
DE-CENTERING THE FORUM :

IS ANOTHER CRITIQUE OF THE FORUM POSSIBLE ?

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In the weeks following my return from WSF 3, whenever someone would ask me, “How was it ?” I would reply, “Amazing ! I had an amazing time. The official event itself was somewhat of a disaster, but the people it brought together, the spaces and encounters it made possible — even unintentionally — exceeded most of the limitations the Forum itself had”. And I meant it. I had learned so much and gained so much political inspiration, even as my pessimism about certain forms of traditional politics increased. As I repeat this to myself now — however, in spite of, or perhaps in lieu of the myriad critiques and discussions in the months following the Forum — I wonder why the more mixed and exhilarated sentiment I had by the Forum’s end did not appear to be more widely shared.

Why does it seem that even many critical and progressive people are discussing giving up on the Forum, when even in its current form, it is an incomplete, plural, and contradictory space that far exceeds both the event itself and its official manifestations ? We cannot forget that both the Forum and the ‘movement of movements’ of which the Forum is just one part, are messy, dynamic and radically plural entities whose parameters and objectives are by their very natures neither stable nor easily explicable. It is certainly important to recognise that there was an ‘official’ Forum, one that emerged from a concrete set of actors, ideas and events, and that was, in fact, what the majority of people did have the opportunity to experience, but there was also much more. While disappointment, disillusionment and even anger with the ‘official’ Forum are valid and important subjects to discuss, they may be obscuring the alternative and diverse practices that, though less visible, were still very much a part of Porto Alegre.

How we think about this Forum is important for how we imagine our critiques. Even more, how we write about and discuss the Forum does, in fact, contribute to producing it. It also produces for the thousands who could not attend or for those who look to such discussions to process their own assessment. The fact is that the Forum is not

just an event, but also a process; not simply something that happened but a political concept and a potentiality. Thus all our analyses play an important role in developing and shaping it and by extension the ‘movement of movements’ of which it is a part.

I believe that all too often, even our most critical writings have perpetuated a shallow understanding of the Forum and its critiques. Rather than focus only on the Forum and its shortcomings, I believe we need to *de-centre* our own vision and critiques. We need to make visible the various alternative spaces, the rich political diversity that were part of the WSF, even if the faults of the larger Forum rendered them largely invisible.

Situating Critiques of the Forum : From Structure to Politics

Since the conclusion of WSF 3 in Porto Alegre, there have been a number of critiques and discussions about its problems and weaknesses. In addition to concern about the effectiveness of a Forum that now has 100,000 participants — a number that in itself makes functioning difficult at many obvious and practical levels — there have been a number of rather serious critiques about the internal contradictions and the lack of democracy in its functioning.

Many people from various geographical and political backgrounds have criticised the Forum for a series of formal or organisational problems that they believe make it an undemocratic space. These problems include a lack of transparency in decision making, hierarchical organisation, as well as special treatment of celebrities and the creation of elitist tiers that privilege the more well known and consolidated components of the movement over many of the smaller and more grassroots and perhaps more radical organisations. A number of people have also criticised what they consider to be the privileging and co-optation of the Forum by institutionalised political structures like political parties, trade unions, and mainstream NGOs that, in addition to being hierarchical organisations themselves, tend to be reformist or social democratic in their outlook. This is seen as integrally related to the lack of transparency and democracy within the Forum structure. Many also highlight the need for being more critical of the State in the struggle against neoliberal globalisation, a position that is seen as precluded by the presence of more conventional (state-related) actors within and around the Forum.

These critiques have come from a variety of sources — from those who identify with the ‘official’ Forum, but are weary of its declining effectiveness as its size and popularity grow; to those who identify themselves as somewhat ‘outside’ it and consider the Forum in its current form to be actually opposed to the spirit of the new alternative globalisation movement. It is significant that these criticisms have come from such a wide array of political actors. But criticisms of organisational structure, vision and political approach existed long before (as well as during) this particular forum. Such criticisms did not emerge only as reactions to the technical and functional difficulties evidenced at the Forum, but from larger ethico-political disagreements and debates about what resistance to this phase of neoliberal globalisation and the political crises that accompany it ought to look like.¹ In fact for some, notions of ‘true’ democracy, hierarchical and non-hierarchical organisation, self-organisation and anti-authoritarianism, are at the heart of the political projects they seek to develop — at the Forum, and within the ‘movement of movements’ more generally.

