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Another Structure of Knowledge Is Possible: The Social Forum Process and Academia

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USA

Keywords

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In this paper, I consider the possibilities opened by the emergence of the social forum process (both manifested at the global level in the World Social Forum and at more local levels, particularly the United States Social Forum) for the reconstruction of the structures of knowledge. By structures of knowledge, I mean two things. First, following Immanuel Wallerstein, I mean the disciplinary organization and hegemonic approaches since the late nineteenth century in the social sciences.¹ Secondly, and this will provide more of my focus, I mean the institutional and practical features of academia – the research universities, academic journals, university presses, libraries, conferences, professional associations, etc. Structures of knowledge in both senses produce ways of understanding the world. These ways of understanding in turn compete with those produced in other sites, including everyday common sense(s), journalism, think tanks, the entertainment industries, social movements etc. The academic forms (which themselves are not unitary) are by no means universally hegemonic. They are, nevertheless, quite significant. Academia in its modern sense has blossomed in tandem with the growth of modern nation states and the deepening of the capitalist world economy, during the period 1800 – the present, roughly the period that Immanuel Wallerstein describes as characterized by a coherent ‘geoculture’. Not unlike the modern nation-state, the research university starts to emerge around 1800, congeals in form about

¹) Wallerstein 1991.

one hundred years later, and then rapidly spreads around the world as does the nation-state form in the period following World War II (i.e. decolonization).² As the state was being separated from ‘the economy’, and both were separated from ‘culture’, so academia developed ways of studying economy, politics, society and culture as separate concerns, each in theory shaped by universal laws. It does not seem unreasonable, therefore, to regard this structure of knowledge as fitting reasonably well with the structures of the nation state and the capitalist world economy. This does not mean that this fit is perfect or without contradictions, by any means. But the university would not have spread along with the nation-state if the contradictions between them were particularly acute.

Present day academic structures of knowledge are also almost entirely print based. Without being technologically determinist, it does not seem entirely coincidental that the capitalist world system flourished in the era of print (the dates of Wallerstein’s modern world system – 1500 is almost simultaneous with the emergence of the printing press – 1450).³ Printing lends an air of authority to printed documents, which are both ascribed an individual author and not easily revised (nearly all of the conversations that constitute the context for the production of a particular text – before and after if is printed – disappear). As physical objects, they can stick around for hundreds of years. Even before the full fledged emergence of the nation state (by most accounts, nationalism is heavily entwined with print⁴), print facilitated the authority of state centers by allowing rulers to distribute uniform decrees, laws, rulings, histories, etc. Although new media began to emerge roughly one hundred years ago, film, radio, and television had minimal impact on the production of academic knowledge. To this day, no one pursuing prestige in academic disciplines produces documentary films, except as supplemental to the ‘serious’ documentation of journal articles and books.

We are presently undergoing a transition of some sort, of which the heyday of neoliberal globalization in the ‘90s increasingly appears to be a brief moment rather than a terminus. Perhaps this transition is to a new form of capitalism, decentered through a number of sites or recentered in East Asia.⁵ Or perhaps this transition marks the end of the modern

²) Meyer and Hannan 1979.

³) Eisenstein 1983.

⁴) See Anderson 1983.

⁵) Arrighi 1994.

capitalist world system, and will only end with the emergence of an altogether different system, one which may be more or less equal than its predecessor.⁶ Both a less equal world of gated communities, intensified surveillance and fortified shopping malls and a more equal one rooted in autonomous movements are in fact already visible.⁷ Of course, a crucial element of this transition is a shift towards a new communications medium, the ‘hypermedia’ epitomized by the internet.

An innovative institution that has emerged to help facilitate progressive agency in this period is the Social Forum. Beginning with the World Social Forum held in Porto Alegre in 2001, numerous regional and national forums have now also been held, including the US Social Forum held in Atlanta in June 2007 (all social forums have some sort of territorial basis – there have been no sectoral social forums regarding culture, food, religion, etc. Global conferences on population, women, the environment, and racism have been convened by the UN – mostly before 2000 – although, interestingly, these are rarely mentioned in the same breath as social forums).

