
WORLD FORUM MOVEMENT : ABANDON OR CONTAMINATE

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In November 2002, 60,000 activists from all over Europe converged in Florence, Italy, for the ESF at the same time as the neoliberal elite met at the TABD in Chicago.¹ The ESF promised to be a meeting space for “in-depth reflection, democratic debate, free exchange of experience and planning of effective action among movements of civil society engaged in building a planetary society centred on the human being”.²

Preparatory meetings in Brussels, Vienna, and Thessaloniki led to the involvement of more than 600 organisations and 40,000 more participants attending than expected. The final day saw an anti-war march attracting a million Italians from all over Italy to Florence (which has a population of just 400,000). The ESF was clearly one in the eye for the Berlusconi regime, particularly since none of the promised violence and damage to monuments publicised in the right-wing media actually occurred. The eventual crackdown on dissent took place fairly quickly, with up to forty ‘No-Global’ activists arrested or held under house arrest.³

The ESF’s parent organisation, the WSF, first anticipated the creation of a European Forum and other regional Forums in 2002. The WSF sees itself not only as a meeting-place for discussion of alternatives to neoliberalism, but also as a counterpoint to the WEF.⁴ Whilst the WEF met in Davos (Switzerland) in 2001, in 2002 it was forced to meet in New York. This was not a powerful statement by the neoliberal elite standing firm against its opponents but due to the costs of protecting the 2001 WEF conference from protestors. The security operation for the 2001 conference was the Swiss government’s most expensive since the Second World War, provoking cries of protest from within Switzerland. While the WSF has risen in status the WEF has steadily fallen, having lost its prime-magnet for corporate and financial heads — the serene mountain top location it has met at since 1971. It now describes itself as a gathering to “discuss how to maintain hegemony over the rest of us”.⁵

The power of the anti-capitalist movement has been felt not only by the WEF, but also by other organs of world neoliberal government. The WTO in Seattle (1999) was disrupted by workers and ‘fair trade’ protestors and trade unionists. The World Bank and IMF in Prague (2000) abandoned meetings a day early as protestors scaled and surrounded delegates at their conference centre. And world leaders had trouble declaring benevolent intentions over the thick tear gas, savage beating of protestors and the murder of activist Carlo Giuliani by the police at the G8 meeting in Genoa (2001).⁶ The legitimacy of world leaders and their organisations has been put into question and the “violence of some of the actions, as well as the violence of the State, has led the mainstream media to focus on what the ‘anti-capitalists’ have been saying and doing, rather than on the communiqués issued by the summits themselves”.⁷

But disrupting the conferences is not nearly enough, particularly when they can be moved to inaccessible locations and violent means used to suppress protest. This is where the WSF and its continental (and local) offshoots offer the liberal anti-globalisation and radical anti-capitalist movement a summit of their own, able to devise alternative strategies of globalisation, or in the WSF’s own words, to make ‘another world possible’.

However, the contradictions inherent in (what has loosely been termed) the anti-globalisation movement are all too apparent at protestor summits, and has led to conflict and uncertainty for some sections of the movement. The actions of activists engaged in direct action and militants on the street have captured the headlines and brought about concrete, but arguably short-lived results. Others, such as liberal-reformists (who want to reform capitalism), NGOs (who want money to carry out their activities and are often happy to enter into negotiations with big-business and government), and authoritarian leftists (who want to enter government to affect reform or build a mass party for revolution), enter into a dynamic push-and-shove to hash out a way forward in the form of the Social Forums. Unfortunately, this vocal leadership, which has the money and experience to organise, are moving the Forums away from the direction initiated by radicals, and into the self-destructive orbit of conventional politics.

The anti-capitalist movement, the WSF and the ESF, are all direct responses to declining involvement in party politics. This is due to a neoliberal consensus that stifles opportunity for change, resulting in growing radicalism. Nick Dearden succinctly says, “it is acute political and economic disempowerment, the violent death dance of a tiny global elite hell bent on turning a majority of the world’s population to the margins in a push towards war, blood, starvation, and unending inequality and impoverishment that has brought these diverse groups and individuals together into what is surely the largest movement in history”.⁸

According to Hilary Wainwright, the concerns of participants at the ESF included the democratic autonomy of nations, regions, cities and communities; the social right to health, housing, asylum and a “high-quality” environment, “and the desire to live in something other than a shopping mall for big corporations”. At the top of the list is a de-militarised Europe at peace with itself and the world, taking a high moral stance against US imperialism. High on the list too was a radical rethink or complete rejection

of predatory capitalism, conceiving of a Europe that rejected crude market ideology and with fully accountable institutions.

