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## HOW OPEN ?

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### THE FORUM AS LOGO, THE FORUM AS RELIGION : SCEPTICISM OF THE INTELLECT, OPTIMISM OF THE WILL

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During the third world meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2003, a new initiative named 'WSFItself' organised a workshop on power relations within the WSF. An exercise during the workshop required participants to imagine the kinds of policies that could be adopted that would kill — or certainly, cripple — the Forum. In its words, the 'toxics'. The idea was to reveal, through this exercise in intense negativism, what needed to *not* be done. But as a participant, I gradually became aware that the exercise gave me an insight into some of what is, in fact, already taking place but is not being 'read' given the positivist lenses through which we normally tend to see the world around us, including the Forum.<sup>1</sup>

In some senses, this essay is a continuation of that exercise, of trying to *read* the Forum.<sup>2</sup> I have written this essay because even as I celebrate the fact of the Forum and what it is doing, I also believe that there are several tendencies taking shape within it that are deeply negative and contradictory to its very spirit. Most centrally, they include the Forum becoming a commodity and a brand name and its motto a logo and the beginning of a kind of worldwide franchising; and an increasing struggle for its control. In large part this is happening because the very success of the WSF as an enterprise has, as Roberto Bissio put it, "created a power (and a value) around the logo, whether we like it or not. And this has to be recognised and acknowledged, since denial of reality would become manipulative".<sup>3</sup>

But the list goes deeper. Even if, in principle, it should be possible to address (and arrest) these trends, they are accompanied by other more structural factors. These include the related fact that the actually existing Forum is not the 'open space' that it is said to be, but is instead highly structured and, in several dimensions, exclusive. Among other features, the Forum — though declaring itself 'open' — is in reality

‘open’ only to particular sections : to those who already agree with certain policy formulations, which largely limits it to those who can broadly be said to be on ‘the Left’, and beyond this, increasingly, to those who are willing to declare in writing their adherence to certain given policy formulations. The Forum also discriminates against individuals, as I explain subsequently. All this adds up to a rising dogmatism and an organisational fundamentalism that is a hallmark of old politics.

In short, we are already witnessing the crystallisation and rise not only of corporatism but also of *orthodoxy* and *dogma*, which I suggest constitutes a fundamental challenge to the future of the WSF. The WSF is showing distinct signs of behaving like a tightly controlled corporation, a movement, or an institutionalised religion. This is reflected by, among other things, a growing discourse of ‘we’ and ‘they’ in the WSF International Council and its counterpart bodies at national levels, such as the WSF India Organising Committee. The Forum is therefore gradually becoming a place *only* for gatherings of the committed and converted.

Even though I am deeply worried about what I see taking place in the Forum today, I still hold to my earlier argument that the crystallisation of the WSF is one of the more significant developments of the past many decades, and perhaps of the past century.<sup>4</sup> I therefore believe that all of us who share some or all of this position, need to urgently look at what needs to be done.

In this article, I attempt to both analyse what I see happening and make some suggestions for a more creative future. In particular, I propose that the Forum must recognise the fact of grey areas and open itself to those who are concerned about the empires it has chosen to challenge but may not yet have clear positions on them. To the opposite of weakening it, this can be one of its most significant contributions in today’s world of growing fundamentalisms.

The Forum needs also to explicitly recognise that individuals play myriad roles in social life and transformation, and that modes of civil and political association are changing; and it must abandon the discriminatory policies it has institutionalised against them. Its central historical role must remain to encourage and enable free and open debate and not to overtly or covertly build a world movement of organisations of The Left. Those who are today concerned about the possibilities of movements taking over the Forum are, in fact, only moving in what in generic terms is the *same* direction, but via a different path; and the growing and almost knee-jerk reactions of some among the leadership to criticism and opposition, are only leading the Forum to lose its soul.

### Fundamentals

I believe the primary significance of the Forum lies in the *political culture* it represents, and that its main contribution is in *political-strategic* terms. The Forum, as argued by those who initiated it, is not an organisation or a movement, nor a world federation, but a *space* — and to boot, a relatively non-directed space, from and within which movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and find space to take forward their work and their visions, locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. Literally, a free space, for free thought, where people can dream of other

worlds, individually and collectively and struggle to forge ways of achieving their dreams, or to use Marx's term, a 'space for human self-development'.

The original organisers of the Forum saw their task as being not the building of movement, or the co-ordination of opinion and position, but simply as the building of space — literally and metaphorically — where free exchange is possible, and as widely as possible. This is most resonantly expressed in the Forum's Charter of Principles.<sup>5</sup> A principal architect of the Forum has recently issued an interesting note reflecting on 'the Forum as space, the Forum as movement', and has come out strongly against seeing the Forum — the space — as being primarily occupied by movements.<sup>6</sup>

The real 'success' of the Forum is that it is making possible a scale of talking across boundaries that has rarely been dreamt of before, and contributing to building a culture of open debate across conventional walls. The real 'alternative' it offers is showing that it is possible to create, and to sustain, a non-directed space. In my understanding, helping to *bridge* old politics and the new is arguably one of the most crucial but most difficult challenges for the Forum, and quite possibly also one of its historically most important.

The Forum, as it takes place, is thus a challenge not only to mainstream, orthodox, and conservative thinking and practice, but also to all those organisations and initiatives that claim to be working in terms of 'alternatives.' It implies, and requires, new cultures of politics. But this is precisely one of the areas where it is already showing signs of imploding.

### The External Challenge

The growth of the WSF has to be understood in the backdrop of the world context. September 11 took place in the same year as the first Forum and gave an impatient imperial power the opportunity to unleash its so-called 'war against terrorism', to link it with the war for so-called 'free trade', and for its President to declare that "Those who are not with us are against us". The numbers attending the Forum, which has explicitly opposed this war and this 'free trade', have continued to dramatically grow, in spite of — and in the face of — this threat.