For example, even before the Forum began, many groups and networks — including Indymedia, Intergalactika Laboratory of Global Resistance, Life After Capitalism, and many other actors — had planned and organised alternative and autonomous spaces and meetings outside of (and within) the official Forum.² They liked the original idea of a truly free space and they too wanted to participate in an international encounter of this sort. But they saw the official Forum with its planned panels, plenaries, and celebrity focus, as structurally, and therefore politically, problematic. They did not want to replicate political forms and approaches that they believe perpetuate the systems and relations of power they hope to oppose and overcome. So they set up alternative spaces.

The Intergalaktika Laboratory of Global Resistance, where I spent a great deal of time, was such an autonomous space. It was housed in a humble white tent at the edge of the Youth Camp; it had no blackboards or air-conditioning, and was in all senses rather far removed from the well-equipped PUC classrooms.³ Although many participants at the Forum might not have realised it, the Youth Camp — located about 15 minutes from the Port and almost directly behind the arena where Lula spoke on the first day — was truly a world within the Forum. Filled with food stands and various vendors, its own media centre, several concert venues, and countless spaces set up for various meetings — including Intergalaktika — the large expanse of green that had been planned and organised by a committee of youth, housed nearly 30,000 people. They slept in tents, showered outdoors, and practically ate, drank and breathed the Forum experience ! Long after many of us retreated to our hotels, the Youth Camp was still very much active — filled with live music, intense meetings, film viewings, and myriad other events and activities !

Despite its distance, Intergalactika attracted a variety of people, including some who identified as anarchists, autonomist Marxists, and others who refused any political labels but saw their politics as inspired and co-authored by the Zapatistas. The events held there consisted of a variety of workshops committed to sharing experiences, debating ideas, and developing a political praxis based on the principles of horizontality, self-organisation, anti-authoritarianism, participatory democracy and direct action. In Laboratorio Intergalaktika — as well as for a significant part of the alternative globalisation movement — organisational form, process and the more micro-political and quotidian elements usually excluded from conventional politics are key sites for political intervention and elaboration. This was also the case in Porto Alegre.

For example, at a Saturday morning workshop in the Laboratorio, Masco, a member of the Argentinean Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (MTD) emphasised the importance of such micro-politics. He recounted how becoming unemployed, and thereby experiencing a total rejection by the capitalist system, radically shifted the political outlook and praxis of his group. It forced them to realise that in order to be truly and “radically opposed to capitalism” they needed to think beyond traditional organisational forms like unions and political parties, they needed to, promote “another way of living”. This meant producing “new practices, and new social relations” that worked against the pursuit of power and against inclusion into the capitalist system. He acknowledged that this was an incredibly difficult task, but that being

unemployed (en masse) produces a “rupture so strong that it allows one to dream again”. For him, and many others, radically democratising micro-political spaces and processes — and thereby pointing to the inherently political nature of such spaces — is necessary if people really hope to work towards effective social change.

For these groups, this movement was certainly about opposing institutions like the WTO, IMF, World Bank, etc., but it was also about *reinventing* politics. It was about making visible the political nature of practices and spaces that were not traditionally considered political, while at the same time mobilising new forms of political practice that embody anti-authoritarianism as well as a critique of all forms of sovereign power. Looking to the Zapatistas, Situationists, Anarchists and Autonomist thinkers / activists, these activists emphasise what some have referred to as “pre-figurative politics” — “modes of organisation that consciously resemble the world you want to create”.⁴

Now it will be necessary to create new spaces of encounter, exchange and articulation; plural spaces, that are open and truly autonomous. Spaces that are free, not only of vertical organisations, but also of vertical, ‘unidimensional’ words / discourses — free of old and new prestiges, of new and old authorities. We are going to think in situation, name in situation and in action.⁵

For those who participated in Intergalactika, institutional structures, meeting process and daily elements of living are inherently political and constitute critical points for elaborating effective opposition practices. Moreover, it is the historic Left’s failure to recognise these new spaces of politics that has contributed to its complicity in producing the current crisis in political institutions and democracy. Previous leftist movements and organisations — including the older versions of Marxism and communism, political parties, as well as some of the ‘new social movements’ of the seventies and beyond — failed to achieve lasting social change because they had a narrow understanding of what constitutes ‘the political’. Today, many actors working to change the world have still not realised that if they truly hope to combat neoliberalism and oppression they cannot work only in the traditional political terrain. They have to recognise that how panels are formatted, decisions made, and inclusion / exclusion enacted, are themselves powerful political acts. They cannot ignore the political logic, institutions and social relations that are a part of how capitalist and other forms of oppression manifest themselves — often within leftist struggles and spaces like the WSF itself.

Attention to democratic form and structure is not simply a procedural or technical topic of critique; it is central to an ethico-political and strategic vision.⁶ Critiques of institutional and organisational democracy are as much an attempt to actively work to create and spread a new form of political engagement, as they are critiques of the Forum as it exists.

