Opening Spaces: Power, Participation and Plural Democracy at the World Social Forum

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abstract

This paper assesses the potential pitfalls of the 'Open Space' methodology employed at the World Social Forum by interrogating the shortcomings of a concept very close to the 'Open Space' – that of 'Communicative Action' proposed by the critical social theorist, Jürgen Habermas. The author argues that the 'Open Space' requires a more realistic conception of the nature of power, as well as an ethics of alterity to compliment its politics of difference, in order to remain both a radical, and an inclusive, form of democracy.

Precisely because the 'open space' methodology adopted by the World Social Forum (WSF) represents a genuinely important contribution to participatory democracy, it is vital to reflect on that methodology in a *critical* spirit. This probably sounds counter-intuitive. Why should we speak negatively of the WSF movement's most innovative contribution to global political organisation to date? But this would be to confuse negativity with true critique, behind which there is always a certain generosity, as well as a willingness to test the boundaries that constrain us. Thus, what is being proposed here is not at all to speak negatively of the 'open space' in order to deny its value. Rather, it is to sound a note of caution in order to ensure that its huge potential has the chance to be realised in empirical practice. This mode of critique is therefore motivated by a kind of faith, rather than by cynicism.

The 'Open Space' Methodology

What is this 'Open Space', and how does it operate at the WSF? Essentially, the vision behind the open space is of a kind of refuge from the overweening influences of global capital and the distorting effects they have on free debate. A space apart then, which is inclusive, non-hierarchical, non-judgemental, and in which the voices of the victims of neo-liberalism might be granted a platform denied by traditional statist representational mechanisms. According to its Charter of Principles, the WSF is "an open meeting place" where "democratic debate" and the "free exchange of experiences" is welcomed and where "all forms of domination and all subjection of one person by another" are

condemned.[1] In fact, such inclusive and egalitarian cosmopolitanism has been the most invigorating and, in terms of political mobilisation, most productive aspect of the WSF movement ever since Porto Alegre. The sublime spectacle of young and old, male and female, gay and straight, black, brown, yellow and white, all united in a principled opposition to systemic oppression and in a commitment to global justice undoubtedly motivates activists around the world. And from such demonstrations of unity in diversity there emerge deepening and widening solidarities – though hardly ones organised around a single defining agenda. More importantly still, the realisation that this is a grass-roots movement with a very broad-base indeed, and not merely the extremist rantings of disaffected Western youth, might jolt those in positions of influence into standing up and taking notice. Only the inclusivity of the open space approach can maintain and expand this broad-base of participation.

The forum in Mumbai in January 2004 was characterised by even more expansive participation than those witnessed at the three previous events. Attendees included not only diverse nationalities, races and ethnicities, but also, in the presence of the local Dalit or 'untouchable' class,[2] members of a truly indigenous, subaltern peoples. In contrast to the heavily circumscribed spatial and bodily politics regulating their movements within traditional Indian society, the Dalits encountered in the WSF a space in which to circulate, co-operate and communicate with relative freedom. Beating their drums and performing traditional dances, an estimated 1300 Dalits brought unprecedented attention to their plight in Mumbai. That they travelled from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka in order to air their grievances in the open space demonstrates that the WSF is a truly popular mass movement with moral as well as political roots amongst the world's dispossessed and downtrodden. Indeed, transferring the fourth WSF away from the American continent succeeded in indicating, and perhaps in galvanising, the emergence of a genuine transnational and trans-social solidarity which should give all critics of neo-liberalism great succour. The Dalit experience in Mumbai then, *seems* to represent a confirmation of the ability of the open space approach to transcend, or at least suspend, structures of oppression.

Potential Pitfalls of the 'Open Space'

However, before getting too carried away with eulogies to the 'caste-busting' inclusivity of the open space – eulogies which so clearly echo the very discourse of the 'Global Village' which the WSF rightly challenges – one should also note the problematic *participation* of those same Dalits, and indeed Indians generally, in Mumbai. Achin

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1   Charter of Principles, http://www.wsfindia.org/charter.php, accessed 26 March 05.

