

The 2003 European Social Forum: Where next for the anti-capitalist movement?

Simon Tormey

The Paris European Social Forum (ESF), which took place in November 2003, was the second such continental gathering since Florence in 2002. Yet much of the political energy of Florence was lacking. Why was this? The author argues that the social forum is caught between a desire for greater 'inclusivity' and the need to develop political strategies that can affirm the guiding rationale of the social forum process, i.e. that 'another world is possible'. The London ESF, due to take place in October 2004, needs to reassert the primacy of the political over the social function of the ESF, and to help promote forms of activism that offer a genuine challenge to the corporate takeover of the planet.

It is Paris in late autumn 2003. It is the European Social Forum (ESF): the very epicentre of the new anti-capitalism. Here is where the future of European resistance to global neoliberalism is being forged. I take myself off to an exciting-sounding session—one of forty or so to choose from at this particular hour, on the last full day of the Forum. This one is encouragingly entitled 'Cultural action by and for young people as a tool to transform society'. I follow a gaggle of fashionably grungy Italian *disobbedienti* into a marquee. So many have come to hear so few: there are about 600 of us inside. One could cut the sense of expectation with a *baguette*. But wait: this doesn't look so promising. Down at the front sit three middle-aged men, in full Marks & Spencer-style 'casual' garb. For the next forty minutes excitement gives way to tedium as, one by one, the speakers tell us how various French *maries* (town halls) help

'youth' to articulate itself in these difficult times. We are told that rock bands regularly receive subsidies from them; that they hold seminars on social exclusion; that marginalised groups are able to use the facilities of the *marie* to hold meetings and so forth. They tell us about the photography exhibitions they hold, and how members of the community are invited to talk to the 'youth' about how it can overcome obstacles to self-advancement. It goes on. I look around the room. People are frowning, although they seem too overcome by this over-bearing, if well-meaning, speech to know whether to yawn, yell or leave. I leave. On the way out, I encounter a 'Russian Marxist'. He tells me that these are 'nice people', but that he has 'come to find revolution'. I nod in sympathy. We are in the wrong place.

Cut to two days earlier. There is a session on 'The World Social Forum from Porto Alegre to Mumbai: Dynamics and ambitions of the Social Forums Movement'. It features one of the founders of the World Social Forum (wsf), Bernard Cassen. Cassen is delivering a plea for the politicisation of the wsf process so that it might, well, *do* something, *achieve* something, *be* something. His view is that the social forum process needs to constitute itself formally as a political movement, with a manifesto, permanent offices, elected representatives and, indeed, the full garb that political scientists associate with organisational 'maturity'.¹ It is clear that this is an unfashionable view with the audience and with the other members of the panel, who luxuriate in the anarchic disaggregation of the Social Forum. By the end of the session, Cassen can be seen cradling his head in his hands, dreaming, perhaps, of setting up (yet) another organisation that might be able to confront the corporate dominance of the planet. As the audience and participants move cheerily off, he, in contrast, looks weary. After three years of intense involvement with the social forum process, he does not look like someone who is looking forward to being involved for another three.

I may have been unlucky. I may have misjudged the nature of the sessions I chose to attend or not attend. I may have taken away an unrepresentative impression of the ESF. But I cannot recall any session filling me with puzzlement about the social forum process and what it 'represents'. Having thought that the Social Forum would be, at the very least, 'political', at the end of three days I could not point to anything that might make the avatars of contemporary

capitalism more worried than usual. A cartoon in *Le Monde* on the Friday of the Forum said it all. It showed a group of executives sitting round a table. One of them asks: 'What are we going to do about the *alter-mondialistes*?' Another replies: 'We can always sell them stuff.' Indeed they can, and they will. What has gone wrong here—if it has?

The Social Forums: How? Why?

