
BOUND TO MOBILITY ?

IDENTITY AND PURPOSE AT THE WSF

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The anti-globalisation movement was not borne out of an economic crisis but out of a political crisis. Political parties, radical ones even, preserve old forms of organisation. What distinguishes us is our speed, our creativity, and invention. We have to create a new colour in political terms. We need to maintain our diversity and not a unity at any cost.²

As a historically significant process and event, the WSF is a site of convergence for those opposed to neoliberal economic globalisation. Coming to this event from different social and cultural histories, groups and individuals bring to the WSF elements both of *convergence* and *contradiction*. In a space that vigorously encourages disagreements, participants at the WSF consistently seek to take issues beyond de-contextualised protests of neoliberalism, and into a variety of different (sometimes divergent) directions based on their specific experiences.

But this structure of 'messiness' makes the WSF illegible to those that try to explain it using reductionist disciplinary frames. In this paper, I try to show why the extraordinary heterogeneity of participants in the process, with the diverse directions they are coming from and heading toward, is neither conducive to processes of analysis or control. The over 1500 events hosted at WSF 2003 on almost as many different issues make the Forum impossible to define. In each of these events, individuals and groups from around the world built horizontal conjunctions. As contact information for people across the world was exchanged freely, the structures that separated and divided them were made that much weaker.

The messiness of the WSF also has a profound effect on those that experience it. Participants at the Forum consistently invoke different identities depending on the spaces they find themselves in. As they move between national subject, gendered person, professional occupation, class and ethnic identity, they selectively employ these to protest different structures of power. In constantly shifting and addressing different structures at the same time, they were also questioning, both implicitly and explicitly,

the differentiation of the structures themselves. And in debates and dialogues with other participants, they had to critically examine their own roles in these structures.

The WSF, therefore, is not only a large international event where the resistance to neoliberal globalisation appears increasingly united in the growing number of exuberant participants every year. It is also a process by which the sheer *diversity* of peoples present at the event challenges participants to question and transform themselves in the process.

Another World Revolution is Possible

As people from around the world converge to demand change in the systems of global capitalism, the word ‘revolution’ was conspicuous by its absence. New social movements,³ each emerging from context specific social histories, have disowned totalising realities. They instead “seek structural transformation in an era in which nation states are losing control of their national economies...The issues of human rights, gender equality and ecological sustainability have dissolved Left and Right loyalties to instigate promiscuous re-combination of their various elements”.⁴ The call for ‘another world’ therefore, is an eclectic collection of marginalisation stories — crisis narratives and inequalities that speak from shared spaces about different places.

When new social movements oppose neoliberalism along with more traditional social movements like those of organised labour, they refuse to prioritise certain inequalities over others. Speaking at a 2003 WSF panel on old and new social movements, Quota Dejuwete of the Next Generation Network, Holland, said “...the new movements refuse to accept hierarchies between different struggles of racism, sexism, class; (they argue) that these have to be understood collectively”. More precisely, new movements for “gender, generation, ethnicity, race, sexuality and disabled seek not the turning of the tables but an elimination from consciousness of the presumptions of superiority”.⁵

While actively challenging and creating consciousness in different ways, participants see inequities and injustices not only in the worlds that they work in, but also the many worlds that converge at the WSF. Riding in a bus from one conference location to another, I overheard a conversation between an organiser from India and a member of an international nomadic society. Starting with an appreciation that a space like the WSF provided for such diverse peoples to meet, the conversation quickly moved to interrogate the politics of the individuals. The nomad asked questions that compelled the labour activist to defend his position on Pakistan and Kashmir. Soon, the nomad was justifying the policies of the Israeli government towards Palestinians. Recognising the contradictory politics that emerge out of particular social and cultural histories, the WSF is a space for activism to turn on itself. Controversy and disagreement are encouraged even as participants try to reconcile these contradictions with those of others in the numerous formal and informal spaces that exist for these interactions.

For example, Carol Phillips of the United Auto Workers Union of Canada, acknowledged that labour movements were extremely patriarchal and lacking in ethnic diversity, something her union had been actively trying to address. She said :

Still there are strong criticisms as unions continue to remain strong hierarchies, rigid, and the decision making structure is traditional...for the purposes of organising, speakers tend to be loud and imposing. That is because unions need to be solid and moving with

everyone in the same direction at the same time. Yet we are democratic — operating with discussion, election and debate.

