

---

## GLOBALISATION FROM THE MIDDLE ?

### REFLECTIONS FROM A MARGIN

---

SOME SKETCHES FROM THE FIRST EUROPEAN  
SOCIAL FORUM, FLORENCE, NOVEMBER 6-10, 2002

peter waterman

#### **Introduction : The Privileges of Marginality**

Being marginal to the WSF process, in the sense of either ideology or power has its privileges, at least if one has the wherewithal for attendance, internet skills and access ! From such a position today, and in relation to a process that is itself carried out partly on the internet and partly in negotiations themselves, partly accessible to outsiders, it is possible to see and say things that those who are central and responsible either cannot or do not.

I had three commitments at the European Social Forum (ESF) held in Florence, Italy, November 6–10, 2002, one near the core and two at the periphery. The first was to informally introduce, at an evening reception, the new e-journal of the Amsterdam-based Transnational Institute, Transnational Alternative ([www.tni.org/alternativ/htm](http://www.tni.org/alternativ/htm)). The second was to present a paper requested by an existing web journal, The Commoner ([www.thecommoner.org](http://www.thecommoner.org)), an Italian-edited but English-language ‘web journal for other values’. The third was a last-minute addition thing (a result of searching the discussion forum on the ESF website), to contribute to a session on ‘New Era, New Internationalism : Political Theory and Practice of the New Movement(s)’. This was set up by the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty (AWL), a tiny British Marxist party, itself part of the Socialist Alliance in the UK.

Apart from these, I took time to attend one of the official panels on ‘Politics as Common Good : The Movement Against Neoliberalism, Talks to the European Leftwing’ (in which the who was who, and the nature and direction of the dialogue, was obscure);

to wander the bookstalls; to spend time with my Peruvian partner; to do some last-minute tourism; to search (without success) for a cup of bad espresso; to walk a long way on an anti-war march of 400000 – 500,000 people, to check out the Feltrinelli bookshop for Italian books on the new movements. Oh, and to travel to the neighbouring region of Umbria in search of an old friend, once a young friend, within another internationalist movement nearly fifty years ago.

I enjoyed all these activities, as well as what usually turns out to be of most lasting value to me : meeting and talking with old friends and new about the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement. How could I not enjoy this ? It is, after all, not so often that one can be a participant-observer in a world-scale social movement with emancipatory aspirations. Being now 67, I am inclined to make the most of this latest wave.

The lesser breeds, without the cabin translation, were to be found not within the central Forum site, nor even in the centre of Florence. They were sited, in both cases, some 30–40 minutes bus ride away, on the edge of town, but with compensating views of the post-renaissance suburbs of Florence and of its decorative surrounding hills.

Workers' Liberty offered what appeared to be an almost entirely British event. It could have been transported from the back room of a pub in Brighton or Birmingham into the alien setting of a Florence cultural centre. When I arrived, however, I found that the earlier-mentioned title had dropped in size to 16 points Times Roman, whilst another had appeared in 30 points :

## *Capitalism, Nation, Classes, Empire*

What with the leaflet layout, I was transported, momentarily, back to the Young Communist League, London, fifty years ago. With the assistance however, of a glass of neighbouring grappa, I took it in my stride. Ten to fifteen youngish Worker Libertarians (WL) had set up a Lit Stall (as we called them Back in the Pro-USSR years) downstairs, from which I bought a copy of their magazine, *Workers' Liberty* 2000, dealing with the Big G. The first two speakers, Martin Thomas from AWL, and Akis Gavrillidis, a Greek, spoke from or about, traditional Marxism. Since WL had printed two somewhat disconnected passages from my writings on its leaflet, I took this as a licence to try out on them a third, 'Omnia Sint Communia / All in Common'.<sup>1</sup> This was the one I was due to present up another mountain that same afternoon. Although I would have thought there was some Marxist licence for reviving the notion of 'the commons' within the GJ&SM, one young guy did say something to this effect :

Yes, well, we do have to remember that there was no united mass movement in defence of the commons historically, which is why they were lost, whereas organisations and parties rooted in the working class are still here and fighting.

I did not say so, but certainly felt that this suggested both a certain disregard for the historical origins of the labour movement and a matching lack of imagination about its future (at least if it wants to have one).

