



Ground Zero of the Forum: Notes on a Personal Journey*

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When I first attended a social forum – the first European Social Forum in Florence (Italy) in November 2002 – I was just overwhelmed by joy. Although I cannot say that it was the experience of the social forum that (re)politicized me – this came, odd as it sounds, through the experience of theory when I started my PhD in 1998 – the trip to Florence was my first encounter with the street politics of social movements since the Velvet Revolution in the then Eastern Bloc, which had turned my world upside down when I was sixteen. Now, sixteen years after the *Wende* – as the collapse of real-existing socialism and the turn towards the capitalist West is called in Germany – we seem to be in the peculiar situation that, although the experience of the Velvet Revolution is relatively recent, the majority of people simply can't imagine the possibility of a repetition of such an event – the collapse of the dominant ideological system that structures our being. Today, people either seem to think that we live in a post-ideological open society, which is the culmination of all history, or they think that US imperialism produces a kind of totalitarian system that allows very few possibilities of escape. Does this not mirror the ideological situation in the former Eastern Bloc at the end of the 1980s?

Real-existing socialism – meaning not an illusionary or social democratic, that is opportunist, socialism but one that exists in reality and that has already come very close to the ideal of communism – was either hailed by *the* party as the culmination of history and the victory over capitalism, or it was denounced by the critics – mainly from the West – as a totalitarian monstrosity that didn't allow its citizens basic freedoms. The funny thing was that both sides were totally surprised when the Eastern Bloc suddenly collapsed. Almost overnight the all-mighty, totalitarian governments of the East looked shaky, its leaders confused and even frailer than usual. The ideological gloss-over – all the heroic talk, leader cult and shiny wrapping – was suddenly taken off and the unbearable truth of the East became exposed. It seemed to just happen: from one day to the next everything one took for granted was turned on its head.

* Many thanks to Chris Land and Sian Sullivan for their very useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

This radical change did, of course, not simply fall from the sky. In East Germany, for example, the few pockets of free speech the state allowed to exist – for example, in churches – were used by *Bürgerrechtler* – human and citizens’ rights campaigners – to discuss alternatives to real-existing socialism and ways of challenging the socialist state. One of the organisations that emerged out of these meetings was the *Neues Forum* – the New Forum – which played a crucial role in the transformation period in East Germany in 1989 and 1990. The New Forum understood itself as a political alliance bringing together people from all occupations, life circles, parties and other groupings to discuss the problems in East German society at that time. The New Forum consciously decided not to become a political party, as it was very concerned to be close to its grassroots and work according to a model of participatory democracy. By the end of 1989 the New Forum had about 10,000 members and about 200,000 people had signed its foundation appeal.¹

The appeal for the foundation of the *Neues Forum* was published on 10 September 1989. It starts by saying: “Communication between the state and society is obviously disturbed in our country.”² It then describes the conditions in the GDR and need for change – but no concrete political demands were placed. The main objective of the appeal was to call for a ‘democratic dialogue’ about the important questions the GDR was facing. The New Forum wanted to be a ‘political platform’ for this dialogue, and called all citizens of the GDR to become members of the New Forum in order to cooperate and work together for the ‘transformation of our society’. The New Forum had an amazing effect on people, and it played a crucial role for mobilizing large parts of the East German population. It helped to organise the legendary Monday demonstrations that took place mainly in Leipzig but also in many other parts of the country. It organised many meetings across the GDR at which people discussed the future of the country. It also began to develop organisational structures. Regional and supra-regional working groups were established each addressing different issues. These working groups began to place specific political demands that enacted the highly volatile political situation in East Germany in the autumn of 1989 until the first free elections in March 1990. It also took part in many so-called Roundtables, which placed various political demands on the existing GDR government as well as local councils and political decision makers. Most members and participants of the New Forum wanted to change the GDR – make it more humane, dynamic and democratic. Most were acutely aware of the downsides of the capitalist system, and therefore unification with West Germany was not really on the agenda of the New Forum.