The Social Forum has several characteristic features. It is an ‘open space’ which fosters dialogue and networking between organizations, rather than a political agency in itself (although this is subject to debate). Political parties and armed groups are sidelined (again, to precisely what degree is also subject to debate) in favor of social movements not focused on the attainment and exercise of state power. Forums are typically open to all individuals who wish to participate, and any groups that broadly agree with the principles of their charter. Although the forum does not take positions, there is considerable sympathy among participants for ‘prefigurative politics’ which attempt to implement ideals and develop new sorts of institutions and social relations in the present, rather than ‘instrumental’ politics which divorce solutions from the means to attain them. An example of the former would be a food cooperative, the latter is epitomized by the bureaucratic political party which has a plan to be implemented upon the attainment of state power. The social forum is itself, for many participants, an example of prefigurative politics, and there is now a tradition of harsh criticism and protest at the forum (and in cyberspace) when it is seen as failing to embody its ideals. In contrast to traditional coalitions on the left (but rather like the wave of ‘anti-globalization protests’ around 1999–2003), social forums do not encourage groups and individuals participating to submerge their

⁶ Wallerstein 1995.

⁷ Davis and Monk 2007; Klein 2002.

identities in favor of a list of demands or a single strategy. Social forums typically have workshops (usually panel discussions), plenary sessions, informational tents and tables. But in contrast to, say, academic gatherings, music, theatre, colorful costumes and protests (sanctioned by the forum or not) help to constitute the space as raucous and unbounded. Social forums constantly struggle with questions of inclusivity – are participants from all possible geographic locales, class positions, movement sectors, etc present? These questions are not always successfully resolved, by any means, but they are constantly posed and struggled with. In general, and in dramatic contrast to earlier left forms of organization, the social forum constitutes itself as a work in progress, subject to critique and reformulation.

The framework for this paper is that the social forum is a valuable site for thinking through the reconstruction of the structures of knowledge. The social forum provides a potential ‘free space’ for activist scholars to reconceptualize the structures of knowledge, one in which, at the very least, the disciplinary and class-based constraints on collective thinking pervasive in academia are weakened. Of particular importance is this – for the last two hundred years, the state has been the crucial location for the regulation of society, and the world has been ‘modernizing’ along capitalist, Eurocentric lines. The existing structures of knowledge facilitate this process. The structures of knowledge provide the backdrop for the professions validated by the nation-state, which administer modern society (teachers, engineers, lawyers, social workers, doctors, planners, etc). If we are to create a world that is not focused on the state as regulator of society, that is not capitalist or Eurocentric (all aspirations of a considerable portion of social forum attendees), we will need structures of knowledge that function differently. Indeed, experiments with alternatives have already begun. In the remainder of the paper, I will sketch out a brief history of US academia and consider its present strengths and weaknesses as a space for critical thought and action. Then, I will note some concrete examples of new directions, and finally, on a more speculative note, consider some ways the social forum process could strengthen the creation of new structures of knowledge. This paper will be largely US focused, although I think much of it will resonate with circumstances elsewhere.

The American Academy

In line with broader trends in American society, the recent history of American academia can be roughly divided into three periods – expansion

of liberalism (1945–1965), radicalization of liberalism (1965–1975), and backlash (1975–present). In the first period, higher education was widely recognized as a public good which needed to be expanded. ‘Fordism’ required more trained engineers and other professionals, while optimism about the prospects for the management of social problems by governmental bureaucracy fueled the growth of the social sciences. More facilities were built, and efforts to make higher education affordable (such as the GI Bill) were implemented. More faculty were hired, and social sciences and area studies programs (both functional to the needs of cold war liberalism) were expanded. Although McCarthyism undermined academic freedom, and intellectuals often shared genteel fears of the masses,⁸ for the most part disciplines like political science and sociology could proceed with confidence about their tasks, knowing that the beliefs characteristic of the most prominent members of their disciplines – beliefs in American pluralism, the need for governmental measures to ward off the anomie and atomization of American modern life, etc. – were not so far from the political mainstream.

Around 1965, things start to come unwound. Expansion of Great Society programs under Johnson generated pressure to expand higher education further, and steps were taken to rethink the admissions process to insure inclusivity (e.g. open admissions at CUNY). Vital Black Power, student, and anti-war movements rocked the academy. Militant protests raise questions about the complicity of the universities with military and corporate elites, the purpose of the universities, the nature of topics studied, relations between universities and surrounding neighborhoods. Many student activists entered grad school as protests began to wane in the early seventies, optimistic about the prospects of transforming the university and in turn transforming society. Indeed, much was achieved. Area studies programs were now introduced that related to the ‘new’ social movements – black studies, women’s studies, and such. Radical caucuses in sociology, anthropology and elsewhere gained an institutional toehold in their disciplines, and journals receptive to their thought were founded. Cultural studies eventually emerged as practically a new discipline, politically engaged and frequently bringing into the university voices traditionally considered marginal to its mission.

