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## THE WSF AS OPEN SPACE

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The success of the World Social Forum 2003 in Porto Alegre and its process of globalisation during 2002 have raised many questions about its continuity. Many points of view have been expressed and new proposals put forward for the organisation of the 2003, 2004 and 2005 events.

The Forum faces a positive crisis three-fourths of growth three-fourths that demands a deeper look at some of the issues in its Charter of Principles.<sup>1</sup> To avoid destroying its potential, some of these ambiguities have to be overcome before the process moves towards irretrievably crystallised, concrete orientations. To contribute to this debate, I explore here three themes that have become fundamental for the continuity of the Forum process :

- The choice between a Forum-as-space and a Forum-as-movement;
- The relative importance, in the Forum meetings, of the activities organised by the participants and the activities scheduled by the Organising Committees, and the respective nature of these two activities;
- The role of the Committees that organise the Forum events.

A fourth issue is, or could be, how the Forum should relate to political parties. I, however, will address only the first three themes in this note.

### Forum : Space or Movement ?

At this stage of the evolution of the Forum, the question of whether the Forum is a 'space' or a 'movement' has become a fundamental question and choice. To avoid answering this question, by not phrasing it clearly, would be the best way to create difficulties for ourselves. The Charter of Principles of the WSF emphatically defines it as a 'space'. Not everyone, however, thinks and acts as if it were really a space, or that it should always remain a space.

Many consider the Forum a 'space' that is something of a 'movement'. To others, it is 'still' 'only a space'. This means it can and should become an enormous movement, or a 'movement of movements' as some journalists call it. The great success of the February

15, 2002 demonstrations against the war on Iraq leads most enthusiasts to see this as a result of the Forum, even tending to say that it is the *product* of the Forum. It encourages others to want the Forum to take up a mobilising function, like all movements.

To begin with, movements and spaces are completely different things. Without over simplifying things in a Manichean way, either they are one or the other. Nevertheless, they can co-exist. Nor are they opposites, which means that they do not *neutralise* each other, but rather, they may even be *counterparts*. But you can't be both things at the same time, not even be a bit of each — which would end up by impairing one or the other. Movements and spaces may be seeking, each one performing its roles, the same general objectives. But each one works in a way of its own, aiming at different specific objectives.

The main question then becomes : would transforming the WSF into a movement, now or later, as the process advances — be a good strategy to achieve the objective of the overcoming of neoliberalism and the construction of 'another possible world' ? Or conversely, would it be helpful for us to be able to count on spaces like those that are opened by the WSF now and in the future ?

For me, there is no doubt that it is fundamental to ensure at all costs the continuity of the Forum as a *space* and to not yield to the temptation of transforming it now or even later, into a *movement*. If we maintain it as a space, it will not prevent nor hinder the formation and the development of movements — to the contrary it will ensure and enable this process. But if we opt for transforming it into a movement, it will inescapably fail to be a space, and all the potentialities inherent to spaces will then be lost.

Furthermore, if we do transform the Forum into a movement, we will be — without any help at all from those we are fighting against — throwing away a powerful instrument of struggle that we have been able to create by drawing on the most important recent political discovery, of the power of open, free, horizontal structures. It is this idea that explains the success in Porto Alegre as well as Seattle, and of the February 15 demonstrations against the war. And keeping in mind that this idea of 'horizontal social articulation' still has so much to contribute to our struggle today, it will also be necessary in the very process of the construction of the world we want.

This conviction is based on the analysis of the advantages of the current character of the Forum as a space as compared to a possible manifestation of the Forum as a movement.

### What is the Difference Between a Movement and a Space ?

A movement *congregates* people — its activists, as the activists of a party — who decide to organise themselves to collectively accomplish certain objectives. Its formation and existence entails the *definition* of strategies to reach these objectives, the *formulation* of action programmes, and the *distribution* of responsibilities among its members — including those concerning the direction of the movement. Those who assume this function will lead the activists of the movement, getting them — through authoritarian or democratic methods, according to the choice made by the founders of the movement — to take responsibility for their commitments in the collective action. Its organisational structure will necessarily be pyramidal however democratic the internal process of decision and the way used to choose those who will occupy

different levels of management might be. On the other hand, its effectiveness will depend on the explicitness and precision of its *specific objectives*, and therefore, of its own boundaries in time and space.