Meanwhile, new movements do not want structure. They see ideology as constraining and want to embrace change in different situations when necessary. Here solidarity is a diversity of tactics. [It] allows for approaching the same issue completely differently...The tension between the old and new movements is mainly because of these reasons. But the different approaches also work well together. The new movements see labour as essential for solidarity. Mobilising large numbers of people as they did in Seattle, labour unions are essential for mass mobilisations. Labour sees these new movements as the first force that can stall these international meetings. Yet it's important to balance these forces out. Absolute diversity can take us in circles...The coming together is to some extent overdue...if we don't do so they will continue to divide us.⁶

But new social movements actively refute and reject the simplifications of collective action and consensus. As opposed to working to create solidarity, McDonald (2002) sees these groups as creating 'fluidarity'.⁷ As they organise to act around specific events, they speak through the actions of individual actors in these events — events in which the names of the groups become invisible. There is no single or identifiable principle under which people participate in these activities. Each may do so for their own reasons and articulate these in their own way.

I have dichotomised old and new social movements as separate and distinct so as to illustrate the difference in their approaches. Yet this dichotomy is not completely clean. Many groups hybridise these different approaches in their functioning. Many new movements emerge from older histories of social mobilisation. They reject totalising organisation yet seek to smoothen differences between different actors. They echo Phillips' apprehension about absolute diversity and recognise the dilemmas of producing collective action based on diversity.

The difference between the approaches of developing consensus building and that of discussing differences is a source of considerable tension in the WSF. Those that see the Forum as a single expression against neoliberal globalisation are constantly trying to move the Forum towards forming a single global movement against capitalism. Coming out of strong Marxist traditions, a labour organiser from India saw new social movements as having neither "strong political ideology" nor being able to "adequately problematise the issues". In an attempt to use strong crisis narratives to erase difference and distinction, he said, "it is all well to talk of autonomy, but we must come together politically for the enemy is strong".⁸ Through out the Forum there were similar calls for unity against strong and mobile forces of neoliberal capitalism.

This is a source of a dynamic tension and graphically illustrates what Fortun describes as the "double bind" of advocacy. In *Advocacy after Bhopal*, Fortun shows how contemporary activists are compelled to work in ways that demand integrity, consistency and formalism, and by making claims to universal truths and justice. In doing so they chart clear and directed (albeit 'alternative') paths towards progress. In a Controversy Table on 'Social Movements, Political Parties and the State', Gilberto Mauro of the MST spoke of how "centrality, discipline and unity of action" were important principles of the movement he represented.

The 'double bind' emerges when many activists simultaneously realise that the constituencies that they are working within are significantly more complex than the frameworks they work within. Working with different groups of peoples, even as they lay claim to universal truths, they simultaneously talk about the unique social and cultural histories of the places they are working in. And they fight against the centralisation of power and decision-making and argue for citizens to be given control over the directions of their own futures.

The WSF is a space where this double bind is frequently confronted — both within and between groups. Groups with defined and particular visions for different structures of market and state meet each other to build networks. However these participants are also seen as targets for their organising and advocacy, resulting in persistent attempts to formalise, mark and name the WSF as 'a movement of movements' for another world. Others, especially women and youth groups, insisted that the WSF was a space for discussion and dialogue on difference, that people were not all the same and that the purpose of the Forum is not to construct 'another world', but '*many* worlds'. What was being contested was not only the specific other world being imagined, but also the notion that there was only *one* other world possible.

Shifting Identities and Illegibility

As a confluence of funders, mainstream development and environment organisations such as Oxfam, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), indigenous peoples organisations, small environmental groups, and more radical political units such as the PSTU of Brazil, the WSF confronts participants with encounters and meetings that challenge communicating within familiar discourses. Those participating in the event frequently take advantage of the space it provides to shift and change their identities to assume those that are expedient at a given moment. One delegate moved between participating as a press representative, representing a Venezuelan NGO, and taking part as a US university student from Nepal. Depending on the meeting space, she spoke as a woman, as US student, as a minority, as a researcher, as Nepali citizen and as a media artist.