History, of course, was not on the side of the New Forum. The then West German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, bulldozed in soon after the Berlin Wall came down on 9 November 1989. At the end of November 1989 he presented a ten-point-plan that would lead to the reunification of both German states, and within a year of the establishment of the New Forum Germany was reunited on 3 October 1990 – most New Forum activists probably saw it as a de facto annexation of the GDR by West Germany. Part of the New Forum took part in various post-GDR elections in an alliance called Bündnis90, which later merged with the West German Green party. Other fractions of the New Forum

1 These paragraphs on the *Neues Forum* are based on http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neues_Forum.

2 <http://www.ddr89.de/ddr89/nf/NF1.html>

wanted to remain independent and not become a political party. Today the New Forum still exists, but its visibility and ability to mobilise people are fairly limited.

Why do I report on the New Forum and the collapse of the GDR in such detail in the context of this short intervention? There is a two-fold reason for this. First, I think there are important lessons to be learned from the radical change that took place in Eastern Europe more than one and a half decades ago. Especially the history of the New Forum in East Germany should be closely studied by social forum theorists and activists, as we might be able to learn something from its fate. The second reason is more personal in nature. I still vividly remember the crazy days of change at the end of 1980s. The few months between September 1989, when the New Forum was formed, and the first (and last) free election in the GDR in March 1990, felt like a lifetime. Every day brought news of seemingly life changing importance: masses of people fleeing over borders to the West; others were occupying Western embassies; mass demonstrations; the opening of the Berlin Wall; and the Roundtable discussions that genuinely tried to look for an alternative way forward for the GDR. People, I felt, had tremendous hope at that time; hope that a different world would be possible. Many people were not naïve; they knew very well what capitalism would bring; and today many East Germans feel disillusioned, disappointed and disenchanted – some even want to have the old GDR back. The hope many had back then was not that we would simply be rushed into the West and capitalism. Many hoped for something else, a different world, and that hope produced an enjoyment that is hard to describe. This enjoyment was not simply an individual experience; it was a shared and communal experience. For many years I did not feel such an enjoyment, such as sense of possibility, again – until I travelled to Florence for the first European Social Forum in November 2002. So, whenever I think about social forums, I'm immediately reminded of the history of the New Forum and my own history at that time.

I think social change is as much about political strategies as it is about a bodily and communal experience. Change means nothing, if it's not connected to personal experiences and histories. Also, if a project of change cannot engage people – that is, if it cannot produce some kind of intense enjoyment of collectivity – then it is unlikely to go anywhere. I think it is historically significant that the contemporary social forum movement is the first movement after the Velvet Revolutions in Eastern Europe that can repeat the event of collective hope and possibility felt back in 1989.

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When I returned from the first European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence I knew something had happened to me. I was touched by this joyful experience. In this way, the ESF was a real event for me; an event which, in fact, is still taking place at the time of writing these notes. One of the most immediate effects the forum had on me was that my PhD thesis, which I was working on at that time, changed direction. Although the specific empirical details of social forums only featured in one of the chapters, the thesis – entitled *The Political Event*³ – was, in a way, all about the event of the social forum,

3 Since then the thesis has been partially rewritten and it will now be published by Palgrave Macmillan as *Repositioning Organization Theory: Impossibilities and Strategies* by December 2005.

and the theoretical, organisational and political challenges it poses. In this thesis I was interested in conceptualising the political event; I wanted to explore the political possibilities and strategies for events taking place that can fundamentally change the way a society is organised. Implicitly, of course, I already knew the answer; I knew that it would be possible to change the world, because I experienced it myself with the collapse of the GDR. But the point is that today's political constellation is perhaps quite different to the one the New Forum and other movements faced at the end of the 1980s. Today's political and organisational strategies will therefore have to be different, which is not to say that we cannot and should not learn from history. But this is precisely why theory is important: there is a need to analyse historical constellations so that contemporary struggles can be informed about the type of organisational and political strategies that are likely to be effective.