2   The Dalits represent the 'lowest of the low' in the Indian caste-system, being below the four recognised castes and thus symbolically, if not physically, outside society. They are considered 'untouchable' because contact with them threatens a carefully maintained hierarchy. The religious (but also and always political) binary of cleanliness and the sacred figures the Dalits as a radical impurity. This makes them genuinely subaltern insofar as they are economically the most marginal and most exploited members of Indian society, and also the most politically disenfranchised (despite constituting almost a quarter of the country's entire population).

Vanaik, in the *New Left Review*,[3] does exactly that. Painting a picture of a lamentably fragmented civil society in India, he claims that neither "leaders nor ordinary members of the many large organisations or groups that gathered there showed much interest or involvement" in the WSF, and that this was due to a "weakness, whose basic roots are political" (Vanaik, 2004: 59). This may sound like the resignation of the professional cynic, yet one should not be distracted from an important message: simply turning up, even in numbers, is not enough. As Vanaik suggests, the presence of subaltern peoples like the Dalits may add 'colour' and supposed 'authenticity' to proceedings, yet *effective and progressive* participation – even in an open space – may require what some would rather uncritically term 'political literacy', one of the many things such peoples supposedly lack. But should we not immediately ask, what politically, historically and socially locatable assumptions and strategic interests does this unreflexive notion of 'political literacy' contain? More importantly, to what extent might such assumptions and interests perpetuate the subalternisation of already subaltern peoples, such as the Dalits, even in the name of an emancipatory and supposedly benevolent politicisation?

To this extent, and to avoid the spectre of 'tokenism' looming here, it is crucial to view the open space, as both Thomas Ponniah and Chico Whitaker do,[4] as also a *pedagogical* space in which a new kind of 'political literacy' might be learnt.[5] Clearly, this would have to be a critical pedagogy conceived along Freirean lines.[6] For the point of a truly open space is surely that the aims and modes of political debate are not pre-set, and are therefore not reducible to some assumed 'literacy' which might well be teachable, but which would certainly both exclude people and circumscribe possible perspectives. Just as Freire emphasises a reciprocal learning that flattens the hierarchy between student and teacher so thoroughly that the two positions become substitutable, so the open space enables the creative elaboration of a new form of politics through mutual exchanges of experience on a relatively horizontal plane. No-one in the open space is present simply to transmit a supposedly neutral knowledge to others who do not possess it. Rather, such strategic, local and perhaps temporary knowledges must not pre-exist the forums, but must emerge *at and through* the forums and their ancillary events.

In the context of the open space then, 'reinventing the wheel' can be interpreted as a positive mission, rather than as a wasteful tampering with something that already works. It is precisely the time-honoured efficiency of even counter-hegemonic political organisation that is no longer adequate to the contemporary terrain. This is why the WSF Charter also legislates against the forum being taken over by political parties whose own brand of 'political literacy' would very likely be foisted on all participants as the only way to 'do politics'. If we are to move forward over that contemporary terrain towards other possible world's with other possible economic, political, social and cultural topographies, then even the wheel must be subjected to a critical dismantling!

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3   Vanaik, A. (2004) 'Rendezvous at Mumbai', *New Left Review*, 26: 53-65.

4   See Ponniah, T. (2004) 'The World Social Forum: The Desire for the Unknown', and Whitaker, C. (2004) 'The World Social Forum: Recovering Utopia', both in *Situation Analysis*, 4: 16-20; 111-121.

5   See Andreotti and Biccum, this issue.

6   Freire, P. (1996), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M. B. Ramos. London: Penguin.

In this sense, one of the most important pedagogical lessons to be learnt from the open space is that those endowed with so-called 'political literacy' must also, to use Gayatri Spivak's felicitous phrase, *unlearn their privilege*. That is, they must view their Western 'political literacy' as a form of loss, as the loss of other perspectives and, ultimately, of the perspective of the Other. Learning to unlearn, they must find ways of attending with ethical sensitivity to those who may not 'know' much (in the sense of possessing little capital in the global knowledge-economy), but who certainly know the despair that comes with not being able to feed one's own children (let alone dream of their upward social mobility). At stake here is the suspension or displacement of processes of subalternisation, notwithstanding Spivak's famous skepticism in this regard.[7] Paradoxical as it may sound, the possibility of a subaltern form of political literacy has to be taken seriously. Not only must the testament of the Dalits, as victims *par excellence* of the complicity between corporate globalisation and pre-modern patriarchal class systems, be clearly heard, but so also must their valid proposals for solutions on the local and even familial levels. The open space is only partially about demographic inclusivity then. More crucially, it is also about opening up conceptual systems and interpretative paradigms to the inevitable 'skewing' effect of their own socio-political provenance (almost invariably, in the soil of the West).