This experience is not new in a meeting of this kind. Participants use the opportunity to explore and represent their various citizenships and identities. Keck expresses similar mobility experienced by Dutch policy makers, who had difficulty "in remembering which hat they are wearing at a particular meeting — academic, member of a leading human rights NGO, member of the NGO governmental advisory board or governmental delegate to an inter-governmental organisation".⁹ In the same way, at the 1995 Fourth World UN Conference on Women in Beijing, Riles found official delegates frequently seeing and presenting themselves as covert activists.¹⁰

Shifting identities in these spaces are further compelled by the realities of multivalent citizenship. But multiple identities are contrary to the disciplinary practice of 'special interest' advocacy, where each person has a single unique role to play in the larger process. Assuming and practising multiple roles rapidly and together then becomes a resistance to simplified realities imposed by a 'disciplined' discourse. Moving between these fixed separations of expertise and practice becomes a way to reject the enforcement

of a socially reproduced anatomy of power that marginalises and fractures its subjects through self-imposed constraints on their actions.

The WSF provides an important space to reject these divisions and disciplines and explores different experiences (within individuals) of the same reality. Personal identities are mobile, fluid and changing, sometimes existing simultaneously. The delegate I described above was constantly moving from one space to another with different identities as a way for her to address her different (sometimes internally inconsistent) otherwise fractured citizenships. Underlying the WSF was this ethic of movement — between venues and spaces where specialised discourses were being played out, participants frequently shifted and moved between different identities and ideological positions.

At the same time, movement at the Forum was also taking place along a vertical axis. Those attending the Forum were divided into participants, delegates, *conferencistas*, organisers, press and vendors. (The somewhat anachronistic nature of these social divisions is discussed elsewhere in this edited volume). Yet at the same time, very visible at the Forum was the lack of distinction between the conference speakers and the listeners and between experts and the subjects of their expertise. In a conversation with P. Unnikrishnan, a health activist masquerading as press person (in that moment of time), I learnt of a presentation he was making on global health immediately after he was attending a teach-in. Experts became audiences; audiences became experts and also the press who mediated stories between themselves and the world.

This has a profound effect on the participants at the Forum. Horizontal conjunctions that are established are often as challenging as they are supportive. As representatives of institutionalised groups, participants often develop particular repertoires of discourses around issues that dominate their professional and social actions. They frequently resort to essentialising such activities and oppression stories : the virtuosity of toiling peoples and the sanctity of indigenous culture and practice and of eco-feminism, to name just a few. But in the process of speaking to a diffuse and shifting set of persons operating with different frames, these essentialising activities do not go very far. They are either challenged by the audience or subverted by speakers so as to build alliances of support with wider bases.

For instance, Maria Betania Avila — working with SOS Corpo in Brazil — refused “to fix feminism as inherently good” and saw this tendency as “disempowering”.¹¹ Motivated by the need to build with a wider spectrum of advocacy groups, another participant announced, “Our issues should not be based on our own identity. We have fundamental alliances to build with indigenous peoples and lesbian feminists”.¹² Allowing for multiple, complex, layered identities permits people to move beyond the “fetishisation of ideal typical concepts such as ‘woman’, ‘indigenous’, ‘community’ and ‘local’” to explore alliances beyond expedient politically marginalised groups.¹³

Pernicious and Messy Theory

Those studying diverse social networks and spaces like the WSF are at once confronted with methodological difficulties. While attempting to make coherent the actions of

actors that frame different discourses at different times, distilling or avoiding these contradictions gives rise to apocryphal simplifications. “The question remains of how to deal with such re-doubling and border crossings not as humorous asides but as a central analytic challenge”.¹⁴

In making simplifications, we lose the importance of the contradictions themselves. Individuals attending the WSF representing groups, bring with them their own personal behaviour (complete with internal and external transcripts of action) as well as that of the group they formally represent. Collective spaces and events like the WSF therefore, are even more beset by complexity. These spaces “defy thick description” and “cut across regions of academic inquiry, at once tracing the commonalities and creating a form that none can recognise or analyse in its totality”.¹⁵

WSF meetings present themselves as consciously open spaces within which “movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and find space to take forward their work”.¹⁶ Rejecting the idea of specific Forum goals, agendas or outcomes, participants in the WSF actively refuse to filter their objectives through an identifiable list of demands. Without these frames that impose one reality over others, participants in the Forum can explore partnerships and explore their understandings without having to abide by the tyrannies of consensus, agreement or declaration that typify other global meetings of this scale. Refusing to provide a checklist of desired outcomes also precludes the possibility of negotiation (and therefore compromise) with the event.