Too often, however, our critiques do not point to the political sources or the highly political nature of these critiques. We make it look as if such criticisms were ‘just’ structural. This stems from a larger problem : for the most part critiques and assessments of the Forum tend to reinforce the privileging of the ‘official’ Forum, and the marginalisation of the alternative spaces. While we have taken the critiques and

analyses seriously, especially those of its organisation and undemocratic functioning, we have done so from a vantage point that takes the official Forum — with its panels at the well equipped PUC, the Stadium and the Port — as the necessary object of critique. We have said what the Forum lacks, but have not pointed to the participants of the Forum who were very deliberately already democratising spaces within and around the movement. Rather than engaging the multiple peripheries, alternative, coincidental and contradictory spaces that comprise the Forum in its totality, we write as if it is the ‘official’ Forum that must be fixed (or dismissed).

Even writing and arguing for ‘abandonment’ of the Forum has obscured the fact that the Forum is *already* a plural and contested space, and have perpetuated the invisibility of those who actively contest it. Instead of explaining the political trajectories and projects of these alternative actors, writing positively about them, their histories, and their ideas — in other words, rather than making them visible in their own terms — we have tended to write as if the Forum, and the movement of which it is a part, has a more important central part, and it is a single, unified, entity. In writing and speaking this way, we contribute to producing it as a reality : we simultaneously bolster the importance of the mainstream and perpetuate the marginalisation and invisibility of multiple alternatives.

Although spaces like Intergalactika might have been marginal compared to the ‘official’ Forum, they were very much part of the Porto Alegre process, and for some people (like myself) they even constituted a central part of the entire Social Forum experience. It is not enough to point out that such places were marginalised and largely invisible;⁷ we need to show and explain why it is so important that they not be. Unless we write concretely about spaces like Intergalactika and the histories and movements from which such projects emerge, we maintain their invisibility, and contribute to an impoverished understanding of the criticisms of the ‘official’ Forum — and of the Forum itself. We prevent people from comprehending the ways in which criticisms of organisational democracy are as political as they are functional, and on the other, what an internally democratic Forum might look and feel like.

My being able to witness and participate in alternative and critical spaces has had a profound effect on the way I read and engage in the debates and discussions that have proliferated since the close of the Forum. Augmenting my intellectual and analytical engagements, my actual experiences have made the various critiques of the Forum resonant and palpable in a different way. Rather than thinking (abstractly) about participatory democracy, horizontality and self-organisation as things the (official) Forum lacked, I have a positive sense of what they are and why they are critical to a politics that is desperate not to replicate failures of the past. This is not to deny that Intergalactika and other ‘alternative’ spaces themselves had myriad problems and were rife with tensions and divisions of their own. But it is precisely the sense of these as spaces as real, lived places, and not only as conceptual counterpoints to the mainstream Forum that has given me a different understanding, an odd combination of intellectual and visceral comprehension, of what ‘another Forum’ (or forums) might look and feel like.

De-centering the Forum : De-centering Theory

Why have our critiques fallen into this trap ? I believe it is because of our tendency to perpetuate the marginalisation of the peripheries and the privileging of the centre. It has to do with both our dominant modes of critique — particularly a certain style of de-construction — as well as with the nature of the diversity with which these new movements compel us to deal. While we are constantly stating how diverse and plural this movement of movements is,⁸ our analytical tools and vocabularies have themselves not caught up with this intellectual recognition.

The problem with most forms of de-construction or criticism is that, even as they critique or deconstruct something they see as problematic, they almost always maintain the centrality of that ‘dominant’ or ‘hegemonic’ term and phenomenon. In addition, they are highly intellectual and rationalistic. For example, critiques of capitalism can make capitalism seem to be such a coherent and total system that it renders existing alternatives and struggles within the system irrelevant.⁹

A different strategy is to destabilise or destroy the dominance or totality of a hegemonic concept or entity by showing that it is not so total or coherent as one might think; and, by making visible the plethora of actors, experiences, differences, etc., that its seeming unity or dominance has obscured. For example, it is one thing to say the Forum was problematic. It is quite another thing to recognise that while the ‘official’ Forum was problematic according to certain criteria, there were myriad effects, occurrences, meetings events, contingencies that the occasion of the Forum made possible. These might have been less obvious, but they were present. Similarly, it is one thing to say that panels featuring experts and stars are problematic because it produces hierarchy. It is quite another to actually *show* a workshop that attempts to challenge such hierarchies by locating everyone in a circle, combining ‘experts’ with grassroots activists, etc. One approach relies on the intellectual and abstract agreement that hierarchy is bad, the other on a more visceral and positive sense of why alternatives might be better. It is not that the first mode of critique is wrong; on the contrary I believe it is quite necessary. But it should not be our only mode of intervention.

