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Reading Nairobi: Place, Space, and Difference at the 2007 World Social Forum

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Keywords

World Social Forum, Africa, place, open space, difference

Introduction

The 2007 World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Nairobi, 20–25 January, at the Moi Sports Complex in Kasarani, on the outer ring of the city and in close proximity to many informal settlements. It was the first time the world event was held in Africa and was the product of a continent-wide organizing process reaching back as far as January 2002. It succeeded in attracting participants from all 53 African countries, across numerous ethnic, linguistic, religious and geographic divides. Somewhere around 57,000¹ people registered, about two-thirds of them Black with at least 50 per cent participation by women. About 60 percent of attendees were from Africa and almost 70 percent of these from Kenya.² The overall numbers were considerably less than the 100,000 plus that had attended the annual WSF since 2003 in Porto Alegre (2003, 2005) and Mumbai (2004) but with dramatically more people from Africa and the African diaspora than had previously been at any World Social Forum. Over 1300 events were mounted. Critics and apologists alike acknowledge that it was the most

¹ The final report of the organizing committee suggests close to 75,000 people participated. The difference in numbers is attributed to those admitted for free (without registering) and those who participated in WSF activities outside the main venue. See Organizing committee of WSF 2007, p. 35.

² Organizing committee of WSF 2007, p. 36.

significant gathering of progressive forces in Africa in terms of both size and substance that had ever taken place. For the World Social Forum and for the world-wide movement against neoliberal globalization, the event asserted the central place of Africa, both as the region most devastated by neocolonialism and at the heart of resistance and alternatives to the reigning world economic order.

Even before it concluded however, the Nairobi event provoked a barrage of criticism that quickly elided into a diagnosis of the exhaustion of the WSF as a global project. Most of the controversies had to do with the character of the space that was produced there and what it signalled about a more global political drift in the WSF. The event was said to be NGO-dominated, little more than a “trade fair,” and thereby co-opted by the more elite, institutionalized, and reformist forces at the expense of putatively more radical mass movements. Critics were also alarmed at the visibility of churches, modes of overtly religious expression, and discourses of abstinence as a strategy to combat AIDS and opposition to abortion. Others focused on the protests by local poor people for free access to the Forum, the lack of accessibility created by the fee structure, and the middle class character of the event. Visible corporatization of the event was a scandal to many, with prominent sponsorship by Celtel and Kenya Airways, and the provision and exorbitant pricing (by local standards) of food and water controlled by corporations, including elite hotels and restaurants. Midway through the Forum, protests erupted around a restaurant that had been granted prime location in the stadium when its ties to the nefarious Minister of Internal Security were revealed. Accusations of corruption and collusion were quickly leveled at the local organizing committee. Finally, the visible presence of (armed) security personnel on the grounds prompted critiques of the militarization of the event and the irony of the WSF locking out poor people. Critical commentary on the event was rapid, relentless and unforgiving. A great deal emanated from the North but also, more authoritatively, from Kenyan activists and local WSF organizers,³ who accused key figures in the local organizing process of nepotism, authoritarianism, and intolerance of dissent.

The controversies provoked by the Nairobi event also became the occasion for a reprise of a larger debate about the World Social Forum. The most enduring controversy about the Social Forum, including among its

³ For axample, Oloo 2007; People's Parliament 2007.

proponents, has to do with the assertion that it is a “space” to serve, incubate, and advance progressive movements, but is not itself a “movement,” understood as a more unitary political organization that makes decisions and embarks on actions. The political contradictions evident in the Nairobi event led leading left intellectual Walden Bello to propose that the WSF “fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation”,⁴ a defense by WSF founder, Chico Whitaker,⁵ and a flurry of other similar interventions.

This article is an analytical response both to the body of criticism about Nairobi and to the terms of this larger debate. I want to make a case for analyzing the World Social Forum in different terms. I will argue that it is essential to recognize (1) the difference that geographic place makes in the production of Social Forum spaces and in any assessment of a particular Social Forum process/event; (2) the plurality of ‘open space(s)’ that the WSF process is throwing up globally, to analyze the production of those spaces and compare them as praxes producing variable outcomes; and (3) that encounters across different kinds of difference are happening across the diverse places and spaces of the Social Forum, and the central role this should play in our assessment of any particular Social Forum process/event.

This article addresses the challenge of ‘reading Nairobi’ but, more generally, it seeks to elaborate an approach by which to more adequately analyze the World Social Forum, both as a somewhat coherent global political process while also recognizing the exploding plurality of the WSF as a multi-faceted phenomenon. This requires an interpretive framework that allows for different and intersecting levels of analysis: between any one event and the multiple longer-term and larger-scale processes (locally, regionally and globally) in which it is embedded; of events/processes at different scales, in different world regions, at differing points in time and their relation to what is unproblematically called “the process,” in the singular, at the global scale. I want to appreciate the particularity of Nairobi as a node in time and space, toward understanding the global ‘process’ as an uneven, chaotic and conflictual work in progress that nonetheless is making specific and irreducible contributions to myriad struggles for a more just world.

