering. Especially given the trends I discuss in this essay, this is of concern to all, even the miserable individual participant in the Forum. This is particularly important given the juncture in history at which the Forum has taken shape and is acting. It has a responsibility to a much larger history than its own. It can only do this by forging new vocabularies and grammars of thought and action, and not by relying on old categories, as its leaders are tending to do. As with all initiatives, the Forum is too important to be left to its leaders.

In particular, participants in the Forum — individuals and organisational delegates alike — must struggle to regain the spirit of the 'open space' that it started out saying that it wanted to be. It can only do so by abandoning the hard-line, discriminatory policies it has adopted against individuals and against including those who are 'concerned' but not necessarily yet 'committed.' To repeat, its central historical role must remain to *encourage* and *enable* free and open exchange and debate, not to overtly or covertly build a world movement of organisations of The Left.

We need, in short, to struggle to regain the dream. We can only do so if we persist in attempts to read and interrogate the actually existing Forum — and if we insist on dreaming the dream.

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Endnotes and references

¹ This is a heavily revised excerpt from an earlier essay, Jai Sen, May 2003d. The first version was a revised and expanded version of a Note I was invited to prepare by Carola Reintjes on the World Social Forum for the *VI Encuentro de Economía Solidaria* held in Córdoba, Spain, May 1-3 2003, which I titled ‘A moment for reflection : Take a moment to reflect on what is happening in the World Social Forum’. I thank Carola for giving me the opportunity to spell out these thoughts; Roberto Bissio, Jeremy Brecher, Sundar Chaterji, Taran Khan, Dave Ranney, Carola Reintjes, David Szanton, Teivo Teivainen, and Peter Waterman for their comments on earlier drafts, and Peter Waterman for suggesting the second half of the present subtitle; and Rukmini Shekhar for editing down the text to its present shape.

² The workshop was titled ‘Getting over issues of rivalry and power : A challenge for the FSM ?’. More information from Celina Whitaker at wself@no-log.org. One of the key participants was Chico Whitaker, member of the Brazil Organising Committee and one of the architects of the World Social Forum, and the author of an important essay (also featured in this volume) that I discuss in this article. The deep irony of the workshop, given its theme, is that the provocative list of ideas that was generated in the course of this exercise was then never published by the organisers, even though it was the clear understanding at the end of the session that it would be (on the WSelf listserv, if nowhere else); and that a much diluted formulation seems to have instead taken its place. Given the symbolic importance that WSelf has come to occupy in the WSF space, it is vital that that original document is made public even now; and it would be a monumental tragedy if it is not.

³ Roberto Bissio, personal communication, May 29 2003.

⁴ Sen 2002.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001, and World Social Forum Organising Committee, June 2001.

⁷ Whitaker, March 2003. See Whitaker February 2002 for an earlier statement of this position. Whitaker represents the CBJP on the WSF Brazil Organising Committee, but is only one out of eight members, representing different organisations and tendencies; so this does not necessarily represent the perception and position of the Committee as a whole.

⁸ Sen 2002.

⁹ These first few paragraphs of this section draw heavily on an earlier paper, Sen, January 2003a. See also Sen December 2003f for a revised and abbreviated version of the full paper.

¹⁰ Bhushan, March 2003, and Hussain and Tiwari, April 2003.

¹¹ This led to the first-ever meeting between the Foreign Ministers of Brazil, India, and South Africa, in Brasilia on June 5 2003, and the establishment of a Trilateral Commission.

¹² Teivainen, 2003b. For some of the same ground, see also Teivainen, 2002.

¹³ For more discussion of this point, see Sen October 2003b, and Amin 2003.

¹⁴ Sen, December 2003f.

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¹⁵ Albert February 2003; Savio, January 2003; and Waterman, 2003c.

¹⁶ See Whitaker, February 2002; Escobar January 2003, and Vargas 2003; and Nikhil Anand 2004, for a discussion of some of its internal dynamics.

¹⁷ See the WSF website for details of the systematisation project : www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.

¹⁸ Albert 2003.

¹⁹ Klein, January 2003.

²⁰ From : ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001. Emphasis supplied.

²¹ World Social Forum, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002.

²² Fisher and Ponniah, eds, 2003.

²³ In : Ponniah and Fisher, February 2003. It is only fair if I acknowledge that I too have so far accepted, internalised, and widely advocated and celebrated this concept in my writings on the Forum, as cited here, and for which I seem to now be also quite widely cited by others. Evidently, I am now, after two years of close involvement with the Forum, re-thinking my position on this crucial question.

²⁴ Whitaker, March 2003; emphasis given.

²⁵ See Amin, January 2003. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ WSF India, July 2002a.

²⁷ ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, and others, April 2001, as above. Emphasis given.

²⁸ At the world meetings, the Zapatistas have been among those denied access. At the 2002 meeting, the registration given by the organisers to some Basque organisations was also later cancelled when they realised that they were Basque and therefore might well be supporters of armed struggle, thereby allegedly contradicting the WSF's Charter of Principles. Teivo Teivainen, personal communication, June 2003. In India and at the Asian Social Forum in January 2003, organisations affiliated or sympathetic to the PWG (People's War Group, a militant Maoist organisation operating in the region around Hyderabad, the city where the meeting was held) were kept out of the meeting. This and other dynamics led to a group named FAIG (Forum Against Imperialist Globalisation), which had initially been actively involved with the organisation of the Forum, to withdraw and to organise a major rally in opposition to the Forum, during the Asian Social Forum.