Back down to the main station, then up the other hill, to one of Italy's famous 'social centres' — in this case a disused factory of considerable proportions, with early-industrial toilets and a tent-like internal structure intended (without notable success) to protect us from the rapidly falling mercury. The goodwill of the resident activists, handouts of excellent food being prepared for other Forum marginals, and the perfect espresso (evidently not yet Europeanised), kept me going till the Commoners arrived. Mixed in terms of age, gender and European nationality, these appeared to be followers of the Italian tradition of 'workers autonomy', which first required Marxists to pay serious attention to the new social categories and movements (largely, however, by seeing them as other parts of the working-class and of working-class struggle). In the case of Massimo De Angelis, the London-based Italian academic behind The Commoner, the tradition seems to be going beyond both workerism and political-economy (whilst not — Marx forbid ! — abandoning either).

This Robin Hood and his Merry Wo/men seem to be now seeing the notion of the 'commons' as something that can bring together a wide range of struggles (social and geographic) in defence or extension of what is considered to be common property. And that can give a cutting edge to a Forum process that seems to be settling down as a radical-reformist rather than an emancipatory movement (these may be dialectically inter-related within the GJ&SM, but there is a difference of ambition between them).

The two-session workshop was of a theoretical, though non-academic character, in which various contributors, mostly new to one another, took on rather complementary roles. If WL is at the Old Left periphery of the Forum, the Commoner event seemed to me to be at the New Emancipatory one. I met here Mariarosa Dalla Costa, an Italian veteran of autonomist-socialist-feminist struggles, and Olivier de Marcellus, from Switzerland, a leading figure in a radical tendency within the new movement, People's Global Action. Also Franco Barchiesi, another wandering Italian, just back from South Africa, whose unprinted contribution really requires more than a second glance. People handed out documents, showed or mentioned books they had been reading, Olivier's offering being one in French on the 'gift economy' under contemporary capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Being not content with my own paper, which was intended to (re)link the struggles of labour with the concept of the commons, I was happy to declare it part of the Common Heritage of Humankind (CHH) and therefore available to others — preferably to produce something better.

Many of those engaged in the official Forum programme are *themselves* engaged in struggles — to preserve the environment, to save the welfare state, to seek alternatives to privatisation, or to extend social control within cyberspace, and insofar as the first event I had attended, had itself been addressed to 'the common good' — (exemplified rather than conceptualised). I did think that a revival or re-invention of the concept of the commons could have an emancipatory effect. My own argument was largely focused on the value of this notion for the international trade union movement (still in a posture of junior partnership to those downsizing it) and in relation to international campaigns for the Common Heritage.

### Other Margins...

I did not attend, but heard, other marginals talking about The Hub.<sup>3</sup> This turned out, from a computer search, to be both an earthly entity and a cyberspace. It could have been more centrally placed than other marginal events. It seems to have acted as some kind of focus for those on the libertarian left periphery of the Forum. One interesting feature is precisely the extent to which it represented and advanced a multi-mediated and cyber-spaced internationalism. As one commentator wrote to her list immediately following the Forum :

....what we're definitely good at is creating a space, a laboratory, an alternative infrastructure in no time. It was just incredible to see how from Tuesday evening until Wednesday night / Thursday, that space emerged out of nothing, until it included a large computer network, a TV station, video projections, an evening programme, a (more or less) decorated meeting space, a rough but relatively well-functioning collective decision-making structure, a satellite experiment, a sleeping space, a kitchen...and a bar, of course...generally, a whole alternative village created from scratch...  
<https://www.inventati.org/mailman/public/hub/2002-November/000298.html>

The writer continues with interesting criticism of the shortcomings of the experience. The Hub promises us its own evaluation of ESF in the near future. Given the recognised shortcomings of WSF communications revealed by communications specialist, Roberto Savio,<sup>4</sup> it may be significant that communication sensitivity and intensity finds expression precisely at the margins of the Forum. Because here was an activity that marginals (again with web access) could participate in without being physically present in Florence.

### Forum Resources : The Printed and the Virtual

#### Books

Whilst my partner, Gina, was attending the International Council for the next WSF in Porto Alegre, late-January, 2003, I was collecting and buying Italian books and documents about the Forum process. I also, for the first time since arriving in Florence almost a week earlier, checked my email and scanned the web.

Even from what I picked up or bought at the Forum or within Florence, it is clear that the GJ&SM is creating a new international/ist global culture, at least in print, and that Italy is making a major contribution to that. I want here, however, to talk about one significant contribution to this culture. This was the French edition of a new collection on the 'globalisation of resistance.'<sup>5</sup> Produced by the influential World Forum of Alternatives, this consists of an extensive regional survey, an identification of key issues, and the editors' analyses and strategy proposals. It is a professional production and will appear in English, Portuguese and other languages. It may have a major impact on the image and / or orientation of the Forum. If the ESF could be considered to be under the heavy influence of Italian and other European political parties and NGOs on the Left, this collection strikes more of a radical Third-World/ist note. This evidently means a stress on North – South contradictions and openness to a development discourse. Whilst labour struggles may be mentioned in the review, they play no significant part in the sections on analysis and strategy. But then, women's struggles here also seem to be largely understood in developmental terms, and

without regard to body politics. Indeed, the general orientation of the compilation seems to be towards problems and policies rather than social movements as such.