Having an open communicative space to share information is attractive to people across the political spectrum and also to funders, who see communication and information as central to the functioning of liberal democracy. The disagreements between participants at the WSF are also a source of their strength. Their multiple and varied differences allow their “politics to be located in many places at the same time”,¹⁷ and “not all participants [in such newer advocacy networks] view the state or the market in the same way”.¹⁸ By including participants who want to rescue modernity and the state (Workers Party, Brazil), those who want to rescue ‘good’ science (Peoples Science Movement, India), and those that see the problems precisely in these structures of knowledge and hierarchy (Next Generation Network, Holland), the differences between these groups help them to simultaneously engage with systems of marginalisation at multiple levels. Their diverse demands deny the State the power to impose legibility and emergency over the shifting, diverse and unclassifiable politics of populations.

The lack of legibility of participants and process is deliberate.¹⁹ The smoke and mirrors that are deliberately and rapidly erected with such activities confound order, classification and essentialism. The secret of the WSF is that it “keeps moving — any peak or plateau, any institutionalisation of the movement will be or should be or could be immediately challenged”.²⁰ This is extremely significant. In his delicate account of the Penan resistance to logging, Brosius cautioned that scholars have a history of undercutting resistance by showing how its works.²¹ Mapping social movements frequently provide blueprints to those wanting to subvert these. As people move about the WSF in unpredictable, sometimes bizarre ways, it becomes difficult to represent or

map the WSF as a single coherent event. It also makes it that much more difficult to appropriate. As an unruly, messy process, with no identifiable mandate or set of outcomes, the WSF process is difficult to limit through analyses.

Conclusion

Through this paper I have tried to show how, by coming to the WSF, participants are compelled to give up singular discourses of marginalisation and come to terms with more complex and multivalent relationships. Their ability to give up essentialist discourses is critical for their efforts to build alliances with other marginalised groups. By frequently shifting identities — blurring horizontally and vertically differentiated disciplinary discourse, participants challenge the processes of legibility and order with a politics of indiscipline. In doing, so many hierarchically organised movements, which have unity of ideology, purpose and action, are forced to discuss issues in a framework that may be inconsistent with their activities in (otherwise specialised) more hierarchically organised frameworks.

The Forum brings the double bind of these movements to public view. It challenges participants to step outside of universalising discourses that fracture, separate and specialise human reality into disciplines, and place some as leaders of others. In the past, and for the WSF itself, universal crisis discourses have been instrumental in bringing peoples together in essentialised formations. But as the leaders of the movements engage in these horizontal partnerships, they open themselves up to charges of inconsistency either with their constituency or their network partners.

As an event, the WSF finds itself in a similar predicament. The ever-growing size of the Forum has compelled a significant degree of formalisation and structure of a process that still explicitly upholds the importance of not being more than an open space for discussion, dialogue and reflection. As meetings have become larger and more important to organise and manage effectively, recent years have witnessed the emergence of a professionalised class of WSF organisers (discussed elsewhere in this volume) that hosts an extensive series of ‘big ticket’ lectures, meetings and events.

The threats that these developments pose for the Forum are ameliorated in the ability of participants at the WSF to rapidly move between these formalised and informal spaces; and between different identities and action frameworks while at the event. That the strength of the Forum lies in its illegibility of action, action, agenda, event and outcome is recognised even by the public statements of the organising committee (made at the conclusion of the lastForum). The criticisms levelled on the contradictions emerging at the Forum, are therefore essential to its strength. In their ability to mobilise collectively and interchangeably by invoking their different identities and building relationships in this shared space, participants at the Forum refuse to become instruments of their own oppression. Their success at doing so and actually moving outside the discourses of power and marginalisation depends only on their ability to use the ideals of this non-hegemonic, anti-specialised, non-vanguardist shifting frame in the WSF and in their daily practices of organising, advocacy and livelihood.

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NOTES

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² Dakhli, AARRG / France, WSF 2003.

³ For more on the naming and categorisation of new social movements, see Amin et al 1990; Ludden 2000; Slater 1998.

⁴ Ludden 2000, p 252.

⁵ Arrighi et al 1989, p 114.

⁶ WSF 2003.

⁷ McDonald 2002.

⁸ Phillips, WSF 2003.

⁹ Keck and Sikkink 1998, p 103.

¹⁰ Riles 2000, p 148.

¹¹ WSF January 24 2003.

¹² WSF 2003.

¹³ Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000, p 7.

¹⁴ Gupta 1998, p 6.

¹⁵ Riles 2000, p 64.

¹⁶ Sen 2002.

¹⁷ Fortune 2001, p 243.

¹⁸ Appadurai 2002, p 30.

¹⁹ Ludden 2000, p 255.

²⁰ Waterman 2003.

²¹ Brosius 1999.