²⁹ WSF India, April 2003. Those joining are also asked to make a suggested 'voluntary contribution' of Rs 5,000 (Euro 100, approximately) when they join, as a token of commitment and as a way of generating local funds. The fact that this requirement of written adherence is specifically mentioned in a subsequent memo from WSF India makes clear that this was not a bureaucratic accident but rather represents clear intention.

³⁰ Santos, March 2003.

³¹ This is consistent with my understanding of 'civil society', as outlined below in footnote 56.

³² Resolution taken at the WSF India National Conference in Nagpur, India, March 21-22 2003.

³³ WSF India, nd(a). The specific wording WSF India has used for the axes is : "Imperialist globalisation; Patriarchy ; Militarism and peace ; Communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism); and - Casteism & racism (oppression, exclusion and discrimination based on descent and work)".

³⁴ Several speakers at the meeting of the International Council in Bangkok in August 2002, the first time that it met in Asia, raised the questions of religious nationalism, communalism, and caste, and the need for the Council to embrace them. The proposals found wide support among participants and observers, especially among those from Asia.

³⁵ WSF India, nd(b).

³⁶ The online literature for the Mumbai meeting, while distinguishing clearly between individuals and organisational representatives – by offering a clear choice going to different registration forms -, uses the terms 'participant' and 'individual' somewhat interchangeably, sometimes along with the term 'delegate', but does not say anywhere what the respective rights and privileges of individual participants and organisational participants are. The registration form for 'Individuals' (at <http://www.wsfindia.org/participantForm.php>) curiously provides for three categories : 'Event Organiser', 'Delegate', or 'Observer', and also gives no explanation for what the terms respectively mean or imply, or what the consequences are, of choosing one or the other of the latter two categories.

³⁷ See : WSF India, April 2002.

³⁸ For details, see Sen October 2003b.

³⁹ Teivo Teivainen, personal communication, June 1 2003.

⁴⁰ Personal correspondence with Chico Whitaker during March 2003.

⁴¹ I thank Taran Khan for pointing this out to me.

⁴² Whitaker, March 2003.

⁴³ My thanks to Dave Ranney for summing up this issue so succinctly.

⁴⁴ See Nikhil Anand 2004, for a fascinating discussion of this as it took place at the 2003 world meeting.

⁴⁵ See Escobar, January 2003.

⁴⁶ Anderson 1983.

⁴⁷ Klein, July 2000b.

⁴⁸ Albert, February 2003.

⁴⁹ While I cannot think of any specific documents I have seen making this analysis, I do not claim originality over these thoughts, such as 'logo', 'franchise', etc. I think that there are many of us involved with the Forum who share these concerns, and may well all be using these concepts, and I see myself voicing them here only an expression of a wide and deep concern. Roberto Bissio, of the Third World Institute in Uruguay, has for instance informed me that he apparently used these same terms during the meeting of the International Council in Porto Alegre in January 2003.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the issue of the globalisation of civilisation, see Sen, November 2002d.

⁵¹ See Wolfwood September 2002 for an exploration of the menu – and experience - of the Forum.

⁵² Whitaker, March 2003.

⁵³ It is interesting and significant however, how strongly this shift – which was approved by the IC at its meeting in Miami in June 2003 – was resisted by some members of the WSF's Content Commission, even at the last minute before the Mumbai Forum, at its meeting in Peruggia, Italy, in October 2003.

⁵⁴ For some discussion of the politics of the Asian Social Forum, see Sen October 2003. Rivalry over control of the European Social Forum is now legendary 'within the WSF', and one can only hope that someone will perhaps write on it soon.

⁵⁵ Sen 2002.

⁵⁶ I see 'civil society' – as the term is used today – as referring to the attempted hegemony by the middle and upper classes, and by the middle and upper castes in those parts of the world where this stratification applies, and to its celebration – essentially, by members of these sections – as embracing 'all of society' outside the state. I see it as being merely a way of these sections disguising their historical project of struggling for hegemony, including by 'civilising' the 'uncivil(ised)'. I of course use the term 'uncivil' purposely and figuratively. I am also aware of another usage of this term, especially in the UK, referring essentially to what we in India refer to as 'anti-social' – which is definitely not what I mean. So we need to flip a coin for the usage. Personally, I think my usage is the more creative. Alternatively, one of us can change to using the alternate term 'incivil'. For earlier and more detailed discussion of this idea, see Gera, Howell, and Sen, June 2002, and Sen, November 2002d. And for an early discussion of the concept of unintendedness, see Sen, April 2001 (April 1975).

⁵⁷ For a discussion of this question, see Sen October 2003b.

⁵⁸ 'Dalits' refers to 'the oppressed', earlier called – by the upper castes - 'the untouchables' in the caste system (and then 'Harijans' by Gandhi). 'Adivasis', literally meaning 'original inhabitants', refers to tribal and indigenous peoples.

⁵⁹ For a discussion, see the full version of Sen, January 2003a.

⁶⁰ Again, Sen October 2003b.