Two years later, and even though now increasingly challenged in terms of moral authority, capitalist globalisation is still riding triumphant across the globe even as the economy of its heart unravels from within. Nation-states across the world are relentlessly tightening 'security' and surveillance measures, supposedly in defence against those labelled terrorists but also aimed at protestors of state politics and market operations. There are also periodic signs that Europe is moving to the Right, and Hindu, Islamic, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalisms are rampant in different parts of the world, intertwining with variants of economic fundamentalism. And in 2003 we have seen the 'coalition of the coerced' defiantly launch its war on Iraq in the face of world opinion, as an obvious widening of the reach of its empire.

Equally, other 'coalitions of the coerced' are also pushing hard — to bring in the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas), to open all of the Americas to free trade and to bring in major changes at the WTO. If their efforts succeed, the results will represent major advances in the neoliberal project. In all this — all done in the name of freedom the deep shadows of imperialism and authoritarianism are evident.<sup>7</sup>

Certain developments in India have been equally discouraging. In early 2002, India experienced a brutal anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat. Later in the same year, voters of the state returned to power, with a landslide victory, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that is widely seen as having been responsible for the communal violence, and its neo-fascist Chief Minister. In late 2003, the same party won elections in three more states in north India, routing its opponents. These remain crucial developments even if elections in the bitterly contested and brutalised state of Kashmir in late 2002 yielded a new, moderate government, and during 2003, the Congress (I), a more centrist party, won state elections in another state and also in the small state of Delhi, within which the capital is located. Although public and international reaction to the Gujarat experiment forced the BJP to move to taking a more centrist stance after the pogrom, the shadows of fascism still threaten India since its allied 'popular' organisations see Gujarat as a model for what should happen in the rest of the country. If this were to take place, it would have worldwide repercussions.

Against this grim scene, the developments in Brazil and in global transnational space over this past year have been encouraging. In 2002, the Brazilian presidential elections brought Lula, the leader of the Workers' Party to the Presidency. Among many other initiatives, Lula has stressed that his government's foreign policy sees the building of relations across the South as a key element, and especially with three major countries — South Africa, India, and China.

The massive and sustained demonstrations across the North over the past few years, along with demonstrations in many countries of the South, and the growing sense of self-confidence of global civil movement, have also been important indications of another politics and of other possibilities. The recent toppling of the President in Bolivia by a popular movement is a dramatic suggestion that new barriers are being broken.

How does the Forum fit into all this ? Most importantly perhaps, the WSF has struck at the level of *meaning* : along with the struggle that is still emerging across the globe against neoliberal globalisation, it has made resonantly clear that the TINA (There Is No Alternative) dictum does not hold good, and that there *is* world wide resistance to neoliberal globalisation and its attendant depredations; and that there *are* alternatives. The challenge for the Forum is now to envision how to relate to today's extraordinarily fluid and volatile context, and how it can most effectively realise the potential of a world transformative power that it seems to be gathering. It needs to consider what role(s) it can play in translating these possibilities into real social and political alternatives; how, to use Teivo Teivainen's terminology, to remain primarily an arena, and not become a leading actor.<sup>8</sup> This ambiguity of identity and role has been its strength, and a secret of its magic, as is the case with many social and political actors. But it is going to have to re-invent itself, as it constantly tends to become more an actor than an arena.

An important indication of how the WSF is working to both globalise itself and to relate to the wider world situation is its decision to hold its next world meeting in India — on the continent where imperial interests have now so decisively landed.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Internal Challenge**

But aside from this major 'external' challenge, there are several *internal* challenges that also demand its attention. In the pages that follow, I discuss these challenges in terms of a series of descriptive metaphors intended to highlight particular problems.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Forum as Market, the Forum as Alienation**

As many others have pointed out, despite all its other virtues, the Forum is becoming an *alienating* event suffering from gigantism.<sup>11</sup> It has become a place of a thousand events, but with too few transversal connections, and not a real meeting of minds. This problem also arises from the undeclared emphasis in the Forum on individualised, separate initiative, and from the lack of prioritisation given to the collective and to sharing, between participants, and between organisers and participants.

In the theorisation of the Forum as 'open space', the basic but undeclared assumption is that if people come together in a large open space, they will necessarily interact. To a substantial extent, this does seem to be happening. This 'self-organisation', individually and collectively, is increasingly seen to be the strength — and the magic — of the Forum.<sup>12</sup> But individuals and organisations belonging to particular streams of thought and action, or coming from different cultures and language-groups, also tend to stick together, especially in large, overwhelming experiences such as the Forum, unless major efforts are made by the organisers to help participants to overcome the differences. One consequence is that large numbers of events are therefore in reality not 'open', because of language problems, and that in reality most events happen autonomously with little or no exchange of content.

Although the Brazil Organising Committee has had volunteer translators and helpdesks available in many parts of the Forum and crucial information available in several languages, and from the January 2003 meeting is now also developing a post facto 'systematisation' (documentation) of events,<sup>13</sup> there have so far been no arrangements for real-time transverse sharing of ideas. The International Secretariat does not even respond to suggestions that it should consider creating a discussion space on the Forum's website. While there is reason to argue that this sharing best happens through spontaneous self-organised initiatives, this is no reason for not making any such provisions at all, and becomes a case in point of the emphasis in the Forum on *private enterprise* and the lack of prioritisation given to *the collective*.

Although there are some signs that this might be changing, these tendencies have been only accentuated by the tendency of the organisers, both in Brazil and India, to *control things*: by making closed-door decisions about key organisational issues, by reserving 'sensitive' roles to its own members (such as who takes part in roundtable discussions with political parties), and tending to act as a vanguard and politburo.<sup>14</sup> Equally, as Naomi Klein and others have pointed out, the Forum is also increasingly coming to be dominated by 'big events' and big names.<sup>15</sup> All these factors emphasise a certain culture that 'separates out' participants and produces alienation, tending to make events discrete and isolated rather than a meeting of minds that the Forum has the potential of being.