The example of the Dalits at Mumbai therefore illustrates that the open space, precisely in its insistence on a kind of ideal and neutral inclusivity, opens *itself* up to the danger of so many essentialising gestures and patronising benevolences that, as already stated, it is in need of its own vigilant Critical Watch(wo)man (which is not the same as security on the door). To reiterate, this is not a negative criticism, but a warning regarding the potential co-optation of the WSF movement.

Having used the example of the Dalits to adumbrate some of the possibilities but also the potential pitfalls associated with the open space methodology, it is perhaps of value to interrogate some of the philosophical assumptions behind that methodology. I believe it is possible to do this by revisiting a critical social theory which undoubtedly paved the way for the very notion of the 'open space': the theory of Communicative Action proposed by Jürgen Harbermas.[8] By addressing some of the weaknesses of Habermas' theory, we might simultaneously signal some of the potential weaknesses of the 'open space' methodology. Then, by looking at the ways in which Habermas' original insights have been advanced by subsequent theorists, some positive implications for the 'open space' methodology can be enumerated.

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7   In 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (in Nelson, C. and L. Grossberg (eds.) (1988), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Illinois: University of Illinois Press), Spivak defines the subaltern as that which falls beneath the radar of emancipatory discourses (pre-eminently Marxism, since the term comes from Gramsci). The subaltern is thus a category of structural exclusion and should not be conflated too rapidly with an ontological subject who is the 'victim' of a wrong for which there might be an adequate tribunal.

8   See Habermas, J. (1991) *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press; and Habermas, J (1992) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Cambridge: Polity Press; see also Ylä-Anttila, this issue.

Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action

A second-generation critical theorist, Habermas has supplemented the Marxist analysis of labour as the engine of social relations with an emphasis on communication. On this account, forms of sociality emerge from acts of symbolic interaction as much as, or even more than, from relations of production. Much as the WSF views the 'open space' as a sanctuary away from the forces of global capital in which to constitute a new world view or views, so Habermas thinks of communication as both a realm apart from the regulatory mechanisms of what he calls the 'system' (institutionalised forms of power), and a space in which to constitute the 'lifeworld' (an inter-subjective realm of sociality negotiated through communication).[9] What Habermas is reacting against is also essentially similar to that against which the WSF sets itself. Habermas shares the Weberian concern with the imposition of a scientific form of 'means-ends' rationality onto the spaces of appearance of social life, referring to this danger as the 'colonisation of the life-world' by the 'system'. While the WSF's common enemy, in neo-liberalism, is notoriously nebulous and protean, it surely encompasses something of this idea that forms of sociality are increasingly subjected to commodification.

In other words, just as the WSF can be understood as responding to a threat to civil society's capacity to recognise and reflect upon oppression, so Habermas argues that the free and open debate which should be characteristic of the 'lifeworld' is increasingly threatened by the penetration of the instrumental reason typical of modernity into our very lives, our very minds, our very speech. In common here is a fear about the dwindling capacity to articulate, even with exorbitant utopianism, an *alternative* form of life – hence the defiant motto of the WSF, that 'Another World is Possible'. Not only would a thoroughgoing colonisation of the lifeworld nullify the capacity to conceive of alternatives by attacking our very political imagination, but the resultant symbolic poverty would also reduce democratic debate to a façade of representation, behind which only the interests of the system would be served.

In the Habermasian lexicon, this specifically symbolic violence is referred to as 'distorted communication'. The colonisation of the life-world by the system denatures the very conceptual resources upon which we must draw to formulate meaningful critique. Here, Habermas indulges a novel take on Freud's notion of the unconscious by transforming it from a dark and primordial region within the individual's psyche, the existence of which can only be inferred from the distortions which ripple the surface of the conscious, to a public and social phenomenon, whereby social discourse becomes corrupted by passing through filters of administrative power. Condensation, displacement, contradiction and symbolism, on this account, are evidence not of repressed psychic material, but of the system's capacity to break the mirror-like clarity of critical discourse with which we might be able to speculate on reality, and the possibility of its inversion. Setting aside Habermas' jargon though, one can see the danger inherent in speaking only through received clichés, tired platitudes, and

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9   See in particular the chapter entitled 'The Uncoupling of System and Lifeworld', in J. Habermas (1992) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 153-198.

hackneyed sound-bites, particularly when the subject of debate is something as complex, ambivalent, rapidly changing and insidious as neo-liberalism. Again, the entire ethos of the open space testifies to the urgent need for incessantly renewing our critical vocabulary.