There were specifics too — Europe should have open borders, and people within it have the right to work and to have a home; there should be a Tobin tax on financial markets and regulation of corporations; there should be no GM foods, no privatisation of public services; the media should be in the hands of the many, not the few, and racism should be driven out. Wainwright stated that the ESF's task is to create a “much more vigorous, more democratic control over the quasi-state institutions of the EU than the ones the European Parliament currently provides”.⁹

But while these demands sound progressive, even radical, they beg question as to whose agenda Wainwright is describing — that of the grassroots or that of the organisers and their selected speakers? This question harks back to the foundation of the WSF as an idea conceived by the Workers Party (PT) of Brazil. Noam Chomsky stated in a keynote address to the 2002 WSF that it offered the beginnings of a sketch of what a 21st century international might look like, but warned that in order to avoid the destructive fractures of previous internationals (that caused a split between Karl Marx who headed the statist faction, and Bakunin who headed the anti-state anarchists), the WSF had to organise on an anti-hegemonic basis.

This lesson has gone unheeded, and as Jason Adams writes, the PT “jealously controlled the organising committee of the WSF” with the result that one anarchist spokesperson remarked, “with all of the rhetoric that has gone around, we thought the WSF was going to be an open event, but then when we attempted to get involved and take part, it was made clear to us that we would be given no decision making power at all...we were given menial tasks and were excluded from the actual planning and execution of the event”. At WSF 2001, anarchists and ecologists loosely affiliated with People's Global Action protested against this exclusion and in 2002 their protests led to the Workers Party calling in riot police; as Indymedia posters pointed out, “Porto Alegre isn't the social democratic paradise that the PT makes it out to be”.¹⁰

Likewise at the ESF, certain sections of a widely defined anti-globalisation movement were more active — or more able — to undertake organisation of the Forum.¹¹ The first decisions of the ESF in Italy were taken by a group of six people meeting at the Rimini congress of the Rifondazione Comunista. This group included Tom Benetollo (the national President of the ARCI), a cultural association closely linked to the old Italian Communist Party and now seen as a front for the Left Democrats — the equivalent of New Labour — who control the Tuscan regional government and Florence city. Although the Left Democrats helped set up and arrange the ESF, their policies in regional government have included privatisation of local services and entailed environmental destruction. Also from a parliamentary Left background is Peppe De Cristofaro (of *Giovani Comunisti* — the youth organisation of the *Rifondazione Comunista*, which got 5 per cent of the vote in the 2001 elections and now has an opinion poll rating of 8 or 9 per cent).

Their leader Fausto Bertinotti urged all Italians to come to Genoa the day after Carlo Giuliani was murdered at the anti-G8 demonstrations in 2001 to “defend

democracy”. Also present were Pierluigi Sullo (Carta), Alfio Nicotra (a representative for the Italian Social Forums), Bruno Paladini of Cobas (an anarcho-syndicalist union that had a prominent presence at the anti-G8 demonstrations), and Marco Bersani of ATTAC Italia that helped set up the WSF and calls for a tax on financial speculation amongst other demands, and is linked closely to the French Parti Socialiste, especially when Lionel Jospin was Prime Minister.