For those not completely *au fait* with the social forum 'process', some background is required. The World Social Forum (WSF) was the brainchild of *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT) led by 'Lula' da Silva, former leader of the opposition and now the president of the country. The idea was to provide an alternative to the World Economic Forum (WEF), which normally meets in Davos, Switzerland. The WEF is a private, corporate-only affair that draws the big companies along for discussions on 'world affairs'—for which, read 'lobbying' on behalf of corporate interests. The idea of the WSF was to provide an alternative forum: one that gives voice to 'global civil society' (Cassen, 2003). By the normal standards of institutional development, the WSF has been an enormous success. The first WSF in 2001 was a rather hastily put-together affair, but by the 2003 event it had become slick and media-friendly, providing a platform for some of the best-known figures on the anti-capitalist 'circuit' (Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Walden Bello, etc). It also gave rise more or less spontaneously to the idea of continental, regional, national and, indeed, local 'social forums'. The idea would be to create a vast, interlocking network of activists that would be 'horizontal', democratic and participatory.

The first European Social Forum was held in Florence in 2002, and provided the yardstick for 2003's effort. Despite complaints of its having been undemocratic, and in thrall to big institutional players such as the Italian trade unions and political parties, the event's reception seems have been largely positive. Such feelings may well be heightened in the wake of the Paris forum which, in contrast, seemed beset with difficulty. First, there is the question of logistics. The Florence forum was held on a single site in the middle of the city; the Paris ESF was dispersed across four sites (La Villette, Bobigny,

St-Denis and Ivry-sur-Seine). Even allowing for the excellent transport links in and around Paris, it was difficult to avoid having to spend hours shuttling from one place to another (and back again). Secondly, the ‘material’ edge of Florence was singularly lacking in Paris. Few trade unions showed up, and those that did seemed lost in the vortex of ‘citizens’ groupings’, Leninist parties and single-issue groups. At the much-anticipated session between Alex Callinicos and Toni Negri on the subject of ‘Working class or multitude?’, which drew perhaps a thousand participants, one looked around in vain for someone who appeared even vaguely ‘working class’—as opposed to being part of the ‘multitude’.² If there were any horny-handed ‘toilers’ present, then they were lost in a sea of Peruvian hand-knitted woollen hats, carefully coiffed dreads and ‘combat’ threads. And thirdly, the ‘political’ edge of Florence seemed lost amid the carnival-esque flavour of Paris. Many sessions were overtly apolitical, or focused on spiritual healing or some other introspective process of coming to terms with the world. There were sessions on yoga, on overcoming stress, on ‘Levels of self-consciousness and self-realisation’, ‘Great operas’, and one that was intriguingly entitled ‘Rivers, water and flying fish citizens’. In the meantime, the anarchists and ‘libertarians’ had moved off, deciding that their interests and perspectives were better catered for at an ‘alternative ESF’.

The above illustrates the dilemma of the Social Forum process. On the evidence of the European forums so far, it seems all too logical to draw a negative correlation between the degree to which they are ‘social’ and participatory, and the degree to which they are able to effect a significant mobilisation. At one level, this is a question of overload. As mentioned above, one could have attended, at any one time at the Paris ESF, one of thirty or forty sessions. At this level of disaggregation and participation, it is simply impossible to get a sense of what a collective politics of resistance, let alone a collective ‘project’, might look like. For many, of course, this is precisely the point: an ‘alter-politics’ is (or should be) a politics of disaggregation. There are so many people, so many voices, so many positions, so many minorities to encompass, that it could not be otherwise without losing the character of the social forum itself. In addition, the forums have to be horizontal, democratic, participatory, inclusive (etc.). In this sense, they are regularly contrasted with the ‘verticalist’ ambitions of those who want

to create a party—or, even better—to use an *existing* party as a launch-pad for an assault on power. The UK Socialist Workers Party (SWP) has, for example, been identified by the Brighton-based direct action collective SchNEWS as a practitioner of this strategy.³ Similar suspicions are liable to fall on anyone who expresses a craving for a ‘crystallisation’ of the movement of movements behind a set of demands, or for a shared manifesto. For ‘horizontal’ libertarians, Cassen is one step away from those who, like Callinicos, urge ‘the building of the Party’.