It is this fear of a negation of the emancipatory power of communication that leads Habermas to try to ground his theory of communicative action, and the radicalised democratic politics he believes can be built in its image, upon certain structural properties of language itself.[10] Habermas attempts to get behind (and before) the danger of the absolute merger of system and lifeworld – pessimistically adverted to by the first generation critical theorists under the monolithic term, 'the totally administered society' – by positing what he calls an 'ideal speech' situation. For Habermas, this situation would be one in which "everyone would have an equal chance to argue and question, without those who are more powerful, confident, or prestigious having an unequal say".[11] Participants in this ideal situation would have as their primary goals the reaching of "the intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another".[12] Moreover, this process actually generates a *sensus communis*: "In communicative action, beyond the function of achieving understanding, language plays the role of co-ordinating the goal-directed activities of different subjects, as well as the role of a medium in the socialisation of these very subjects".[13] Once again, one may be justified in hearing echoes of this 'ideal speech' situation in the idealism of the 'open space', where experiences are freely exchanged and all forms of domination condemned.

Crucially, Habermas tries to guarantee such an ideal speech situation by appealing to four validity claims that he insists are so intrinsic to communication that they can be considered a 'universal pragmatics'. These are intelligibility, truthfulness, sincerity and rightness. Respectively, these validity claims imply that statements can be understood; indicate a true state of affairs verifiable by reference to the empirical world; are presented honestly and openly; and are uttered by someone who is enabled by the norms of a legitimate social order to speak in this way and of these things. Deploying a kind of Kantian formalism stripped of its restriction to individual psychology then, Habermas asserts that although language is prone to all sorts of abuses – which Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, discusses under the heading of 'paralogy' – these abuses are *a priori* predicated on the possibility of an ideal communication. In short, one can only lie effectively because language always holds out the possibility of communicating truths.

There are therefore numerous overlaps between the ethos of the open space and the assumptions of the theory of communicative action. There is a faith in language as

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10 See the chapter entitled 'The Foundations of Social Science in the Theory of Communication', in J. Habermas (1992) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 3-42.

11 Wallace, R, and A. Wolf (1999) *Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 178.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Jürgen Habermas (1992) *The Theory of Communicative Action: The Critique of Functionalist Reason,* Cambridge: Polity Press, 5.

constitutive of alternate possibilities. There is an awareness of the distorting effects of power on that language. There is an emphasis on symbolic interaction as formative of social and cultural life, not simply in the service of an instrumental decision-making. There is also an emphasis on open and free exchange in a context which is not determined by hierarchical power. There is the implicit possibility of legitimating a collectively shared ethics by submitting it to a communicative rationality. Finally, there is a commitment to a radicalised democracy based upon this form of horizontal communication. But as the example of the Dalits in Mumbai has already signposted, the theory of communicative action and the open space methodology also have in common an idealism which can only be maintained by evacuating, on the analytical level (the only level on which this is possible), *the* most important factor: power. If we now review some objections to Habermas' theory of communicative action, perhaps they may also serve as caveats for the 'open space' methodology of the WSF.

Five Critiques of Communicative Action

Firstly, it is always possible to argue in exactly the opposite direction, as Jacques Derrida has,[14] that the possibility of telling the truth, any truth, indeed of conceiving of the very notion of truth, is actually predicated on the *a priori im*possibility of full and complete communication. That is, it is always possible that lying can be said to be the condition of possibility for telling the truth, rather than vice versa. If, as Derrida has shown, iterability, as the necessity of repetition beyond any and every 'intentional' context, cuts across or expropriates logics of property as well as of propriety, it follows that nobody either owns the truth, or, moreover, has the capacity to transmit it to others in a pure form. Why attempt to communicate at all if there were not some difference (or even *différance*) between interlocutors, a gap across which messages must be sent in the hope – and it is only a hope – that they will arrive at their intended destination? Is not this difference and this gap the *raison d'être* of political debate, and what makes it, as Habermas himself claims of modernity,[15] an unfinished, but also, as Habermas cannot claim, an ever unfinishable project?

