

The World Social Forum: Exploiting the Ambivalence of 'Open' Spaces

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abstract

In this paper I argue that it is a mistake to regard the new culture of politics and the 'open space' of the World Social Forum (WSF) as an immediate and euphoric redress coming out of this contemporary crisis moment. Using historical examples from colonial discourse analysis and recent 'development' processes, I argue that contemporary politics, as a direct trajectory of this history, is intrinsically paradoxical and ambivalent. Using the concept of ambivalence from the work of Homi Bhabha, and influenced by postcolonial theory in general, I suggest that, while this ambivalence is problematic for our times, it nevertheless is productive and exploitable for progressive social movements. Following this logic, I argue that the WSF, arising as it does out of a crisis moment, also is fraught with productive paradoxes and ambivalences and should not be presumed to exist as an a priori 'openness'. I propose a strategy of resistance for this particular moment of crisis (in the meaning of neo-liberal globalization – of which the anti-globalization movement is part and parcel). I also affirm the value of a political praxis which openly, knowingly and purposefully exploits ambivalent moments in political, pedagogical, representational and 'open' spaces; so as to politicize people, engage in politicized activity and enable a broader range of people to become critically aware of the hegemonic narratives that naturalize the current world order and posit that 'There Is No Alternative'. Clearly, a wide spectrum of people, both in the metropolis and in the 'developing' world, *are* critically aware and are engaged in the work of *engendering critical awareness*. This paper makes the case that the World Social Forum and its tangential activities also can provide a tool for exploiting ambivalent moments, so as to reach beyond the strata of the already 'converted'.

Introduction

The logic of our contemporaneity can be characterised by the logic of a crisis in signification: a crisis in the narration of history and contemporaneity – or history as contemporaneity – as well as a political and economic crisis; a crisis grounded in the question – 'how do we organise the world now that we are 'at the end of history'. Has the dream of liberal democracy materialised? Or is there still the space or possibility for living *otherwise*? The crisis in signification for the neo-liberal world order, as represented by the mantra of the World Economic Forum (WEF) that 'There is No Alternative' to the globalisation of neo-liberal capitalism, also is accompanied by a recent spate of literature in history and on the 'New American Imperialism'¹ which is

1 There has been a flurry of revisionist literature on Empire and Imperialism recently, the most popular of which has been Niall Ferguson's *Empire*, televised for Channel Four, whose premise is that the British Empire has provided more benefits than harm and, in being responsible for the creation of the

apologetic on the question of empire, and designed precisely to mask or postpone the possibility of raising of these sets of questions. These questions are being and have been raised in an organised response to the mantra of neo-liberal capital in the increasingly consolidated anti-globalisation movement: a series of protests amalgamated in recent years into a yearly counter-meet to the WEF. This is the World Social Forum (WSF), whose organisers and participants respond to the neo-liberal mandate by claiming that 'Another World is Possible'. It does so, its organisers claim, by promoting and practising a 'new' kind of politics: a politics of the 'open space'; a post-modern, non-hierarchical, decentralised politics that is a response to the political activism of modernity, to the politics of identity, to the hegemony of liberal humanism which informs and paradoxically underpins the neo-liberal project. The advocates of this 'new culture of politics' champion this 'open space' as a radical departure from the 'old' style of politics: as a space for both education *and* mobilisation which occurs *outside* of the corruption of a free market economy and in which the dream of liberal democracy is realised as a radical 'living democracy' of free association.

I argue here, however, that it is a mistake to regard the new culture of politics and the 'open space' of the WSF as an immediate and euphoric redress coming out of this contemporary crisis moment. Rather than existing outside the corrupting influence of the globalised economy, the WSF as an organised response to neo-liberal capitalism actually is deeply embedded and equally a part of the crisis of signification characterising the contemporary political moment. Drawing on the cultural criticism and theory of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak I argue that this contemporary crisis in the logic and discourse of neo-liberal capitalism, as for colonial culture and discourse in the past, is an *ambivalent* moment, and that the WSF also is fraught with and caught within this political ambivalence. But rather than dismiss this ambivalence on the grounds of its contamination by the hegemonic practices of globalised capital, as has been done in relation to the WSF04 by some critical commentators from the Marxist-Leninist camp in India, I argue that ambivalence is always/already *productive*, in that it unwittingly permits the possibility for its exploitation in the form of resistance. In this paper, following the influences of post-structuralism on the theorisation of contemporary politics, I thus argue against naïve postmodern assumptions of received decentralisation, and of pure and uncontaminated 'open spaces', and I make the case for the conscious exploitation of fleeting ambivalent moments in contemporary politics of which the WSF is one. Coalescing around this project of exploitable ambivalences towards a non-directive critical pedagogy this 'new culture of politics' might go some way towards raising what I will refer to as a 'critical (self)consciousness'.² An un-controlled and uncontrollable praxis of framing, exposing the staging of popular narratives: prizing open spaces in fleeting moments in which the raising of fundamental questions becomes the politics of the possible.

'modern' world, has achieved in part its civilising mission. This has been accompanied by, and paves the way for, apologetic gestures within the political studies literature which claim that American Imperialism is 'new' and largely benevolent. See Lal (2004), Ferguson (2004), Bacevich (ed.) (2003), Barber (2003), Johnson (2004), Mann (2003), Todd (2004) and Lefever (1999).

