

FOREWORD

THE FORUM
AS JAZZ

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The World Social Forum is like a resonant piece of jazz or a picture that looks different from every angle. How we make sense of it and what it means to us depends on our perceptions. I've participated in the first three Forums in Porto Alegre,¹ with my senses originally formed by the 'new' movements of the late sixties — the student movement, the peace movement, and most profoundly, the women's liberation movement. I'm a 54-year-old, quick to identify with the now genuinely new movements for global social justice, partly because they are so recognisable, and because many of their horizontal, informal ways of relating are so familiar. But, also because they have moved on and tackled problems that defeated us and all but swept us away — the problem of multinational corporate power which so undermined the bargaining power of the radical Northern trade union movement in the sixties and seventies and the failure of traditional political parties of the Left to understand the importance of the movements growing under their feet.

Now, even spokespersons for the global elites recognise that a new agency for social change is emerging. In 2003, as positions in the UN hardened against the US's proposal for a pre-emptive war on Iraq, Kofi Annan's Press Secretary observed that "We now have two superpowers : the US and the public opinion". By February 2003, and most dramatically on February, 15 it was clear that public opinion had become a *distinct* force. It had also become, to a degree, an *organised* force.

On the other hand, even though the people protesting against the war on Iraq were generally in a majority, they proved powerless in stopping the war.² They had an impact on the way the war was conducted — the generals knew they were being watched. They had an impact on the ability of the US and the UK to cover up the real reason they went to war. But ultimately, the power of numbers did not stop the decisions of those, who in theory, depend for their office on the people behind the numbers. Potentially, this experience could lead many people to re-think what it takes to create a democracy and to realise we still have a long way to go. It could lead to a renewed struggle to widen the narrow, elite forms of 'democracy' we have inherited from the Cold War.

These reverberations of the 'war on terrorism' are important for the development of the WSF. Its potential is closely related to the way that global public opinion understands itself and its role. February 15, and then September 9 – 13, 2003, in Cancun have been two moments in which global public opinion or global social movements acted as conscious global agent. I

distinguish 'public opinion' from 'social movements' because, on February 15, many people participated in extra-parliamentary protest for the first time. On the morning they woke up to go on the streets they saw themselves as part of a social movement. They marched because they believed that they only had to stand up and make politicians aware of the strength of feeling that existed against their policy; that, they thought, would be enough to convince the government to change its mind.

After February 15, and the vindication every day in Iraq of the arguments of those who marched, activism for peace and social justice will never settle back into conventional national parliamentary politics. Of course, the questioning of traditional forms of political agency — both their restriction to parliament and their primarily national framework — goes back most recently to 1999 and Seattle, and the attempt to halt a process of secret and unaccountable deals between supposedly democratically elected governments. It also has a pre-history in the student and workers' movements that exploded on the streets in 1968 and the feminist movement that burst into kitchens, bedrooms, workplaces and communities across the world. But February 15 and the consequent behaviour of the US Empire is leading to a broader radicalisation than we have witnessed for many years.

What role can the WSF play in this emergence of new and powerful agencies of social change? The WSF is a resource in the global struggle against neoliberalism. It is not a leadership or a distinct source of power. To understand the WSF's potential as a resource for the diverse organisations struggling for another world, it helps to understand what is distinctive about the movements and networks that have converged on Porto Alegre and then Mumbai. In many ways the book is about that.

I want to highlight two related features of the new movements, which build on the innovations of the movements of the sixties and seventies. They are features that indicate how these movements have taken account of, even if only instinctively, the failures of previous Left political agencies — whether of the Leninist kind or the parliamentary.

First, the way these movements build into their organising and into their ethics, the importance of the practical knowledge and transformative power of the people organised 'from below'. There has been a revolution in thinking over the past thirty years against mechanical models of action and knowledge. In these models, society is like a huge machine operated from the centre — the State — and the knowledge which underpins politics, is knowledge of linear laws of cause and effect.

The new thinking about knowledge and society understands the creative, unpredictable role of human agency and the non-linear, non-instrumental, even non-rational dimensions of knowledge and understanding. Politics, including conventional Left thinking, has been slow to catch up with this transformed methodology. While capitalist management theorists appreciate the creativity of chaos, the use of networks to transfer practical know how, and talk of 'the gold' in the worker's mind, traditional parties of the Left have long acted as if knowledge can be centralised and the membership given their instructions. The mass membership is not seen as creative, knowing, both autonomous and interconnected human beings, but as 'supporters', voting fodder, or in military analogy 'the rank and file'. Historically, this has deprived Left governments of a huge source of creative power, and made them fatally vulnerable to the extra-political power and inside knowledge of the ruling class.