But theory is, of course, not enough. There are many who claim to do critical and politically relevant social and organisational theory today without being connected with the practices of any contemporary social movements. Theory, it seems, is still often hidden away in university departments. Academics are more concerned (and pressed to be concerned) to do well in the RAE (Research Assessment Exercise), which by and large measures academic research output in terms of the number of papers submitted to 'high-quality' (according to certain rankings) academic journals, which on average will be read by probably only a handful of people. Open access journals like *ephemera*, which are actually read by thousands, do not seem to matter in the world of academic performance measurement. On one hand, the academy is pressed to be more practice relevant; on the other, practice plays almost no role in the way academic work is evaluated. And then there is, of course, the big question of what counts as practice. Is practice only related to what benefits companies (the economy) and government departments (the state) – and sometimes NGOs (civil society)? What about social movements, like the anti-capitalist or social forum movements – do they count as practice that academics should engage with? And what about teaching? Surely, the most immediate and important practice is to teach students to look at the world critically. Yet, teaching plays a relatively minor role in the way academics are evaluated. But let me not go on about the shortcomings of the politics of the academy today. Let's get back to the issue at hand: social forums.

So, for me it was not enough to simply theorise the political event and reflect – from a distance – about the politics and organisation of social forums. When I returned from the Florence ESF I knew I had to get involved; I had to get my hands dirty, as it were. For the next two European Social Forums in Paris (2003) and London (2004) I was part of a gang of people organising the Radical Theory Forum (RTF) – and more events are planned for June and July this year.⁴ What we try to do with the RTF is to provide a space that brings together the theory and practice of contemporary radical social movements. In a way, the RTF is a forum within the Forum; a forum that specifically tries to bring academics and writers into the same space as activists. Without trying to privilege one over the other, the RTF tries to be an open space for theory and practice to

4 www.radicaltheoryforum.org; for wiki space (i.e. online collaborative website), go to <http://radicaltheoryforum.omweb.org/modules/wakka/HomePage>

meet. In this way, the RTF hopes to bridge the gap between theory and practice, in order for both to inform and infiltrate each other.

For this meeting between theory and practice to be successful – if we measure success not in terms of academic league tables or RAE points but in terms of collective enjoyment – we needed to make the RTF space as inviting and non-threatening as possible. It was therefore natural for us to participate in the organisational politics of so-called ‘horizontal’, which practice principles of participatory democracy and non-hierarchical decision making. The RTF wants to be an open space, which makes it easy for people to participate and take part. This follows the principles of the WSF, according to which social forums are open, participatory spaces. Social forums are facilitators of a political process; forums provide a space for people to meet and discuss without stamping on them a pre-defined political agenda or bureaucratic rules of how to discuss and make decisions. In the first instance, social forums bring people together – they are tools for overcoming the increasing individualism of society by forming new communities that cut across national as well as political borders. Open spaces facilitate collective enjoyment, which is a political response to the neo-liberal agenda of the privatisation of all public spaces. It is for this reason that open spaces are of great importance – politically.

In this regard the term ‘World Social Forum’ (WSF) is significant. It was originally coined in opposition to the World Economic Forum (WEF), which is taking place in Davos, Switzerland, every year. At this forum the economic and political elite of the world is gathering. People like Blair, Bush, Bono and Buffet are meeting there, but ordinary folk are excluded. The elite is talking about the problems of the world and how they can be address mainly economically. The WEF is a high-security zone, because the elites have to be fenced off from the people they are governing or economically dominating. In contrast, the World Social Forum is a festival of those people who are on the other side of the fence. It is in the first instance a *social* gathering of those people who are economically dominated by the elites of the world. The WSF is a space of dialogue: a space for the exchange of ideas and the establishment of connections between different groups and networks from around the world. This social aspect of the forum is important; it reduces the traditional logic of politics to a kind of a ground zero. It brings everybody down to the same level playing field without privileging certain groups or ideologies – at least this is the idea.