I am not an expert on Africa. To read Nairobi in any modestly adequate way, we need more work by African social scientists committed to the

⁴) Bello 2007.

⁵) Whitaker 2007a.

Social Forum process. I am writing as a scholar of social movements and of the WSF, an activist committed to the process, white-skinned and from the global North, and returning from my first trip to Africa. In my reading of Nairobi, I want to assert the irreducible importance of placing the event in its African historical and geographic contexts and of listening to the diverse (and conflicting) perspectives of African organizers and participants about what the process and the event signified for them. As an outsider, I do not know enough to weigh them in any authoritative way. I have sought to be informed by them and to have them interact with my own observations and political sensibilities in order to produce an inevitably partial reading of a complex event that, like the WSF itself, still eludes our theoretical, analytical, and political grasp.

The WSF in Africa and Africa in the WSF

To begin to assess the significance of the Nairobi event, it is important to situate it in the history of the WSF process. The history of Africans in the anti-globalization movement and in the WSF process, as on the global stage more generally, has been one of struggle for visibility and voice. Undeniably, Africa is the world region most devastated by neoliberalism and neocolonialism. Arguably, its situation and its peoples should be at the centre of the WSF imagination. However, also due to its economic and political marginality, the numbers of Africans in attendance at the world events in Brazil and India have been minimal. Africans have been few on the WSF's International Council (IC) where only 6.3 percent of the member organizations are headquartered in Africa.⁶ Africans made a breakthrough in terms of numbers and visibility in the 2004 event in Mumbai, with 350–400 participants, the majority sponsored by Action Aid (UK), the Dutch NGO, HIVOS, or associated with the African Social Forum Council (ASF).⁷ The number of Africa-based organizations involved in the world event went from 40 to 400 between 2001 and 2004. The ASF, through its Senegalese secretariat Environment and Development in the Third World (ENDA), first produced *African Flame*, a newspaper which appeared daily during the Mumbai event and reappeared in Porto Alegre the following year. In Porto Alegre in 2005, 60 people were sponsored by

⁶ Wekken 2005.

⁷ Mutasa 2004.

ASF plus about 300 others. This delegation orchestrated about ten events, including a dialogue with Afro-Brazilians, with the explicit intent of raising the visibility of African issues and making a claim for African movements on the global scene.

From their first appearance at the WSF, African organizations have been carriers of a pan-African identity and politic. The Social Forum in Africa was a continental project from its inception, with goals to both insert Africans into the world movement and to strengthen grassroots struggles for economic justice across the continent. Prior to the WSF event in Nairobi, there had been four African Social Forum events: Bamako, Mali in January 2002, with about 200 participants from 45 countries; Addis Ababa in 2003 with 200 from 40 countries; Lusaka, Zambia in December 2004 with 500–650 participants;⁸ and Conakry, Guinea in December 2005.

The numbers in attendance at the pan-African Social Forums have not been large but the events have all been very international, involving participants from 30 to 45 African countries. Bamako was one of three sites for the polycentric WSF in 2006, along with Caracas and Karachi. It was the smallest of the three, with about 5000 participants. The inaugural ASF event in Bamako in 2002 was, according to Patrick Bond, one of the first such gatherings to convene progressive NGOs, labour, activist churches and social movements from all parts of the continent⁹ and observers continue to make such claims about Social Forum events in Africa. ASF member, Taoufik Ben Abdallah, claimed that the 2007 WSF was the most important event of post-colonial Africa. Organizers reported that their working together across national, linguistic, regional and religious difference, and across the great geographic divide of the Sahara, was unprecedented, and resulted in participation in the event from all countries of the continent.

The strong pan-African orientation of the Social Forum process in Africa marked the Nairobi event and departed significantly from other WSF processes, which, in the case of Brazil, were originally more cosmopolitan, and India more nationally-articulated. A radical vision of African integration and unity, including as an explicit alternative to the neoliberal NEPAD, was an overt goal of the ASF since its origins.¹⁰ In my view, this pan-African praxis and politic might be one of the greatest achievements of the process and an emergent (and resurgent) alternative.

⁸) See Brill 2005 for a report.

⁹) Bond 2005, p. 437.

¹⁰) African Social Forum 2004.

As early as 2003, a sub-regional strategy for enrooting the Social Forum across the territory of Africa had been articulated by the ASF at its meeting in Addis Ababa. The patterns of sub-continental Social Forum organizing have been politically and culturally specific, reflecting distinct histories of struggle and repression, to some extent, expressing institutional cleavages. NGOs appear to dominate the process in West Africa while combative grassroots movements are more prominent in Southern Africa, for example.

The turn to the local and national scale was undertaken more recently, around 2005, as an extension of this effort to enroot the Social Forum in local places and in ways relevant to grassroots movements. By the Nairobi event, 30 national-scale Social Forums had taken place.¹¹ Some national fora have been larger than the continental events. For example, the Nigerian Social Forum attracted 3,000 at the height of a general strike and occupation of oil facilities. The Zimbabwe event involved 1200 participants, again reflecting a high level of national mobilization against the Mugabe regime. Over 100 Social Forum events took place in Africa in the year leading up to the 2007 WSF. Whatever the contradictions of the Nairobi event, the Social Forum process on the African continent appears impressively robust. It is geographically widespread, internally diverse and, as one would expect, organizationally and politically uneven.