Yet this partial transformation of the production of knowledge was not accompanied by a broader transformation of American society, or even a

⁸⁾ For example, Hofstadter 1963.

sustained presence by a left. Relatively little changed in the university besides what could be studied and how (although restrictions on student social life were also loosened). The structure of grading, for example, was never threatened. Nor was the relationship between the university and either local or national society seriously transformed. Disciplines remained intact, even if they were now in good part discombobulated and typically committed to methodological pluralism as a way of maintaining a truce between those adhering to traditional practices and those seeking to transform them. Although the movements helped consolidate the triumph of meritocracy over inherited position at the elite schools, universities remained exclusionary. Most radical professors did not sustain political ties to groups outside the academy.

And, of course, American society would soon move in another direction altogether. Beginning with the economic crisis of the mid-seventies, governance would shift over the next decade from Keynesian fordism to neoliberalism, in which social spending was tightly restricted. Furthermore, the right would gain ideological momentum. Universities ceased expanding, while prison construction exploded. Financial aid dwindled. University budgets tightened, and full time professors were increasingly replaced by temporary adjunct positions. These trends had the effect of intensifying both students' and faculty's tendency to focus on their individual goals. With the federal government no longer interested in expanding social provisions, universities began to refocus on serving the business community (as well as on the criminal justice institutions, the only portion of the state not being defunded). Larry Summers, for example, the president of Harvard between 2001 and 2006 said that students should get less multicultural social science and more economics and mathematics. A number of elite universities produced international extensions of their business programs.⁹ The right wing began sustained campaigns of harassment against radical and liberal faculty, and the supposedly pervasive and oppressive 'politically correct' atmosphere on campus. Of late, right wing foundations have been making contributions to universities in order to set up right wing curricular programs and centers of research.¹⁰ After September 11, the federal government became more openly interested in surveilling academia, and, on several occasions, refused to give visas to prominent international scholars. Middle Eastern Studies in particular has been targeted

⁹) Ong 2006, pp. 139–156.

¹⁰) Warren 2007.

for ideological containment. However, so far, within the social sciences and the humanities, the right wing has not made significant ideological progress. The American Sociological Association, for example, has had two of its most left presidents in the last three years. With no left to call on, radical academics have had little option but to maintain a liberal defense of academic freedom, although, compared to the right wing, they are far less experienced at selling a position to the public. In this worsening climate, many faculty on the left have intensified talk of ‘academic-activists’, exploring ways that academics can escape their gilded ghettos and strengthen movements for change. And many of these academic-activists have been attracted to the social forum process. A number of scholars who might be said to write for a left public globally (Arturo Escobar, Immanuel Wallerstein, Boaventura De Sousa Santos, Michael Hardt) have clearly been energized by engagement with the World Social Forum, as have many others.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Contemporary US Academy as a Site of Radical Knowledge Production

What is the status of academia, on balance, for radical scholars? If one can attain it, a tenured professorship is one of the more pleasant ways to ‘pay the bills’ in the contemporary US. This is not because of the pay (middling by middle class standards) or even the prestige (college professors typically rate as one of the most prestigious professions in opinion surveys). Rather, it is because of the autonomy afforded by these positions. Notwithstanding often substantial teaching and service responsibilities, professors in the social sciences and humanities are more or less free to shape their research agendas. Covertly, funding agendas of government and foundations, and norms of disciplines pose constraints that tend to push research in some directions and not others. But these are very weak constraints compared to those placed on nearly all other salaried employees in the US, including teachers outside of higher education and researchers in places like think tanks and corporations, and even those devoted to social change by working for nonprofits. Identifying oneself as a ‘Marxist’, for example, does not necessarily have adverse career consequences. Although Marxism is not presently fashionable in academia, views of the world that closely parallel Marxism – belief that capitalism is generally a bad thing, broad sympathy

for workers, the nations of the ‘global south’, and other ‘subalterns’, critical examination of high literature and popular culture for the ways they reproduce oppressive ideologies, are quite pervasive in a number of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Notwithstanding the growth of fast food franchises and credit card hucksters in front of the bookstore, college campuses themselves are greener, quieter, less commercial than most spaces Americans spend time in. Many, if not most, have some ‘town square’ like spaces where civic activities – petitioning, peaceful protest – that have largely vanished in the US are still reasonably common. Productive social, intellectual, and political ties are often made with like minded colleagues and students.