Secondly, this structural necessity of the possibility of lying obviously opens up all the murkier aspects of communication – rhetoric, insincerity, fiction passing itself of as fact, emotional manipulation etc. – that Habermas is trying to avoid. Indeed, the textual tics that litter one of his founding statements on this topic, 'What is Universal Pragmatics?',[16] betray his attempt to expel these dark forces from language. Thus, he confesses that "I start from the *assumption* […] that other forms of social action – for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general – are *derivatives* of action oriented to reaching an understanding",[17] and again, "I shall take into consideration only

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14 See 'Signature, Event, Context', in J. Derrida (1997) *Limited Inc*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1-23.

15 See Habermas, J. (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

16 'What is a Universal Pragmatics?' in W. Outhwaite (1996) (ed.) *The Habermas Reader*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 118-129.

17 *Ibid.*, 118, my italics.

consensual speech actions, leaving aside both discourse and strategic action".[18] Surely what passes here for exegetical clarity is actually a founding exclusion of the very things which make political discourse necessary in the first place: conflict, competition, strategy and counter-strategy? It is as if Habermas takes the Greek conception of the *agon* which remains the foundation of our understanding of democracy and, by way of a forced conflation with the *Aufklärung*, purifies it of precisely its agonistic dimension.[19]

Thirdly then, this belief in the ideality of the speech situation leads Habermas to place his faith in a form of politcal action based on the legitimacy of a universal *consensus*. If everyone strives hard to achieve 'reciprocal understanding' and 'mutual accommodation' and in this way arrives at a decision, then that decision must be respected and acted on because all have been involved in debating it and because the proper protocols have been observed. To this extent, that decision is final. Indeed, one is licensed to move on to the next issue, and work towards consensual agreement on that as well. One can discern here an almost Hegelian teleological investment in the perfectability of language and its relation to the world. The problem is – and this is in fact where the WSF is far in advance of Habermas – that even *consensus* should be seen as the death of a truly radical democracy. Only an unthinking fidelity to representational democracy makes us find a practical and effective politics of *dissensus* so hard to imagine. Yet, in so far as it does not allow individuals to speak in its name, nor 'recommendations' chaired at its meetings to be in any way binding on its participants, nor, indeed, any document or statement to be produced and passed off as the sanctioned opinions of its constituency, the WSF is arguably already practicing such a politics.

Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the ideality of Habermas's posited speech situation is dangerous in the current context, precisely because the tentacles of neo-liberal value-systems and forms of consciousness suffuse the global system to such an extent that there really is no such thing as a hiding place or sanctuary. In terms of subject-positions from which to speak, are there really any that we can claim are now outside global capital? Part of globalisation is precisely the 'complex connectivity'[20] that intimately entwines the lives of, say, an affluent Wall Street lawyer, on the one hand, and an Aboriginal mother of six in Australia, on the other. If colonialism was always destined to put multiculturalism on the national political agenda, so globalisation, in its de- and re-territorialisation of heterogeneous subjectivities and identities, is destined to put a quasi-universal cosmopolitanism on the inter(trans?)national agenda. Given the intricate web of global relations and interrelations that now exists, power, more than ever, cannot be left at the door, even the door which opens onto the open space/ideal speech situation. Power-relations cannot be eradicated. Agendas cannot be purged from our debates, nor should they be! None of this is to say that the 'lifeworld' has now been so colonised by the 'system' that the possibility of counter-critique has been extinguished, like a candle-flame, plunging us into the long dark night of the totally administered society. For this relates to a fifth objection to Habermas's critical social theory, which is that, for all the other ways in

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18 *Ibid.*, 120.

19 See also Gilbert, this issue.

20 This phrase is coined in Tomlinson, J. (2001) *Globalization and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

which he refines and surpasses them, he nonetheless inherits from Adorno and Horkheimer the Freudo-Marxian understanding of power as repression.