And so the social forum ‘process’ goes on, in its relentless quest for yet greater inclusivity and participation. Each year (we can anticipate) there will be a larger convergence than the last. Why stop at yoga, great operas and faith healing? What is to stop people from holding sessions on the Atkins Diet, on Scientology, or on pyramid selling? Very little, it seems. As long as the social forum remains resolutely inclusive and apolitical, there is nothing to stop anyone from proposing anything. Why not have McDonalds providing the food (suitably ‘localised’), and Nike providing the T-shirts (‘ESF: Just do it!’)? Isn’t there some alternative to the endless, sprawling Camden Market-isation of the social forum? On the other hand, with the 2004 Social Forum scheduled to take place in London, perhaps the Camden Market analogue is entirely appropriate. Where better to promote the social forum as commodity-spectacle than at the UK home of the ‘alter-commodity’?

Where next for the social forum movement?

Let us assume, for a moment, that the social forum process is actually part of a global anti-capitalist movement. If so, then those who are actively committed to it are faced with a choice. It can either become political (which it currently is not), or it can remain social. If it remains social, then the most that can be said for it is that it is a welcoming, heterodox space of temporary convergence. Think of it as the anti-capitalist equivalent of the Glastonbury Festival: a safe, agreeable, funky place to be for a few days, before we trudge back to ‘normal’ life. It would be something to look forward to, much as we look forward to our holidays or to some other form of respite from TV, stress and boredom. To be

clear, this is not a valueless role, just as holidays are not valueless. On the other hand, most of us don't usually think of holidays as a challenge to the logic of capitalist accumulation and, consequently, neither would the social forums be thought of in such terms either. But what if, as seems to be the case, activists demanded a social forum capable of providing a meaningful convergence of ideas and suggestions for combating neoliberalism? What if it were *political*?

One of the problems of the current impasse is that many activists are prone to confuse political *logics* with political *strategies*. This, in turn, has infected discourse on the future of the social forum in an unhelpful and, indeed, obstructive way. The two logics are that of horizontal activism or 'disorganisation', on the one side, and that of vertically-organised movements, or parties of a more or less democratic kind, on the other. When they are democratic, parties resemble something like the German Greens; when they are authoritarian, they resemble the sects or groupuscles parodied by Monty Python in *The Life of Brian*. As seems clear, the social forum process is determinedly horizontal in orientation and likely to remain so, even in the face of demands from prominent figures that it become more 'professional' (for which, read: more like a vertically-organised political party). But the way in which activists are organised does not tell us much that is of use about the *strategy* that is to be pursued, in order to confront entrenched power. Here, on the contrary, we seem stuck in the ancient and entirely unhelpful dichotomy between 'revolution' on the one hand and 'reform' on the other.

Quite how such a simplistic distinction survived into the analysis of twentieth-century political radicalism, let alone into that of the twenty-first, is anyone's guess. But in fact, the anti-capitalist movement cannot be meaningfully constituted on the basis of the validity of either term. If it is to be radical and political, then it has to think of itself—and be thought of—as 'transformative': as working to confront and change the present in the name of 'another world'. The reality is that people's views differ on what that better world is. As the social forums demonstrate, there are myriad visions of how the world is to become a better, cleaner, safer, healthier and, yes, even a more spiritual place. For this reason, 'horizontality' is a basic requirement of the movement if it is to maintain anything like the inclusivity we have seen at the social forums to date, and if it is to remain true to the

spirit that has animated the social forum process so far. Political parties were banned from the first WSF, for example. On the other hand, the fact that it is horizontal does not make it transformative. It makes it *inclusive*. In order to become transformative it would have to support, promote and nurture forms of activism that directly confront the ever-intensifying concentration of power in the hands of the elites. It would need to be reassembled as a place that spawns activism, not just a carnival that bears witness to it. It would need to foster, encourage and make possible the multiplication of forms of resistance that challenge power, exclusion and representation at all levels—not just locally, but nationally and globally. From this point of view, a politicised social forum would facilitate *political* action by generating alliances, affinities and associations aimed at querying, contesting and confronting entrenched power. It would promote convergences that remained consistent with the horizontal and network nature of contemporary activism. It would foster alliances and affinities that were not merely ‘euphoric’, dissipating the moment the carnival packed up, but which could endure, grow, multiply and re-multiply in unpredictable ways—as well as in ways familiar to radical activism. Those engaged in the social forum process need to remember what it is there for; what activists want from it; what hopes they have for it. But above all, the social forums need to engage and re-engage with the enemy: neoliberal capitalism.⁴