At the same time, such autonomy comes at the cost of accepting some less than universally appealing aspects. First, professors in the social sciences and humanities have basically resigned themselves to being ignored in the public world (although several professional organizations now talk more about ‘public intellectuals’ and have put in place a few programs, these efforts are still very marginal). They write for academic journals and university presses largely off the radar of any existing literary or political public sphere. Politicized professors sometimes find that years spent in graduate school and on faculty have eroded their ability to communicate in a direct way with activists outside the academy. Professional associations, journals, and other paths to prestige are highly competitive in ways sometimes at odds with values left professors would like to promote. Although interdisciplinary efforts are celebrated in theory, faculty must concern themselves with impressing their peers in a particular discipline, and so these efforts are fairly marginal. Faculty often find that students have very different agendas than their own. Most undergraduate students go to colleges hoping to earn degrees that will facilitate their professional advancement, rather than open-ended intellectual inquiry. Faculty typically play an insignificant role in deciding what sorts of communities their schools will serve. Most schools simply try to attract the most prestigious students (based on conventional assessments like grades and standardized test scores) they can find. Faculty at schools that have to settle for the least prestigious students often complain that their students are ill-prepared to read and write at a level needed for serious intellectual inquiry. Faculty at schools that are successful in the competition for ‘the best’ students complain that the students are homogenous by class and to some extent race, and often too privileged to be very excited by critical perspectives on US

society. Related to this is the wild unevenness in funding between prestigious and less prestigious institutions. On the other hand graduate education within disciplines is celebrated as a context for interacting with inquisitive students who can potentially become partners in research. Professional graduate programs attract students who are more focused than undergrads, but the focus on training them for positions in one or another state apparatus in the loose sense (education, social work, law, policy-making etc.) somewhat constrains the intellectual space. However, these programs can sometimes be the context for the practical application of some of the social sciences, again, more ideologically constrained (with the boundaries determined by what is presently politically ‘realistic’) than within the disciplines.

Faculty sometimes participate in efforts to develop new programs or assess older ones, but such program development is extremely constrained by certification requirements, funding priorities, etc. developed elsewhere. Apparent opportunities to reopen fundamental questions about pedagogy thus soon deteriorate into pedantic questions about whether to require 4 or 6 semesters of a foreign language, or whether to use the word ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ in the mission statement. Faculty (and student) relations with non-administrative staff (often highly feminized, non-white, and poorly paid) are for the most part non-existent and sometimes actively discouraged by institutions. The boundaries between idyllic campuses and surrounding communities (and many of the most prestigious institutions – University of Chicago, Columbia, Duke, etc about poorer communities) are discreetly and not-so-discreetly surveilled and policed to insure that the ‘wrong’ people do not spend much time on campus. In other words, while faculty ‘make their own thinking’, they do so ‘not in circumstances of their own choosing’. Relatively free to critique the existing world and dream of another one (although the latter activity is not generally professionally rewarded), they operate within institutional constraints that they have little ability to reshape. What I would like to suggest in the remainder of the paper is that the social forum process¹¹ provides a space where many of the disciplinary, class, and institutional boundaries that seem insurmountable within academia can be transgressed.

¹¹ There is a growing recognition that the ‘social forum’ cannot be understood simply in terms of the week-long event, but should be understood as a process of networking a variety of groups together. That includes work before, during, and after the events. Some work that is done outside of the explicit umbrella of the social forum may be considered part of

Transforming the Structures of Knowledge

In terms of thinking about how the social forum process can be a part of reshaping the structures of knowledge, I think it is worth framing the question in terms of a movement away from states and towards autonomous social movement actors as sources of transformation of society ('towards' is an important word here. By no means does it seem likely that the bureaucracies of nation-states and international organizations will disappear altogether anytime soon. For that matter, it is not clear to me that such a disappearance would be particularly desirable). On one level, the question is what sorts of knowledge would be useful for such a transformation? How would it be used? How would it be produced and disseminated? On another level, the same sorts of questions can be asked of particular social movements or organizations that scholars are working with. Or they can be asked of the social forum process itself. These three levels – the general knowledge needs of a movement based society, the specific needs of particular movements, and the needs of the social forum process share a focus on social movements. The social forum is a crucial space for academics to work on these questions because of its potential to create new alliances, both within academia (across disciplines and epistemic divides) and between academics and the many different sorts of actors who participate in social forums.