This repressive thesis is too blunt a tool for the formidable task of prizing open the mechnanisms of globalised power. What we have witnessed at Porto Alegre, Seattle, Monaco, Genoa, Mumbai and elsewhere, *could* be described as an irruption of previously repressed psychic material, a kind of neurotic symptom of late capitalism, but is it not politically more optimistic, and probably more accurate, to describe it as the blossoming of *new* forms of resistance that are commensurate with the increasingly refined technologies of power to which we are subjected as global 'citizens'? There is not space here to elaborate on the contrasting conception of power articulated by Michel Foucault,[21] yet in so far as it posits power as productive rather than simply repressive, as therefore determining but also determined, and, perhaps most importantly of all, as necessarilly productive of its own sites and modes of resistance, it is far better equipped than Habermas's concept of power to explain the dialectical dance of oppression and resistance, capital and anti-capital, system and lifeworld, that we see performed at every WSF (and now ESF, or European Social Forum) event. Marx himself famously said that capitalism produces its own gravediggers, and although few of us now hope that the promised hereafter will be Communist in orientation, perhaps the WSF can continue to serve as a kind of joyous wake?

Building on Habermas

But we must not throw the baby out with the bath water! Habermas's model of communicative action has much to recommend it. Its core propositions – that all those who are effected by policies should be given the chance to debate them, and that a set of rational principles should be used to ground such debate – are surely valuable correctives to top-down models of patrician power. The open space methodology of the WSF thus has a great deal to learn from the refinement, rather than the outright rejection, of Habermas's theory of communicative action.

One such refinement comes in Iris Marion Young's important book, *Inclusion and Democracy*.[22] In this work, Young demonstrates an acute awareness of the problem of 'political literacy' adverted to above in relation to the Dalits. She observes that the 'cultural capital' (to use Bourdieu's phrase) required to be eloquent in the conventional political arena necessarily excludes forms of 'popular' expression. Thus, the gendered, racialised and class-marked conduct of official state politics defines itself in strict separation from froms of personal narrative, emotive rhetoric, and public protest. Young advocates an expanded notion of the public sphere in order to redefine the discourses, events and actions of civil society as *already* modes of communicative action, effectively making the boundaries of the polity coterminous with those of society. This has the advantage of acknowledging the diversity of progressive expression in large and

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21 Foucault is perhaps clearest on this in *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality, Volume One* (London: Penguin, 1998)

22 Young, I. M. (2002) *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

often multicultural social formations, and also of underlining the importance of the media as an arena in which to stage civic discourse. By recognising the multiplicity of both forms of, and outlets for, popular yet political speech, Young lays the basis for a politics of difference conducted in conjunction with a plural deliberative democracy for our times. If the ideality of Habermas's schema conveniently sidesteps the specific difficulties of political life as a woman, or a homosexual, or a non-white person and so on, Young challenges deliberative democracy to find ways of including such marginalised identities.

Another important refinement of Habermas's theory is articulated by Seyla Benhabib, in an afterword to her co-edited book, *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*.[23] Here Benhabib addresses many of the five critiques I have just levelled. Firstly, she qualifies the Kantian emphasis on universalisability present in Habermas's notion of a universal pragmatics. For Kant, universalisability, as a test of the categorical imperative, is a formal capacity of the Faculty of Reason. While Habermas displaces this capacity onto the discursive and therefore social level, Benhabib gives it an extra, almost Levinasian, twist, by transforming it into an injunction to reciprocal empathy: "Universalizability enjoins that we reverse perspectives among members of a 'moral community'; it asks us to judge from the other's point of view".[24] Such an ethics of reciprocal recognition is surely not only a regulative Idea but also a precondition for the covergence of difference and diversity constitutive of the WSF. Honoured in practice, it can allow marginal groups such as the Dalits to experience genuine communicative exchanges, even, perhaps especially, with those who are complicitous in their marginalisation.

More importantly still, Benhabib challenges the rationalistic primacy given to consensus in the Habermasian view (which brings that view uncomfortably close to the liberal parliamentary model, albeit of a radically inclusive kind). In fact, consent, she argues, is "a misleading term for capturing the core ideas behind communicative ethics: namely, the processual generation of reasonable agreement about moral principles via an open-ended moral conversation".[25] For Benhabib, communicative action should place less stress on the moment of consensual decision-making, and more on the rationality and transparency of the procedure by which agreements are reached. While this means that no decision can enjoy the kind of final legitimacy Habermas seems to dream of, it also means that it is possible to interrogate the discursive construction of specific claims to legitimacy. Crucially for the WSF, this has the consequence that communicative action may not be a blueprint for running democratic *institutions*, but it does have profound institutional implications. Thus, the liberal contract theory at the root of Habermas's model can be turned to critical advantage:

> [I]t is not so much the identification of the "general interest" which is at stake, as the uncovering of those partial interests which represent themselves as if they were general. (Benhabib and Dallymar, 1991: 353)

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23 Benhabib, S. and F. Dallymar (1991) (eds.) *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*. London: MIT Press.