This ground zero is of immense importance for the WSF, because, as for the New Forum in East Germany in 1989, there is an urgent need to first of all open the space of politics up again. Like in the Eastern Bloc at the end of the 1980s, today’s official politics is not an open space but a closed one, fenced off from wider, popular participation. Politics – at least the official version of it – is based on parliamentary democratic principles, which – over the years – has turned off many people. The last UK general election saw only about a fifth of the national electorate voting for Blair’s Labour Party; yet, he enjoys a significant majority in the House of Commons. This is just one example of how the current political system turns people off from politics.⁵ There is no or relatively little collective enjoyment in official politics today. Today

5 Also see S. Sullivan, this issue.

politics is a profession characterised by spin, career plans and individual agendas. The social forum process is one of the attempts to re-open the space of politics and let people participate again in the discussion of the important issues the world faces – and we are certainly not short of those.

Although the charter of the WSF follows horizontal principles of organising, many would say that the WSF process has been dominated by so-called ‘vertical’ organisational politics, which means that the open space of the WSF has never been truly open. Instead, many traditional forces of the Left have been trying to co-opt the energy of the WSF and use it for their own political agendas. We are not just talking here about a conflict between different organisational principles and agendas, but about different movements and their histories, identities and perhaps different enjoyments. The conflict between ‘horizontals’ and ‘verticals’ is the historical conflict between so-called new social movements (feminist, radical ecology, civil rights movements, indigenous peoples, queer, etc.) and their grassroots politics and participatory democratic principles on the one hand, and old social movements (labour movements, unions, socialist parties, etc.) and their more traditional bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational model, on the other.

There is no point repeating here what has been said about this conflict elsewhere in this *ephemera* issue.⁶ For those of us who organised the RTF it was important to follow this idea of a forum being a ground zero of politics. I think this is what made the New Forum so successful and important in 1989. The New Forum had to follow a strategy of *tabula rasa*, in order to start a new, non-corrupt political movement and thus give people hope of a different world – which is not to say that the different histories of the people and groups were simply erased. I think this is why horizontality cannot be dismissed; it is one of the most important political and organisational tools to explore possibilities of a future beyond the corruption of the liberal-democratic space of politics. Horizontality brings politics not only close to the ground – to the grassroots of social movements – but it also reduces politics to a ground zero, which opens new spaces of political engagement. The RTF also wants to engage people in a different way; it wants to cross traditional boundaries between theory and practice, academia and activism. For this reason it has to reduce politics to a ground zero. This ground zero doesn’t erase history, but it starts afresh with a project of building new social bonds.

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I would like to add one minor tale to this story about the conflict between ‘horizontals’ and ‘verticals’, which, I think, might make the point clear again. Some of you might know that the AUT (a union for the higher education sector in the UK) recently voted to boycott two Israeli universities in protest against their direct or indirect involvement in the suppression of Palestinians.⁷ This resulted in an angry outcry among many of the paying membership of the union. In our local AUT branch at Essex, which is normally fairly quiet and not exactly describable as particularly active or controversial, the members’ email list suddenly came to life with many people expressing their anger and

6 See Nunes, Juris and other contributions in this issue.

7 <http://www.aut.org.uk/index.cfm?articleid=1201>; [<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/4472169.stm>]

disbelief about this decision to boycott the Israeli universities and threatening resignation – some also came out in support of this decision. The point here is not to revisit this hot debate, which I'm sure was held up and down the country in many local AUT branches. For many days the debate on the email list became ever more animated – it was clear that the members of our local union branch clearly felt strongly about this issue. So, a general meeting of the local branch was called for, which was supposed to decide how to go forward. As so many union members, I felt quite strongly about this issue. For the first time for a while I felt that my union is not just there to negotiate pay and conditions for its members – although I don't deny that these are important issues. No, this time my union, I thought, would not only concern itself with issues of economic distribution, but take wider political issues on board, which we are all indirectly implicated with. So, I specifically went onto campus for this general meeting, and – as it turned out – it was probably the worst political meeting I've ever attended.