#### Internet

My email was surprisingly thin, or short, possibly because many of the people I correspond with were themselves in Florence ! Given that official and shopfloor union organisations were better represented than ever in this Forum,<sup>6</sup> I wondered whether cyberspace had been already informed of this. I did a search under 'European Social Forum, Florence, Unions'. Nothing directly relevant.<sup>7</sup> Even a week or more later, indeed, there was little or nothing to be found on the sites of either the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions or even of the institutionally independent LabourStart. The first thing that turned up whilst I was still in Florence was a *non-labour* item entitled 'Who Controls the European Social Forum' ?<sup>8</sup>

This had been uploaded, or updated, with considerable alacrity. It contains the most detailed information about the funders and sponsors of the ESF, about the political parties and NGOs most prominently involved, and includes the accusation that what the event amounted to was an exercise in the control of social movements in the interests of a new kind of corporatism :

The ESF is not a radical organisation : it has financial links to business and governments, and promotes neo-corporatism. Like the WTO, the European Social Forum cannot be reformed : it should be abolished.

#### The Forum as Disputable Terrain

Abolishing something that has hardly begun — and something that is capable of assembling massive numbers of young and old people, workers and women from all over Europe — seems both hasty and extreme. However, Paul Treanor's is an "Ultra-Radicalism of a New Type." His argument is not only documented, but provides links to those he is dismissing. Moreover, whilst much of his alternative agenda is eccentric (in the sense of representing a personalised wishlist, hallmarked by impossibilism, and un-articulated with any familiar group, worldview or utopia), his challenges, concerning what I have elsewhere called the political-economy of the Forum,<sup>9</sup> are surely reasonable.

In the case of the Amin–Houtart book, for example, the financial sponsors of the World Forum of Alternatives are actually identified as including not only European NGO funding agencies (themselves mostly state dependent) but the General Commission of International Relations of the French Community in Belgium — presumably a sub or quasi-state body. Treanor is also, admittedly, a 'funding-mentalist' — someone who believes that ideas and behaviour are totally determined by funders. Insofar as most critique of capitalism has come from universities funded by capital and state, and insofar as even Marx's *Das Kapital* was funded out of the surplus value of Engels' textile mill, this assumption does not meet the evidence of either actually existing or historical radicalism.

Other radical critics, such as some of those mentioned above combine their critique of the Forum form and process with an intervention within it. The Treanor position assumes that places are either entirely liberated or totally incorporated. It does

not allow for the existence of contradictory spaces. Nor for change as process or apparently, for transformation of a non-apocalyptic type. It does not recognise to what extent the space created by the Forum process differs from those provided by or within other or earlier forms of capitalist polity, other forms or periods of internationalism. The Forum form, in my view, cannot be considered both simply traditional and determined, nor simply free and indeterminate. It is a disputable and disputed terrain. And one that needs within it, its own marginals and radicals. Given, in fact, that the Forum is both articulated with and dependent upon cyberspace, Paul Treanor's challenge-cum-diatribes *is* part of the WSF process (or it is, now that I have written about it. Sorry about that, Paul). Self-marginalisation today may require not simply non-presence but a vow of silence and a cloak of invisibility.

### Conclusion : Globalisation from the Middle ?

There are working class participants in the events of the Forum, and popular voices speaking from the central platforms of the Forum. There are, on its councils, representatives of the poor and marginalised. But many such representatives are there without being in any way mandated, without being answerable to their constituencies and therefore without any necessary empowering effect on those they claim to speak for. Many other leading figures and NGO representatives are, indeed, self-appointed and financially dependent on such states as the Scanadanetherlands. This is not an accusation — it is a statement of the case. It is nothing to necessarily feel embarrassed about — even if many such people do feel embarrassed about it. The leading NGOs, Left unions and other organisations are there because they had tasted the wind and foreseen the whirlwind, and whipped it up into something a bit more like El Niño. But does this provide a justification for characterising the WSF, as many do, as an instance of 'globalisation from below' ?

