



Notes from the WSF 2005: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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How to describe an event with ca. 150,000 people, and a programme of workshops about as thick as the Sunday newspaper? Well, I guess – and I really don't mean this as some postmodern trope – there are about as many Forums as there are participants, so what I'm about to write may or may not reflect anyone else's experiences.¹

But still, where to start? Maybe with the lack of media coverage in the main papers of at least the countries whose press I sometimes look at (i.e. Sweden, UK, and Germany – so, of course, this is in no way representative, but I think it may be the same all over Europe and the United States). Why was there so little in the Western mainstream press about this gigantic event? Because the process has run out of steam? Because it's not important anymore? Or maybe because, by its very nature as something that's not supposed to be an institution or an organisation, but an 'open space' (never mind that this very concept is self-contradictory, and not a fancy dialectical contradiction, but of the old fashioned logical kind), a Social Forum cannot, in the long run, satisfy the demands of mainstream/profit-driven media. Social Forums are not supposed to produce declarations to be pronounced publicly by big talking heads, large-scale actions with their sexy pictures, or general agreements. In fact, were they to produce general declarations, then they'd cease becoming Forums, and start becoming political parties.

And this prospect I find quite scary: because, if we follow Gramsci, a hegemonic order always requires the integration into the hegemonic bloc of subordinate social forces – their occupation in other words. And since right now we live in a non-hegemonic global order, the powers that be need someone that they can negotiate with, and can please and integrate into their bloc, like they did with trade unions back in the days.² Creating something called 'global civil society' is exactly such an attempt (which is why we should all stop using this ghastly concept). So, if the Forum were to start making

1 For the ultimate, objective, and perfectly democratically legitimated account of the WSF, check out the 'what's hot and what's not' list at <http://hotandnot2005.blogspot.com>. This text was originally an email I wrote to friends to describe my experiences at the Forum. So bear with me if the style occasionally seems too colloquial.

2 For an extended argument explaining this point of view, check <http://fluke.omweb.org/modules/wakka/WhenWeWereWinning>.

general declarations, global demands, etc., suddenly there would be someone to negotiate with, someone respectable, who can make concessions and all that. Someone who can form the junior partner in a new global hegemonic bloc, a new global neo-liberalism with a human face. Someone, in other words, who can sell us out. Or as America Vera-Zavala (a very clever Swedish radical) put it, more eloquently than I: “My fear is that someday the head of the IMF will pick up the phone to call ‘the movement’ and that somebody answers the phone”.³

Alright. So, the Forum is not about agreements, declarations, or even actions (in the radical ‘Caracol Intergalactika’ space at the WSF 2005 we talked about spectacular direct actions for a while – but then we just dropped it, which I thought was excellent). So, what is it about? It’s about connections, about meetings, conversations, flows, convergences, etc., by which I mean: the really important processes at Social Forums happen way below the radar of most media outlets; they happen in all the little meetings and workshops (all hail the International Council’s decision to scrap these ridiculous panels with eight to nine thousand people attending) and informal gatherings that are facilitated by the creation of the Social Forum space. Ideally, Forums are about a counterhegemonic politics *from below*, where the intensification of connections and flows between different projects of resistance enables us to link our struggles (without ‘unifying’ them) in such a way that we can become a serious threat to capital, whilst not having general agreements formulated by a politburo or other such institutions.

In this sense, the World Social Forum 2005 was a success. The number of meetings and intersections of flows was uncountable, and that’s good. Just a few examples of this real globalisation from below: my partner, an anthropologist working with Somali migrants, and more generally with victims of racism in the UK, for the first time met people from the African Social Forum, a process that’s generally been ignored in the European political scene. Then she talked to someone from the UK about what she heard there. This person is carrying that information onward to a meeting in Leeds. Activist researchers from the Global North finally linked up with activist researchers from Latin America, and are continuing their discussions and connections via an e-list and website. We met some Argentinean activists there who we later started working with on arriving in Buenos Aires after the Forum. The Dissent! Network⁴ mobilising against the G8 meeting in July in Scotland linked up with anti-FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas – a primarily US-driven attempt to expand NAFTA to include all of the Americas) campaigners across Latin America, and potentially even with anti-WTO campaigners from Hong Kong (where the WTO will meet at the end of this year). And so on and so forth. And all this happened without any general declarations being signed, any grand agreements formulated – it was counterhegemonic politics without anyone hegemonising them.