I believe that there is an interesting parallel to be made between the fact that our modes of critique reinforce the ‘mainstream’ by always criticising it according to its own terms, and the ways in which these new movements hope to re-define politics. If many of the critiques are premised on mobilising areas not traditionally considered political, their critiques cannot be understood according to the regular (political) terms of the conversation. Said differently, to my mind it is no coincidence that the ‘official’ Forum — that aspect associated with a more ‘traditional’ understanding of politics — is more visible than the actors seeking to expand politics to new spaces precisely because the ‘official’ actors are favoured by the current common sense of politics. The fact of the matter is that we just don’t have the categories in our political and sociological vocabularies to treat critiques of organisation, forms and micro-politics in the same way as more traditional political categories such as ideology, tactics, etc.¹⁰

We know how to talk about differences in various *issues* and *actors* in the movement, and about the remarkable fact that this movement is comprised of so many

different actors — environmental groups and labour unions, political parties and NGOs, environmental campaigns and economic ones. But it is much more difficult to speak of the *differences* that exist between groups that function according to principles of horizontality and radical democracy and those that don't. For even when we speak about diverse political approaches, such as anarchists and communists, political parties and NGOs, we tend to rely on categorical descriptions and generalised statements about ideologies, and rarely on concrete political practices.

As a consequence of the paucity of our own analytical tools and categories, we then relegate critiques of process — or the belief that process is an essential part of democratising daily life — to non-political space. Such critiques then appear to be *additional* to rather than *part of* substantive political debates. In this way discussions and critiques about democratising the Forum appear to be a way of making the Forum function better, rather than re-constituting the political potential of the Forum itself.

In addition to the significant work of analysing and assessing the problems of the 'official' Forum, it is important that those engaged in such work be attentive to the ways in which we do so, and to the effects that our modes of critique have. I truly believe that we should augment the current debates with more vivid descriptions and narratives of the 'other' parts of the movement and point to their histories, ideas and perspectives as relevant in their own right. And that we should emphasise the fact that in spite of the official Forum's flaws, the occasion of Porte Alegre included a wide variety of interesting and important alternatives, and unexpected encounters and outcomes. We will then be giving not only a more accurate picture of the Forum and this movement, but we will also begin to pluralise the political categories and visions that currently constrain both our analyses and the ability of movement actors to communicate with one another on more equal grounds.

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NOTES

¹ The relationship between neoliberalism as an economic process and a political one are keys.

² It is hard to speak of inside / outside the Forum with much exactness. Not only are there multiple potential parameters, a space might be 'within' the Forum in one sense but against and outside it in another. For example, Life After Capitalism is slightly different from other radical spaces.

The WSF : Challenging Empires

Critical Engagement

Although critical of the Forum and its narrow view of politics, it too had a traditional panel form and sought to be housed within the official facilities of the Forum.

³ Notably, Intergalactika was named after the first Intercontinental Meeting Against Neoliberalism and For Humanity. The meeting called for by the Zapatistas in 1996 was attended by representatives from over 43 countries. In a way, the concept was quite similar to the Social Forums, though I have rarely heard them spoken of in relation to one another. In my mind this is another manifestation of how the one part of a movement, and its history, is seen as *the* only history. For more information on the first and second Intergalaktics see Holloway, 1998a, as well as 1998b.

⁴ Grubacic, 2003. Also in this volume.

⁵ From the Hub listserv : a discussion listserv in which many of the critiques of the Forum were posted and hotly debated. English translation : “Now it will be necessary to create new spaces of encounter, exchange and articulation; plural spaces, that are open and truly autonomous. Spaces that are free, not only of vertical organisations, but also of vertical, “unidimensional” words / discourses. Free of old and new prestiges, of new and old authorities. We are going to think in situation, name in situation and in action”.

⁶ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only dimension of these actors’ political vision or analysis. I focus on it because it serves to emphasise how what is taken to be ‘merely’ procedural, logistical, etc. by some, is in fact of utmost political relevance to others.

⁷ Whether or not this marginalisation was intended or the fault of the official Forum, is not something that I would like to address at this moment. I am personally of the opinion, (like Grubacic), that it was the combined effect of the myopia of the bureaucracy of the official forum, mistakes made by the organisers of the space, as well as a general chaos and confusion.

⁸ Even the term ‘movement of movements’ is a product of this !

⁹ Gibson-Graham, 1996.

¹⁰ Perhaps it is true, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos says, that we need a new epistemology to assess experiences such as the WSF since they will always be found wanting when gauged with established criteria.