

De-centering the Forum: Is Another Critique of the Forum Possible?

In the weeks that followed my return from the third annual Forum, whenever someone would ask me “How was it?” I would reply “Amazing! I had an amazing time. I mean the official event itself was somewhat of a disaster, but the people it brought together, the spaces and encounters it made possible—even unintentionally—exceeded most of the limitations the forum itself had.” And I meant it. I had learned so much and gained so much political inspiration, even as my pessimism of certain forms of traditional politics increased. As I repeat that phrase to myself now, however, in spite of, or perhaps in lieu of, the myriad critiques and discussions that have emerged in the months following the forum, I cannot help but wonder why the more mixed and exhilarated sentiment I had by the forum’s end did not appear to be more widely shared.

Why does it seem that even many critical and progressive people are discussing giving up on the Forum, when, even in its current form, it is an incomplete, plural, and contradictory space that far exceeds both the event itself and its official manifestations? We cannot forget that both the forum and the “movement of movements” of which the Forum is just one part, are messy, dynamic and radically plural entities whose parameters and objectives are in their very natures neither stable nor easily explicable. It is certainly important to recognize that there was an “official” Forum, one that emerged from a concrete set of actors, ideas and events, and that was in fact what the majority of people did have the opportunity to experience, but there was also much more. While disappointment, disillusionment and even anger with the “official” Forum are valid and important subjects to discuss, I am concerned that they may be obscuring the alternative and diverse practices that, though less visible, were still very much a part of Porto Alegre.

How we think about this Forum is important for how we imagine our critiques. Even more, how we write about and discuss the forum does in fact contribute to producing it. It not only produces it for the thousands who could not attend, or for those who look to such discussions to process their own assessment. In so far as the forum is not just an event, but a process; not simply something that happened, but a political concept and a potentiality, all of our analyses play an important role in actually developing and shaping it—and by extension the “movement of movements” of which it is a part.

I believe that all too often even our most critical writings have perpetuated a shallow understanding of the Forum and its critiques. Rather than focus only on the Forum and its lacks, I believe we need to de-center our own vision and critiques. We need to make visible the various alternative spaces, the rich political diversity that were part of the World Social Forum, even if the faults of the larger Forum rendered them largely invisible.

Situating Critiques of the Forum: From Structure to Politics.

Since the conclusion of WSF III in Porto Alegre, there have been a number of critiques and discussions about the problems and weaknesses of this annual gathering in which thousands of people from all over the world and myriad political backgrounds come together to discuss and strategize around their common opposition to the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalist globalization. In addition to concern about the effectiveness of a forum that has now grown to include over 100,000 participants—a number that in itself makes functioning difficult at many obvious and practical levels—there have been a number of rather serious critiques about the internal contradictions and lack of democracy constitutive of the Forum itself.

Many people from various geographical and political backgrounds have criticized the Forum for a series of formal or organizational problems that they believe make it an undemocratic space. These problems include a lack of transparency in decision making, hierarchical organization, as well as special treatment of celebrities and the creation of elitist tiers that privilege the more well known and consolidated components of the movement over many of the smaller and more grassroots and perhaps more radical organizations. A number of people have also criticized what they consider to be the privileging and cooptation of the forum by institutionalized political structures like political parties, trade unions, and mainstream NGOs that, in addition to being hierarchical organizations themselves, tend to be reformist or social democratic in their outlook. This is seen as integrally related to the lack of transparency and democracy within the forum structure. Many also highlight the need of being more critical of the State in the struggle against neo-liberal globalization, a position that is seen as precluded by the presence of more conventional (state) actors within the Forum.

Notably, these critiques have come from a variety of sources ranging from those who identify with the “official” forum, but are weary of its declining effectiveness as its size and popularity grow; to those who identify themselves as somewhat “outside” it and consider the forum in its current form to be actually opposed to the spirit of the new alternative globalization movement.

Now, it is certainly significant that these criticisms have come from such a wide array of political actors. But I think that it is also crucial to emphasize that criticisms of organizational structure, vision and political approach existed long before (as well as during) this particular forum. Such criticisms did not emerge only as reactions to the *technical and functional* difficulties evidenced at the forum; but from larger *ethico-political*

disagreements and debates about what resistance to this phase of neo-liberal globalization and the political crises that accompany it ought to look like.¹ In fact for some, notions of “true” democracy, hierarchical and non-hierarchical organization, self-organization and anti-authoritarianism, are at the heart of the political projects they seek to develop—at the forum, and within the “movement of movements” more generally.