24 *Ibid.*, 339.

25 *Ibid.*, 345.

From the point of view of the WSF, this counsels us to qualify the old Rousseauian dream of a single 'collective will' by both questioning the inherently *political* constitution of any notion of collectivity, with all their attendent exclusions, and by pluralising the 'wills' legitimately demanding democratic expression.

If Iris Marion Young challenges deliberative democracy to accommodate the politics of difference, and if Seyla Benhabib foregrounds an ethic of reciprocal empathy and procedural transparency over and above collective consensus, then Chantal Mouffe goes furthest in reintroducing to radical plural democracy the otherwise suppressed element of *conflict*. Building on her seminal work with Ernesto Laclau[26] in books like *The Democratic Paradox*,[27] Mouffe mobilises poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories in order to present a structural, and therefore necessary, *dis*equillibrium that challenges the smooth and serenely rational workings of Rawlsian or Habermasian liberal deliberative democracy. If the subject is not whole, and society cannot be sutured, then the Habermasian scene – in which sovereign individuals politely convey their personal opinions and eventually secure agreement with a gentleman's handshake – starts to seem a little ridiculous. Thus, Mouffe would counter that just as the Lacanian subject is formed around a constitutive lack whose scar the Imaginary continually attempts to cover over, so political discourse is shot through by an inerradicable antagonism which is also its condition of possibility, and which it obfuscates beneath hegemonic articulations that – in their presentation of a particular interest as a unversal value – deserve to be called 'ideologies'.

This antagonism[28] both cleaves the democratic imaginary in two and is its positive driving force. Accepting this tension between democratic inclusion and liberal equality and working with it is for Mouffe the only way of revitalising contemporary democratic practice:

> '[A]gonistic' democracy requires accepting that conflict and division are inherent to politics and that there is no place where reconciliation could be definitively achieved as the full actualization of the unity of 'the people'. (Mouffe, 2000: 15-16)

While many on the Left are suspicious of her allegiance to certain tenets of liberalism, it is nonetheless the case that by bringing the competitive clamour of the ancient Greek *agon* back into the democratic equation, Mouffe ensures a more radical vision of democracy built not on consensus, but on the inerradicable possibility of dissensus. That is to say, while the concept of hegemony accounts for the possibility of decisions being made at all, insofar as 'empty' and 'floating' signifiers do get temporarilly filled, it also guarantees a certain provisionality which always already invites further debate.

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26 Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

27 Mouffe, C. (2000) *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.

28 In fact, Mouffe develops this notion of antagonism as articulated in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, where it is first explicitly opposed to contradiction in the Marxist tradition, by contrasting it to agonism. Antagonism becomes a potentially destructive relation among enemies, whereas agonism becomes a conflictual relation between adversaries within the same democratic 'game'.

So it is that the 'postmodern' post-Marxism of the likes of Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Zizek, Michael Ryan, and Yanis Stavrakakis, who all take the critique of essentialism seriously, can be said to represent a broadside against the Enlightenment rationalism inscribed in certain models of deliberative democracy. Blind to the potential tyranny of consensus, such models imply that the calm silence which follows a collectively and rationally made decision is the quintessence of political communication. In contrast, the poststructuralist postmodern post-Marxists advocate a far more voluble mode of politics which is unapologetically interminable. This is because they view debate not as representing pre-existing constituencies, and therefore as a process whose rational success should be measured by its capacity to be finalised, but as itself performatively constituting a fluid and heterogenous hegemony. As participants in the WSF know, when discussing the injustices of neo-liberalism and their possible remedies, silence is extremely rare. When it does occur, that is precisely when one should reflect deeply on the discursive violence which probably paved the way for it!

Implications for the WSF

Having noted the inheritance within the open space methodology of Habermas's theory of communicative action, having criticised that theory, and now having seen how that theory has been adapted and advanced by others, we can conclude by briefly exploring some implications for the WSF.