2 The framing of this concept is informed and inspired by Spivak's now notorious prescription to 'unlearn one's privilege as one's loss' in addition to her advocating of a transnational literacy.

I begin by describing what Homi Bhabha means by the term ambivalence in his description of colonial culture and discourse, and I indicate how I intend to use it throughout this paper. I then rehearse the debate which has occurred over the 'open space', briefly review critical responses to the Forum in the form particularly of the Mumbai Resistance, and narrate my own personal experience of the World Social Forum in Mumbai 2004 to demonstrate further this ambivalence.³ I conclude by making the case that ambivalences can be, and are being, exploited for the purposes of de-homogenising or de-colonising knowledge. This process is not new, is part and parcel of the effort to produce counter-narratives and raise 'critical self-consciousness', via engaging in critical pedagogies and praxes necessary for the realisation of 'other worlds'. The WSF is a significant, if (and because) ambivalent, moment and process in this endeavour.

Empire and Ambivalence

From the late nineteenth century, the consolidation of liberal democracies in Europe held problematic paradoxes for Europe's relations with the rest of the world. This relationship is what Homi Bhabha (1994) refers to as the ambivalence in the global organisation of politics which persistently haunted colonial rhetoric.⁴ For Bhabha, the structural ambivalence in the belligerent rule by emerging liberal democracies of foreign territories is revealed anxiously in colonial discourse in fleeting, uncanny moments in which the discourse of colonial authority lets slip the fear that its benevolence in the civilising mission might be manifesting itself in violence. That is, that a colonial relationship over foreign territories contravenes the emerging late nineteenth century liberal discourse of freedom, fraternity, equality and democracy.⁵ These anxious moments in colonial rhetoric occurred also in relation to the issue and exercise of free trade, implemented in British colonial policy from 1846,⁶ and, despite shifts in discourse and policy back toward direct imperialism after the conference of Berlin in 1885, remains the policy directive motivating corporate-led globalisation, to which the WSF is an organised response. In other words, what requires emphasising (and which seldom is in anti-neo-liberal or anti-globalisation rhetoric), is that neo-liberalism is the return or taking up of a classical late eighteenth and early nineteenth

3 I was a participant as a 'Media' delegate in the WSF in Mumbai 2004 with my colleague Brazilian educationalist Vanessa Andreotti. Together we documented the Forum, and conducted interviews with key figures such as Thomas Ponniah and Chico Whitaker. Those interviews appear in *Situation Analysis 4* (www.situationanalysis.co.uk) and also were utilised as materials in an educational project headed by Vanessa upon our return. The educational materials and project can also be found online at www.otherworlds.co.uk (also see Andreotti, this issue).

4 The same uncanny anxiety which Bhabha notices in British colonial discourse on India recurs in contemporary development rhetoric, as I argue in Biccum (2005, forthcoming).

5 See 'Articulating the Archaic', in Bhabha (1994).

6 For discussions of the relevance of this shift in colonial policy and its resonance throughout the Nineteenth Century and into the Twentieth, see Semmel (1971), Furinival (1956), Arndt (1987), Havinden and Meredith (1993), and Douglas (1996).

Century emphasis on the freedom of the market with major continuities with previous colonial regimes.⁷

The following quote from J. S. Furnival, in his discussion of the rhetoric around Free Trade in British colonial policy in the early Twentieth Century, illustrates this ambivalence between global democracy, world economic leadership and a never changing relationship of Development and/or economic and military coercion between the 'first' and 'third' worlds:

Free Trade is good for Britain and good therefore for India; social legislation protects British labour and should, therefore, promote welfare in the tropics; democracy strengthens the political future of Europe and should therefore, help dependencies toward autonomy. (Furnival, 1956: 7)

This then is the ambivalence integral to demands for the imposition of freedom and democracy on supposedly autonomous nations, such that if 'democracy' is not 'naturally' forthcoming, it will be violently imposed by 'democratic' powers from without. Of course, this has become brutally evident in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For Homi Bhabha, colonial discourse therefore is an ambivalent discourse. It is a discourse that produces a continual undecideability inherent and integral to its articulation of difference – its deciding, distancing and differentiation of the two terms coloniser/colonised: "[i]t is in the enunciatory act of splitting that the colonial signifier creates its strategies of differentiation that produce an undecideability between contraries or oppositions" (Bhabha, 1994: 128). This ambivalence of which Bhabha speaks is especially noticeable in the dual mandate of British colonial policy *vis à vis* India. This dictated that the civilising mission of British colonial policy was a benevolent gesture encapsulating and signifying British cultural morality and hence superiority, *at the same time*, it just so happened, that the practice of colonisation was in the British economic interest.