A space has *no leaders*. It is only a place, basically a *horizontal space*, just like the earth's surface, even if it has some ups and downs. It is like a *square without an owner*. If the square has an owner other than the collectivity, it fails to be a square, and becomes private territory. Squares are generally open spaces that can be visited by all those who find any kind of interest in using it. Their purpose is solely being a square, whatever service they render to its users. The longer they last as squares the better it is for those who use them for what they offer for the realisation of their respective objectives.

Even when a square contains trees and small hills, it is always a socially horizontal space. Those who climb the trees or the hills cannot control from above the actions of those inside the square. Being considered ridiculous by the others in the square is the least any such climbers would expect. Should they become insistent or inconvenient, they will end up talking to themselves, for those who are in the square will leave it. Or they may even come back with 'public authorities' who will make them leave or stop preaching from above to restore the peace and tranquillity typical of public squares.

#### The Forum : Space to Incubate Movements ?

The Forum's Charter of Principles strongly opposes the assignment of any kind of direction or leadership inside it : nobody can speak on *behalf* of the Forum — there is no sense speaking on behalf of a space or its participants. Everyone, individuals and organisations, retains their right to express themselves and to act during and after the Forum according to their convictions, embracing or not, positions or proposals that are introduced by other participants but never on behalf of the Forum or all of its participants.

Like the public square, the Forum is an open but not neutral space. The Forum opens from time to time in different parts of the world — in the events where it takes place — with one specific objective : to allow as many individuals, organisations, and movements as possible that oppose neoliberalism to get together freely, listen to each other, learn from the experiences and struggles of others, and discuss proposals of action; to become linked in new nets and organisations aiming at overcoming the present process of globalisation dominated by large international corporations and their financial interests.

Thus, it is a space created to serve a common objective of all those who converge to the Forum, functioning horizontally as a public square, without leaders or pyramids of power. The Forum works as a 'factory of ideas' or an *incubator*, from which new initiatives, aiming at the construction of another world we consider feasible, necessary and urgent, can emerge. We can expect the birth of many movements, bigger or smaller, more or less combative, each with its specific objectives, to perform their own roles in the same struggle — and their development is the primary aim of the square.

The greatest potential of the Forum-as-space is to create movements that amplify this struggle. Conversely, when a movement generates new movements, this happens unwillingly as a result of internal divisions. And that is what would occur if the Forum became a movement.

The objectives of these new initiatives do not have to be all clear and precise, quite different from what occurs in movements. Some are still being formed, waiting in the incubator to be hatched and need time to mature.

### **The Advantages of Not having a ‘Final Document’**

The Forum’s Charter of Principles underlines this role by insisting that there be no ‘final documents’. A square does not make ‘declarations,’ but those inside it can do so. The participants of the WSF can make whatever final declarations they wish — and these are most welcome. But they will never be declarations of the Forum as a Forum. As a space common to all, it does not ‘speak’, or rather, it ‘speaks’ a lot through its very existence. As more and more people and organisations get together in order to find ways to overcome neoliberalism, this in itself is an expressive political fact. Nobody therefore, needs to speak on behalf of the Forum.

This idea, as adopted by the Forum, was easily grasped by a great number of participants in its last edition in Porto Alegre, who contributed to the ‘Notice Board’ that was placed there for this purpose with ‘Proposals for Action adopted During the 2003 Forum’. In addition to the fact that this notice board enabled participants to express themselves, the final proposals and declarations brought, or sent later, make clear the richness and the diversity of the engagement of the participants. The proposals can be found in the Forum’s web page, but this year it was not possible to show everything that its participants decided to do, the notice board was poorly publicised.

The diffusion of this information through the internet — indicating how to contact the authors of the proposals — opens other perspectives through new contacts and relationships now made possible, allowing new expressions around the proposals during the Forum. It is as if the Forum’s square had become permanently open, outliving time and space, lasting longer than the limited five-day event of Porto Alegre. The contacts may be multiplied and lead to more concrete actions, fostered by the unlimited new possibilities opened by the internet. The same can happen with the ‘notice board of proposals’ set up in other events.