The continental process, underway since 2002, has been internally fractious. The African Social Forum Council was formally constituted in the summer of 2004 in an effort to broaden and democratize a process that had hitherto been assumed by a few people representing Africa at the WSF (and the Social Forum in Africa) without any structure of accountability. Long-standing tensions had burst out publicly at the WSF in Mumbai the previous January with criticisms leveled at the Senegal-based Secretariat by other Africans present around its failure to organize a regional event prior to Mumbai, the lack of transparency in selecting delegates to attend the Mumbai WSF, and the same old faces being featured repeatedly as international delegates and speakers.¹² In this context, according to Mutasa, Action Aid was quite justified in supporting delegates to attend the WSF outside the ASF structure. The African Social Forum Council was formally constituted in July 2004 and was comprised of forty representatives from the continent's five sub-regions.¹³ However, an open challenge to the legitimacy

¹¹) Organizing committee of WSF 2007, p. 7.

¹²) Mutasa 2004.

¹³) Wekken 2005.

of the ASF Council was issued in Lusaka in December 2004 at the continental event. Social Movements Indaba of South Africa declared the Council unelected, self-appointed, unrepresentative and dominated by NGOs and challenged them to hold an open plenary to establish political direction.¹⁴ In addition to challenges to its legitimacy from below, the African Council has also struggled for identity and autonomy at the global level within the International Council. This manifested, for example, in a struggle over the location and timing of the 2007 WSF. The decision for Nairobi was eventually made by the African Council, but this was after a struggle with the IC who had earlier been directly approached by Morocco in a bid to host the world event.

In assessing the Nairobi event, it also seems important to recognize the context of Africa in general, and East Africa and Kenya more specifically, as significantly more colonized and dependent than either Brazil or India. The latter two are regional hegemonies and emerging global economic powers, with vibrant civil societies with large progressive middle class sectors. The extreme poverty and immiseration of a high proportion of Nairobi's population, over half of whom live in slums, and that of the region and the continent, makes for vastly different social conditions and social forces in the making of the WSF. The 'development' apparatus is pervasive, donors cast a long shadow, opportunistic NGOs abound, and discerning the boundaries between these and genuinely liberatory and enabling social institutions is fraught with difficulty, especially for those coming from outside.

Aside from the familiar macro-economic and social indicators that raise questions about popular organizing capacity, it is also important to recall that anti-colonial independence struggles were waged and won as recently as the 1960s and 70s across most of the continent. Furthermore, the post-colonial history of Kenya and great parts of Africa has been characterized by brutally repressive and exploitative regimes which have systematically suppressed the formation of autonomous parties, unions, social movements and civil organizations. Social movement activists, including Social Forum organizers, are regularly harassed and detained by their respective governments.¹⁵ In Kenya, the dictatorial Moi regime was ousted only in 2003, with lawyers, churches, and NGOs in the forefront of the democracy struggle. Progressive forces also assume these organizational forms and

¹⁴) Alexander and Mbali 2004.

¹⁵) Bond 2005, p. 438.

this history of repression and struggle in Kenya puts the prominence of churches and NGOs at the 2007 WSF in a different light.¹⁶

Notwithstanding the predominance of these organizations, indeed often due to their support, the poor and the marginalized of Kenya were everywhere apparent in the Nairobi event if one went looking for them: the Mau Mau veterans; the thousands of slum dwellers; the Masai and other groups of pastoralists and ‘minorities’; small farmers, many of them women, protesting Economic Partnership Agreements. Their presence was often, although not always, supported, organized, and or articulated by NGOs and churches, many of them local, some with international connections. In some sessions which I observed, the discourses were often descriptive, testimonies of suffering and wrong-doing, in which people were just beginning to articulate collective identities and rights claims – to land, food and water, and basic services. Many were not ‘militant’ and ‘political’ in the ways we associate with ‘antiglobalization’ movements. Was this because these groups were associated with NGOs or churches? Or does it reflect a more general condition among poor and marginalized communities in an impoverished region and subject to abusive and highly exploitative governments? Are there progressive mass movements that were crowded out by NGOs or excluded by co-opted organizers? We need more social science, from both African activists and scholars, on civil society, social movements, NGOs and churches in the region and in the Social Forum process to answer these questions with any confidence.

In sum, then, I would say that the mere fact of the world event taking place in Nairobi was a triumph against tremendous odds. Bringing together tens of thousands of progressive Africans from across a vast and diverse continent was unprecedented and placing Africa squarely in the sites of the world-wide global justice movement represents a critical accomplishment.