There are two competing aspects of this ambivalence of the dual mandate. First, the idea of development, democratisation and/or welfare becomes a two-pronged moral project whereby Western beneficence has the conflated and convenient effect of being good for 'them' *and* for 'us'. That is, progress equals freedom for the 'developing/colonised/Third World' and again just happens to be in the economic interest of the (corporate) West. This marks a shift whereby 'our' welfare becomes connected to 'their' welfare in a synecdochal conflation which masks the actual relation between economic interests and exploitation: the interests of the corporate West become the interests of 'the World'. What happens, in Gayatri Spivak's terminology, is a '*worlding of the world*', or a '*worlding of West as World*' (Spivak, 1987). Second, the sublated mirror terms of progress, democracy, and development – that is, backwardness, authoritarianism and poverty respectively – are posited as both a 'handicap' or barrier to Third World freedom and, conveniently enough, a threat to 'global' security, economic welfare and the functioning of the system.⁸ In other words, what is inscribed in the Dual

7 For arguments to this effect, see Reno (2004), Gallagher & Robinson (1953), O'Rourke & Williamson (1999).

8 For evidence of this perpetual construction of poverty as a cause in and of itself see Government White Papers (1997, 2000) and DFID promotional literature generally. For echoes of this sentiment in

Mandate referred to above, and repeated in contemporary and globalising neo-liberalism, also is the logic of a 'threat': their poverty, their lack of development, their authoritarianism stands in their way, *and* in ours.

This threat also is double. There is the threat of profit loss, control of land, cheap labour and resources, that is, all that is needed to reproduce liberal democratic life in the metropole; *and* the threat of exposure of the fact that liberal democracy in the metropole is dependent upon this ambivalent, unequal and violently exploitative relationship with developing and/or un(under)developed nations. Colonial and/or development policy as the cause of poverty, inequality, etc. in the first place is masked, and a differentiation and distancing between two terms is produced which effects, as Bhabha explains, coeval statements of belief:

Splitting constitutes an intricate strategy of defence and differentiation in the colonial discourse. Two contradictory and independent attitudes inhabit the same place, one takes account of reality, the other is under the influence of instincts which detach the ego from reality. This results in the production of multiple and contradictory belief. The enunciatory moment of multiple belief is both a defence against the anxiety of difference, and itself productive of differentiations. Splitting is then a form of enunciatory, intellectual uncertainty and anxiety that stems from the fact that disavowal is not merely a principle of negation or elision; it is a strategy for articulating contradictory and coeval statements of belief. (Bhabha, 1994: 132)

Thus two terms become articulated together discursively so as to establish and produce their difference, e.g. coloniser/colonised, developed/un(under)developed; but simultaneously this difference must be rigorously maintained so as to avoid running the risk of their conceptual collision – of exposing their structural relationship, the causal relationship *between the two* (also see S. Sullivan, this issue).

My intention is to take this concept of ambivalence beyond Bhabha's use of it to describe colonial discourse and to show that it also can be applied to contemporary political contexts (Biccum, 2005). The possibility of this application, I have argued elsewhere, might then tell us something about the nature of this particular historical moment, especially as its current narration remains relatively open (*ibid.*, and Biccum and Moore, forthcoming).

For instance, the crisis in signification which I described in the introduction manifests itself here in the UK as a crisis of the national narrative. Thus there is a profound and ambivalent slippage in the question, 'what does it mean to be a British citizen?' This connotes not only the politico-socio-legal-economic context for the current moment. It also carries the haunting spectre (if perpetually suppressed reminder) of Britain's colonial past, simultaneously implying issues of migration, migrant communities, multiculturalism, community cohesion and race relations. Anxiety over migration in the press and in policy is rife, measures are draconian, borders are closing down, military expenditure and adventure is increasing, as is development aid. Assimilation policies have been introduced, race relations legislation has recently been updated, and migrant communities are being monitored and policed whilst money is spent to 'cohere'

mainstream discourse from the previous government see Government White Paper (1995). This sentiment has been expressed explicitly throughout mainstream development discourse.

fractured communities found to be leading 'parallel lives'.⁹ The death knell has sounded on 1980s multi-culturalism. Community 'leaders' complicit with government policies are being sought, while national security is paramount and persistently under threat from the 'other' organising within. British citizenship as an 'ideal' is supposedly up for public debate at the same time that it has been institutionalised *and 'fixed'* within the National Curriculum (in the discipline known as Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE)) as part of the fabric informing and attempting to produce national subjectivities. The government is promoting as a part of PSHE the introduction of a 'Global Dimension' in the national curriculum as part of its push for 'Development Education', apparently aimed at promoting an understanding among young people of 'global interconnectedness' – a euphemism for the normalisation of neo-liberal globalisation. 'Global Citizenship' has been included in the national curriculum at the same time that the nation's borders are closing down for the rather more specific citizenships of people from countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. There is a deep ambivalence, in Homi Bhabha's sense of the word, for a liberal democratic nation state forced to legislate, for legitimacy's sake, against its own institutional racism. There is an even deeper ambivalence around the ways in which an institutionally racist society enforces its own legislation against the racism officially admitted to permeate the fabric of its institutions. The current paradoxical climate of border paranoia, global migration, globalisation, millennium development and foreign intervention has the potential to heighten awareness of ambivalences in the construction of contemporary social life. It is an ambivalence which I feel becomes most profound, and can best be exploited, in both pedagogical and political/public spaces. This is because these are spaces in which conscious/critical practitioners of (development) education can knowingly, and purposefully, reframe the relationship implicit in 'Global Citizenship' between 'our' lives and 'their' lives, in a way that forces a collision, and/or creates the possibility for critical engagement with the two differentially but simultaneously articulated terms, i.e. 'ourselves' as 'developed and those in the world 'out there' needing to *be developed*.¹⁰