### **Diversity, a Prized Goal**

But the Forum-as-space still has further advantages. As an open space, the Forum has the possibility of ensuring respect for diversity, unlike if it were a movement. The principle of respecting diversity, adopted by the WSF Charter, is grounded on the conviction that one of the fundamental characteristics of the other world we intend to build must be respect for diversity.

Without becoming ‘totally neutral’, the Forum allows each participant to maintain his / her own freedom to choose the sector or the level in which to act. This action can be either very wide and comprehensive or rather restricted; it might intend to address either the deeper causes of the problems the world faces or the superficial effects of these problems. The vast range of themes discussed during the Forum and the objectives sought in it can be thus very wide, such is the range of changes required for the construction of a new world. Nobody in the Forum has the power or the right to say that one action or proposal is more important than another. Nor should they have

the power or the right to give or demand a bigger visibility to their proposals, 'usurping' for their own particular objectives a space that belongs to everybody.

This is an issue however, that requires more careful reflection, in view of what is being witnessed in the marches and street protests that tend to characterise the conclusion of the Forums. The banners should be the banners of all, as a final visible expression of its diversity and of the variety of proposals sheltered by it or born from it. To privilege this or that struggle, or to be in the first ranks in the marches or in the appointment of the public speakers at the end of the marches, contradicts the principle of respect for diversity and conveys a vision of a Forum-as-movement instead of a Forum-as-space. This question remains to be discussed in greater depth.

All these features of the Forum certainly account for its great acceptance and appeal and the success of its events. Its participants feel respected for the choices they make, for the rhythms they adopt and for their own level of engagement. Some may come to the Forum as activists of a specific movement. But the majority come driven by their individual belief that it is important to do so, to exchange experiences, to learn and to join others, keeping the freedom that they had before and will continue to have during and after their participation in the events.

They know that they will not be given orders nor will they have to follow commands, nor have to report back on what they have done or not done. Nor will they have to give proof of loyalty and discipline, nor will they be expelled if they don't do this — much the contrary of what would occur to them had they come to participate in any meeting of an organised movement.

### Joy and Mutual Responsibility

This character of the Forum explains the great joy that reigns in this square. It is like an enormous fair, a real party with spaces for demonstrations and 'performances' of many different kinds. Nobody is anguished in the Forum, because no one has to fight to see their proposals and ideas prevail over others. Nor is anyone worried about having to defend themselves from others trying to control the Forum, or to impose orientations or rules of behaviour on the Forum that must get together to evaluate, decide, and undertake tasks. And, still less, political behaviour, as occurs in groups and 'delegations' as in good and disciplined parties or movements. Such meetings are possible but never obligatory for those who are activists of this or that movement.

It would be a pity if this joy of the square was lost, which may well happen if it is not a square any more. It is precisely this joy — the same joy we would all like to always see in the 'other possible world' — that takes a hold of and invigorates everybody, and that also destroys the divisions that segregate the struggles of different movements : the fact that we are *many* in the *same* fight.

In this way, activists of different movements meet up with and recognise each other in the open space provided to all by the Forum : those fighting for the rights of women, of rural and urban workers and of children; those fighting for the environment; those seeking new economic relations within countries or at the international level; and those seeking

democratic participation in governments or for the enhancement of the spiritual dimension in the human being, etc., in short, the great diversity of existing movements.

If the Forum becomes a 'movement of movements,' none of these movements would individually be able to create such a space and succeed in getting all the other movements to accept its invitation without conditions. The reunion would be curbed by the need to start building another structure that has the intention to unify, with all the rules — agreed upon by all — which would be required to make it possible. And then, competition would again emerge along with divisions as a result of the struggle for space and its control, and also for the definition of the objectives of the new movement.