For example, even before the forum began, many groups and networks—including Indymedia, Intergalactika Laboratory of Global Resistance, Life After Capitalism, and many other actors—had planned and organized alternative and autonomous spaces and meetings outside of (and within) the official forum.² They liked the original idea of a truly free space and they too wanted to participate in an international encounter of this sort. But they saw the official forum with its planned panels, plenaries, and celebrity focus, as structurally—and therefore politically—problematic. They did not want to replicate political forms and approaches that they believe perpetuate the systems and relations of power they hope to oppose and overcome. So, they set up alternative spaces.

The Intergalactika Laboratory of Global Resistance, where I spent a great deal of time, was such an autonomous space. It was housed in a humble white tent at the edge of the Youth Camp; it had no blackboards or air-conditioning, and was rather far from the well-equipped PUC classrooms.³ Although I many participants at the Forum might not have

¹ The relationship between neo-liberalism as an economic process and a political one is key.

² It is hard to speak of inside/outside the forum with much exactness. Not only are there multiple potential parameters, a space might be “within” the Forum in one sense, but against and outside it in another. For example, Life After Capitalism is slightly different from other radical spaces. Although critical of the Forum and its narrow view of politics, it too had a traditional panel form and sought to be housed within the official facilities of the Forum.

³ Notably, Intergalactika was named after the first “Intercontinental Meeting Against Neo-liberalism and For Humanity” .The meeting called for by the Zapatistas in 1996 was attended by representatives from over 43 countries. In a way the concept was quite similar to the social forums, though I have rarely heard them spoken of in relation to one another. In my mind this is another manifestation of the how one part of a movement, and its history, is seen as THE only history. For more information on the first and second Intergalactics see Holloway, John. 1998. *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*. London: Pluto Press, as well as 1998.

realized it, the Youth Camp—located about 15 minutes from the Port and almost directly behind the arena where Lula spoke on the first day— was truly a world within the forum. Filled with food stands and various vendors, its own media center, several concert venues, and countless spaces set up for various meetings—including Intergalactika—the large expanse of green that had been planned and organized by a committee made of youth, housed nearly 30,000 people. They slept in tents, showered outdoors, and practically ate, drank and breathed the forum experience! Long after many of us retreated to our hotels, the Youth Camp was still very much active: filled with live music, intense meetings, film viewings, and myriad other events and activities!

Despite its distance, Intergalaktika attracted a variety of people, including some who identified as anarchists, autonomist Marxists, and others who refused any political labels but saw their politics as inspired and co-authored by the Zapatistas. The events held there consisted of a variety of workshops committed to sharing experiences, debating ideas, and developing a political praxis based on the principles of horizontality, self-organization, anti-authoritarianism, participatory democracy and direct action. In Laboratorio Intergalactika—as well as for a significant part of the alternative globalization movement—organizational form, process and the more micro-political and quotidian elements usually excluded from conventional politics are key sites for political intervention and elaboration. This was also the case in Porto Alegre.

For example, at a Saturday morning workshop in the “laboratorio,” Vasco, a member of the Argentinean Movimiento de Trabajadores Desocupados (MTD) emphasized the importance of such micro-politics. He recounted how becoming unemployed, and

thereby experiencing a total rejection by the capitalist system, radically shifted the political outlook and praxis of his group. It forced them to realize that in order to be truly and “radically opposed to capitalism” they needed to think beyond traditional organizational forms like unions and political parties, they needed to, in effect, promote “another way of living.” This meant producing “new practices, and new social relations” that worked against the pursuit of power, and against inclusion into the capitalist system. He went on to acknowledge that this was an incredibly difficult task, but that being unemployed (en masse) produces a “rupture so strong that it allows one to dream again.” For him, and many others, radically democratizing micro-political spaces and processes—and thereby pointing to the inherently political nature of such spaces—is necessary if people really hope to work towards effective social change.

As such, for these groups, this movement was certainly about opposing institutions like the WTO, IMF, World Bank, etc, but it was also about reinventing politics. It was about making visible the political nature of practices and spaces that were not traditionally considered political, while at the same time mobilizing new forms of political practice that embody anti-authoritarianism as well as a critique of all forms of sovereign power. Looking to the Zapatistas, Situationists, Anarchists and Autonomist thinkers/activists, these activists emphasize what some have referred to as “pre-figurative politics” – “modes of organization that consciously resemble the world you want to create.”⁴

[“Ahora será necesario crear nuevos espacios de encuentro, intercambio e articulación; espacios plurales, abiertos, veredaramente autónomos. Espacios libres, no solo de organizaciones verticales, sino también de discursos/palabras verticales, ‘unidimensionales’, libre de viejos e nuevos prestigios, de nuevas y

⁴ Grubacic, Andrej. 2003. Life After Social Forums: New Radicalism and the Question of Attitudes Towards the Social Forums. http://zmag.org/content/print_article.cfm?itemID=3010§ionID=4. Also in this volume

viejas autoridades. Vamos a pensar en situación, nombrar en situación y en acción.”
⁵] * cut?*