If James Scott and others¹² have illuminated contemporary structures of knowledge by asking how a state sees, we might ask 'how do movements see?' Or is 'seeing', with its implications of a panopticon, the wrong metaphor? According to these authors, 'seeing like a state' involves a heavy focus on quantitative surveillance of society, universal proscriptions for social engineering, reductionism, indifference to cultural difference, and efforts to model human behavior along the lines set out by mathematical physics. To some extent, this critique has had a major impact, and one does not need to travel to Porto Alegre to hear that more attention must be paid to local knowledge, cultural difference, and such. These are now clichés of most NGOs and major international organizations (and they are sometimes used to encourage 'local' development that does not challenge neoliberal

this process to the degree that it is pursuing the end of creating space for dialogue, networking, projects between and among movements. It is this very loose sense that the term should be understood when used in this paper.

¹² Scott 1998; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1994.

visceration of states¹³). At the same time, since the major knowledge employing institutions like the World Bank and the nation-state remain untransformed and retain a panopticon stance towards social life, critiques have made only a limited impact. Within academia, three major alternatives have been formulated. One emphasizes the construction of knowledge through dialogical attendance to cultural difference. A second involves the deconstruction of the categories that constitute the modern world.¹⁴ The other seeks to reformulate the social science project as historically grounded, emphasizing the contingent nature of any rules that are operant on the social field.¹⁵ While these approaches – and others – have their virtues, it is crucial to not practice ‘epistemological sectarianism’, that is, claims made by small groups of intellectuals not in touch with a diversity of movements that they have found the ‘one true way’ to disrupt the dominant ways of knowing. As is the case for many aspects of the left, what would be more worthwhile than competition between these positions would be instead a process of translation¹⁶ between the different positions so that they could discover both commonalities and unique aspects to strengthen each other.

Would not the social forum process be a valuable context to begin this process of translation, free of disciplinary pressures? The debate can be further enriched by opening up questions of how the knowledge would be disseminated and used. Again, because the social forum brings together so many different kinds of academic actors, it is a better place to have such a discussion than an exclusively academic space. For example, present at the USSF were URPE (Union of Radical Political Economists), Global Studies, Sociologists without Borders, and many other left academic groupings. At the same time, social movement organizations who should be part of this discussion are also present. Although the planning committee of the USSF was not particularly sympathetic to the contributions of radical academics (and I’ve written a little elsewhere about how this might be rectified¹⁷), these groups were nevertheless welcome and held workshops. The social forum potentially is a space in which they can interact and build stronger cross disciplinary networks. Can the social forum process

¹³ Petras 2005.

¹⁴ Mitchell 2002.

¹⁵ Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences 1996.

¹⁶ De Sousa Santos 2006.

¹⁷ Sherman 2007.

strengthen unity between radicals in academia across disciplines? Can the social forum process help trigger a broad reformation of academia through new alliances of academics and activists? Can social forum based activities perhaps act as a staging ground for experiments in the reorganization of academia?

Contemporary Examples of Academic Interventions

In this section, I want to note several ongoing practices of radical academics that may provide useful models for further experimentation. Efforts to creatively combine the activities of scholars and activists are numerous, and provide the grounds on which new practices can be developed. For example, the book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*¹⁸ emerged out of a conference held at a university, but primarily consists of writing by activists. It addresses a topic – the possible cooptation of movements by the ‘nonprofit industrial complex’ difficult to approach within an activist milieu heavily dependent on precisely this funding. Academics supplement the writings of activists by offering historical perspectives on these questions. Finally, the text was published by South End Press, a left-wing publishing house. Its purpose is clearly to offer insights into ways that movements for social change can act more autonomously, rather than to help refine universalist social theory or inform the practices of liberal policy makers. Thus it is an example of the way resources of the university can be mobilized towards the construction of the kinds of projects valued in the social forum process. The slogan ‘the revolution will not be funded’ was something of a subterranean theme at the US Social Forum, although it is hard to imagine the book generating as much debate within academia, given both its list of contributors and its publisher.