I would argue that if the 'open space' methodology of the WSF is to realise its tremendous potential as a radical form of particpatory, plural, and radical democracy, it must heed the following five caveats emerging from this critique of Jürgen Harbermas:

1. There is no transcendental guarantee that can ensure the honesty and sincerity, and certainly not the 'neutrality' or 'disinterestedness', of particpants in radical democratic forms;

2. Only a naïve understanding of democracy which denies the centrality of agonism as well as the gendered, sexed and racialised nature of political participation can even begin to imagine these twin theoretical fictions of 'neutrality' and 'disinterestedness';

3. A truly radical democracy is predicated on the ever-present possibility of *dissensus*, whereas a consensus that abuses the legitimacy of supposedly universal support is the opposite of democracy (consensus should be viewed as a strategic precondition for further dissensus);

4. Globalisation, as an ever densening network of complex connectivity, means that it is precisely the ideality of a neutral, utterly horizontal space that is now impossible (if, indeed, it ever was possible);

5. Viewing power as productive of its own forms of resistance enables one to embrace the ubiquitous nature of its effects, which in turn enables a rediscovery of the *agonistic* heart of radical democracy.

In fact, these five points really combine to recommend the continuation and intensification of the two fundamental existing strengths of the 'open space' methodology: firstly, uncompromising inclusivity, and secondly, the courage to resist the consensual model of modernist politics. However, they also indicate the need to supplement these two strengths with an ethics of alterity through which the open space opens itself up to the Other. The transformative and indeed politicising effects of Othering the Self, which includes displacing one's own assumptions about what politics is and how it can be done, deserve to be put at the heart of this process. To return to the example of the Dalits in Mumbai, encountering lived subalternity *should* productively question pre-existing epistemological, theoretical, and also emotional presuppositions. And yet, given the critique of essentialism which has informed the more radical elaborations on Habermas's model, the most difficult task for the WSF is perhaps that of charting a course between recognition on the one hand (for example, recognising the genuine and specific plight of the Dalits), and essentialism on the other (for example, setting up the Dalits as the embodiement of authentic victimhood). Political, but not only political, forms of representation thus remain at the heart of democratic praxis.

In general then, the WSF must not fall under the nostalgic spell of the Old Left and, in so doing, invite the political parties, of any stamp, to take the reigns. It must withstand the jibes about it being little more than an efette and terminally liberal talking-shop. It must ignore the corrollary demands for some kind of manifesto which will spell out 'where we stand, and what we must do' (who this constituent 'we' is is always already in question, and productively so). And shocking as it may seem, the WSF must also tolerate the imprecise definition of its enemy: the fact that 'neo-liberalism' means different things to different particpants at the forums should be celebrated, and used, rather than deemed an analytic short-coming. Indeed, that this apparent catch-all term can encompass the experiences of sweat-shop workers, trade unionists, aid volounteers, small business owners, farmers, feminists, economists and environmental activists, indicates the kind of semantic reach absolutely necessary to the shifting complexity of a globalised world. And only a rhizomatic acitivism, rather than an arboreal political philosophy,[29] is appropriate to the networked nature of that world. Rather than some kind of cosmopolitan global parliament that uncritically adopts a simplistic notion of representation then, the WSF meetings must continue to be conceived as spaces which are open, but still criss-crossed by the inescapable, yet also enabling, constraints of power.

It follows that one of the greatest threats to the open space is the utterly unwarranted, but dangerously tempting, analogy with parliamentary democracy, as if what what was being opened was a *stately* space of polite discussion in which diplomacy was the means, agreement the end, in which mostly white men, and always the elite, make decisions on behalf of those too uneducated or uncultured to make them for themselves.

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29 This distinction is famously made in the introduction to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari's (1988) *A Thousand Plateaus*, London: Athlone Press.

On the contrary, the open space creates a clearing in which a temporary, uncontrollable, and unruly cross-fertilisation and inter-contamination leads to experiences of both difference, divergence and commonality. What is important is neither that agendas are unified under a collective political identity, nor that binding decisions are reached in a rational manner, but simply that fragmented and even heterogeneous solidarities are forged, strategies swapped, alternate visions debated, and worldwide activism against neo-liberalism ushered into its own global phase.

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