The use of the notion of ambivalence is a way for Bhabha to describe, according to a post-structuralist logic, the desire within apparatuses of power to fix meaning in discourse that nevertheless is perpetually undermined by discourses' unceasing movement, flux and motion, which renders the fixity of meaning an impossibility and makes the repetition of utterances a necessity. The promise of a better world (for some and never for all) is predicated upon and really only made possible through colonial/imperial/capitalist exploitation. This is not a universal function of power's operation of but the *historically specific paradox of our time*: a paradox which post-colonial theory, and other political writings from the Third World, including

9 This rhetoric has entered race relations discourse via the inquiry into the summer violence of 2001 in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, conducted by the commission led by Ted Cante titled 'Community Cohesion: A Report by the Independent Review Team', [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/docs2/comm_cohesion/html]. It largely blames the insular separatism of migrant communities, encouraged during 1980s multiculturalism, for the violence, and has been the spur for new government spending on projects which promote 'community cohesion'.

10 See Barker (2004), for the struggles practitioners are having between government directives for Development Education and practitioner's more idealistic and political/pedagogical goals

Dependency Theory and other nationalist and anti-colonial literatures¹¹ have, throughout the twentieth century, been persistently at pains to point out. The impossibility of fixing meaning and power structures absolutely, produces this ambivalence within structures, apparatuses and discourses of power, and it is this that contributes to periodic crises in signification.

To sum up my understanding of ambivalence, then, it is a simultaneous 'either/or' which produces the possibility of a question, is productive of uncertainties and creates the space for movement one way or another. Discursive ambivalence produces a fissure convenient for the mobilisation of activism and resistance to discourses of hegemony and power. An ambivalent space leaves room for the 'hijacking' of that space, that narrative or that agenda; of forcing a collision between two differently articulated terms, and of exposing the staging implicit in the narration of neo-liberal capitalism. Because ambivalent space is productive space, what is of utmost importance is how we utilise and engage with this space; to use that ambivalence against itself, to push it back the other way.

The exploitation of ambivalences in this way holds forth the promise of raising a critical (self) consciousness; a strategy and a praxis for the ability and desire to ask questions about one's position in the world, about privilege (or lack thereof), about the political implications of this privilege (or lack thereof), about the connections between your life, your world, your understanding and those of others. This can heighten one's ability to analyse, question, critique and resist the hegemonic narratives, apparatuses of power and oppression that currently exist, partly through (re)thinking one's complicity in those apparatuses. Exploring one's consciousness of what is happening in the world, why it is happening, and what it has got to do with 'me'. Exploring, seeking out and encouraging others, in negotiation and solidarity, a consciousness of how the world can be otherwise and exploring strategies for the part you can play in effecting change (given that change is desired). In these terms, the Social Forum process, as both political and pedagogical space, can, I feel, do much to bring itself beyond the consciousness of the already converted.

Experiencing the Forum: Ambivalent Spaces at the WSF 2004

Euphoric defences of the Forum as a manifestation of a radical democracy contradict my own experience of the Forum, parts of which I found to be problematically hierarchical and yet highly politically productive in its spontaneity and uncontrollable multiplicity. It *was* a space, depending on how you engaged with it, which fostered a transnational literacy, a space in which the very recipients of World Bank dispossession policies could walk up to you at any moment and tell you, through an interpreter, of their experiences of dispossession. But it also was a space fraught with contradictions, where there was a clear (to my eyes at least) gendered and racialised division of labour

11 E.g. Amin (1972 & 1989), Cardoso (1982), Diop (1987), Fanon (1986 & 1967), Memmi (1965), Frank (1978), Hobsbawm (1968), James (1993), Césaire (1972), Mudimbe (1988), Nkrumah (1965), Rodney (1981), Wallerstein (1984), Walvin (1993), Mariategui (1926 & 1929), Williams (1994).

(especially with respect to garbage collection and toilet maintenance) and a distinct hierarchy of access whereby the possession of a 'Media' badge afforded the most privilege and freedom of movement.

While, on the one hand, there were a bewildering and wonderful array of cultural diversity and cross cultural communication, interaction and exchange despite language barriers (I received numerous hugs and kisses from girls and women) and the freedom of expression for just about every political issue under the sun, there was also a bewildering stratification in wealth and prestige, manifested particularly around accommodation (five star hotels for some participants, camping outside the grounds for many others – myself and my colleague were fortunate enough to be hosted by friends), and a hierarchy of access and participation whereby Mumbai's most abject it seemed – those urban slum dwellers not fortunate enough to have NGO sponsorship – remained outside the gates begging money and food from participants as they came to and left the proceedings. Within the Forum itself there seemed to be a division and virtually no dialogue between two factions: the politically reformist NGOs discussing in cosy tents over glossy promotional literature ways to democratise current development policies, and the hoards of angry groups marching and making up noise throughout the Forum with what seemed to me to be a very clear message: "Down IMF! Down WTO! *Down, Down, Down, Down!*" So much for productive contamination or pedagogical levelling out.