These six individuals took important decisions about the ESF’s structure, ultimately deciding who spoke in Florence, at what time, and on what subject. All the main speakers were chosen in advance by the organisers — anyone else got a maximum of three minutes speaking time and international NGOs, such as Amnesty International had priority. The inevitable result were meetings with the celebrity names you would expect — such as José Bové, Johan Galtung, Cees Hamelink, Jacek Kuron, Tony Bunyan, Alex Callinicos, Susan George, Wolfgang Sachs, Riccardo Petrella, Tariq Ali — and the organisations you would expect — SOS Racisme, ATTAC, Amnesty International, European trade union federations, Oxfam, Friends of the Earth, Le Monde Diplomatique, Statewatch, Pax Christi, and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.¹²

In addition to the leadership’s ability to define the ESF’s agenda, their choice of speakers led to much of the initiative and organisation coming from NGOs who rely on lobbying politicians and parliament to achieve change — quite the opposite of putting grassroots resistance into action. The liberal anti-globalisation movement’s call for a tax on financial speculation might explain the presence of NGOs, since the revenues raised by this tax are to be distributed to the NGOs themselves. Some of the funding for the WSF and ESF even comes from government organisations, such as the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, the involvement of the ‘old guard’ of political parties such as the PT, the RC and even Blair’s equivalent — the Left Democrats — should be seen as a key test of the integrity of the ESF.

In Britain, the main organising group was Globalise Resistance, who are considered a front-group for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Chris Nineham of Globalise Resistance doesn’t shy away from his position in regard to political parties, stating that “left wing parties are already central to the movement”, mirroring a recent spate of SWP propaganda proclaiming the party to be “at the heart of the anti-capitalist movement”.¹³ So while the Socialist Workers Party was officially not there the much more ‘movement’ sounding Globalise Resistance was present, though not surprisingly GR’s ‘star’ speaker was SWP Central Committee member, Alex Callinicos. The Alliance for Workers Liberty came as the anti-sweatshop group, No Sweat, Workers Power came in their pseudo-anarcho (but ultimately Trotskyist) ‘Revo’ outfit and the Socialist Party adopted the unimaginative title ‘International Socialist Resistance’ Façade’. Although these organisations are involved either as a source of funding or in an attempt to grasp hegemonic control over the disparate anti-capitalist movement, the fact that these hierarchical and authoritarian organisations are involved at all should ring alarm bells for activists.

Not surprisingly, the involvement of establishment, hierarchical, organisations and parties led to bureaucratic control over the proceedings, disliked by many

participants — mirroring the experiences of some activists at the WSF. Boris Kagarlitsky claims that organisational difficulties — quite impossible to avoid considering the numbers that turned up — would have been minor annoyances if the organisational muddle had been redeemed by interesting or substantial discussion. In fact, he claims that discussion at the Forum never happened and that people who gathered in Florence to talk about the prospects for the movement found that they had come to a three-day rally instead. General statements were delivered from the podiums; successive speakers voiced delight at how many of us there were, and how young and good-looking everyone was, and that “initiating serious debate in the halls full of thousands of people, warmed up by mass-meeting rhetoric, was impossible”.¹⁴ Wainwright echoes this when she writes that the “Florence Forum certainly achieved diversity, but often failed to establish real dialogue in the formal sessions”.¹⁵

So whilst the WEF meets in what it terms a “unique club atmosphere”, it could be expected that the ESF and WSF would organise in a form quite distinct from these organisations — after all, the kind of world we want to create can only arise out of organisational structures that mimic and set a blueprint for future society. Instead, we see that hierarchical and authoritarian means of organisation have been employed, preventing direct grassroots democracy within the Forums. More positively, the sheer scale of a Forum with simultaneous translation in five languages for 1,000 speakers at 30 conference sessions, and over 200 workshops, 150 seminars and 25 campaign meetings in addition to a range of cultural and fringe events, show that authoritarian control from above was nigh impossible for the majority of sessions.

More worryingly however, the liberal-establishment that controlled the ESF, managed the agenda with radical questions such as the legitimacy of the ‘war on terror’ and ‘anti-terrorist legislation’ excluded, as this was seen as too provocative to the government. Other discussions, such as the legitimacy of the nation state and parliamentary democracy that allows post-fascists (or even fascists on occasion) to enter government — like in Italy today under Berlusconi — were also left off the agenda.¹⁶

Instead, the main theme of the Forum was the war on Iraq. One of the main proposals to come out of the ESF was a call for national demonstrations against a war on Iraq (or whatever the next target happens to be) in every European capital city on February 15, 2002, which will pose a symbolic show of strength and unity by the anti-war / globalisation movement that will be hard to ignore completely.¹⁷ Unfortunately, a war with Iraq must be seen within the wider context of capitalism and imperialism, and the effort and time concentrated on discussing the war is explained by the accommodation afforded to it through the support of the liberals opposing it.