At the American Sociological Association meeting of 2007 (theme: Is Another World Possible?), a reception entitled ‘New York City Activists meet the Sociologists’ was organized. ASA President Frances Fox Piven introduced a number of New York City activists, who briefly described struggles they are involved in, and encouraged other activists present to step forward. Most of the activists who spoke mentioned ways that sociologists could contribute, identified specific research goals that they wanted help with. It should be noted that it was clear that the vast majority of

¹⁸) INCITE! 2007.

people present at the reception were sociologists attending the conference. A reception at a sociologist conference held in a convention center does not necessarily strike most activists as a place they need to be. However, one could imagine a similar reception being held more productively in the context of the US Social Forum. The effort to match activists research needs with sociologists could be continued in cyberspace.

A more ambitious vision of the interaction of activists and scholars is provided by Boaventura De Sousa Santos' vision of a popular university of the social movements (PUSM). The PUSM would bring together limited numbers of movement activists, scholars, and cultural producers for a couple of weeks of intensive seminars, devoted to understanding how to produce, teach, and disseminate knowledge. "On the one hand, it aims to enable self-education of activists and community leaders of social movements and NGOs, by providing them with adequate analytical and theoretical frameworks... On the other hand, it aims to enable self-education of progressive social scientists/scholars/artists interested in studying the new processes of social transformation, by offering them the opportunity of a direct dialogue with their protagonists."¹⁹ Aspects of the PUSM have been adopted and put into practice in several countries.

At the same time, important struggles are also waged to defend academia as a space for the production of critical knowledge and to weaken its complicity in the most oppressive state practices. For example, some psychologists recently waged a (for the moment) unsuccessful struggle to have the American Psychological Association condemn any participation by its members in military interrogations. That the organization could not even distance itself from these widely condemned practices is indicative of how much its activities are tied to state goals (the involvement with the CIA and the military takes place against a backdrop of uncontroversial involvement with police and prisons). Perhaps the social forum could be a useful place for coordinating actions on such a struggle across disciplines (one hardly heard a word about the struggle within psychology at the almost simultaneous sociologists' conference described above), and working to isolate those throughout academia who insist on producing knowledge and techniques for purposes of torture, surveillance, and otherwise maintaining inequality. Similarly, the social forum process might provide a fruitful context to forge an alliance to defend space for academic dissidents such as Ward Churchill and Norman Finkelstein. This is not to disparage

¹⁹) Santos 2006, pp. 148–159, quote is on p. 150.

the professional associations and unions that already do so; rather, it is simply to note that there are certain kinds of alliances and discourses that they cannot participate in directly, both due to the broad membership they represent and the rules governing the discourse of those sorts of organizations.

Towards a New Structure of Knowledge

Finally, in the spirit of ‘another world is possible’, I want to suggest that the social forum can provide the basis for beginning to renew the structures of knowledge. The importance of the internet to the reconstruction of the structures of knowledge can hardly be exaggerated, although it has attracted relatively little attention among scholar/activists (on the other hand, activists have sometimes enthused over the networking potential of the new media, and at other times despaired over the prospect of the substitution of complaining on line for street protest, although this latter concept has not been confirmed by research). Innovations in the architecture of the web have come from corporations or non-profit movements (Wikipedia, open-source) entirely autonomous from left social movements. Compared to print, internet texts are readily available, easily searched, blend text, pictures, and sounds, and can be easily appropriated through ‘cut-and-paste’ or linking procedures. Thus texts are constantly being quoted, appropriated, revised, commented upon. The conversations around the text become part of the web as much as the text itself, complicating print-based notions of authorship. The capacity to access the web and the information on it has great democratizing potential, so long as that information is not privatized and restricted. The aura of the text in print form, at the very least, is being seriously revised if not deteriorating altogether.²⁰ These features of the internet cannot help but affect the structures of knowledge, and those interested in reshaping these structures in line with aspirations for another world would do well to pay close attention.