The 'open space', it seems to me, performs more like a market-place (also see Gilbert, this issue). Post-development critic Gerald Berthoud defines the market of neo-liberal capitalism as follows:

The market as place is a bounded, situated phenomenon, clearly differentiated from ordinary life. [...] Ideally, the individual is totally free to act in his own interests; no explicit limits are imposed. Such behaviour would be dangerously uncontrollable in everyday social practice. Hence, individuals in the marketplace are no longer seen as social beings with particular rights and duties. They are liberated from a deep feeling of belonging to a community. Furthermore, they may not bring their potential conflicts with them. To express this in a positive way, individuals must be able to initiate utilitarian exchange with anyone they choose. In this idealised scheme, the marketplace is composed of an aggregate of strangers willing to exchange with each other for their mutual advantage. (Berthoud, 1992: 75)

So like a conventional market place, autonomous NGOs at the Forum compete for space to host their seminars and events; the ones with most prestige and financial backing have the best time slots and venues and affording therefore the greatest attendance. From one perspective, the WSF facilitated a unique opportunity for a talk-shop for the reformist/welfare liberal faction of the global finance and trading infrastructure. The 'open space' of the WSF also is a regulated space in which, like the description of the market above, conflicts, violence and party affiliations are left at the door and individuals and NGOs are free to mobilise to their mutual advantage.

In my travels through the Forum there seemed to be little or no engagement between these two factions: the largest NGOs and the smaller critical grassroots movements and individuals, particularly of the anti-imperialist variety. In the few seminars I participated in, in which there was a challenge put by a member of the audience to the dominating reformist position of the hosting NGO, it went largely ignored. This happened more

than once and it recurred particularly around the issue of development. I was also struck as I moved through the Forum and spoke to and encountered various people and movements by the variety of ways in which a kind of pedagogy was employed as political praxis. We spoke to many people whose activities and activism were focused on education and the raising of awareness to combat hegemonic knowledge apparatuses. In between seminars we interviewed an anti-communitarian theatre group who were engaged in countering communitarian state sponsored violence through the use of theatre in villages to promote an awareness of the issues and stem the violence. We met and spoke to these gentlemen while sitting in a green clearing. We also met and interviewed Ahmed Shawki, an Egyptian American and the editor of the *International Socialist Review*, who is actively engaged in promoting critical awareness of U.S. foreign policy among Americans through alternative media. Many Americans, he argues, are aware of media propaganda and the fascist control of narratives in the media and are thirsty for information produced outside the U.S. because they don't trust the information produced inside the U.S. Ahmed is actively trying to provide this alternative narrative. We came across several educators who viewed their role as primarily political and during a session on 'post-development' a leading member of the Post-Development Network in France spoke of the need to 'decolonise the mind' and try to get beyond the restrictive epistemological constraints imposed by notions of modernity and development as hegemonically operative terms. Peter Reil, a former U.S. army officer and Vietnam Vet, spoke at the Mumbai Resistance about the necessity of raising the critical consciousness among working class soldiers who have no means of questioning their role in various imperial missions. He spoke himself of the effects of the Vietnam War on the psyche of soldiers in a way which was reminiscent of Frantz Fanon.

A 'New' Culture of Politics? Exploiting Forum Ambivalence; Promoting Transnational Literacy

I have suggested that at national and international levels we are experiencing a crisis in signification of which the WSF, with its appeal to alternatives, is a manifestation. But just as the WSF is a manifestation, or a result, of this crisis – that is, of the failure of dominant discourses to convince everyone that there is no alternative – it also is fraught with all the same ambivalences, ambiguities and contradictions of that crisis. This is first and foremost apparent in the debate over the Forum as 'open space'. The WSF desires to embody the new politics of networks based on transient association which mobilised mass protests such as those against the WTO Ministerial meeting in Seattle 1999, and proclaims itself an open space for facilitating the mobilisation of civil society against corporate led neo-liberal globalisation. The 'open space' is meant to be a direct alternative to conventional politics, the myth of liberal democracy, the fallacy of representational politics predicated on the problematic modern ideal of autonomous, rational, individual and bourgeois subjects. Embracing a post-modern decentering of that subject, the 'open space' levels the hierarchy associated with conventional representational politics and avant-garde movement politics and decentralises the identity of those participating in the space, enabling a freedom of association and the

possibility of solidarity across the conventional identity politics of modernity, and across differing political interests.

In our interviews with Thomas Ponniah, co-editor of the book *Another World is Possible: popular alternatives to globalisation at the World Social Forum* (2003), for example, he claimed that the Forum is inherently contradictory, trying “to walk a tightrope between two visions”, the modern centralised and the postmodern decentralised. The Forum tries at one and the same time to identify a common enemy – neoliberal globalisation – while simultaneously “releasing a plethora of alternatives”, trying to “produce a universalism of difference” (Ponniah, in Ponniah and Andreotti, 2004). For Ponniah, the Forum is a glimpse of utopia trying to embrace a radical democracy: “[t]his movement’s durability is built on the depth of its democratic process, and at this point, it is the most sophisticated and inclusive democratic process the world has ever seen” (*ibid.*). Thus for Ponniah, the ‘space’ of the WSF can be seen as a space of becoming: for the production of a ‘living’, which I interpret as moving and fluctuating, democracy. The WSF stands as an example of the utopia which is desired by the anti-globalisation movement, not a Manichean telos but as something that is happening in the WSF grounds itself.