Finally, a feature of the Forum-as-space is the feeling of mutual responsibility. The fact that it is a square without an owner makes this possible. Even the errors of the organisers — which are often many, given the scale that the events have taken — are accepted and corrected by the initiatives and by the creativity of the participants. In the 2003 edition of the WSF in Porto Alegre, there was a serious and involuntary mistake that forced the organisers to make a great effort to try to minimise its effects: the workshops' programmes were only published on the second day. This could easily have destroyed the entire event. Nevertheless, the participants found ways to compensate the failure on their own, and there were even initiatives from 'outside' in the form of a pirated publication of the programme prepared by people trawling the internet the evening before.

### Risks We Face

To maintain the WSF as a space is then, perhaps, the best way to guarantee its biggest asset. This must be preserved at any cost. In this sense, those who want to transform it into a movement are working against our common cause. They are effectively acting against their own interests and against all our interests. As articulations and initiatives born in the Forum, they are hindering and suffocating their own source of life — or at least destroying a powerful instrument that is available to them, for expanding and enlarging their presence in the struggle we are all engaged in.

Initiatives that have been taken by certain self-nominated 'social movements' point in this direction. Justifiably concerned with the need of a popular mobilisation to fight against neoliberalism, they are however seeking to absorb the Forum inside their own mobilising dynamics, to serve their own objectives.

Such movements know that they do not and cannot ever congregate all the participants that come to each Forum, even if they manage to bring together a few important organisations. But even so, they think that their own final document can and should be presented and understood as a 'final document' of the Forum. One initiative of this kind — born in the incubator square of the 2001 Forum — has already given rise to several tensions and misunderstandings after the Forum. The pressure in this direction has also taken shape in other events, even after the 2003 Forum, though less easily. This last attempt jeopardised the mobilising effects and articulations that became possible with the 'Proposals for Action Notice Board'.

Recently the 'co-ordination' of these movements has gone farther : as members of the Organisation Committees for the WSF events, they have proposed that their

own final meeting, that is normally held towards the end of the Forum, be included in the last day of the Forum schedule. This meeting, which necessarily only gets limited participation, would then appear — at least to the media — as the concluding meeting of the Forum as a whole.

If they adopt this orientation, this will create a new tension. Everyone will then feel it necessary to bring the results of their own activity to this meeting, in order to ensure that these results are implemented by those who are going to ‘coordinate’ its effective realisation as in a well-organised movement. By focusing attention on the meeting they organise at the end of the Forum, and even if all Forum participants do not take part, this meeting will inevitably ignore or disrespect some proposals for action that are advanced. Or it will create the need of ‘representations’ that will transform the Forum into the usual pyramid, without the joy of the horizontal square.

The great challenge for the continuity of the Forum process therefore, and for it to fulfil its vocation of being an incubator for more and more movements and initiatives, is to *multiply* such spaces across the world that are genuinely open and free, without focussing attention only on specific proposals. We must hope that nobody, however inadvertently, contributes to ‘closing down’ the Forum to such a point that it disappears as an open space.

All this is a matter of choice. Individuals and organisations who are planning events this year or in the subsequent ones within the process of the WSF, and members of its present IC or of the enlarged Council meeting in June 2003, may consider adopting an orientation of the type proposed by the so-called ‘social movements’. Nobody can prevent such a decision. It is an option, but each participant in the Forum process will then have to decide about the continuity of their own participation. The Forum will not yet be a movement and therefore there will be no rules of membership nor will there be the need to respect majority decisions even if taken democratically.

What we must not do is avoid clear recognition and consideration of this question, nor forget to analyse the consequences of such positions and decisions.

### Organised versus Self-organised Activities

This discussion is essential because, quite aside from the pressure of participants to transform the WSF into a movement, the organisers of events themselves will tend to adopt this option if the present method of organising them is maintained. The choice between WSF-as-space and WSF-as-movement will necessarily return to face us in such an organisation.

In the Forum-as-space, self-organised activities would have priority in the minds of the event organisers once it is clear to them that the WSF works better as a space. Experience has shown us that events programmed by the organisers are overvalued and take place at the expense of meetings and seminars programmed by the participants themselves. These self-organised activities, which are at the *core* of Forum-as-space, are treated almost with negligence. Since the time that this way of organising the events was invented in the 2001 Porto Alegre Forum, these activities are almost looked down

upon as secondary, less important activities that hold low prestige, almost as if they were a burden that the organisers are forced to carry.