Although I've been politically active for quite a while now, I've mostly been involved with horizontal politics. So, I was not well prepared for what was going to hit me at this meeting. The room was a fairly big lecture theatre. At the front we had two middle-aged men sitting – who were obviously in some sort of leading position in our local union branch. There might have been 30 people (a significant majority of them were white, middle aged men) in the lecture theatre, which – as I was told later – was actually quite a good turnout. I was surprised to see so few people there (the local AUT branch must have hundreds of members), given that there had been such a hot debate about this issue on the email list. The meeting had a very strict agenda and it was chaired in a very structured and no-nonsense sort of way. The first ten to twelve minutes were allowed for discussion of the issue. I think about 6-8 people managed to say something. At that time I had not quite made my mind up yet about how to express myself; so I just waited – I thought the time when I could make my contribution would surely come later on in the meeting. Then the chair went on to explain the only motion that was put forward to the meeting, which called for a meeting of the union council to re-open debate on the boycott policy. At least 10 minutes were spent on the chair of the meeting explaining the various bureaucratic aspects of this vote, which then led into a lecture – at least it felt that way – on various other aspects of how the local branch runs. The other middle-aged man then complained that there are not enough people who get involved with the local union branch and that the burden is really on him to keep the local union ship moving.

By that time I was paralysed by disbelief. I came to this meeting in the hope that there would be a real discussion – a discussion of the various pros and cons – of the boycott. That is, I thought this meeting would continue the hot debate that developed on the email list. Instead, we spent most of the meeting listening to some union bureaucrats lecturing us about how the union administration and the decision making should work. This meeting did nothing for the exchange of ideas; it was a big turn-off. It wasn't surprising that after that meeting the email discussion also faltered – and things just went back to 'normal'. Towards the end of the meeting I finally raised my hand – I wanted to share some of my concerns about how the meeting was conducted. But I was not allowed to speak, because my contribution was not relevant to the technical discussion that was going on at that time – I was told. I couldn't believe it. Needless to say that the chair didn't get back to me later on in the meeting, or indeed after the

meeting. My contribution was simply not invited. Before the meeting, I was secretly considering to get more involved with my local union branch – to spend time and energy on union politics, because I think there is indeed a need for this. But this meeting turned me off to such an extent that I don't think I will go anywhere near a union meeting too soon again. Ah, by the way, the motion was passed unanimously.

Why am I telling this story? Well, in a strange way this episode is the story of the conflict between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' in the social forum movement.⁸ The union meeting I witnessed at Essex is an example of the type of bureaucratic decision making and hierarchical organisation that horizontals criticise. It's exclusive, non-participatory, dependent on inflexible hierarchies – and it is simply a big turn-off. When one of the middle-aged leaders complained about not enough people getting involved with the local union branch, I thought: well, it's not really surprising, if you conduct the meeting the way you do. Who is supposed to feel invited to contribute to such an organisation? The point to make is that the AUT – and probably many other unions – are not close enough to the ground. Over a long period of time they have developed sophisticated organisational bureaucracies in order to negotiate pay and conditions with employers. They also sell insurance and other commodities to their members. In short, they've become big service organisations, which have found their place in today's so-called knowledge economy. Needless to say that unions are ill equipped to take on political issues that are not following the traditional agenda of campaigning for fair wages and salaries. The original boycott decision by the AUT was a radical acknowledgement of the fact that the economic struggle the union is engaged in cannot be disconnected from a range of global political, social and cultural struggles. Unfortunately, this wasn't communicated very well, and in May the general union council decided to reverse the boycott decision. Things have now gone back to 'normal'. (I think it's time for union bosses to pay attention to their overpriced insurance products.)

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But let us go back to the issue at hand: the forum as ground zero. When above I talked about my experience of joy at the 2002 ESF in Florence, I'm convinced that this enjoyment has something to do with what I've described here as the forum's ground zero of politics. Social forums open up spaces of politics and thus enable an excess enjoyment of people creating a political community. This enjoyment is absolutely key, in my view, for any social movement. Enjoyment creates new bonds between people, bonds which haven't necessarily existed before. In this sense the ground zero of the forum creates the social afresh – it begins to form alliances between people who otherwise are compartmentalised by neo-liberalism into reproductive economic bodies. At the most fundamental and most basic level, forums are a bodily and collective response to the individualism and economism of dominant hegemonies. This was the case with the New Forum in East Germany in 1989 – as it provided a space for breaking out of the dominant ideology of real-existing socialism, which forced people into their individual homes as the only non-ideological safe havens – and this is not much different today, as social forums respond to neo-liberalist capitalism and its ideology of the individual as the only unit of measure.

