2008

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Recommended Citation

Ponniah. 2009. "The Meaning of the US Social Forum: A Reply to Whitaker and Bello's Debate on the Open Space." *Societies Without Borders* 3 (1): 187-195.

Available at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol3/iss1/13>

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BRILL

The Meaning of the US Social Forum: A Reply to Whitaker and Bello's Debate on the Open Space

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Keywords:

globalization, social movements, development, World Social Forum

The achievements of the US Social Forum (USSF) contribute a great deal to debates concerning the future of the overall Social Forum process. In a recent exchange Walden Bello and Chico Whitaker, both representatives on the International Council of the World Social Forum (WSF), disagreed on the future of the Forum. Bello, the executive director of Focus on the Global South, argued that the Forum was now at a crossroads.¹ While acknowledging that the WSF had contributed a great deal to the struggle for global justice, Bello suggested that the Forum's open space methodology, which on principle, refuses to take a collective stand on any issues even on such evident concerns as the war on Iraq and the WTO, was now inhibiting decisive political agency. He argued that there was merit to the charge that the Forum was becoming a mechanism that was disengaged from actual struggle and thus more of a carnival than an organizational event. The article provocatively concluded by asking "is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?"²

Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF, replied to Bello, arguing that crossroads do not have to close roads.³ He noted that while the

¹) Bello 2006.

²) Ibid.

³) Whitaker 2006.

Forum's Charter of Principles precluded the International Council from making statements representing the overall World Social Forum, the open space methodology left possible the opportunity for movements to independently build global coalitions that produced common manifestos. Therefore, for Whitaker the WSF's crossroads were in fact two paths that could co-exist, not as mutual hindrance, but as reciprocal sources of inspiration. The open space could continue to allow movements to express themselves while proposing new social projects without needing to speak on behalf of all participants at the World Social Forum.

In order to thoughtfully assess the different positions, that is, to recognize the plurality of goods that are being put into dialogue, we need to reflect on the process' actual achievements. No edition in recent memory has better expressed the substance of its operation than the 2007 United States Social Forum (USSF). The USSF demonstrated the accuracy of both Bello and Whitaker's arguments, affirming the importance of continuing the Social Forum process but on more truculent conceptual ground. The US forum, held from June 27 to July 2, in Atlanta, Georgia, the birthplace of Martin Luther King J.R., attracted over 10 000 participants. The slogan of the Forum was "Another World is Possible. Another U.S. is Necessary." Mirroring yet amplifying the worldwide process this national forum made key contributions to the US struggle and by extension, in light of its geopolitical significance, to the planetary movement for global justice.

The Identity of Difference

The first achievement of the Forum concerned its articulation of an identity of difference. The US Social Forum created an open space that allowed multiple people's movements to come together from around the United States. For the first time, a variety of activists from around the country were able to collectively interact in a non-hierarchical, horizontal manner that emphasized mutual recognition. If the space had been dominated by one ideology, for example anarchism, or if it had been dominated by one strategy, for example, statism, then it would not have attracted such a diversity of actors. The open space, as Whitaker has always contended, allowed for a multitude of identities, ideologies, and strategies to be represented at the Social Forum. The space not only facilitated dissimilar groups from across the US to express themselves but also to connect on novel, experimental terms.

The open space permitted activists to move away from focusing primarily on the differences between social movements and to focus instead on commonalities. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there were numerous divisions between different sides of the North American Left. Socialists, anarchists, ecologists, feminists, anti-racists, queer activists, and indigenous activists rarely worked with each other. The USSF created an arena where all of these organizations felt that they could express their agenda without being overwhelmed by another's program. Because speakers at plenaries came from communities that were directly affected by the problem at hand grassroots actors spoke for themselves. The Forum was a common, self-representative venue which thereby allowed for trust to be built between movements. Trust is the coin of social cohesion, and while rarely discussed among progressives, it is the basis of organizational solidarity.