Place: The Local Worlds of the WSF

The option to move the world event geographically embodies a recognition that place matters in terms of the global event as well as for the place-based processes in the host region. In 2002, the WSF’s International Council

¹⁶ For a critical exchange on the prominence of NGOs at the Nairobi event, see Abdul-Raheem, 2007 and Gutierrez 2007. For a larger perspective on the proliferation of NGOs in Africa, see Shivji 2004.

first began to consider the merits of mounting a WSF outside of Brazil as a way of further internationalizing the process. Some key leaders recognized the significance of the territoriality of the world event in determining who participated in what numbers, the themes, issues and alternatives under discussion, and the horizon of possible futures. The proposed 'local' and 'regional' fora emerged as an extension of this deliberation and represented an emergent understanding of the WSF as 'process' not just event, and further of the possible value of multiple spaces and processes unfolding at multiple scales and temporalities in multiple regions of the world. The decision that the 2006 WSF be polycentric was also an expression of this desire to deepen the process of internationalization through a strategy of regionalization.

Furthermore, the emplacement of Social Forum processes in so many different contexts enroots them in locally-specific and otherwise diverse ways. Those local practices and processes take on a dynamic of their own, with their own process innovations, political breakthroughs, multiculturalisms, as well as conflicts and limits. I contend that we have to appreciate Nairobi, indeed any particular WSF, in this light and resist the temptation to read off the latest event a peremptory diagnosis of the health of the WSF as a global process. However, having said that, proliferating place-based and multi-scale practices are producing difference within the global process and are thus transforming it – in addition to whatever effects they have on the politics of their specific places and social movement networks. This, therefore, does raise the thorny question of what the limits of Nairobi indicate about the state of the global process. At the same time, however, we must be open to possibility that Nairobi also presents the world process with its own achievements, insights, breakthroughs and challenges. For instance, the claims of local, poor people's movements on the WSF at the Nairobi event present the world process with serious political questions: about the status of the local, the poor and the subaltern in the WSF event/process. These are not new questions for the WSF. They have been haunting the process from the beginning. Major breakthroughs were made in Mumbai that were, for whatever reason, not carried back to Brazil. The Nairobi event was the occasion for these questions to be raised again, in a combative and highly effective way, that will be difficult to ignore from now on. This is a critically important development and a fruit of the Nairobi experience.

In the WSF from the beginning, there has been a *de facto* recognition and valorization of the emergence of resistance and alternatives to neoliberal

eralism from the most local to the most global. The creation of conditions for contact, recognition and inter-change among movements and organizations working at a variety of scales, in a range of modes, and on a multiplicity of issues and fronts, and with a pluralism of strategic approaches has been one of the most significant innovations of the Forum. Each instantiation of the WSF in whatever place at whatever scale is characterized by the participation and valorization of activists operating at a variety of scales, and the (possibility of) horizontal exchange among them. This aspect is closely related to the presence, role and status of ‘place-based’ movements in the processes and events constituting the WSF, their own evolving multi-scale politics/practices, and the relation of these practices to their “subaltern strategies of localization”.¹⁷

In Nairobi, ‘local’ movements made a dramatic claim on the ‘world’ event. A slum-dwellers’ organization called the People’s Parliament stormed the gates and disrupted a press conference to protest the cost of registration fees which they claimed made the World Social Forum inaccessible to poor people from the city. At an assembly of social movements on the last day of the Forum, their spokesperson, Wangui Mbatia, had this to say:

For many of us this is the first WSF. What I like about the WSF is that it brings the world to me as a Kenyan poor person: not only the world but the best of the world. In this room, I have met people who believe in the same things as the Peoples Parliament and people who are courageous enough to believe that a better world is possible. I am concerned that there are many Kenyans who have not been able to attend the WSF. We have had to come every single morning to get those doors open so that ordinary Kenyan citizens can attend the WSF. We believe the WSF is a conversation by, between, and amongst people. It is not fair that 90 per cent of the people in the rooms are not Kenyans. That is not just. We have fought day after day after day to get in. But we are not just fighting to get in: we are fighting to be recognized because we are people too.¹⁸

This eruption by a poor people’s organization politicized the question of who the ‘open space’ of the WSF is for, which constituencies should have privileged access to it, and whose presence should not simply be left to their own self-organizing capacities, especially in terms of resource mobilization. Furthermore, it intensified the questions of place and scale: which places and scales of activism should be privileged at any particular Forum?

¹⁷⁾ Escobar 2001. While all social movements have their own spatialities and territorialities, they are not all place-based in the same ways or to the same degrees.

¹⁸⁾ Social Movements Assembly 2007.

Should a *World Social Forum* in Nairobi privilege the participation of Nairobi slum-dwellers? Kenyan organizations? Or strive first and foremost to be a pan-African edition of a world process, as the leadership of the African Social Forum had in mind? The protests by the Peoples' Parliament, which attracted much support from WSF delegates and some organizers, signalled a boiling point for issues that have been simmering from the beginning of the Social Forum process with varying intensity in different places and with various responses by different organizing committees: how 'local' should the world event be? how international? how popular or 'grassroots'? how intellectual?

Even as the poorest and most remote places and peoples are increasingly constituted by 'global' processes, international political circuits, including of insurgent civil society, are largely peopled by cosmopolitan elites, urbanized and educated in the terms of Western academia, whether geographically located and or politically identified with the global South or the North.¹⁹ This is also true of the WSF, especially in terms of its leadership and governance at the global level. The debate about the status of the local in any world event, i.e., concretely, the presence, role, and status of the local-scale activisms of the resident population, unavoidably overlaps with the question of the subaltern in the WSF and, by extension, in world civic politics. The issue of poor people's access to the WSF and the near universal support it garnered in Nairobi indicates, in IC member Gustave Messiah's view, "a great increase in the ethical demands of the alter-globalization movement,"²⁰ whether made by those who feel excluded from it or on itself by its own constituents.