### **The Forum as an Event, not World Process**

This problem of alienation, disintegration, and commodification is reproducing itself on a

world scale. The WSF started off as an event in January 2001. Inspired by its success, the Brazil Organising Committee (BOC) had the foresight to say, in the Charter of Principles they drafted for the Forum just three months later in April 2001, that, “The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localised in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that ‘another world is possible,’ *it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives*, which cannot be reduced to the *events* supporting it”.<sup>16</sup> And when the BOC formed the International Council (IC) in June 2001, it had the vision to see that the main purpose of the Council was to, “take the Forum to the world level”.<sup>17</sup> Consistent with this vision, the IC decided at its meeting in Porto Alegre in January 2002, to give a call for the organisation of ‘regional’ and ‘thematic’ fora from 2002 onwards.

A series of such meetings have now taken place — the Asian Social Forum, the first and second European Social Forums, the World Social Thematic Forum on Democracy, Human Rights, War, Drug Trafficking (held in Colombia), and others. But while it is good to see and understand this flowering as a manifestation of the globalisation of the WSF, each event is taking place in an isolated way. Although this again seems to be changing in small ways through the ‘systematisation’ process, as well as the working groups that the International Council is increasingly working through, between events — there seems as yet all too little or no exchange of experience, of strategy, of information, and no larger culture of being an international political process.

A small but encouraging sign in this area has been a shift in the Forum’s language. As opposed to earlier, when the term ‘the World Social Forum’ was reserved exclusively for the event each January, the International Secretariat is now referring to *all* WSF-related meetings as ‘World Social Forums’ in the plural, which is what some of us have been calling them for the past two years. But this remains a long way from achieving a large composite vision of the whole, and of its politics. One of the most important roles that the Forum is playing is providing a space where old movement and new movement, as well as other actors, can meet and speak. The task of the WSF as actor — here, as manifested in the International Secretariat and the International Council — therefore needs to be one of moving past organising big events to one of joining the struggle for forging a new vocabulary and grammar of world politics and of looking beyond the Forum as a *world event* to seeing it as a *world process*.

### The Forum as Temple

How open is the Forum ? Or, is the Forum, in fact, already highly mediated and structured at a number of levels, and further demarcated and gradually closed down, as happens in religion as it gets institutionalised ?

The Forum’s Charter of Principles says, “The meetings of the WSF are *always open to all those who wish to take part in them*, except organisations that seek to take people’s lives as a method of political action” (Clause 11, emphasis mine). In this section, I am concerned not with the second part of this clause but with the first, the assertion of openness.

For Fisher and Ponniah (editors of the first major English language book on the WSF), the WSF is “not a social movement in and of itself. It’s an open forum, and in that there’s a commitment to its openness, to the participatory nature of it, to *open democracy*. That’s the key convergence”.<sup>18</sup> This is the fundamental working assumption

of participants at the Forum, the idea that it is best known for, and the idea that many researchers and observers most celebrate it for : a culture of openness. But it is precisely because this is such a fundamental aspect of what the Forum is about that we need to look at this question in some detail.

In his thought-provoking recent paper that I have already referred to, Chico Whitaker has compared the open space to a 'square' (*praça* in Portuguese) clarifying that this is "an open but not a neutral space", and is open (only) to those "that oppose neoliberalism...For this reason, in order to join the square, one must agree with its Charter of Principles".<sup>19</sup>

Samir Amin, one of the founders of the 'Anti-Davos meeting' in January 2000 and a member of the WSF International Council, emphatically underlines this when he says that the Forum is "...*not a forum that is open to everybody*. It has a charter to which participating organisations *must adhere*. They *must make it clear* that they are opposed to neoliberalism, not necessarily to capitalism. They *must also be opposed* to militarisation of globalisation — not necessarily imperialism, which means much more".<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from this that the architects of the Forum have themselves never intended that the Forum should be *fully* open. Notwithstanding the formal provision in Clause 11 of the Charter, in reality, it is *only* open to those who have clear positions on certain issues. Exploring Whitaker's metaphor a little further, we also need to recognise that no space that is created by someone ever exists by itself, uncontrolled. Just as all squares and *praças* have historically been and still are produced by someone — religious institutions, a feudal power, a landowner, and more recently, an institution of state or the market (and sometimes but rarely, of popular power) — so has the 'open space' that is the Forum. In this case, the 'square' that is the Forum has been created by the BOC, and is maintained by the IC.

Similarly, just as institutions have rules of their own, in the case of the WSF, the Charter of Principles are the rules. More local interpretations provide even more specific rules, such as the 'WSF *India* Policy Statement' that was generated in India during 2002, modifying the Charter of Principles somewhat to suit local conditions.<sup>21</sup> These rules specify who is and is not welcome in the space, and either openly or covertly suggest the use of force to ensure that the rules are observed. The debate presently going on within the WSF about the role and possible dominance of social movements is a case in point, and it is this that has led Chico Whitaker to produce his recent note, as above, which specifically cautions against the Forum being "turned into" a movement.

Aside from rules as to who is and is not welcome to use the space, are also the important questions of position, the drawing of boundaries, and the tolerance (or intolerance) of grey areas and of internal contradictions. For instance, even while declaring elsewhere that it is "open to all", Clause 1 of the Charter of Principles makes clear that the WSF is, in fact, restricted — that it is a space (only) for :

... groups and movements of civil society *that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism*, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person.<sup>22</sup>

If the Forum is indeed restricted to only those who already have a clear and defined position, how can it be considered to be 'open' ?