8 Also see Dowling and L. Sullivan, this issue.

But ground zero is not simply about bringing people together. Ground zero is the start of a new social bond, and it is precisely this new bond, which I think produces enjoyment. So, the type of enjoyment I'm talking about doesn't simply come from hanging out with people or being together with people from a range of different backgrounds. This social aspect is important; no doubt. But that's not all. I don't think it's enough to go to a music festival like Live8 – although this is, of course, fun, and its political message is important. But for me, enjoyment comes through the possibility of real political significance of creating a new social bond; creating a new society, a new world. The point of politics is to organise the social; it's about making decisions about who we are, and how we want to live our lives. And it's precisely this step towards a decision that can sustain enjoyment beyond the split second of an encounter at a social forum. Obviously, this decision can come in all sorts of forms and guises – and the type of decision I have in mind doesn't necessarily imply hierarchical organisation, representation and other 'vertical' principles. Not at all. The decision I'm talking about here cannot be foreclosed.

What I think was significant about the New Forum was that it wasn't simply about bringing people together in a new type of open space. The ground zero of the New Forum was about taking active steps towards the creation of a new society, a new world. Political demands were formulated; organisational structures were built that were able to sustain its assault on political establishments; the state was confronted head on; demonstrations and other mobilisations were organized. All these concrete political activities didn't stand in the way of the New Forum's social significance, which for the first time engaged citizens of the GDR in a different way. The social and the political go hand in hand together. The ground zero of the New Forum is described by its ability to create new social bonds and work towards the political creation of a new society.

The latest social forum I attended was the 2005 WSF, which again returned to Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January this year. It was a festival of a multitude of colours. Especially at the Youth Camp people came from all over the place, mainly South America. For me it was great to get to know the different struggles in that part of the world. What was striking to me was that neo-liberalist capitalism has much more intense social consequences in the Global South than in the Global North. Of course, one can read about this in numerous publications. But actually seeing with one's own eyes the way corporate globalisation affects indigenous people, the landless, the homeless and even the middle classes on such an immense scale and with such intensity, and indeed listening to their stories, is quite something else. Can someone from the Global North, like me, really imagine what it was like for the Argentinean economy to collapse from one day to the next? People lost their jobs, their life's savings, their economic and social security, their livelihoods – everything changed from one day to the next. It's incredibly difficult to exactly know what this might be like. But having gone through the radical change in East Germany, I can imagine it.

My question now is a very simple one. What is the role of the social forum in these intense political situations? Argentina collapsed in December 2001. The social forum movement was still relatively young then. But, in a way, Argentina is everywhere: it is now and here. The crisis we witnessed there is reproduced in multiple ways around the world a thousand times. These crises articulate themselves in different forms and guises.

Should social forums be able to become much more than an open space for people to meet, socialise and discuss possibilities of a different world? Should social forums be able to respond to these crises in a much more concrete and direct way than they currently do? Do we not have a responsibility to go beyond the talking shop format and accompany the social aspects of the forum with desperately needed political demands? I do not have answers to these questions, but I think it's important to put these questions onto the table – into the open space, as it were.

Of course, some might say: The most radical aspect of the social forum is to simply be an open space, which facilitates a multiplicity of rhizomatic connections to be made between people, groups and movements and their political agendas. So, in a way, social forums are already producing a range of different political demands; it's just that these demands are not visible within the view of traditional political horizons. For example, the connections made at the WSF might have helped different Argentinean movements to respond to the collapse of their economy by way of taking over disused factories or blockading streets. That is, there might be concrete actions that are outcomes of the WSF process; but they are indirect and not direct results of a representational decision of some sort of WSF body. So, the point is that the open space of the forum results in rhizomatic movement that cannot be controlled; and it is this non-controllability that makes them radical. In this sense the achievements of the WSF process are not visible in the traditional way: there are no concrete political demands that are issued on behalf of the WSF, because this would involve an institutionalisation of the WSF. I have a lot of time for such an argument.