For those who participated in Intergalactika, then, institutional structures, meeting process and daily elements of living are inherently political and constitute critical points for elaborating effective oppositional practices. Moreover, it is the left’s the failure to recognize these new spaces of politics that has contributed to the historic left’s complicity in producing the current crisis in political institutions and democracy. Previous leftist movements and organizations—including the older versions of Marxism and communism, political parties, as well as some of the “new social movements” of the seventies and beyond—failed to achieve lasting social change because they had a narrow understanding of what constitutes “the political.” Today, many actors working to change the world have still not realized that if they truly hope to combat neo-liberalism and oppression they cannot work only in the traditional political terrains. They have to recognize that the way panels are formatted, decisions are made, and inclusion/exclusion are enacted, are themselves powerful political acts. They cannot ignore the political logics, institutions and social relations that are themselves part of the ways in which capitalist and other forms of oppression manifest themselves—often within leftist struggles and spaces like the WSF, themselves.

Clearly then, attention to democratic form and structure is not simply a procedural or technical topic of critique; it is central to an ethico-political and strategic vision.⁶

⁵ From the Hub listserv: a discussion listserv in which many of the critiques of the forum were posted and hotly debated. English translation: “Now it will be necessary to create new spaces of encounter, exchange and articulation; plural spaces, that are open and truly autonomous. Spaces that are free, not only of vertical organizations, but also of vertical, “unidimensional” words/discourses. Free of old and new prestiges, of new and old authorities. We are going to think in situation, name in situation and in action.”

Critiques of institutional and organizational democracy are as much an attempt to actively work to create and spread a new form of political engagement, as they are critiques of the forum as it exists.

Too often, however, our critiques do not point to the political sources or the highly political nature of these critiques. We make it seem as if such criticisms were “just” structural— things to fix or tweek. This stems from a larger problem: For the most part critiques and assessments of the Forum tend to reinforce the privileging of the “official” forum, and the marginalization of the alternative spaces. While we have taken the critiques and analyses seriously, especially those of its organization and undemocratic functioning, we have done so from a vantage point that takes the official forum— with its panels at the well equipped PUC, the Stadium and the Port—as the necessary object of critique. We have said what the forum lacks, but have not pointed to the participants of the forum who were very deliberately already democratizing spaces within and around the movement. Rather than engaging the multiple peripheries, alternative, coincidental and contradictory spaces that comprise the forum in its totality, we write as if it is the “official” forum that must be fixed (or dismissed).

Even many pieces arguing for “abandonment” of the forum have obscured the fact that the forum is *already* a plural and contested space, and have perpetuated the invisibility of those who actively contest it. Rather than making explicable the political trajectories and projects of these alternative actors, writing positively about them, their histories, and their ideas; rather than making visible—in their own terms— the radical multiplicity that does in fact constitute the political debates that comprise both the forum and the “movement of

⁶ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only dimension of these actors’ political vision or analysis. I focus on it because it serves to emphasize how what is taken to be “merely” procedural, logistical, etc. by some, is

movements” more generally, we have tended to write as if the forum, and the movement of which it is a part, does have a central more important part, and that it is in fact a single, unified, entity. In writing and speaking in this way, we contribute to producing it as a reality: we simultaneously bolster the importance of the mainstream and perpetuate the marginalization and invisibility of the multiple alternatives.

Although spaces like Intergalactika were marginal with respect to the “official” forum, they were still very much part of the Porto Alegre process, and people did experience them. For some people (like myself) they even constituted a central part of the entire social forum experience. It is not enough to point out that such places were marginalized and largely invisible;⁷ we need to show and explain why it is so important that they not be.

Unless we write concretely about spaces like Intergalactika as well as the histories and movements from which such projects emerge, we not only maintain their invisibility, we also contribute to an impoverished understanding of the criticisms of the “official” forum: We prevent people from comprehending, on the one hand, the ways in which criticisms of organizational democracy are as political as they are functional, and on the other, what an internally democratic forum might look and feel like.

For my own part, having been able to witness and participate in alternative and critical spaces has had a profound effect on the way I read and engage in the debates and discussions that have proliferated since the close of the forum. Augmenting my intellectual and analytical engagements, my actual experiences have made the various critiques of the

in fact of utmost political relevance to others.

⁷ Whether or not this marginalization was intended or the fault of the official forum, is not something that I would like to address at this moment. I am personally of the mind, (like Grubacic earlier in this volume), that it was the combined effect of the myopia of the bureaucracy of the official forum, mistakes made by the organizers of the space, as well as a general chaos and confusion.

forum resonant and palpable in a different way. Rather than thinking (abstractly) about participatory democracy, horizontality and self-organization as things the (official) Forum lacked, I have a positive sense of what they are and why they are critical to a politics that is desperate not to replicate failures of the past. This is not to deny that Intergalactika and other “alternative” spaces had myriad problems and were rife with tensions and divisions of their own. But rather, to suggest, that it is precisely the sense of these as spaces as real, lived places, —and not only as conceptual counterpoints to the mainstream forum—that has given me a different understanding—an odd combination of intellectual and visceral comprehension—of what “another forum” (or forums) might look and feel like.