This is not only a moral and ethical question, but also a deeply political and strategic one. Can the struggle against neoliberalism be won only by those — and we remain a minority — who have already taken committed positions against it? In this struggle, as in any other, is it not necessary, at the minimum, to engage with those who are less sure of their positions on the issue (likely to be the vast majority), and to try and win them over — as well as to listen to their arguments to deepen our own analysis and strategy ?

A related argument applies to another important clause of the Charter of Principles regarding armed groups. As earlier noted, Clause 11 says, "The meetings of the WSF are always open to all those who wish to take part in them, *except organisations that seek to take people's lives as a method of political action*". I am here concerned with the second part of the Clause. There have been concrete cases where this provision has been applied — where groups who have been judged to be of this character, and even supporters of such movements, have been denied access to the 'open space' that the Forum is said to be.<sup>23</sup>

While a literal interpretation of this provision ("organisations that seek... of political action") may be acceptable as a boundary for such an initiative, it is tending to be applied equally to those who allow that it might be sometimes necessary for movements to use violence. But there are clearly contexts in which this question of violence in political action is grey, such as in the context of national liberation, resistance against oppression, self-defence or defence of common property, such as forests for forest dwellers. What the Forum is therefore doing is the classic 'conflation' in human rights discourse : in its opposition to "the use of violence as a means of social control by the State" (Clause 10), it is equating this to the actions of movements and individuals, in *all* circumstances.

Again, and especially given the mission it has taken up, is it not necessary for the Forum to, at the minimum, provide space that allows exchange with such groups ? And on the other hand, what is the strategic purpose of closing the Forum to such exchange ?

Over the past six months, the leadership of the WSF has taken some strong policy decisions in this area that have only reinforced the status quo. In India, it has already reached the stage where those wishing to become members of the newly formed 'India General Council' must first sign a form declaring their adherence to the Forum's Charter of Principles. This development might be viewed by some as being merely an aberration. I believe however, that it reflects a deep-seated culture that is coming to the surface as the menu of the now 'global' Forum is interpreted locally.

In June 2003, the IC of the WSF also took a decision to precisely this effect, requiring written declarations of adherence for all those who wish to become members of the IC. Consistent with this, the online form for registering events at the Mumbai Forum requires those applying to declare 'Yes / No' as to whether they are willing to adhere to the Forum's Charter. This extraordinary requirement is clearly coercive in nature. The consequence for those who have dared to say 'No' remains to be seen — and should be closely analysed by those undertaking the systemisation of the Forum.

In sum, the World (Social Forum) is being rendered in black and white, with no



spaces for shades of grey. If this is so, what is the difference between the Forum and any other ideologically driven organisation, such as a political party or an organised religion? There are many signs that the WSF is fast becoming a *closed* space, reserved for the committed and converted alone. And that 'the Forum' is becoming a party or institutionalised religion with its own leaders, priests and congregation.

In a major paper earlier this year, analysing the dynamics of the Forum, Boaventura de Sousa Santos put forward the important proposition that conventional social and political processes create 'absences', through marginalisation and exclusion, and that a 'sociology of absences' is required if one wishes to understand them in terms of their full meaning and in order to "explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as non-existent". He went on to argue that the WSF itself "is a broad exercise of the sociology of absences".<sup>24</sup> I venture however to suggest that the Forum too is creating absences by virtue of the political culture it is increasingly tending to practice.

Indeed, notwithstanding Santos' radical analysis of the Forum, it is noticeable that that Forum is not, as yet, the arena of spontaneous choice of victims of violence, of oppression, of history. Both in India and Brazil, many of the mainstream organisations of the excluded — such as of indigenous peoples — are as yet keeping away, and many of those who come to the Forum to give testimony to their oppression come because they are brought there by issue-based civil organisations. As I see it, this is happening because the Forum is an initiative that still belongs mostly to the middle class, middle and upper caste, and male leadership of the 'civil', 'present' world. Insofar as it has taken a position against oppression and imperialism of all kinds, the possibility that it may well be causing 'absences' is something that the Forum needs to consider.

This question has now moved into a new dimension. WSF India took a resolution at its last National Consultation in April 2003, expressing its opposition to what we in India and South Asia term 'fundamentalism' (extremism), caste discrimination, communalism, patriarchy, war and militarism, as well as to neoliberal globalisation.<sup>25</sup> As a direct consequence of this Resolution, the WSF India Organising Committee adopted and proposed all these five as 'axes' for the world meeting at Mumbai in January 2004.<sup>26</sup>

Apparently after considerable debate at its June 2003 meeting in Miami about the arguable cultural particularity of some formulations, the IC gave the go-ahead to WSF India to use these themes for the world meeting. In principle therefore, and even if all these new formulations have not yet been formally incorporated into the WSF Charter of Principles, the IC has taken the first step of accepting this much-widened vocabulary as the *Forum's* vocabulary: for the world meeting in Mumbai will, after all, be seen as 'The *World Social Forum*' speaking, not just WSF India. This widened vocabulary will enter world language in an important way.

There are different ways of looking at this development, however. On the one hand, from the point of view of progressive movements in many parts of Asia, possibly also more widely, this widening of the vocabulary of the WSF constitutes a major advance. Sections of the Dalit movement in India for example, have struggled hard to bring caste onto the international agenda, and succeeded in doing so through the Durban conference on Racism, Xenophobia, and Other Forums of Discrimination.

For the issue to be accepted at another world initiative such as the WSF is another major step forward. Similarly, for those fighting religious and national fundamentalism and for those fighting patriarchy — even if women's groups have succeeded in bringing patriarchy to the world stage much earlier.

The big question is whether the leadership of the WSF will be willing to formally include these new issues in its Charter of Principles. Aside from the question of ruling out debate with those who hold different opinions, the Charter of Principles at present takes a position only on neoliberalism and imperialism. In world politics, the WSF Charter of Principles focusses on these because the initiative was conceived, born, and given shape to during the time of the rise of global civil action against the WTO and the Bretton Woods institutions.