It is, in fact, the case, that in all the Forums held so far, the process of choosing the themes and speakers at the conferences and panels has taken most of the organisers' time. This has also occurred at the IC : the Bangkok and Florence meetings of the Council (in August and November 2002) devoted a great part of their working programme to this type of decision to prepare for the Porto Alegre Forum. Long meetings beyond the Council's schedule have become necessary, and even a special meeting in Brazil between Bangkok and Florence, of the new working group created for this — bringing together the 'co-ordinators of the main themes' — and with all the costs that such meetings entail. The themes and the lecturers have turned out to be the 'showcase' of the Forum, the most public and visible demonstration of what its concerns are and what is discussed in it; and this of course must be carefully planned in order to keep the positions and proposals clear. This is just as is the case with the Davos Forum which does not have self-organised activities and therefore has to choose the main theme of its events very carefully, each time.

On the other hand, the preparation of the other parts of the WSF — the events programmed by its participants, which are, aside from its themes, a hallmark of the WSF — follows a purely administrative dynamic, which is nearly bureaucratic. A deadline is set for the submission of proposals for seminars and workshops; the ones that cannot be accepted according to the WSF Charter are identified through a process that is rather inadequate given the short time that the organisers have to do it in. In reality, it is only proposals made by persons and organisations that explicitly declare their relations with political parties and armed organisations that are set aside. Dates and places are then administratively allocated for these activities; a 'catalogue' is printed listing every activity, its proponent, its date, and place where it is going to be held. These are almost always issued at the last minute after making all the traditional corrections and last minute changes, and not all participants even receive them.

As the number of these self-organised activities tends to be big, only some can take place in the central areas of the event. The rest are distributed in the best possible way in all available spaces — sometimes in different parts of the cities, and even in areas that are difficult to reach. The final catalogue is usually only available on the first day of the event. The result is that the participants in the self-organised workshops and seminars tend to mostly be only their own organisers and those they themselves had invited, or those who were able to rapidly identify the activities that interested them.

The situation is worse when the organisers of the big events manage to bring renowned persons to their events and when these events overlap with the workshops and seminars, as occurred in Porto Alegre 2003. The big conferences end up attracting most of the participants, leaving the self-organised activities to those who really insist on participating in them. Given this situation, we clearly need to re-examine the function of the events, seminars, and panels.

There are several precautions that can be taken to avoid some of these problems. One, deadlines for submission of proposals for workshops and seminars could be fixed



long before the event and at least two months in advance for the big events. This would make it possible to disseminate the proposals by internet ahead of time, in turn allow interlinks to be established well ahead of the workshops, better distribution of places and spaces that can facilitate such interlinking, and a better preparation by the participants themselves, allowing them to come to the Forum already knowing which activities they would like to join.

Secondly, space for self-organised activities should be located in the main spaces of the events, in the 'main square', which has better infrastructure, easy access, and proper announcement. They should not have to suffer what happened in the Porto Alegre 2003 Forum, which led people to saying that the big 'stars' have usurped the Forum.

Self-organised activities are consistent with the idea of the Forum-as-space and not the Forum-as-movement. There can be no doubt that giving priority to self-organised activities would be much more conducive to achieving the objectives of the WSF as formulated in the WSF Charter and as indicated at the beginning of this article : to allow as many people, organisations, and movements opposed to neoliberalism to get freely together, listen to each other, learn from the experiences and the struggles of the others, discuss proposals of action, and become linked in new networks and organisations aimed at overcoming the present process of globalisation dominated by large international corporations and financial interests.

### **Organisation Committees : Facilitators or Directing a Movement ?**

As declared by the WSF Charter, the Forum is not meant to be a space for disputing power. Till now, it has had the character of a horizontal and open space, and this has effectively prevented the occurrence of such disputes in its events. But the Forum and its events are not immune to this happening.