The question above only occurred to me *after* the event. I was doing, with Gina, our bit of tourism. Because there was a museum in it, we landed up on the opposite side of the square in which the IC (the International Council) of the WSF had been meeting up to the day before. We had noticed, around town, distinctive groups of *Peruan@s populares*. Now we seemed to have landed in the break during some Peruvian Social Forum. Gina, as is her wont, began to talk with one woman with grey strands in her black hair, and a padded jacket that looked as if it had been also slept in. We waited whilst she wrote a letter for Gina to take back to her family in La Victoria, a *barrio popular* in the centre of Lima (which has ten pages on Google, including mention of *cabines internet* — cybercafes). I took a couple of photos. The woman it appeared, and as we had guessed about the other Peruvians, was an illegal immigrant. She was there waiting for a church soup kitchen to open. Her tale was one of being unable to pay the rent on the family shop in La Victoria, of hoping to earn it here in Florence, of having so far found no job, of being dependent on church accommodation where she felt under surveillance.

Was she / they, aware of the ESF that had just taken place ? Of the WSF that had been prepared on the other side of the piazza ? Were those Forum people, who had been considering the place of the migrant labour question in the WSF, aware of the embodiment of this question, and an essential part of the answer, hundred metres away ? My guess is

that even if the *immigrantes illegales* had noted the massive peace march a couple of days earlier (an almost totally white affair), and even if those taking part in the Forum were acutely aware of the existence of such migrants in Italy, the two parties were actually moving on parallel lines. Globalisation from below, in other words, has to be seen as an aspiration to be achieved by the Forum process, not a reality already existent and represented. This is a challenge to all reformists, transformists and us, those at the centre and those at the periphery. And this is one part of that utopian horizon towards which we need, now, to move, with all deliberate haste.

### What I Collected in Florence :

#### Printed Documents :

- ARCI (ed.). 2002. *Porto Alegre 2: Il Mondo Diverso*. Roma : ARCI. 130 pp.
- Cannavò, Salvatore. *Porto Alegre : Capitale dei movimenti – Percorsi e progetti di un movimento globale* ('Porto Alegre : Capital of Movements – Progress and Projects of a Global Movement'). Roma, Manifesto Libri. 218 pp.
- Carta Almanacco. *Firenze Europa*. (Special Issue). 13 November, No. 42, pp. 10-76.
- Ceri, Paolo. 2002. *Movimenti globali : La protesta nel XXI secolo* ('Global Movements : Protest in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'). Roma-Bari, Editori Laterza. 150 pp.
- European Social Forum, Firenze. 2002. 'Seminar, Politics as Common Good : The Movement against Neoliberalism Talks to the European Left'.
- ETUC. 2002. 'Trade Union Participation in the European Social Forum. Florence 6,7,8 and 9 November 2002. Supplementary Information for the Participating Colleagues'. Email received November 11, 2002. 10 pp.
- Girardi, Giulio. 2002. *Resistenza e alternativa al neoliberalismo e ai terrorismi* ('Resistance and Alternatives to Neoliberalism and Terrorism'). Milano, Punto Rosso. 335 pp.
- Pianta, Mario. 2001. *Globalizzazione dal basso : Economia mondiale e movimenti sociali* ('Globalisation from Below : World Economy and Social Movements'). Roma, Manifestolibre. 190 pp.
- Ripa di Meana, Carlo. 2000. *Cane sciolto* ('Unleashed Hound'). Milan, Kaos Edizioni. 279 pp.

#### Audiovisual documents :

'Porto Alegre : Social Forum', Un video di David Riordino. VHS. 45 mins. Italian spoken. Production: Pontassieve Cultura – Giunta Regionale Toscana.

#### Web references :

The Hub Eur@ction Project. <http://hubproject.org/>

DECEMBER 2002

Edited version of original essay, available from [waterman@antenna.nl](mailto:waterman@antenna.nl), or [www.antenna.nl/~waterman/](http://www.antenna.nl/~waterman/)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Waterman 2002a.

<sup>2</sup> Godbout 2000.

<sup>3</sup> The Hub Eur@ction Project. <http://hubproject.org/> Nor, for that matter, did I discover The Disobedients, who seem to have been doing something similar. Though it might have been the same event ! <http://euskalherria.indymedia.org/eu/2002/10/2261.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> Savio 2002a, b.

<sup>5</sup> Amin and Houtart 2002.

<sup>6</sup> ETUC 2002a.

<sup>7</sup> A week or so after the event, I searched for the ESF on the websites of Global Unions, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and the independent LabourStart (e-dresses under Resources below). Bearing in mind the active and visible presence at the event of the ETUC, and some major ICFTU affiliates (even outside Europe), the virtual silence on the matter can hardly be accidental. A report that does deal, at some length, with labour at the Forum is that of Stuart Hodkinson (February 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Treanor 2002. <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/esf.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Waterman 2002b.