In addition, the limelight ensured to ‘establishment’ speakers by the leadership of the ESF led to dangerous assertions being made in regard to the EU and the world economic system. One theme that emerged for example, was the need for ‘widespread and conscious participation by citizens in the European political process’, a call that ignores the very reasons for the growth of the movement. The fact that 60,000 people turned up at the Forum rather than join a political party or meet their parliamentary representative shows that the movement has grown out of a recognition of the fallacy of

parliamentary democracy and liberal reform. A demand that the EU's constitution include 'provisions to safeguard labour, environmental, health and education rights' is in effect, demanding (without threat) that the master of capitalism in the EU reform itself — of course, it can't. Wainwright's desire that the ESF hold the EU to 'account' masks the truth that the EU is the friend of the capitalist system that demands the destruction of the earth, our rights, our liberties and freedoms. There is no way for the EU to be reformed, its undemocratic, anti-grassroots, authoritarian and centralised nature is directly opposed to all the demands of the anti-capitalist movement, even if some EU departments work towards progressive ends.

Even more naively, Sousa Santos said that the only way to achieve a "true and independent European identity was for the EU to clearly differentiate its socio-economic system from the US neoliberal model", urging the rehabilitation of the state in economic affairs. As if pre-World-War-One colonialism and the laissez-faire capitalism of nineteenth century European nation states were ultimately different from those of the US today, and that non-neoliberal *capitalism* was a solution to the problems of neoliberalism ! The danger inherent in this approach is that it is self-destructive, ignoring the reasons that made the Forum possible in the first place.

Potentially more troublesome tendencies within the liberal leadership of the ESF are indicated by the symbolic dates for the meetings of the Forums — the same dates as the self-appointed global elite meet; this points to an even more impotent and self-destructive direction. When Pascal Lamy (EU Trade Commissioner) stated at a TABD dinner speech that the TABD "continues to put forward recommendations to which governments on both sides of the Atlantic (will) do well listen carefully".¹⁸ US Vice President Al Gore stated that of over a hundred recommendations put forward by the TABD, over half had been implemented into law, wishing that the Senate was as effective as this in drawing up legislation.¹⁹ The most dangerous route that the leadership of the ESF can take is to see the Forums as potential stronger negotiating partners for government than the TABD or WEF.²⁰

Instead, the ESF and WSF should see themselves as an embryonic form of direct, grassroots democracy, capable of forging ahead in gaining power through undermining the legitimacy of existing structures of power, distributing this power as widely and diffusely as possible.

Attendance at the ESF — three times than expected — and the anti-war march that shocked Italy in its size, show that discontent is strong for a different order. The ESF is a chance for the Trade Union movement and anti-capitalist movement to create permanent links without the go-between of a political party, and to help people from all over the world with experiences of different struggles to come together and share ideas, tactics and strategy for change. The stale bureaucracy displayed in some sections of the leadership, and those who would divert the anti-capitalist movement to further their own aims looked out of touch with the grassroots composition of the ESF. Jonathan Neale of Globalise Resistance (also a member of the SWP) told me that the leadership had been wholly reluctant to call an anti-war demonstration from the start — because it would upset Berlusconi — and was far

too timid in its demands and rigid in organisational framework. He said that it was the grassroots that were forcing the leadership into more radical positions as it saw itself superseded by a groundswell of radicalism. Perhaps the next ESF could see a complete removal of those who want to create a hierarchical, old-fashioned party-type Forum, replacing it with representatives of grassroots struggle from below instead.

For the anti-capitalist movement to achieve real change, it will have to do so through a confrontational approach to liberal democracy. This could involve the setting up of Social Forums throughout Europe, at local levels, creating direct links with local communities in struggle. These, organised in a federal structure — but respecting local autonomy — would undermine and ultimately make obsolete the earth-destroying, authoritarian and oppressive governmental structures that currently control the planet. Activists have the opportunity to wrest the ESF from its current ‘leadership’ and steer it in a truly progressive direction, rather than seeing it become a negotiating partner on par with the TABD, or able to lobby the EU more effectively.