When the Forum is looked at as a movement — which demands a 'political' orientation — it becomes strategically necessary, for the political forces that participate in it, to enter its OCs with the objective of influencing decisions. Tensions then arise between those who are already inside it and who virtually take 'possession' of it, and those who feel themselves excluded or simply want to get in and participate in setting that 'orientation'.

There are also those who feel it necessary to bring this struggle even to the Brazilian Organising Committee (BOC) — which is presently the Secretariat to the Forum process — and to its International Council (IC). They even say that the present composition of the Brazilian Committee is not representative, because it does not take into account the proportional participation of all the forces or political tendencies that should be in the leadership of the Forum process. They also say that the International Council should be 'conducted' by some persons, or reduced to a group that represents others.

These proposals would only be justified if the Forum was a movement, but they are not adequate to a Forum-as-space, to a 'square', that — as we have already seen before — does not admit having or representing a 'political direction'. More than anything, the Forum needs people and institutions willing to perform the task of organising the use of the square without interfering with what is discussed in it, and even less in the freedom that should be guaranteed to all its participants.

On the face of it, it seems desirable that the composition of the OCs of the Forum-as-space have a diversity that respects and reflects the diversity in the events. But this does not mean that there has to be proportional diversity according to the importance of the organisations and movements that will participate in these events, because these organisations and movements are not coming to the Forum to receive orders. Far more important than having diversity in the committees is the credibility of people and organisations that make up the committees. They need to be able to invite people to the Forum without leaving them in any doubt about the real interest of the invitation they receive. Those invited must not be wary of the possibility of their being used by those who have invited them, to carry out their own real objectives — as happens when political parties decide to ‘generously’ support the process.

In this perspective, the concept that is more appropriate for the OCs and also for the IC, within the option of Forum-as-space, is that of a ‘facilitator’. Facilitators do not command. What they do is make it possible for existing or future movements to progress in their struggles, to help avoid confrontations among them on alternatives about how to change the world. Still less do they have to try to impose their ideas and proposals on each other.

What they need is to be concerned, within a common perspective that they adopt, with ensuring that each event organised by them accomplishes the objectives of the Forum itself. They need to choose and put into effect, carefully taking into account the political reality at each moment, the best alternatives for organising the time and the space that will be made available.

It is, of course, the case that besides the OCs of the events, other levels of organisation for assessment and proposals for the Forum process — such as enlarged committees, councils, and assemblies — can amplify the effect of the process. This will be especially so if they can manage to incorporate an even larger variety and representation of movements engaged in the construction of the ‘other world’. But in the option of Forum-as-space, this kind of organisation ought not to direct those movements and organisations, but only endorse and support the creation of more and more Forum spaces.

This kind of perspective is far more difficult to adopt because it is not as ‘heroic’ as the exercise of the political leadership that the option of Forum-as-movement requires. Adopting it will perhaps lead to less interest in participating in the organisation of the big events. It will then become even more crucial to conserve efforts and resources to amplify adhesions, links and articulations during the event.

But right now, it is useful and necessary that the barriers between different types and areas of engagement are brought down, and, that the articulation in the struggle against neoliberalism is spread all over the world. That it gets amplified, stronger, and denser; that more movements, networks, and initiatives of struggle are nurtured; and that the debate on proposals and ways to overcome the domination of capital are deepened.

If this is the moment we are living in, we can be sure that the task of multiplying Forum spaces is inestimably important, irreplaceable, and highly commendable in our common engagement to build other worlds.

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Open Space

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Forum's Charter of Principles was first formulated by the eight members of the WSF Brazil Organising Committee in April 2001 (ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001). It was then modified and approved by the first meeting of the 'WSF International Advisory Committee', later renamed 'International Council', in June 2001 (World Social Forum Organising Committee, June 2001). Whitaker is here referring to the June 2001 version; but since the April 2001 version, authored by the eight Brazilian organisations, has also been widely circulated and translated, across the world, different authors in this book in fact variously refer to these different 'versions' of 'the Charter'. So please carefully note the version that is being referred to, is distinguished by the date. Both versions have been reproduced in this book, for reference. See also the item on p 72–75. — Eds