Decentering the Forum: Decentering Theory

Why have our critiques fallen into this trap? I believe that our tendency to perpetuate the marginalization of the peripheries and the privileging of the center has everything to do with both our dominant modes of critique—particularly a certain style of deconstruction—as well as with the nature of the diversity with which these new movements compel us to deal. While we are constantly stating how diverse and plural this movement of movements is,⁸ our analytical tools and vocabularies have themselves not caught up with this intellectual recognition.

The problem with most forms of deconstruction or criticism is that, even as they critique or deconstruct something they see as problematic, they almost always maintain the centrality of that “dominant” or “hegemonic” term. In addition, they are highly intellectual and rationalistic. For example, critiques of capitalism can make capitalism seem to be such a coherent and total system that it renders existing alternatives and struggles within the

system irrelevant.⁹ A very different strategy is to destabilize or destroy the dominance or totality of a hegemonic concept or entity by showing that it is not so total or coherent as one might think, and by making visible the plethora of actors, experiences, differences, etc. that its seeming unity or dominance has obscured. For example it is one thing to say the forum was problematic, it is quite another thing to recognize that while the “official” forum was problematic according to certain criteria, there were myriad effects, occurrences, meetings events, contingencies that the occasion of the forum made possible. Though these might have been less obvious, they were still present. Similarly, it is one thing to say that panels featuring experts and stars is problematic because it produces hierarchy; it is quite another to actually *show* a workshop that attempts to challenge such hierarchies by locating everyone in a circle, combining “experts” with grassroots activists, etc. One relies on the intellectual and abstract agreement that hierarchy is bad, the other on a more visceral and positive sense of why alternatives might be better. It is not that the first mode of critique is wrong; on the contrary I believe it is quite necessary. But it should not be our only mode of intervention.

I believe that there is an interesting parallel to be made between the fact that our modes of critique reinforce the “mainstream” by always criticizing it according to its own terms, and the ways in which these new movements hope to redefine politics. If many of the critiques are premised on mobilizing areas not traditionally considered political, their critiques cannot be understood according to the regular (political) terms of the conversation. Said differently, to my mind it is no coincidence that the “official” forum—that aspect associated with a more “traditional” understanding of politics—is more visible

⁸ Even the term “movement of movements” is a product of this!

than the actors seeking to expand politics to new spaces precisely because the “official” actors are favored by the current common sense of politics. The fact of the matter is that we just don’t have the categories in our political and sociological vocabularies to treat critiques of organization, form and micro-politics in the same way as more traditional political categories such as ideology, tactics, etc.¹⁰

While we know how to talk about difference with respect to the various *issues* and *actors* in the movement—we can talk about the remarkable fact that this movement is comprised of environmental groups and labor unions, political parties and NGO’s, environmental campaigns and economic ones— it is much more difficult to speak of the difference that exists between groups that function according to principles of horizontality and radical democracy, and those that don’t. For even when we speak about diverse political approaches, such as anarchists and communists, political parties and NGO’s, we tend to rely on categorical descriptions and generalized statements about ideologies, and rarely on concrete political practices.

As a consequence of the paucity of our own analytical tools and categories, we then relegate critiques of process—or the belief that process is an essential part of democratizing daily life—to non-political space. Such critiques present themselves as *additional* to, rather than part of, substantive political debates. In this way discussions and critiques about democratizing the forum appear to be a way of making *the* forum function better, rather than re-constituting the political potential of the forum itself.

⁹ Gibson-Graham, J.K. 1996. *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Perhaps it is true, As Buonaventura de Sousa Santos says (this volume) that we need a new epistemology to assess experiences such as the WSF since they will always be found wanting when gauged with established criteria.

In addition to the important work of analyzing and assessing the problems of the “official” forum, it is important that those of us engaged in such work be attentive to the ways in which we do so, and to the effects that our modes of critique have. I truly believe that if we augment the current debates with more vivid descriptions and narratives of the “other” parts of the movement; if we point to their histories, ideas, perspectives as relevant in their own right; if we emphasize the fact that in spite of the official forum’s flaws, the occasion of Porte Alegre did already include a wide variety of interesting and important alternatives, unexpected encounters and outcomes, we will not only be giving a more accurate picture of the forum and this movement, we will begin to pluralize the political categories and visions that currently constrain both our analyses and the ability of movement actors to communicate with one another on more equal grounds.