It is easy to get caught up in the fervour of this utopianism until it is remembered that neo-liberal or post-modern capitalism is itself constructed upon and operates according to the logic of non-hierarchical networks (see Hardt and Negri, 2000; Kiely, 2005; Hoogvelt, 1997; Cox, 1987 & 1996), thus illustrating the problematic that Spivak continually sites from a post-structuralist perspective, that critique and/or resistance is forced to occupy and utilise that which is being critiqued and/or resisted (Spivak, 1987). Thus according to Jai Sen, a prominent figure in the WSF process and co-editor of the WSF’s official text *Challenging Empires*: “[i]t is not always easy to see the differences between the ‘alternative’ globalisation proposals with the idea of many business leaders that some democratisation is necessary in order to make the global expansion of capitalism acceptable” (Interview with Jai Sen, 2004).¹²

What this illustrates is a *productivity* in the complexity of ambivalence and the possibility of its exploitation, and not a defeatism or an undermining of agency as some critics of post-structuralist thinking would have.¹³ Exploiting ambivalence is never a matter of imagining you can create a space ‘outside’, but of pushing the boundaries of what is to hand.¹⁴ This begs the question of what might happen if the ambivalences

12 www.otherworlds.co.uk

13 These criticisms come especially from a ‘classical’ Marxist camp. E.g. see Ahmad (1992), Jameson (1998) and Eagleton (1996).

14 Bhabha illustrates the exploitation of ambivalence in resistance to colonial domination in his ‘signs taken for wonders’ in which he gives three examples of ways in which key texts in the ‘civilising mission’ were used, unwittingly, against themselves. Texts used in England’s civilising mission, particularly the Bible, for example, were “written...in the name of the father and the author, these texts [...] immediately suggest the triumph of the colonist moment...” (Bhabha, 1994: 105). These books were presumed to be ‘universally adequate’ and had as the aim of their circulation, the production of adequate and appropriate subjectivities, ready to receive the civilisation that would be so benevolently bestowed upon them. The civilising mission for Bhabha represents a shift to a much more “interventionist and ‘interpellative’ ambition... for a culturally and linguistically homogeneous India” (*ibid.*). Bhabha describes the reception of the Bible into India in the early Nineteenth Century

inscribed in the practices of authority were knowingly, purposefully exploited? As Bhabha says, when “the words of the masters become the site of hybridity [...] then we may not only read between the lines, but ever seek to change the often coercive reality that they so lucidly contain” (*ibid.*).

It could be argued that the WSF, in setting itself up in opposition to the World Economic Forum, actually becomes its sublated mirror term and functions according to similar insidious logic of duplicity (as described above). The place of difference and otherness, or the space of the adversarial within such a system of ‘disposal’ as I have proposed, thus is never entirely on the outside or implacably oppositional (Bhabha, 1994). The clear and defined position being laid out in the Charter of Principles that attendees must endorse before attending is that the WSF is ‘open to groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society centred on the human person’. Thus the ‘open space’ of the WSF is from the outset closed to any one not opposed to neo-liberalism, any one engaged in the use of violence as political praxes, anyone affiliated with a political party. Similar to the paradox produced by the belligerent spread of ‘civilisation’ through military despotism, the ‘open space’ of the WSF is not and never intended to be what it claims to be. As Jai Sen, commenting on this debate¹⁵ over the ‘open space’ asks: “[i]f the Forum is indeed restricted to only those who already have a clear and defined position, how can it be considered to be ‘open’?” (Sen, 2004: 217).

In other words, the WSF has already attempted to fix meaning of the crisis of which it is seeking to take advantage. Similarly, the openness of the ‘open space’ clearly is not so open and neither, as we shall see, is the ‘space’ so horizontal. Chico Whitaker, one of the three founding progenitors of the WSF phenomenon argues strongly for the maintenance of the WSF as a space, rather than a movement (the structure of the traditional vanguardism of leftist politics), because only a space maintains its ‘horizontal’ orientation, with no leaders and operates as he says, ‘like a square without an owner’. This space, he says, will work as a ‘factory of ideas’ (the metaphor of production should not go unnoticed): an incubator from which new initiatives can emerge, with mobilisation beyond the space one of its primary aims. Responding to the criticism that the organisers and leaders of the WSF are still largely white, male and middle class, Whitaker says that because the WSF is a space for facilitation, representation on the organising committee and in the International Council does not matter, since all the space needs to function is people and institutions willing to perform the task of organising and facilitating the use of the square without interfering with what is discussed in it, or the freedom guaranteed to its participants.

as a situation in which the assumption of its authority is undermined by its inappropriate use (as anything other than a ‘holy’ book), and by questions raised by the “natives” about the English presence which accompanies it. “Revealing”, Bhabha says, “the hybridity of authority and inserting their insurgent interrogations in the interstices” (*ibid.*). The subversive character of the Indian response to English texts occurs much as a result of the inevitable instability of authoritative texts.