The expression of difference at the USSF was so pronounced that the event appeared to be more diverse than any of the World Social Forums held in the last three years. Not since the 2004 World Social Forum in India, has a Forum embodied such heterogeneity, not only as members of the audience, but importantly as speakers and facilitators on panels, seminars and workshops. One could argue that the Forums in India and the United States simply reflected the demography of two of the most multicultural societies on the planet. Few nations in the Global South have as many religions, cultures, and languages as the former. Only in India, a country with a population that is eighty percent Hindu, could an Italian Catholic woman, Sonia Gandhi, win the election for Prime Minister, then hand the position over to a Sikh, Manmohan Singh, under the auspices of a Muslim President, AJP Kamal.⁴ Similarly, no country in the Global North has the cultural multiteity of the United States. Over 30% of the US population is comprised of people of color, that is, African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanic-Americans,⁵ which is almost double the figures found in the most diverse nations in Western Europe or the rest of North America. There is merit to the argument that the diversity of these Forums simply reflected their contexts but this interpretation of the USSF and WSF India is partial. What was remarkable about both events was not simply that they embodied their countries' cultural range but that they also demonstrated their nation's economic diversity. Both Forums were genuinely

⁴) Waldman 2004.

⁵) US Census Bureau 2000.

grassroots events with participants from every economic class. While other editions of the Social Forum have been moving, inspirational events, they have not substantially included the impoverished, marginalized, and exploited members of their countries.

However, the USSF and the Forum process in general, do not just express diversity. It would be tempting to argue that the Forum process is essentially one that creates space for multiplicity to flourish, that is, a locus for producing numerous other worlds. This contention would only be partially correct because while the Forum is the most diverse arena in the world it is not simply a multicultural or post-structural utopia where repressed, often antagonistic, subjectivities are unearthed. In addition to diversity, the open space concept, as evidenced in the US Social Forum has helped enunciate common self-identifications among progressives. What began in Seattle in 1999 as the US wing of the anti-globalization struggle has now become an alternative globalization movement. North American activists who took part in the USSF process, were able to even more clearly recognize that diverse forms of dissent such as rallies against social Katrinas, demonstrations against privatization, and protests against climate change, are not separate events but instead instances of one overarching dynamic: the demand for global justice. The Social Forum process bridged numerous solidarities of difference: black/brown, student/labor, and environmental/social justice alliances. These coalitions came together on the desire for another world free of discrimination, of neoliberalism, and biodevastation. The first great contribution of the US Social Forum process then was its capacity to enable the social, cultural and economic diversity of US movements to come together within the rubric of a common social imaginary⁶ that is, a collective identity of difference, aspiring to an alternative globalization.

Autonomy

Second, the World Social Forum, and now the USSF, has promoted a revolution in how progressives imagine themselves. From its inception the organizers of the Social Forum process understood that people's movements have needed a space of articulation that was autonomous of corporations and political parties. Historically most progressives have imagined

⁶ Taylor 2004.

their primary adversary to be the market. The left has always argued that free markets, corporations, and capitalism, posed a danger to society, that is, commodification inevitably led to alienation. The market, in Marcuse's memorable phrase, made the human one-dimensional.⁷

To restrain commodification, past leftwing movements have called for the state to regulate the economy. In the first world, social democrats, such as the New Deal politicians in the United States in the 1930s, tried to regulate the industry for the benefit of the public. In the second world, Soviet Communism tried to regulate production, and in the third world, the national liberation state, for example Cuba, tried to regulate its economic activity. The dominant strand of the left has always thought that the state could regulate the market and thus liberate the population from exploitation. The faith in leftist statism was tested throughout the twentieth century, finally breaking in the early 1990s with the rollback of the welfare state in the first world, the dissolution of the Soviet state in the second world, and the loss of legitimacy of the national liberation state in the third world.⁸ Progressives ever since have contended with the loss of belief in the primacy of the state.

Learning from history, the proponents of the Social Forum process have understood that whether the state increased its power over the market or whether the market increased its power over the state, in both cases disaffection has inevitably deepened. Both the modes of production and administration, both corporations and the contemporary state, have become proponents of an instrumental rationality that transforms people and nature into objects.⁹ Against rationalization the peoples' movements at the USSF demonstrated the power of self-organized human solidarity. These movements over and over throughout the Forum called for civil society to develop independently of capital and the state. Movements understood that they can pressure states, sometimes even work with states, yet must retain autonomous from the state. The second great achievement then of this Forum was that US social movements increased their capacity for sovereign, collective self-reflection.

⁷) Marcuse 1964.

⁸) Wallerstein 2004.

⁹) Habermas 1987.