But since that time, new questions have emerged on the world scene, such as war. So far, the Brazil Organising Committee / International Secretariat and the IC have shown themselves to be remarkably quick in terms of embracing the question of war and militarisation, by centre-staging these in the agenda of the Forum, although they have not yet formally modified the Charter of Principles accordingly.

The questions of religious nationalism, communalism, caste, and patriarchy have not yet entered the Forum's vocabulary despite their having been specifically articulated in IC meetings and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> This non-acceptance could be seen as being nothing more than a reflection of dominance in the Council by regions where these issues are not strong (the first three, in any case). The Council's willingness to handle these essentially cultural issues will be an important indicator of the degree to which the Forum is an open space.

On the other hand, lies the question of strategy — and of the ironic possibility that accepting this wider agenda might work to make the Forum an even more exclusive space. As above, if the WSF is truly to be a world initiative, then it is only appropriate that it embraces this more comprehensive agenda. But if this wider agenda is accepted into the Charter, then the WSF will become a space for :

... groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to ... imperialist globalisation, militarism, patriarchy, communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism), and casteism and racism (oppression, exclusion and discrimination based on descent and work), and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person.

This in turn, will mean that all those who wish to take part in the Forum, and more specifically, to play any role in the decision-making bodies of the Forum, will need to declare their opposition to all of the above — and in writing. This is no longer a hypothetical possibility. WSF India already requires those wishing to join its 'India General Council' to declare adherence to this full spectrum.<sup>28</sup>

### The Forum as Real Estate

There is one further dimension of 'openness' — or closure — that demands discussion by itself : the question of the openness of the Forum to *individuals*. Notwithstanding the Forum's assertion and reputation of being 'open,' participants in the WSF meetings

held in Porto Alegre have so far been divided into two broad categories : organisational representatives, who have been classified when registering as ‘delegates’, and individuals, who have been classified as ‘Observers’ (or ‘Hearers’). This is also more or less the proposal for the WSF world meeting in 2004, in Mumbai.<sup>29</sup>

This division is also reflected in the organisational structure of the Forum. I do not know the rules for the organising committee for the European Social Forum, but the WSF India Committees and the WSF International Council are made up exclusively of the first ‘class.’ But in insisting upon this formula, are the organisers of the Forum only creating divisive social relations, and thereby again, in effect, acting towards closing down the ‘open’ space ? And insofar as we today live in an age where classical ‘organisations’ are increasingly being replaced by virtual organisations and networks, where people are increasingly *not* belonging to organisations but preferring to work as individuals perhaps loosely affiliated, is this approach not also following obsolete organisational theory and strategy ?

It is a fact that the Forum’s Charter of Principles as it stands, provides space only for organisations and not individuals (“The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world...”). While the Forum is declared to be an ‘open space’, in reality, the organisers have therefore created two ‘classes’ for access to and use of the space. There are some who have the legitimacy to participate, and there are others who are only meant to ‘observe’ and to ‘hear’. In actual practice and as implied even in the term, the rule about ‘Observers’ is not completely exclusive. It ‘only’ means that they do not have full privileges, such as (in Porto Alegre) being eligible to have translation headsets, or the right of access to all meetings. And they are given identity plaques — to be hung around their necks — of a different colour, so that they can be easily identified. By contrast, this division was absent at the Youth Camp at Porto Alegre, where the difference between ‘organisational representatives’ and ‘individuals’ was apparently ignored.<sup>30</sup>

According to one of the architects of the Forum, the thinking behind this discrimination is ‘to push organised people to come (forward) and to avoid transforming the Forum into a traditional congress’.<sup>31</sup> Beyond this, the thinking behind not having individuals on committees is that the committees should be made up only of organisations fighting neoliberalism — since ‘who do individuals represent ?’ In short, it is organisations that ‘represent’ society, and therefore are and should be the vanguard of change in society. The formation of the IC as it stands essentially reflects this wider thinking, which has now come to dominate thinking in India as well, after a brief one year when we thought more freely.

I suggest that this marginalisation of individuals is a reflection and manifestation of two closely related forces : a deep belief in the primacy of organisations (and especially of movements) in social change, and a subliminal reassertion of property relations — here, in terms of the ownership of the open space that the Forum is meant to be. In terms of the latter, the unstated and undeclared structure of the Forum is that organisations *are* the owners of the space that is the Forum. This is never openly said, but is the underlying theory and reality. But I suggest that it is precisely this attitude

and unstated ideology that underlies the struggle and debate that continues and is sharpening in the Forum, regarding understanding the Forum as space or seeing it as movement.<sup>32</sup> Because the Forum is now real estate.

In terms of the former, the primacy of organisations, even while recognising the importance of organisations in social processes, we need to be willing to recognise and acknowledge the significance of the many roles that individuals play, perhaps especially in civil organisations. To start with, many such organisations, are in fact, built around particular individuals, and even if those individuals claim to be representing 'their' organisations, they often actually act largely as proprietors, representing their own interests as much as those of their organisations and its members. So the distinction between organisational representatives and individuals is often thin.