So this was the good stuff about the Forum. Here’s the bad stuff. Of course, there were people trying to hegemonise Forum politics: a group of nineteen intellectuals and general bigwigs, many of them members of the International Council (cheekily referred to as the G19 by Forum media) wrote a declaration that they hoped to get somehow seen

3 <http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2003-11/11vera-zavala.cfm>

4 <http://www.dissent.org.uk>

as a general statement by the Forum, calling for all kinds of good stuff, like unconditional debt relief, fair trade, enshrining countries' right to food security, etc. Not that I mind these proposals, but I hope I made clear above why I don't like these kinds of politics: if I were the head of the World Bank, and I wanted to talk to 'civil society', the 'G19' would be a great, respectable group of people to talk to. Good lord, the group even includes two Nobel Prize winners! Connected to this were issues (not new) of the representativeness of the various bodies organising the Forum, in particular the International Council (probably the closest thing the Forum has to a politburo, although with quite a few good people in it). How do you get in, how do they make decisions, etc. – all a bit tricky, that.

Then there were issues of size: the so-called 'solidarity economy' was entirely incapable of supplying the Forum with all that participants needed in terms of food and drink, and so most of the Forum spaces became sort of anarcho-capitalist free-for-alls: from the infamous 'earring avenue' in the youth camp (where crazed hippies aggressively peddled their jewelery); to the ubiquitous sellers of beer and water 'bem gelada'. The amounts of trash produced were of epic proportions, and the atmosphere was far from 'solidaric'. So what does this mean for the future of the Forum? Continuing to grow the Forum in ways surpassing our abilities to democratically organise and sustainably produce and consume might not be the best idea. Split it up, maybe? And: how are size and democracy connected? If we can't organise a 150,000-people Forum democratically and sustainably, as the problems about the representativeness of the organising bodies seem to indicate, then what does this say about our ability to contest capital's and states' control of, say, big urban centres?

Which in turn connects to yet another serious problem perceived by many participants of the Forum, namely a problem of 'security' (such a terrible word, and so politically occupied by our enemies – but so important). And here's where it gets ugly. The 'International Youth Camp' – a strange creature, somewhere between camp-space for those unable or unwilling to afford/find a hotel, music festival, and supposedly 'self-managed alternative space'; inhabited by 30,000 people and criss-crossed by many, many more – was a terribly unsafe space, especially for women. While it's difficult to find even unofficial numbers of sexual violence and rapes in the space, it's certain that rapes did happen; as did many incidents of sexual violence. This was to the point that women were warned not to walk around alone in the camp at night. In the many, many parties going on there (a lot of Porto-Alegreñ@s and people staying in the camp never did seem to go to workshops, but primarily party a lot) women continuously were grabbed, touched, chatted up, and worse. For the first time in six years of being with my partner I felt I had to physically intervene when two guys on a dancefloor grabbed her at the same time and pulled her in different directions (normally, of course, she is way more hardcore than I and perfectly able to take care of herself). And then there was theft: sooo much stuff was stolen from the camp, it was completely nuts. Some people in our little camp space (a circle of tents housing people somehow connected to Dissent!) were robbed *three* times. Basically, the space was frequently aggressive, unsafe, very very macho, etc.

I had a hard time starting my notes on the WSF, and I'm having an even harder time ending them, let alone summing them up. The encounters of millions of flows excites

me; the issues about representativeness and democracy worry me; and the aggressiveness and violence of the spaces angers me. I'm thinking a lot right now about this whole question: how to *do* counterhegemonic politics without creating new centralised (discursive, material, organisational) structures to replace them with. I saw glimpses of that in the World Social Forum, and I saw glimpses of its opposites. So, whatever anyone else took away from the Forum, I think I can end like this: I jumped into a sea of flows, saw lots, missed much, and was enriched and inspired by many of those I touched. *La lucha sigue*, the Social Forum process goes on. We'll just have to make the good outweigh the bad and the ugly in the future...

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