But if we look closely, then it is self-evident that the WSF is not simply an open space, a facilitator. Even facilitation involves organisation and therefore some forms of institutionalisation – especially if we talk about 150,000 people coming together for several days. Let's not kid ourselves. There are important organisational decisions made by the International Council (IC) and the various organisation committees on behalf of the participants of social forums. Isn't this a form of representation? The problem is that this representation is often not acknowledged or problematised by either those who make decisions or those participants – often claiming to be 'horizontal' – who see the WSF as a totally open space. No, it's not a completely open space. The WSF is to some extent a closed space in the sense of there being people who make decisions about how things are run: Who finances the forum? Who builds the necessary spaces? Who provides food, which is produced in what kind of way? Which speakers are invited? What is put on the website? Where is the next WSF taking place? What technology is used? All of these are perhaps mundane organisational issues, but they are intensely political at the same time – as many contributions to this special issue show.

I still felt glimpses of enjoyment at this year's WSF. But somehow my mood had changed. I was increasingly getting impatient with the social forum process. Isn't it strange, for example, that there is no democratic control of the IC? As one of the IC's members acknowledged in one of the seminars, it's a fairly arbitrary process to become involved with the IC.⁹ In fact, she was saying that the IC is based on a kinship principle. The IC and the various organisation committees see themselves as facilitator and its

9 See, Caracol Intergalactika, this issue.

members frequently deny that they are in a position of power. How odd. I think when the Ford Foundation or big multinational corporations (like Petrobras or Banco do Brasil) partly finance the WSF then this involves important questions of power relations.¹⁰ What is even odder, though, is that I had a feeling that many participants of the forum didn't particularly question these power relations – although there were, of course, exceptions. So, there is a certain denial of power at work on both sides: on one hand, the organisers don't see or don't acknowledge the political importance of their work; and on the other, there is no big push by the multitude of participants to hold the organisers accountable for their decisions.

I'm wondering whether this is perhaps a necessary outcome of the open space methodology. The open space mantra gives us the impression or even illusion of the social forum being a completely horizontal space. What is often not realised, however, is that each open space needs to be opened up by someone; and in this sense each open space is already closed. Horizontals might respond: therefore we need to make sure that open spaces are *really* open, to which I would say: it's an illusion to think that a completely open space is possible. It is for this reason that I think that it is important to ask questions of how social forums are organised. Organising events on the scale of the WSF involves questions of institutionalisation and representation. There is nothing inherently evil about these two words – although sometimes I have a feeling that they are seen as such by some horizontals. The problem I see is that, if organisational questions of institutionalisation and representation are not acknowledged, or if they are dismissed, then this doesn't mean that these questions go away, but that simply someone else makes the decisions for us. I'd rather have these questioned discussed and decided upon democratically.

As horizontals frequently point out: the way we do things, the way we organise ourselves, the way we conduct our action, is as important, if not more, as the political demands we issue. That is, the process of organising social forums is the thing itself.¹¹ Organisation is politics. It is for this reason that I think it's important for us to question the way decisions are made at social forums. The WSF is now into its fifth edition and there are literally hundreds of social forums taking place in different localities around the world. I think they are immensely important for all the reasons that I described above. But I'm increasingly wondering whether it's enough to open spaces for people from different backgrounds to meet. I think a ground zero of politics is not only about socialising and talking. The enjoyment of a ground zero is about the possibility of creating a different world. But for this to actually take place, forums need to be able to respond to crises that happen around them; they need to be able to organise themselves democratically; and they might also need to be able to engage in specific political situations, and, if necessary, place political demands on whoever oppresses communities. My feeling is that, unless this political dimension of the ground zero of forums is articulated in some way or another, social forums will simply become an annual social festival where colourful differences are celebrated. This might be fun, but the question is whether it can create enjoyment beyond the split second of a forum

10 See, Caracol Intergalactika, this issue.

11 See de Angelis, this issue.

encounter. Only if enjoyment can be sustained beyond a temporary, ephemeral moment an event of politics has taken place, an event that can make a different world possible.

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