In the space of the World Social Forum, perhaps most notably in the 2004 edition in Mumbai, India, some of the poorest and most subjugated peoples in the world came to participate and make claims. Of the 80,000 official delegates, about 30,000 were *dalits* (untouchables) and a great number of these were *adivasis* (tribals). Of these, 40–45 percent were women. They came both demanding and offering recognition, solidarity, and dialogue vis-a-vis the thousands of other movements and groups gathered in the WSF. These movements of extremely poor and marginalized people had heretofore been largely invisible on the international stage despite impressive levels of self-organization and forays by individual lead-

¹⁹ For a fuller exploration of issues associated with the cosmopolitan culture and politics of a transnational activist class, see Conway 2007a.

²⁰ Messiah 2007.

ers into UN-sponsored international fora. These groups recognized and helped construct the WSF in India as a transnational political space of a new kind.

Similarly in Nairobi, the Mau Mau Veterans' Association, survivors of the mid-20th century anti-colonial struggle against the British, enjoyed their first opportunity to speak of their experience to an international audience while, in their own words, they "are the unseen and the unheard of Kenyan society," their claims for land and recognition repeatedly rebuffed by successive post-colonial regimes. The Masai, a tribal group of pastoralists being systematically displaced from their land by 'development', were in the 2007 WSF in the hundreds, visibly present in the space and organizing their own discussions primarily for their own constituency.

In Caracas, Venezuela in 2006, 400 activities or about one-third of the planned events were proposed by newly emergent local groups. In a society in the throes of the Chavez-led Bolivarian revolution with little experience of autonomous civil society formations, the Social Forum was an opportunity for these groups to encounter each other, to articulate for themselves their hopes and visions for Venezuela in the transnational space created in their city by the presence of the World Social Forum.²¹ These claims on the Social Forum by localized subaltern groups appear to be growing over time and as the WSF moves geographically, as place-based movements recognize the potential for their own struggles in the Social Forum's arrival in their city, country or region. The degree to which place-based subaltern groups can make these claims is also, of course, contingent both on their organizing capacity and on the particular politics of in/exclusion practiced by the local organizing committee. However, as the world process has unfolded and each major social forum event throws up new problematics and plural visions of both the Forum and the movement, organizers have demonstrated great reflexivity and constant innovation. The process is not perfectly linear, systematic, nor comprehensive, and certainly not conflict-free. Some key organizers in Nairobi made some regrettable choices and, by many accounts, demonstrated more arrogance than openness. However, the issues raised, whether about the participation of local poor people's organizations, or of ethical consumption or financing are not new nor unique to Nairobi. The limits of Nairobi have ignited a global debate that needed to happen. In many quarters of the WSF process, there is a well-established culture of learning, including from mistakes. The controversies

²¹) Lander 2006.

raised by the Nairobi event may well be its most enduring contribution to the global process.

The ‘Open Space(s)’ of the WSF

The Brazilian founders of the WSF vigorously defend the Forum as an open space for free association of non-party civil society entities that are united in their opposition to “rule of the world by money” but are otherwise stunningly diverse. They see the praxis of the Forum as fostering the emergence of a new political actor, that of “planetary civil society,” imbued with a new political culture. It is society that will change the world, not the Forum itself, but the WSF is singular in the functions it has assumed. In particular, the Forum is a space to unlearn the practices of the 20th century left, its hierarchies, violence and authoritarianism, and to learn how to resolve conflicts non-violently, to dialogue with difference, to learn how to live with diversity, and to recognize multiple paths for changing the world.²²

Whitaker and other Brazilian founders also insist that the Social Forum is not a space of power, but one of consensual association, self-management and horizontal exchange. The fact that the Forum is not an entity in itself, does not issue statements, take positions, or embark on actions, protects it and its participants from being consumed by internal struggles for hegemony. Its non-deliberative character frees its participating groups to encounter one another, to listen and to learn, and to be transformed in ways they could not be otherwise. In this view, the Forum’s central function is one of cultural transformation of the movements and groups of civil society that respond to its summons.

The critics of ‘open space’ argue variously that the concept itself is wrong-headed and depoliticizing in its embrace of liberal pluralism; that the Forum is not really open in its exclusion of parties, governments and armed groups; that it excludes proponents of neoliberalism; that the open space is a free market, wherein those with more money and organizational muscle can dominate; that the open space has degenerated into a festival or, in the words of Hugo Chavez, a Woodstock of the left. Others observe that all social spaces are riven through with power and inequality, and that the Social Forum is no exception.

²²) Whitaker 2007b.