Civil organisations also generally practice some degree of voluntarism on the part of those working in them. Beyond this, in this day and age, we know that the vast majority of people in most societies across the world do not belong to formal organisations, and are, to the contrary, increasingly associating informally and often only temporarily, such as through myriad networks. This has historically been the case because the majority of sections have been forced to remain 'unorganised', but is increasingly now the case for those who could, in principle, be within organisations but who prefer a higher form of being organised, of living and acting autarchically. In such a situation, and at such a time in history, can we still argue that formally organised, permanent organisations are and should be the vanguard of society? In short, do we believe that organisations represent the *only* vehicle for the self-development of human potential and of the social individual?<sup>32</sup>

In some ways, it can be said that the history of organisational development — in general, and also those with emancipatory and transformative goals — has been one of simultaneously developing and articulating both individual and collective social identities (class, caste, ethnicity, language, race, and gender, and more recently, sexual preference), and through this, of cultures and structures of authentic representation. In today's conditions, this is intersecting with another trajectory, of more highly *individualised* emancipation and empowerment, and of the building of virtual identities and cultures, of 'imagined communities' (to use and extend Benedict Anderson's phrase).<sup>33</sup> As Naomi Klein, among others, has pointed out, the global civil movement emerging today in many ways mirrors and models itself on the net.<sup>34</sup> Whether it does so consciously or not is not the question.

As I see it, these two trajectories — of formal, permanent, and putatively representative *organisation*, and informal and transient *association* — are to some extent working with different purposes, and the Forum is an arena where the two paths cross. Even while, as I have argued above and elsewhere, the Forum has a vital role to play in providing a space for different modes of movement to meet and carry out a dialogue, what is crucial for our analysis is that the WSF itself is a part of this new phenomenon — of transient association. So we need to reconcile these two different 'memberships', constituencies and realities that make up the actually existing Forum — and most crucially, we need not insist that the rules of one trajectory must be the rules of the whole.

In formal terms, although the Forum's Charter of Principles declares that it does

not intend to be “a body representing world civil society” (Clause 5), the reality today is that in many ways, this is *precisely* how the International Council is structured, with old rules of formation, and where movement organisations, which overtly ‘represent’ large masses of people, are increasingly privileged. ‘The Forum’ today is trapped within a vision of seeing itself as an ‘organisation’, and there are now strong calls for it to create a more federal structure for itself.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, by excluding or marginalising individuals, the Forum is also marginalising a huge and vital section of societies in the world and weakening the larger movement against neoliberalism, imperialism, and fundamentalisms of all kinds. This is especially so in those countries of the world which do not enjoy electoral democracy or the freedom to associate and organise, and where it is individuals who often play the most vital roles in building and protecting democracy.

### The Forum as Logo

My final point : as the Forum spreads across the world, there is a distinct possibility that it is fast becoming a commodity, a brand name, a monoculture, and its motto, ‘Another World Is Possible !’ a logo, and that the ‘regional’ and thematic events are becoming *franchised events*.<sup>36</sup> If this is at all the case, then the WSF is itself becoming corporatised — and is thereby contributing to the globalisation of a certain, very specific civilisation — a monoculture. This is surely deeply problematic ground for an initiative such as the WSF that overtly celebrates plurality.<sup>37</sup>

The organisers of the Porto Alegre Forum, the BOC (now called the International Secretariat), have come up with a very particular vocabulary for the organisation of the WSF.<sup>38</sup> Despite initial discussions within WSF India towards coming up with a more indigenous formula, this menu is being more or less duplicated at the Mumbai Forum. The International Secretariat continues to struggle with this formula however, sometimes creatively. It has, for instance, come up with the proposal that the conferences, which earlier used to be at the centre of the Forum and dominated the event (and where this design was replicated at, say, the Asian Social Forum), should now be at the margins, and the self-organised events should be brought organisationally to the centre.<sup>39</sup> The WSF India Committee has taken this idea to heart and further reduced the proportion of events at the Forum that will be organised by the WSF itself, thereby further emphasising the self-organised events.<sup>40</sup>

There is now already something of a standard formula that has also developed for peripheral events, even within three years. In Porto Alegre, there was a World Youth Forum, a World Parliamentary Forum, a World Forum of Mayors and Local Authorities, and a World Education Forum that are held along with the WSF. There were rallies and marches, and obligatory formal parts of the menu are the colourful inauguration and closing ceremonies. The problem is that since the Porto Alegre Forum is widely seen as having been ‘successful’, this menu is now being widely copied, and there is much reason to think that this *menu* is tending to become standard, as a kind of recipe for success — for replicating the richness, vigour, and flavour of Porto Alegre. There is also the difficult reality that precisely because the Forum has so far been ‘successful’, this has created a power and value to it, and so there is now struggle for control over it

as it spreads. This is as true of the European Social Forum as of the Asian Social Forum.<sup>41</sup> The fact that the Forum has declared through its Charter that it “intends neither to be a body representing world civil society” (Clause 5), and that it “does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings” (Clause 8) cannot prevent it, if it is successful, from accumulating power.

But this is what creating a brand is all about, and why and how franchising comes about; and even if this may be somewhat exaggerating the situation, there now seems to be a distinct possibility of the Forum becoming a world chain, with a *standard* recipe, and The Forum — the event — something that comes out of a biscuit-cutter; and where particular interests start developing local control over the product. Can the day be far off when someone suggests that patenting the Forum’s motto ‘Another World Is Possible !’ just in case someone else tries using it ?

The Forum is also catching. Besides the regional and thematic fora mentioned earlier, there are now city-level fora all over Brazil, in several parts of Europe and the US, and state-level fora in parts of India and surely elsewhere as well. On the one hand, it is exciting to see all this as a part of the globalisation of the WSF. At another level we have to ask ourselves : is what is taking place a spreading of the *culture* of the Forum, along with creative local re-interpretation, or is it more a reproduction of the *outer* form, the menu ?

### The Forum and the Challenge of History

Two points remain to be made. One, as I said earlier, I believe that helping to bridge old politics and the new, in different countries and historical contexts and also in transnational space but at the same time in history is one of the most crucial but most difficult challenges for the Forum, and possibly also one of its historically most important.<sup>42</sup> If we agree that the larger struggle is the war of ideas, then one can reasonably argue that the Forum must move from focussing on exchange between the converted to progressively opening up to the non-converted. It must also open itself up to those who live outside established political channels, such as migrants and refugees, and also to the huge ‘uncivil societies’ of the world who are today in the historical process of finding voices of their own by which they are challenging both states and traditional civil societies where power resides.<sup>43</sup> It must learn to respond meaningfully to those who keep away from it, to those who criticise it, and even to those who oppose it.