15 For this debate and other critical engagements with the forum see Sen et al (2004).

These ambivalences are manifested also in Teivo Teivanen's assertion that "it is possible [for the WSF] to be an arena and an actor simultaneously" (Sen *et al.*, 2004: 122-129). But Teivanen's defense of this duplicity also reveals an anxious ambivalence and produces coeval statements of belief:

While there are reasons to maintain coherence and some underlying rules in the process [*a desire to fix meaning*] so that the WSF brand [*an interesting appropriation of corporate marketing language*] does not simply evaporate [*anxiety over the impossibility of fixing meaning*], too much control by the IC and the secretariat is bound to limit the creativity of those in charge of the decentralised events [*contradiction and coeval statement of belief*]. (*ibid.*, emphasis and asides mine)

What this debate by the participants in and around the staging of the WSF highlights is the naïveté, perhaps somewhat insidious, of presuming that the open space is a space without struggle, devoid of politics and power (also see De Angelis, Dowling and L. Sullivan, this issue). In fact, it is a space, or rather an openness, which must be struggled for. The continual and repetitive desire for fixity amid the motion of politics, of people, of discourse and the world means that one cannot define the boundaries of a space (itself a function of power), declare it open and expect it to remain so. The open space is not a space without movement, it is a space within and amid movement, never static but part of the perpetual motion of social life. The WSF, as its critics and counter-spaces reveal, is part of the struggle to define exactly what the struggle is. Is it a struggle against corporate-led globalisation, all forms of globalisation, capitalism, the domination of one state by another or the entire imperialist system of states? Is it a struggle for the reform, overthrow or transformation of existing institutions and organisation and according to whose interests? These are precisely the questions which are up for grabs and why the WSF must be situated as endemic to the crisis in signification: not outside of it, or occurring as its redress. The alternatives offered depend entirely on how one is framing the question and what is being struggled for is what is at stake in the WSF. It is a difference in emphasis between postmodernism, that emphasizes plurality without foregrounding structural inequality, and a post-structuralist perspective which brings the question of foundations to the centre of its inquiry (Young, 1990). This means that what becomes important, and what we have to be vigilantly mindful of, is not simply that the space exists, *but how and to what ends the space for mobilisation and resistance is used*. This is a question I feel we should ask tirelessly of ourselves and others: it bears both the mark of politics, i.e. as the struggle for meaning and power, and the mark of personal responsibility. How are we, each of us going to engage, how we are obliged to engage, or where exactly is the space for our engagement? These questions do not end with the closure of the Forum, but carry over into all the networks and political activity engendered and participating 'there', and this is especially so given the diversity of positions and movements involved.

That there is no singularity of vision within the WSF or the anti-globalisation movement is evidenced by the many factions from reformist, transformist and revolutionary present at the Forum, and in its opposing spaces such as the Mumbai Resistance (MR) at WSF 2004. The Forum has also come under fire for privileging groups from civil society and organisations over individuals. NGOs and civil society, the critics argue, are themselves an ambivalent manifestation of the institutionalisation and government appropriation of

grass roots politics.¹⁶ For example, this ambivalence was emphasised repeatedly in the criticisms emerging from the Marxist-Leninist camp which organised the Mumbai Resistance, a counter-event that occurred simultaneously with the WSF's staging in India. Of particular relevance for these critics was the issue of funding and the affiliation of the WSF's organisers, a key argument being that global aid and development projects furnished by NGOs is paradoxically funded by the same governments (as affiliates to the international monetary and trading regime) whose violence makes the 'humanitarian' aid necessary. According to this critique, NGOs function ambivalently within the system in much the same role and performing many of the same functions as Nineteenth Century colonial missions. With such a strong NGO presence in its organisation and participation, the WSF offers for these critics no plausible alternatives, but is rather a more insidious part of the problem of imperialism.¹⁷

In our interviews with them,¹⁸ Whitaker and Ponniah responded to the criticisms of the MR by citing the plurality of the WSF itself and the fact that all of these competing factions on the left are participating and engaging in the Forum. And in doing so, they claim, there occurs a kind of levelling out or productive contamination across ideological lines. This leads both defenders of the WSF to emphasize *the pedagogical element* of the Forum. The challenge, for Ponniah in this respect, is to "decolonise the conditions of knowledge production itself", for which the Forum can play a large part. It is clear that the pedagogical aspect of the Forum similarly endorsed by Whitaker is inspired by Freirian critical pedagogies and not conventional power/subjectivity driven pedagogies, so that this potential for cross-ideological contamination comes from a questioning of the self when confronted by the other, a learning to unlearn from the other which has the potential to happen to every participant in the Forum. This kind of pedagogy, for Whitaker, emphasises and *invites* critical engagement.

In this response to the question of pedagogy, Ponniah draws attention to the problematics of conventional education. Ponniah describes the ambivalence inherent in the liberal democratic project of education, an ambivalence which also is connected to its use as a tool historically and contemporaneously in subjectivity production at home and abroad. Thus:

[t]he education system has always been a project for producing good citizens. However, producing good bourgeois citizens necessarily reproduces a consciousness of the contradictions within the overall system. [...] So mainstream knowledge is inherently potentially revolutionary. The challenge for an educator is: how do we teach the student to pursue the interrogation of democracy down to its most radical implications? (Ponniah, in Ponniah and Biccum, 2004: 18).

16 For evidence of this process at the 'international' level, see 'The Economics and Politics of the World Social Forum: lessons for the struggle against globalisation' (2004), produced by the Research Unit for Political Economy in India and distributed at the WSF's counter-meet the Mumbai Resistance and at the WSF itself. For evidence of this occurring in the black voluntary sector domestically, see Kundnani (2002) and other works by A. Sivananadan on the Institute for Race Relations website (<http://www.irr.org.uk>).