In Nairobi, the point that the well-organized and well-resourced can dominate open space was borne out in concerns about NGO domination at the expense of social movements, that of institutionalized groups over the grassroots, activist, or community-based, and of the large over the small.²³ But this important point is often elided with a political critique of open space *tout court*, and especially its non-deliberative character, as in the statement of South Africa's Social Movements Indaba about the African Social Forum in Lusaka in 2004: "The under representation of social movements in relation to NGOs is reflected in the political content of the forum. It manifests in the persistence of the notion that the Africa Social Forum in nothing other than a space, in contrast to the perspective that it should have a programme to advance our struggle against neoliberalism."²⁴

In my view, the global and abstracted terms of many debates about open space are increasingly sterile. They are obscuring our capacity perceive the *plurality of spaces* or, more precisely, the plural praxes of open space, and their experimental, dynamic and evolving character, that the WSF process is generating world-wide. Recognizing the inherent plurality of the WSF, a more fruitful question to pose about any particular event is what *kind* of space is being created? What are the particularities of this instantiation of open space, arising from place, scale, and other decisions made by organizers? What are its breakthroughs and inspirations? its limitations and co-optations? What do the lessons of a particular praxis hold for the local movements and the global process? Rather than reading the latest event as an ultimate vindication for either the proponents or opponents of open space or, indeed, the last word on whether the WSF, or the movement itself, is waxing or waning, it may be more productive to recall the Zapatista wisdom that we will make the path by walking.

In my view, the Forum as a political form and organizing methodology has generated unprecedented creativity and collaboration among disparate actors in major world regions. The limits of this undertaking are not yet in sight and it is a grand experiment which needs to be respected, nurtured and safeguarded. In Whitaker's words, the WSF has issued a powerfully compelling "summons" to which hundreds of thousands of people and thousands of organizations have responded. The WSF's embrace of pluralism and diversity is, in my view, *post-liberal* in its clear condemnation of neoliberal capitalism and the inequalities and oppression it has entrenched.

²³) People's Parliament 2007.

²⁴) SMI quoted in Alexander et al. 2004; Bond 2005, p. 437.

In placing a premium on practice, in opposing the hegemony of “any single way of thinking,” in cultivating an ethic of solidarity among suffering and struggling people, their organizations and movements, and in asserting its critical positionality in the Global South, the WSF’s praxis of pluralism is something new, both post-marxist and post-liberal, the broader implications of which have hardly been noted.

Having said that, however, the praxis of open space is variable across the places and scales of the Social Forum and is changing over time. And the praxis of open space is never entirely straightforward, unproblematic, or without risks. It is surprising, for example, that the WSF has not been targeted for infiltration or take-over by its enemies, or by the enemies of its enemies. There is no indication that right-wing forces or reactionary, fundamentalist anti-imperialist movements have exploited the openness of the Forum to enter, participate, or mount their own activities under more benign banners. In India, organizers decided to specify further criteria for participation to ensure that Hindu nationalist movements, which were anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist but also anti-Muslim and anti-feminist, were not welcome in the Forum. In Kenya, in response to the heavy presence of churches in the 2007 WSF, some of them overtly homophobic and anti-feminist, there has been a call by some for stricter guidelines for activities in the WSF venue.²⁵ While wanting to err on the side of openness, organizers are grappling with the call for greater oversight to *protect* the space as one hospitable to and respectful of the full range of emancipatory movements, even as many recognize that understandings of “emancipatory” are plural, shifting and sometimes uncertain.

It is also critical to recognize that inequalities among movements get reproduced in the open space unless there is affirmative action to ensure that marginalized and minority populations are present and their voices and perspectives amplified. Feminist commentators on the WSF have been most insistent about this, noting that women regularly make up half the participants but only a tiny fraction of the speakers at the WSF, and protesting the historical marginality of feminism as a perspective despite the founding presence of feminist networks in the WSF.²⁶ In some Social Forum processes, organizers have made explicit choices to reach out to marginalized constituencies to encourage and support their participation.

²⁵) See, e.g., *Articulación Feminista* Marcosur et al. 2007.

²⁶) Conway 2007b; Vargas 2003; Alvarez et al. 2004.

Indian organizers sought out the *dalit* movements. In Nairobi, organizers subsidized the participation of 6,000 slum dwellers. Organizers of the Caracas edition of the 2006 polycentric World Social Forum actively supported and subsidized the participation of poor peoples' organizations from the US and of indigenous peoples from the Andean region. In the practical politics of organizing Social Forums, some groups of organizers have actively sought to compensate for historical marginalization and contemporary inequalities. However, thus far, these practices and other kinds of political decisions by organizers affecting the character of the space of any particular event have not informed the discourses about 'open space,' which remain abstracted from actual practices. Here, as in many instances of movement-based knowledge production, practice is leading and theory is lagging.

Difference: The *raison d'être* of the World Social Forum

Difference as an analytical vector in reading any specific WSF event or process has to do with the character and scope of diversity in the 'open space' of the forum, its ethos of respect for difference, and its production of "transcommunality".²⁷ On the question of difference, recognition, and the possibility of communicability, the challenges are far greater than the discourses of open space admit. As a new kind of movement space, the WSF is enacting a new culture of politics among social movements that is both allowing for and requiring communicative practices across identities/differences that had not previously encountered one another or, if they had, had not been ready, able or open to negotiate their differences.