The vision that minds can have without the experience of years of political deadlock, sectarianism and cynicism, arising from the failure of party and parliamentary politics is definitely a bonus for the movement despite Kagarlitsky’s lament about the lack of middle-aged “leaders” who have a better historical perspective. He writes that real power lies in military headquarters, ministries and, in the best case, elected assemblies that have developed an immunity to pressure from the streets, unless, as happened in Buenos Aires in December 2001, the events unfolding on the streets directly threaten the stability of the institutions themselves.²¹ Confrontation with the state or world government cannot, ultimately, be won by force. And this is where the ESF and regional Forums have the potential strength to bypass existing structures that are part of the old order and create grassroots associations of free individuals, linked locally and worldwide, making existing structures obsolete.

Instead of a grassroots approach, which takes some time to build up, the organisers of the Social Forums appear at present to be rushing the process, attempting to establish themselves as the leadership of a movement that has developed without their participation in the first place. In a series of letters made public on Indymedia UK, between Professor Nanjundaswamy of the Karnataka Indian Farmers’ Union (KRRS) and Bernard Cassen of ATTAC, Nanjundaswamy makes it clear that the KRRS cannot participate in the Asian Social Forum (ASF). This is because it expresses its “dissatisfaction about the way in which the ASF is being launched by NGOs little known to the people of India, approaching mass based grassroots movements in December 2002 to have the ASF in January 2003”. Additionally he asks why “ATTAC never apologised for the death of Carlo Giuliani, where instead of looking at the violence of the fascist police that tortures in police stations, declarations focused on the violence of the black block”?²² This was surely a gross example of liberal leadership out of touch with the radical anti-capitalism that has helped build the movement to the position it occupies today.

The second meeting of the ESF takes place in Paris in November 2003. For it to be considered a step forward, it will have to consist of a more representative cross-section

of activists (up to 90 per cent of the delegates at the first ESF meeting were Italian), and as stated in an article on Indymedia UK, needs to be “more diverse and less bureaucratic”.²³ People’s Global Action (PGA), a network of grassroots organisations that have organised ‘Global Days of Action’ against capitalism (and are overtly anti-capitalist rather than anti-neoliberal) feel particularly strongly about the WSF process, seeing it (in 2000) as, “an attempt by sectors of the traditional Left, the old established and bureaucratic Left, to take over the struggle against capitalist globalisation” within the perspective of national development... a Left which desires a “humanised” capitalism; which wants to “socialise” the market; which wants to govern the State. They also observe that the “Forum is hierarchical, verticalised, like the events of the bureaucratic Left...speakers / conferences on the one hand, and, at another, public spectators”.²⁴

At last year’s ESF meeting they organised an autonomous space, “not in competition” and “not anti-ESF”, to facilitate networking between groups and individuals and to “contaminate by association, the ESF with non-hierarchical practices”. They noted that the ESF had many young activists and held potential to develop existing anti-capitalist networks.²⁵ This is the best way of working with the ESF; being constructive in criticism, attempting to change the organisation from inside and outside, preventing liberals from tending towards their self-destructive habits of strengthening existing structures of government through voting and lobbying. Rather than abolishing the ESF because it had a shaky, but ultimately successful start, we should work to make the ESF a truly revolutionary force to change society from below, not of lobbying those above.²⁶ Florence was a beginning, the “site where the foundations for an alternative Europe were laid”;²⁷ as Noam Chomsky has noted, the WSF and its continental offspring “potentially offer the best hopes of the Left for a true international”.²⁸

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NOTES

¹ The TABD’s purpose is to offer “an effective framework for enhanced co-operation between the transatlantic business community and the governments of the EU and US” (<http://www.tabd.org>). Its agenda is pro-business and anti-environment; one priority has been to block efforts made to

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phase out hydro fluorocarbons (HFCs), one of the most potent greenhouse gasses used in refrigerators. The Danish Government had decided to implement a ban on these that was to take effect in 2006, but the TABD described it as a potential trade barrier that would restrict free flow of trade and established a special working group to obstruct or at least postpone the decision. Another priority has been to demonstrate to EU and US officials its concerns over plans to limit corporate tax evasion (see <http://www.corporateeurope.org/observer10/tabd.html>).