Radical Democracy

The third, and most important achievement of the USSF, was its expansion of the principle of radical democracy. Activists extricated themselves from the mental hegemony of the state and market by proposing a new imagination: liberation can only be discovered, explored and expressed by grounding social change in new participatory forms of democracy. What has become clear from the second WSF onwards is that the common thread that has allowed for the autonomous convergence of difference has been new innovative democratic practices.¹⁰ Movements have reframed their alternatives around the question of representation. Whereas previously the demand for redistribution was deployed via state experts, today's movements want self-representation to be the precondition for genuine re-allocation. They contend that society cannot fairly apportion resources without public deliberation on what would constitute an authentic re-allotment. Many movements pursue this line of thought further by suggesting that redistribution would only be sustainable over time if the public itself directly organized the sharing of resources rather than it being vertically assigned by the state. Thus the driving principle of the global justice mobilizations is the call for new democracies that are not simply consultative but participatory to the point where in many cases they are self-constituting.

Radical democracy represents the crucial component of an original theory of popular transformation. Michael Hardt has explained how radicals have historically interpreted the state as playing not only a redistributive role but also a transitional role: the state in the Leninist model helped social processes forward until the populace was ready to democratically self-manage society, at which juncture the state would dissolve.¹¹ A central theme of this narrative was the idea that human nature necessitated renewal because it had been corrupted by capitalist modernity and therefore needed disalienation.¹² The vanguardist model's appeal partially lay in its combination of both the social democratic and anarchist models: social democrats have believed that human nature constitutively needs guidance while anarchists contend that our nature is essentially benevolent and therefore only corrupted due to hierarchical forms of governance such as state leadership.

¹⁰) Ponniah and Fisher 2003, pp. 13–15.

¹¹) Hardt 2007, pp. xv–xxv.

¹²) Ibid.

Leninism brought the two positions together by arguing that humans are potentially collective, creative and self-organizing but needed the temporary leadership of the state in order to release their noblest social being.¹³ Of course what has been evident over time is that the transitional state never transitions. If anything rather than evolving forward, it revolves backwards, and in some cases taking on the worst qualities of past social formations.

Today the transitional role of the past vanguardist state is being replaced by a new mechanism. Social movements at the USSF and in the Social Forum process in general, implicitly believe that local, participatory forms of democracy have become the crucial source for producing new human subjects that refuse to be treated as objects. The idea of a novel, engaged, democratic practice, mentioned over and over again, in all of the manifestos, papers and proposals of the movements attending, as well as permeating the practices at the USSF itself, is that deep democratic processes will allow individuals to deliberately become the political agents that they are meant to be. New forms of democracy that allow humans to daily reinvent society enable the development of new mores, talents, and imagination. Regular participation transforms routinized activity into expressive social experience. The goal of radical democracy then is not only to inhibit neo-liberal and bureaucratic imperatives but to perpetually re-invigorate the internal liberatory process. The orienting hope of the Social Forum's movements is that local, participatory processes will produce the desire for more extensive forms of democracy, thus intensifying the politicization of daily life, and therefore releasing the potential for periodically expanding, future challenges to the advance of instrumental reason.

Conclusion: The Future of the Forum Process

The achievements of the USSF lend credence to Chico Whitaker's consistent principled defense of the Forum. The challenge that remains, and that Walden Bello has recognized clearly, is that while the Forum process at numerous geographic scales is facilitating collective self-reflection – it has not yet produced effective, collective self-organization. There have been discussions of global social movement projects, such as the Bamako

¹³⁾ Ibid.

Appeal¹⁴ and proposals for global political parties¹⁵ but there has been no actual implementation. The war on Iraq continues, worldwide inequality persists and climate change has not been halted. While the methodology of the Social Forum has allowed for the production of new networks it has not yet facilitated visionary projects. There have been significant reactive events, such as demonstrations against the war – but there have been few alternatives that have actually been implemented by the global justice movements, and thus not surprisingly no new, clear national initiatives emerged from the USSF. The lack of comprehensive programs that could be implemented is the great current weakness of the Forum process. While Social Forums have facilitated the capacity for local, national and global social movement reflection, they have not given birth to comparable forms of achievement. Therefore, while Whitaker's argument has been borne out so too has Walden Bello's: the facilitators of the Social Forum process have not yet devised a format that will actually enable decisive social change. The Forums have been innovative in converging differences, consolidating civil society autonomy and propelling forward radical democracy, however they have not produced unified projects capable of transforming society. Much like the sorcerer's apprentice, the Forum process has performed an initial incantation, unleashing an unexpected astonishing energy, without yet being able to provide the content with an effective form. Until it can facilitate overarching vision, the World Social Forum will continue to be overshadowed by a more vigilant, ever-advancing, monolithic system.

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