Furthermore, the diverse movements of the WSF are encountering each other on a historically unequal playing field. Some movements (and their discourses) have been hegemonic relative to others, historically and currently, in and beyond the Social Forum. Some voices and movements remain far more excluded and 'subaltern' than others, including in the WSF. This raises very profound questions about the character of the WSF's putatively 'open space,' its limitations, inequalities, and exclusions.

Two questions underlie this inquiry on difference. The first is if and how the Social Forum is enhancing communicability across various kinds of difference and whether this is enabling capacities for mutual recognition,

²⁷) Childs 2003.

negotiation, convergence and or solidarity. The second is if and how the Social Forum is producing inequality and or marginality and how these might be ameliorated or overcome.²⁸

Moving the world event across regions of the global South is critical to deepening the international, multicultural, and inter-civilizational character of the global process and the possibility for genuinely dialogical encounters among movements across difference. But every Social Forum process, from local to global, is giving expression to different kinds and combinations of difference. This includes those arising from the diverse places and scales of the activists assembled in any particular Social Forum process, as well as across issues and identities arising from other axes of social differentiation. Assessing the effects of any Social Forum process on localized social movements has also to do with that Social Forum's politics of diversity and inclusion and how these get enacted in a particular place-based process.

In Nairobi, one noteworthy breakthrough was the 'coming out' of the African LGBTQ movement, its boisterous claiming of the public spaces of the Social Forum, its assertion of the dignity of queer persons and of its right and responsibility as an emancipatory movement to be present in the WSF. The Gay and Lesbian Coalition of Kenya (GALCK) was the host of the brilliant Q Spot, a tent that became one of the most vibrant spaces of the WSF where, for the first time, activists spoke publicly about being queer in African contexts of extreme homophobic violence and in Kenya specifically where sodomy is punishable by fourteen years in prison. Stephen Barris, of the International Lesbian and Gay Association, had this to say about Q Spot:

the show was almost stolen by the audience. They came to see with their own eyes those gays and lesbians, black, African, like themselves. The activists improvise and make impromptu circles of chairs. Ten, twenty, sometimes thirty people surround an activist, their questions and comments blurring together: "You're gay? Really?" "That doesn't exist in Africa." "How did you get like that?" "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!" and, always, "How do you do it?" "What?" Sex... Once their curiosity is satisfied, it is clear that the young people really want to understand. This also seems to be one of the rare chances to talk about sexuality and pleasure, and the freedom of language and tone seems liberating. The groups laugh together with the

²⁸) This is a much bigger discussion, both theoretically and empirically, than I can do justice to here. For other works exploring this problematic, see Conway 2008 forthcoming-a, 2008 forthcoming-b.

activists as the young Kenyan activists readily reverse the questions: “And you, how do you make love?”²⁹

Q Spot was a triumph and breakthrough, both in its Kenyan and African contexts and in the global process of the WSF. As with the claims made by local and poor people’s movements discussed above, the claims made in Kenya by queer movements were not the first made on the Social Forum. The first Forum on Sexual Diversity was held as part of the first Americas Social Forum in Quito in 2004 and followed up in Caracas in 2006. The Quito event was organized by a coalition of indigenous, feminist and queer organizations. The tensions among the discourses of these movements were not resolved in Quito but they were on the table, being named and explored, even as these movements actively collaborated in conceiving and mounting the event. Their various constituencies co-occupied the space, shared platforms, organized their own discussions, facilitated cross-movement dialogues, ate, assembled and marched together.

The Quito event notwithstanding, sexual minorities have had to fight with organizers for visibility, voice and recognition at other iterations of the Social Forum, including in Nairobi. There was an awful incident at the closing ceremonies in which a lesbian activist was booed off-stage, chased and threatened, with apparently no reaction by organizers to defend her. The achievements of Q Spot and GALCK, like those of Poor People’s Parliament were, in large part, made *in spite of* the Social Forum organizers in Nairobi rather than because of them. Their contributions to enlarging and democratizing the Forum are significant for the global process insofar as they are carried forward by WSF organizers and participants and by those who think and write about the Forum.

Ever-expanding diversity is arising from sheer multiplicity of forms of domination/resistance to which the movements of the Social Forum attest and the array of social locations, places and scales from which they arise. However, mutual intelligibility among movements, including those who share opposition to neoliberal globalization, is not a given. Some movements are more experienced with working across (some kinds of) difference than others. For all the movements, the sheer array of diversity in the WSF is confronting them with a historical challenge and invitation to unprecedented degrees of reflexivity, solidarity and transformation.

²⁹) Barris 2007.