For example, the emergence of Wikipedia should be reflected upon by those seeking to reconstruct the structures of knowledge. Wikipedia is a free, web-only encyclopedia begun in 2001. It is produced by anyone who chooses to participate. It is backed by a non-profit foundation, the Wikimedia foundation, whose total assets barely exceed a million dollars. It

²⁰ Diebert 1997.

now claims to include over 7 million articles. ‘Wikis’, as entries are called, cover everything from Michel Foucault to Walmart to the Internationalist bookstore in Chapel Hill, North Carolina to the Zapatistas. Entries can be easily created and edited by anyone on the web. Information included is supposed to be presented in a neutral manner, and contributors are supposed to limit themselves to settled facts. Deliberately misleading information is usually spotted and edited out by the substantial community that watches wikis (not that there is a single community monitoring all changes. Instead, those concerned with a particular page tend to watch it closely, creating a decentered community of thousands monitoring wikis). There is also an editorial board and arbitration board to ultimately resolve disputes. The point here is not that wikipedia constitutes the new structure of knowledge that I am calling for (Wikipedia’s emphasis on settled, referenced facts, and concomitant disparagement of memory and interpretations probably quite at odds with the needs of the movements). Rather, I mention it to highlight the rapidity with which a new, transnational knowledge tool can be collectively developed through the internet.

The capacity of the internet to represent the knowledge of the ‘movement of movements’ or ‘other world’ embodied in the social forum process has not yet been tapped. The most ambitious attempt to represent the ‘movement of movements’ remains the book ‘We are Everywhere’, produced by the Notes from Nowhere collective.²¹ The book combined political polemics, a timeline, accounts of different organizations, individuals, etc in a deliberate effort to capture the kaleidoscopic quality of the new left. Yet it also had the limits of books in general. It was frozen in time. It could not be modified. Its availability was constrained by the distribution channels associated with its publisher. Similar problems afflict another effort to represent the movement, the wall of demands produced at the World Social Forum 2003. In response to a list of demands written by a small group of intellectuals (mostly white men) a wall was produced where everyone could scrawl their demands. Apart from reproducing the ‘freedom’ fallacy (simply allowing anyone to write whatever they want is enough to ensure that everyone is included) one could well ask whatever became of this wall, whether its multitude of demands was ever in any meaningful sense incorporated into the practice of movements, or whether it was simply shunted off to some archive to be consulted someday by the curious

²¹) Notes from Nowhere 2003.

historian. I would suggest that an internet based representation could come closer to capturing the evolving, processual character of contemporary movements/social forums. What if a social forum were to offer a web-based visualization of the entire network of groups that have participated, with tools to understand the network of movements through linkages between groups, sectoral affiliation, philosophical orientation, etc? What if, in turn, groups were to provide linkages to scholars or research centers they have worked with, or been inspired by? And then the site could be amended through procedures parallel to those employed by Wikipedia. One could imagine such a representation providing the seeds of an alternative structure of knowledge, that foregrounds movements and their knowledge needs (it should be noted here that US intelligence agencies have already developed their own version of Wikipedia, 'Intelpedia'. Again, their completely classified approach is not appropriate for the goals of the social forum; instead it is simply noted that other knowledge producers/users have begun to create wiki-style systems for their own purposes²²).

Conclusion

Because the social forum provides an open space, and subjects itself to internal critique, it provides an invaluable context for the integration of scholars into the 'movement of movements' and broad debate about the production and use of knowledge amongst both scholars and activists. Whereas earlier left movements tended to produce organizations whose sense of infallibility paralleled religious organizations (notwithstanding claims of being 'scientific'), the social forum appears to incorporate the most vital aspects of the modern structures of knowledge, the awareness that knowledge must constantly be subject to debate, amendment, reconstruction, and must include a plurality of voices. At the same time, for radical scholars, the social forum is in many ways preferable to the contemporary academy, since it actively seeks to undo the class biases and exclusions that the academy incorporates into both its knowledge production and its physical infrastructure. The social forum appears to have potential both in terms of very short term tasks of academic radicals (such as delegitimizing the ties between the repressive aspects of the state and the academy, and defending academic freedom) and in terms of the most ambitious

²²) Shane 2007.

long term tasks (rethinking the role of knowledge in ‘another world’ in which autonomous movements play a central role). It provides a site where radical scholars can link with each other and with social movements. It demands the closest possible attention from activist scholars.

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