So at one level, Cassen is right. The social forum has, in a sense, grown away from its rationale, which was to provide an alternative space in which to think the capitalist ‘after’. But the ‘horizontal’ activists are right in that this needs to be done from the inside-out, and without threatening or undermining the autonomy of its constituent parts through the erection of some professionalised movement-structure. The social forum cannot, in this sense, *be* the anti-capitalist movement: how could it, without immediately alienating the various molecules that compose it, each with its own vision, its own notional Good Life to promote? What the social forum can do is to *facilitate* the elaboration of alternatives and alliances. Those who care about it can insist that it be a political laboratory for the creation of innovative, imaginative and engaging answers to the demanding questions people bring to it—and not just a catch-all celebration of alternative lifestyles and identities of the kind that it threatens to become.

As Slavoj Žižek (1997) notes, the multiplication of lifestyles and identities ('inclusivity') is not itself a threat to capitalism: far from it. It makes capitalism seem like the very ground of toleration and benevolence ('I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmon-eee').

In these terms, it bears insisting that the (dreaded) 'crystallisation' of political demands—even if only manifested in a crudely negative register ('*Ya Basta!*'; 'Down with NAFTA'; 'Abolish Debt'; 'Blair Out')—is *not* a threat to anti-capitalism, nor to the social forum process. It is *the very condition* upon which alliance, association and affinity are made possible and can make sense. From this point of view, an anti-capitalist social forum should, at least, aim at the *generation* of an anti-capitalist politics by fostering initiatives with which to confront and transform the structure of existing society. It may be a 'minor' politics; it may take the form of temporary and shifting coalescences. It will certainly require that the vanities and posturing of not only the well-equipped groups, but also of the more discrete and 'virtuous' entities, be put to one side at least temporarily, and if necessary for 'strategic' reasons. It will also require a major attempt at reconnecting with those who seem in danger of being left behind: trade unions, 'single issue' activists and, indeed, with the very many ordinary people who demonstrate an interest in the radical critique of elite politics: the millions of readers of *Stupid White Men* and *No Logo*, for a start. But without having the generation of a transformative politics as a principal objective, the social forum merely condemns itself to containment as 'carnival', and to regurgitation as parodic commodity. 'ESF: Just do it!'

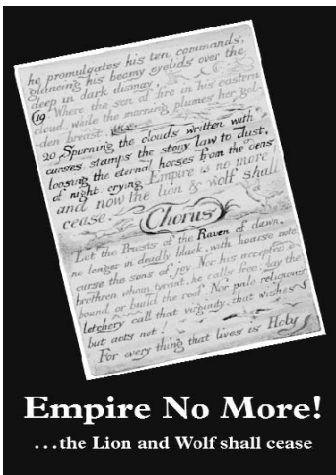
Notes

1. Cassen's role in the birth of the WSF, and his views on its future, are outlined in Cassen (2003).
2. Alex Callinicos is one of the leading figures in the Socialist Workers Party. His views are summarised in Callinicos (2003) and Callinicos (2002). Toni Negri is a leading Italian autonomist thinker and, with Michael Hardt, the author of *Empire*—a much-discussed theoretical work on the nature of global capitalism and the possibility of resistance to it (Hardt & Negri, 2000). The positions of each are briefly summarised in Tormey (2004, chapter 2).

3. SchNEWS accused Globalise Resistance, one of the principal anti-capitalist 'umbrella' groups in the UK, of being a SWP front. See their pamphlet *Monopolise Resistance*, available at <<http://www.schnews.org.uk/mr.htm>>
4. For an analysis of the different 'logics' of anti-capitalist politics, see Tormey (2004, chapter 5). For a more detailed account of ways in which the social forum process could generate a radically transformative politics of the kind described here, see McLeish (2004).

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