I believe it is of great concern that the Forum is not doing this, and to the contrary seems to be becoming increasingly exclusive and arrogant about those ‘it’ disagrees with. These are trappings of power that ‘it’ — here, the IC, the International Secretariat, and the various Organising Committees — need urgently to shed.

Two, I believe that the ‘conservatives’ in the Forum are in any case missing the wood for the trees. Try as they might, they are not going to be able to control and discipline the Forum as a whole — not in the way they are approaching the subject, at least. As Chico Whitaker of the Brazil Organising Committee so often says, the Forum (as planned, by the organisers) is always overwhelmed by the self-organised events. This, indeed, is the magic of the Forum. But the approach that those wanting to retain a certain pristine quality are taking, ignores this, even violates this.

As already mentioned, although the Forum tends to be seen as a six-day wonder that takes place each year, the reality is that 'the Forum' is not limited to the real-time connections and exchanges that take place during those days. The real reality today is that 'the Forum' is today more virtual than real : That its reality is the myriad self-organised connections and exchanges that take place in cyberspace throughout the rest of the 359 days of the year (and also during those six days), seamlessly related to and a part of a much larger universe of exchange that cyberspace allows; and also the myriad other real-world meetings that all this generates. Which in many ways is surely what the Forum is all about, and the spirit it generates. But the crucial issue is that all this is outside the control of those who seek to guide the Forum.

This is the real Forum; and just as states are, till date, not capable of controlling this, though they are trying, there is also no way that anyone within the Forum is going to be able to create rules for this larger universe, put up fences for who comes in, and demand adherence. This, the real Forum, is a free space. The space that has been imagined and defined in the WSF Charter of Principles, and then manifested in the real world in Porto Alegre, Mumbai, and elsewhere, is only a small part of this wider and much larger Forum. The Forum of life.

In one sense, this is a manifestation of Peter Waterman's point, that the Forum tends to *use* cyberspace, but not to *live* it. What we so far term and see as the 'virtual' has in many ways become the real (and in some senses, 'the real' virtual). We need to take stock of this and fundamentally re-think the Forum, our relationships, and the event and process that is so far called 'The Forum', in these terms and in terms of the times we live in and that are emerging. In short, we — and especially the leadership of the Forum — need to re-think the culture of politics that we bring to the Forum.

### In Conclusion : From Symbol to Logo

For many, the WSF has become something of a symbol of a larger global struggle. But there are deep trends taking shape within it that suggest that it is currently going through a process of sharp involution and succumbing to forces of conventionalism and orthodoxy. On the one hand, it is showing all signs of becoming corporate, with the symbol morphing into the logo that 'the WSF' has already become. On the other, it is beginning to increasingly behave like institutionalised religion. The two, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but together they sharply articulate the question of whether another world is really possible.

Both trends seem in part to be a function of the success that the Forum has already become, and of the power and influence that is not only being ascribed to it but was, surely, sought by it. But they are also a result of 'simpler' forces — of conventional organisational dynamics and of its leadership often drawing from a known, familiar (and 'old') vocabulary of structure and management. This seems sometimes to have been a subconscious choice, and sometimes a conscious, ideological choice.

But the WSF now has to face the challenge of how to realise and creatively deploy the potential of the power that it is gathering. Given the trends in this essay, this is of concern to all, even the miserable individual participant in the Forum. This is particularly important given the juncture in history at which the Forum has taken

shape and is acting. It has a responsibility to a much larger history than its own. It can only do this by forging new vocabularies and grammars of thought and action, and not by relying on old categories, as its leaders are tending to do. As with all initiatives, the Forum is too important to be left to its leaders.

In particular, participants in the Forum — individuals and organisational delegates alike — must struggle to regain the spirit of the ‘open space’ that it started out saying that it wanted to be. It can only do so by abandoning the hard-line, discriminatory policies it has adopted against individuals and against including those who are ‘concerned’ but not necessarily yet ‘committed’. To repeat, its central historical role must remain to *encourage* and *enable* free and open exchange and debate, not to overtly or covertly build a world movement of organisations of The Left.

We need, in short, to struggle to regain the dream. We can only do so if we persist in attempts to read and interrogate the actually existing Forum — and if we insist on dreaming the dream.

DECEMBER 2003

Jai Sen — See ‘Editors’ (this Volume).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The workshop was titled ‘Getting over issues of rivalry and power : a challenge for the FSM ?’ More information from Celina Whitaker at [wsfself@no-log.org](mailto:wsfself@no-log.org). One of the key participants was Chico Whitaker, member of the Brazil Organising Committee and one of the architects of the WSF, and the author of an important essay (also in this volume) that I discuss in this article.

<sup>2</sup> This is a revised excerpt from an earlier essay, Jai Sen, May 2003. The first version was a revised and expanded version of a Note I was invited to prepare by Carola Reintjes on the WSF for the ‘VI Encuentro de Economía Solidaria’ held in Córdoba, Spain, May 1–3, 2003. I thank Carola for giving me the opportunity to spell out these thoughts; Roberto Bissio, Jeremy Brecher, Sundar Chaterji, Taran Khan, Dave Ranney, Carola Reintjes, David Szanton, Teivo Teivainen, and Peter Waterman for their comments on earlier drafts; and Arturo Escobar and Rukmini Shekhar for editing the text.

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Bissio, personal communication, May 29, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Sen 2002.