By contrast, the hallmark and vital source of strength of both the new movements and the older feminist, peace, green movement and radical trade union movements — on whose traditions they build — is a fundamental belief in the importance of practical, indigenous,

personal knowledge that contains much insight, though this cannot always be codified into how things work and how things could be transformed. Indeed, the horizontal networking ways of organising of these movements is in part a result of this being the best way to share that knowledge. This egalitarian, de-centred way of co-operating and sharing knowledge produces a greater common understanding than any top down summing up of dispersed fragments of knowledge.

People refusing to obey a system whose continuation depends on their complicity, also base the new movements with a belief in the power of organised individual rebellion. This means that people potentially have a power for change within themselves. Often, they need wider networks of support to realise that power, but it is a matter of acting jointly on a *shared* power rather than looking to politicians to act on their behalf or a vanguard party to lead them to the revolution.

The organisational challenge of now is, how can we share this knowledge and this power across all the groups of people on whom corporate capitalism depends? The use of emails and websites; an alternative press; the development of highly focused networking campaigns that inter-connect with each other and the emergence of extraordinary — but increasingly regular — international gatherings, from the Zapatista International Encuentro to the World Social Forum, are all part of the answer.

This book explores them in depth. There are the organisational forms; behind them stand principles of how organisations should work, in effect, principles of a deeper, participatory democracy. This means openness and easy accessibility; confidence building and time; understanding debate as a process essential to arriving at the truth; seeing opinion as knowledge in the making; recognising the practical relevance of reflectively exchanging information, experience and ideas without necessarily taking decisions; and accepting the benefits of consensual decision making — including consensus on when the time has come to vote.

Indeed, the processes required to fully garner people's practical knowledge and their willingness to exercise their personal power of rebellion and transformation have become new criteria for democracy.

The second distinctive feature is the diversity and breadth of recent social movements. The traditional labour movement, at least in the North, tended to be somewhat narrow in its conception of alliances. Perhaps this stemmed from the transference of the imperative of unity in industrial struggle to other dimensions of struggle. Anything that threatened short-term unity : the specific demands of women, youth or black people; the debates initiated by intellectuals or leftists, was often, though not always, spurned. It was also a product of a certain arrogance on the part of the trade unions, stemming from a sense of their own bargaining power — something that began to break down as neoliberalism eroded their clout. And all this was reinforced by a paternalist attitude to women, black people, and other minority or subordinated groups and a presumption that their needs *would be taken care of*, they had no need for autonomous organisation, or agency.

By contrast, the new movements see diversity as a source of strength. Recognition of the diversity of sources of social transformation encourages organisation and solidarity and a sense of common interest among the many layers of neoliberalism's victims. This welcome to a diversity of struggle also leads to a movement able to respond to oppression and resistance in *every* sphere of life — from the everyday issue of food and childcare through economic problems of exploitation in work to international issues of peace and justice.

Creating a framework in which diverse interpretations of common principles can co-exist is not easy, however.

Two principles seem vital to it. First, the principle of autonomy together with opportunities to talk together through networks and common spaces. This allows diversity and common purpose to be compatible, while it also overcomes the fear of debate and argument, since if organisations feel their autonomy and integrity are secure, then debate is interpreted as an arena of co-operation rather than competition.

The second vital principle underpinning new ways of organising for social justice is shared responsibility for the framework within which diversity and pluralism are possible, without controlling the outcome. This involves a political culture that can thrive on uncertainty, experiment and debate. To me, the fact that the 100,000 strong WSF in Porto Alegre could host such a diversity of events and take place relatively smoothly is already an illustration of the way that people are instinctively taking this responsibility — largely because they themselves come from organisations which need the exchange, networking and debate which the WSF is there to provide.

The WSF is vital to creating a global political culture that welcomes open debate not only as a democratic value, but also as the only way to arrive at the truth and therefore formulating effective strategies and convincing alternatives. At its best, it is like a political jam session with people bouncing off each other in harmony and in counterpoint. Like the jazz of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, the Forum is experimenting with a politics that can cope with uncertainty and is not constantly straining for formal harmony (in political terms, programmatic unity). The aim is to have an underlying structure with which everyone is familiar and then build on this a constant process of improvisation whose character it is impossible to predict or orchestrate.

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NOTES

¹ Thanks to the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam.

² Even in the US, they could well have been in a majority, had the views of the majority prevailed in Britain. Polls in the US showed that the majority would have been against the war if the US was going it alone and it was Tony Blair's government, and to a lesser extent, Anzar's government in Spain, where the majority also opposed the war, that gave Bush the excuse that he had allies.