² See ESF website at http://www.fse-esf.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=1.

³ This led to an immediate response from civil society throughout Italy, with demonstrations of 30,000 in Rome, 20,000 in Naples and demonstrations in 28 other cities throughout Italy. See <http://www.ainfos.ca/en/ainfos10442.html> and http://uk.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=47220&group=webcast.

⁴ The WEF is an annual gathering of 1,000 business leaders, 250 political leaders, 250 academic leaders, 250 media leaders along with token labour, social justice, and entertainment leaders. They aren't leaders "because an electorate or the public says so but by virtue of their wealth, influence, and power, and their farsightedness in being able to maintain all three" (Milstein C at <http://struggle.ws/global/issues/wsf.html>). This is reflected in the composition of the membership of the WEF (which numbers around a thousand corporations), 68 per cent being based in North America and Europe, and less than 1 per cent in Africa (http://www.geocities.com/pwdyson/wef_orgs.htm lists WEF member organisations).

⁵ Walden Bello at <http://www.zmag.org/Sustainers/content/2002-01/31bello.cfm>.

⁶ Numerous other 'days of action' have taken place, all over the world; the ones listed here are the movement's best-known successes. Reports from these days of action can be found at <http://www.pcworks.demon.co.uk/magazine/campaign/zzgda.htm>.

⁷ *Aufheben*, #10 (2002), p 2.

⁸ N Dearden at <http://www.resist.org.uk/reports/archive/esf/esfdearden.html>.

⁹ Wainwright, December 2002, p 5.

¹⁰ J Adams at <http://www.zmag.org/content/VisionStrategy/AdamsWSF.cfm>.

¹¹ Questions have even been asked as to who compromises the International Council of the WSF that decided that the ESF should be set up.

¹² *Socialist Review* (November 2002), p 17 and Treanor P <http://web.inter.nl.net/users/Paul.Treanor/esf.html>.

¹³ *Socialist Review* (November 2002), p 19.

¹⁴ Kagarlitsky B at <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/200211/21kagarlitsky.cfm>.

¹⁵ Wainwright, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Treanor, *ibid*.

¹⁷ See <http://www.resist.org.uk/reports/archive/esf/esfantiwarcall.html>.

¹⁸ Quote from <http://www.tabd.org/media/2001/lamy060502.html>.

¹⁹ See <http://www.xs4all.nl/-ceo/tabd/troubled.html>.

²⁰ It is also possible that these symbolic dates have been chosen because corporations are seen as the enemy rather than elected national or world government, or that the capitalist system itself is perceived to be more powerful force than nation states and government apparatus; either way, these dangers remain.

²¹ Kagarlitsky, *ibid*.

²² Letters at http://uk.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=48336&group=webcast.

²³ From an article advertising preparatory meetings for the 2003 ESF at http://uk.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=47814&group=webcast.

²⁴ From <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/wsf/newsf.htm>.

²⁵ See the text of the ‘final plenary’ of the autonomous space at <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/space/finalplenary.htm>.

²⁶ Treanor, *ibid*, argues that the ESF should be abolished. Peter Waterman notes in regard to the Treanor piece that “abolishing something that has hardly begun — and that is capable of assembling massive numbers of young people, old people, workers, and women from all over Europe — seems both hasty and extreme...whilst much of his alternative agenda is eccentric (in the sense of representing a personalised wish-list, hallmarked by impossibilism, and unarticulated with any familiar group, worldview or utopia), his challenges, concerning what I have elsewhere called the political-economy of the Forum (Waterman 2002b), 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 ‘fundamentalist’ — someone who believes that ideas and behaviour are totally determined by funders. Insofar as most critiques of capitalism have come from universities funded by capital and The State, and insofar as even Marx’s *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”. See <http://hubproject.org/news/2002/11/44.php>.

²⁷ Longhi V, *Red Pepper* (December 2002), p 15.

²⁸ Adams J, *ibid*.