<sup>5</sup> ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001, and WSF Organising Committee, June 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Whitaker, March 2003. See this volume. See Whitaker February 2002 for an earlier statement of this position. Whitaker represents the CBJP on the WSF Brazil Organising Committee, but is only one out of eight members, representing different organisations and tendencies.

<sup>7</sup> Bhushan, March 2003, and Hussain and Tiwari, April 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Teivainen, March 2003. For some of the same ground, see also Teivainen, 2002.



## The WSF : Challenging Empires

<sup>9</sup> For more discussion of this point, see my companion essay in this volume, ‘The Long March to Another World’, and Samir Amin’s essay in this volume.

<sup>10</sup> See Sen 2003 for a fuller treatment.

<sup>11</sup> Albert, see this volume; Savio, January 2003; and Waterman, ‘The Secret of Fire’, in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> See Whitaker, February 2002; Escobar, and Vargas, in this volume; and Nikhil Anand, this volume, for a discussion of some of its internal dynamics.

<sup>13</sup> See the WSF website for details of the systematisation project : [www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br) .

<sup>14</sup> Albert, this volume.

<sup>15</sup> Klein, January 2003.

<sup>16</sup> From : ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, CIVES, CUT, IBASE, CJG, and MST, April 2001. Emphasis supplied.

<sup>17</sup> WSF, Brazil Organising Committee, August 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Fisher and Ponniah, eds, 2003. See also Ponniah and Fisher, this volume.

<sup>19</sup> Whitaker, March 2003; emphasis given. See this volume.

<sup>20</sup> See Amin, January 2003; also in this volume. Emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup> World Social Forum India, July 2002. See this volume.

<sup>22</sup> ABONG, ATTAC, CBJP, and others, April 2001, as above. See this volume. Emphasis given.

<sup>23</sup> At the world meetings, the Zapatistas have been among those denied access, and the clause has also been used to exclude some Basque organisations. In India and at the Asian Social Forum in January 2003, organisations affiliated or sympathetic to the PWG (People’s War Group, a militant Maoist organisation operating in the region around Hyderabad, the city where the meeting was held) were kept out of the meeting. This and other dynamics led to a group named FAIG (Forum Against Imperialist Globalisation), which had initially been actively involved with the organisation of the Forum, to withdraw and to organise a major rally in opposition to the Forum, during the Asian Social Forum.

<sup>24</sup> Santos, March 2003. Edited version in this volume, Section 3.

<sup>25</sup> Resolution taken at the WSF India National Conference in Nagpur, India, March 21–22, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> WSF India, nd(a). See this volume. The specific wording WSF India has used for the axes is : “Imperialist globalisation; Patriarchy ; Militarism and peace ; Communalism (religious sectarianism and fundamentalism); and — Casteism & racism (oppression, exclusion and discrimination based on descent and work)”.

<sup>27</sup> Several speakers at the meeting of the International Council in Bangkok in August 2002, the first time that it met in Asia, raised the questions of religious nationalism, communalism, and caste, and the need for the Council to embrace them. The proposals found wide support among participants and observers, especially among those from Asia.

<sup>28</sup> WSF India, nd(b).

<sup>29</sup> The online literature for the Mumbai meeting, while distinguishing clearly between individuals and organisational representatives — by offering a clear choice going to different registration forms, uses the terms ‘participant’ and ‘individual’ somewhat interchangeably, sometimes along with the term ‘delegate’, but does not say anywhere what the respective rights and privileges of individual participants and organisational participants are. The registration form for ‘Individuals’ (at <http://www.wsfindia.org/participantForm.php>) curiously provides for three categories : ‘Event

Organiser', 'Delegate', or 'Observer', and also gives no explanation for what the terms respectively mean or imply, or what the consequences are, of choosing one or the other of the latter two categories.

<sup>30</sup> I thank Taran Khan for pointing this out to me.

<sup>31</sup> Personal correspondence with Chico Whitaker during March 2003.

<sup>32</sup> My thanks to Dave Ranney for summing up this issue so succinctly.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, 1983.

<sup>34</sup> Klein, July 2000b.

<sup>35</sup> Albert, this volume.

<sup>36</sup> While I cannot think of any specific documents I have seen making this analysis, I do not claim originality over these thoughts, such as 'logo', 'franchise', etc. I think that there are many of us involved with the Forum who share these concerns, and I see myself voicing them here only an expression of a wide and deep concern. Roberto Bissio, of the Third World Institute in Uruguay, has for instance informed me that he apparently used these same terms during the meeting of the International Council in Porto Alegre in January 2003.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the issue of the globalisation of civilisation, see Sen, November 2002d.

<sup>38</sup> See the essay in this volume by Theresa Wolfwood for an exploration of the menu — and experience — of the Forum. Wolfwood September 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Whitaker, March 2003. See this volume.

<sup>40</sup> It is interesting and significant however, how strongly this shift — which was approved by the IC at its meeting in Miami in June 2003 — was resisted by some members of the WSF's Content Commission, even at the last minute before the Mumbai Forum, at its meeting in Peruggia, Italy, in October 2003.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of the politics of the Asian Social Forum, see Sen — 'The Long March', this volume. Rivalry over control of the European Social Forum is now legendary 'within the WSF', and one can only hope that someone will perhaps write on it soon.

<sup>43</sup> Sen 2002.

<sup>43</sup> I see 'civil society' — as the term is used today — as referring to the attempted hegemony by the middle and upper classes, and by the middle and upper castes in those parts of the world where this stratification applies, and to its celebration — essentially, by members of these sections — as embracing 'all of society' outside the state. I see it as being merely a way of these sections disguising their historical project of struggling for hegemony, including by 'civilising' the 'uncivil(ised)'. For earlier and more detailed discussion of this idea, see Gera, Howell, and Sen, June 2002, and Sen, November 2002d. And for an early discussion of the concept of unintendedness, see Sen, April 2001 (April 1975).