In Nairobi, feminists, queers, and Christians openly, visibly and publicly shared the space of the WSF, mutually tolerant but not so mutually intelligible – even as South African Bishop Desmond Tutu went on the public record during the event saying that “Africa must deal with two evils: the dominance of men and homophobia.”³⁰ Since the Nairobi event, feminists especially have raised concerns about some church groups’ public discourses of sexual abstinence and opposition to abortion in the WSF space. While recognizing the valuable work done by many groups in Africa associated with churches and mosques, they are rightly concerned about what they perceive as a denial of sexual and reproductive rights in the heart of the WSF and call for a rejection of such manifestations of “fundamentalism.”³¹ The enormous presence of church groups at the Nairobi event, their undeniable presence and legitimacy in poor communities, and their historic roles in human rights and anti-Apartheid struggles in Africa, confront the WSF with a major intellectual and political provocation about the status of religious traditions, discourses and organizations in the movement, and the boundaries of acceptable difference. Many of the leading movements of the WSF are rooted in the emancipatory discourses of modernity, most notably Marxisms, and are resolutely ‘secular.’ They are deeply ambivalent, if not outright prejudicial, toward anything that smacks of ‘religion’.³² But the question of religion, both in world affairs and in the global justice movement, is not going away and the Nairobi event indisputably put this on the WSF agenda.

Conclusion

In my view, the power and potential of the Social Forum as a new political form and process rests on five features: (1) its character as a non-deliberative yet highly participatory and inclusive ‘space of spaces’ with multiple centres; (2) its global diffusion as a form and method through the proliferation of local and regional social fora; (3) the increasing internationalization, inter- and multi-culturalism of the global process, signaled by the WSF’s move from Brazil to India in 2004 and to Kenya in 2007; (4) the incorporation of place-based and localized movements in a new kind of interna-

³⁰) Barris 2007.

³¹) *Articulación Feminista Marcosur* 2007.

³²) For relevant discussion of secularism as religion and “religion” as itself a problematic term, see Balibar 2007.

tionalism; and (5) a growing recognition of multiplicity, of diversity and pluralism as organizing principles in fostering a new politics for a new world with the space for many worlds within it. These features have emerged in practice and become definitive even as their significance can only as yet be dimly perceived. Their possible meanings depend on how future political practice, experimentation and debates over the future of the WSF unfold. Nevertheless, that the World Social Forum is a world-historic movement-based political innovation is indisputable.

The practices that constitute the WSF are knowledge practices which embody new ways of doing politics. Although drawing on many historical legacies and, in some case, perpetuating old problems, taken as a whole, they represent a rupture with how progressive politics has been practiced and progressive social transformation imagined. They are harbingers that point beyond themselves and, as such, they evade existing theoretical and analytical frameworks. As Stuart Hall wrote about the ‘new social movements’ of the 1960s and 70s, “movements provoke theoretical moments. And historical conjunctures insist on theories: they are real moments in the evolution of theory”.³³

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the context of the surging world-wide anti-globalization movement, the creation of the World Social Forum has provoked such a theoretical moment. In this exercise of reading Nairobi, using key concepts of place, space, and difference, I have proposed some ways of approaching the World Social Forum, both the 2007 edition as a *sui generis* event and, through it, the global process, in order to better apprehend its meaning. Central to this undertaking is recognizing the Forum, understood both as an annual event and global process, as inherently and increasingly plural.

There is no one ‘World Social Forum’ even as there are distinguishing features of the Social Forum as a specific political-cultural form. There is no one World Social Forum process, if by that we mean anything globally unified, coherent and linear, unfolding according to a single logic. As the Social Forum as a particular political form and methodology has diffused across the planet, the WSF is more accurately represented as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process, constituted by many sub-processes, characterized by great unevenness, but more or less seeking convergence, in loose co-ordination and broad solidarity. As a multi-faceted phenomenon, the WSF is evolving daily, and eluding attempts to

³³) Hall 1993, p. 105.

manage it in anything more than very partial, highly de-centred and consensual ways. While the deliberations of the WSF's International Council are an important pole in shaping the world-scale process, the proliferation, dynamism, geographic dispersion and multiculturalism of WSF processes continually overwhelm the IC and any occasional attempts to control and or represent the WSF. This is also true of the organizers of any Social Forum event, especially the gigantic world-scale extravaganzas. However, the periodic concentration of forces and energies in the world event do make it a critical node in space and time for the consolidation and articulation of the process on a world scale and a privileged site for 'reading' the process, even as the world process cannot be reduced to it.

About the World Social Forum in Nairobi, I have argued that we need to read it in its place, located in its historical and political geographies, and in the context of the global WSF process. I propose that we need to appreciate the specificity of the praxis of open space that was instantiated in Nairobi and the particular breakthroughs toward greater recognition, inclusion, and communicability that were made there, whether by design or accident, because of or in spite of the organizers. The controversies of Nairobi represent important challenges for the global process and for Social Forum organizers everywhere, many of which were not new or unique to Nairobi. Some of the controversies produced creative and courageous responses on the spot that successfully politicized questions of inclusion and should be considered fruits of the Nairobi event and contributions to the global process.

More broadly analytically, I have argued for a move away from the global abstractions of the space versus movement debate. I have sought to problematize treating the WSF, as event or process, as a single thing, an undifferentiated whole. Instead, I have advocated recognizing the plurality of the spaces, places, and differences that constitute the WSF, both as event and as a global process. Seeing more clearly what is actually going on, even if through a glass darkly, is an irreducible first step in analyzing and theorizing this new moment that the World Social Forum represents.

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