17 For a wealth of articles articulating this position visit www.peoplesmarch.com and www.mumbaioresistance.org.

18 www.otherworlds.co.uk

It is this ambivalence in traditional pedagogy that Paulo Freire and advocates of critical pedagogy at the Forum aim in part to redress. So that the direction or result of the educational process is left open-ended and both parties in critical pedagogies are presumed to be changed by the process. Brazilian educationalist Clarissa Menezes Jordao (2004) has indicated that there is a danger even in critical pedagogies of their slipping into a kind of pastoralism which has an intended subjectivity in mind, the rational/critical questioning subject, to which it won't confess. This eventuality of the supposed critical openness is what critics in the Mumbai Resistance have been so keen to point out: "[t]he forces behind the WSF were very clear about the path that this coalition should take, right from its inception [...] and in the process, offering negotiations, peaceful pressure, lobbying as the only legitimate form of struggle."¹⁹

Critical pedagogies might escape this pastoralism by recognizing that there is always/already an ambivalence at work in pedagogy as political praxis. Choosing to engage the space of the Forum in a pedagogical way therefore is also fraught with ambivalences and contradictions: no engagement is pure or neutral, and that, indeed, is the point. Education historically is ambivalent: produced by the hegemonic structure of the nation state as a strategy for social organisation and mobilisation, and key in the process of colonisation, as revealed in the following excerpt from the colonial review of 1943:

The spread of elementary education through the colonies is a necessity for everything we are trying to do. Every social improvement, every economic development in some measure demands an increase of knowledge among the people. Every health measure, every improvement of agricultural method, new co-operative machinery for production and distribution, the establishment of secondary institutions – all these are going to make increasing demands upon the people, and they will be able to respond only if they have had some educational opportunities. (Furnival, 1956)

Rather than regarding the WSF as a pedagogical space, it might be regarded as a space and/or an opportunity which has the potential to facilitate, following Spivak, a *transnational literacy*. This notion of Spivak's is a relative of critical pedagogies in that it emphasises a critical attention paid to the narratives that inform one's idea of self, an investigation of where they have been learned, and of how they have implicitly and explicitly constructed the 'other', and has the potential to raise important questions.

Pushing Back

Education, I have tried to emphasise, by itself is not neutral. It is a means to an end, it is a mode and method for signifying, it is a way for constructing how people understand themselves in the world, as pious and productive members of a nation state or as critically aware actors negotiating the ambivalence of meaning in a hegemonic sphere. The promotion or facilitation of transnational literacy, I have also tried to suggest, might have a slightly different emphasis than the project of education, even if done while employing critical pedagogies. Quoting Jai Sen:

19 Quoted from 'The WSF: What other World?' (www.mumbairresistance.org).

Can the struggle against neo-liberalism be won only by those – and we are in minority – who have already taken committed positions against it? In this struggle, as in any other, is it not necessary, at the minimum, to engage with those who are less sure of their positions on the issue (likely to be the vast majority), and try to win them over – as well as listen to their arguments to deepen our own analysis and strategy? (Interview with Sen, 2004: 217)

What Jai Sen is emphasizing here is the dominant structures of meaning which we, and the WSF, are engaged in contesting. And, what all of these examples illustrate, it seems to me, is people taking advantage of the crisis of signification and ambivalences in meaning as they occur at their own local level.

To amplify this ambivalence in my own local context, I have cited the contradiction of the debate over British citizenship, itself a signal of a crisis in the national narrative, and the contradictory and paradoxical promotion within schools of a rubric of global citizenship for UK youngsters, concurrent with the closing down of the nations borders to the very specific citizenships of people entering the UK from places like Iraq, the DR Congo and Afghanistan and Zimbabwe. What this paper has proposed therefore is to take advantage of this crisis in signification, this crisis of contemporaneity, to exploit its ambivalence, to push it back the other way. I have used the WSF as an example of the inescapability of this ambivalence, even in resistance. I nevertheless propose a political praxis which engages at all levels, which knowingly, purposefully exploits ambivalent moments materially and discursively, by holding, by way of example, the notion of British and/or global citizenship to ransom, to exploit this crisis in signification by raising the question, or creating or joining spaces to raise questions about what is wrong in the world, what has it got to do with me and what can I do about it? The potential productivity of the World Social Forum as just a space, an event during which people to ask themselves what is 'really' going on in the world and what are our roles, rights, responsibilities and what are our strategies of resistance, our visions of utopia, how and where do they converge with the strategies of resistance of others and their visions of utopia? Just as this space houses the contradictions of politics and power it also houses the possibility of a productive engagement, and for mobilisation beyond the boundaries of the WSF which it cannot contain.

This paper has moved from a description of ambivalences which denote the workings of power and politics historically and contemporaneously, to the proposal of critical (self)consciousness as *a strategy* (and allow me to emphasise the singular) for political praxis and resistance in this contemporary moment. A strategy which my experience at the recent WSF in Mumbai 2004 has taught me is being employed by so many as a method of combating hegemonic and contradictory national and intra-national narratives of liberal democracy, and neo-liberal globalisation, or the idea that *there is no alternative* (TINA) to the current geo-political structure. A strategy which needs to be amplified, multiplied and pushed beyond the safety zone of the already converted and into the mainstream public domain.

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