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Marlies Glasius, Mary Kaldor, Helmut Anheier, editors-in-chief
Fiona Holland, managing editor

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Box 6.3: Alternative spaces within and beyond social forums

Since its inception in January 2001, the WSF has been presented by its organisers as heir to the wave of resistance against corporate globalisation that burst on to the public radar screen during the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle in 1999. The WSF, designed to generate positive alternatives, was viewed as a broad space of convergence for reflection and debate among all those opposed to neoliberal capitalism. Whereas counter-summit actions had given widespread visibility to the new movement, WSF organisers felt it was time to build a concrete vision for an alternative world. However, many of those who had been most active in organising earlier mass protests, particularly more radical grassroots and direct action-oriented sectors, remained sceptical. They felt the WSF represented an attempt by forces of the traditional left, including leftist political parties, trade unions, and large non-governmental organisations, to establish an hegemony over a new kind of movement that had largely escaped their control.

Many radicals argued that the WSF was inherently reformist in nature, and that anti-capitalists and all those opposed to state-oriented and social democratic approaches should focus on building their own grassroots networks, such as People's Global Action (PGA) (Grubacic 2003). Others, however, rejected the top-down representative structure of the WSF, which was seen as violating the decentralised, directly democratic modus operandi that had emerged within the broader movement. A well-known anarchist thus characterised the WSF as 'a supranational, nongovernmental body that seeks to shape the global agenda, with no accountability to and far removed from those whose daily lives are affected' (Millstein 2002). According to this view, the hierarchical command logic of the WSF is intrinsically antithetical to the horizontal networking logic that grassroots activists are trying to promote (Juris 2004). At the same time, the social forums themselves are constituted by an ongoing conflict between networking and command logics (Juris 2004; 2005; forthcoming). This partly involves a debate between those who view the forum as an open space (Sen 2004) and others who see it as a 'movement of movements' (Patomäki and Teivanen 2004).

However, many radicals recognised the strategic importance of the forum as a space of popular expression far exceeding the designs of its organisers. As a Brazilian media activist argued after the third edition of the WSF, 'The social forums are attracting a wide range of people, many of whom we really want to bring to our part of the movement' (Ortellado 2003). This position has become widely shared, leading to what many refer to as a strategy of 'contamination'. With respect to the European Social Forum (ESF), Linden Farrer (2002) argues, 'The best way of working with the ESF [is] being constructive in criticism, attempting to change the organization from inside and outside, preventing liberals from tending towards their self-destructive habits of strengthening existing structures of government.' Indeed, since the WSF was established, radical grassroots activists have organised numerous alternative spaces during world and regional social forums. Moreover, the strategy of building autonomous spaces, 'separate, yet connected' to official events embodies an emerging networking logic, involving, in part, decentralised coordination among diverse, autonomous elements (Juris forthcoming).

The Intergalactika Laboratory of Disobedience organised during the Youth Camp at the 2002 WSF became a model for future autonomous spaces, even if not necessarily conceived in these terms. Intergalactika provided an informal, participatory forum of exchange for younger, direct action-oriented activists from Europe and South and North America. The grassroots ambience provided an explicit contrast to the massive lecture halls housing official plenaries. In addition to discussions and workshops around diverse forms of resistance, activists shared their ideas and experiences, while organising confrontational direct actions against the official forum to make its contradictions visible. For example, at one point, a large group of activists from Intergalactika, including a Brazilian anarchist Samba band, denounced the official VIP room by occupying the space through a roving dance party. The VIP room was conspicuously absent the following year.

Following that experience, grassroots activists around Europe developed a proposal for an 'Autonomous space' at the ESF in Florence in November 2002 through a series of debates at PGA, No Border, and other gatherings the previous summer. Radicals continued to disagree about whether to participate in the official forum, but arrived at a compromise solution involving the organisation of a space beyond, but not against, the ESF. As the final proposal put it, 'this space would maintain its autonomy with respect to the "official"...

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ESF, but at the same time remain connected... This would mean... having one foot outside and another inside' (Nadir URL). At the same time, what began as a single project would divide into several alternative initiatives, including the Eur@action Hub, a space for networking and experimentation with new digital technologies, the No Work, No Shop space organised by the Italian Desobbedientes, Thematic Squares run by Italian autonomous workers, and a feminist space called Next Generation.

After Florence, the practice of creating alternative spaces within and beyond the forum caught on. For example, the 2003 WSF in Porto Alegre featured several autonomous initiatives, including a new Hub Project, the second edition of Intergalactika, a gathering of PGA-inspired groups, and a *Z Magazine* forum called Life After Capitalism. For its part, the second ESF in Paris in November 2003 featured an autonomous media centre and lab and a direct action space called Space Towards the Globalisation of Disobedient Struggles and Actions (GLAD).

The fourth edition of the WSF in India represented an important watershed. Moving the practice beyond largely urban European and Latin American-based autonomous groups, radical worker and peasant movements organised several alternative spaces in Mumbai, including the Peoples Movements Encounter II, a small PGA meeting and, perhaps most notably, Mumbai Resistance (MR). MR2004 involved a coalition of roughly 300 political movements and organisations, including Lohiaites, Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, and Sarvodaya workers. It was conceived at the International Thessaloniki Resistance Camp in June 2003, and took concrete form when the Coordinating Group of the International League of Peoples' Struggles (ILPS), decided, in July 2003, to organise a parallel event during the 2004 WSF. Although the Maoist and Gandhian peasant movements that organised Mumbai Resistance differed from their 'libertarian' counterparts behind previous alternative initiatives, they were just as vocal in denouncing forum organisers for their timid critique of capitalism, and even more so in rejecting their funding practices, which relied on large international agencies.

Indeed, the cultural politics surrounding social forums vary with the social, cultural, and political context within particular locales (see Box 6.2). Grassroots autonomous spaces reached their fullest expression during the October 2004 ESF in London, where a heated conflict had raged for months between self-styled 'horizontals' and their counterparts from traditional political formations dubbed the 'verticals' (see Box 6.4; Nunes 2004). In the midst of this battle, a diverse group of grassroots activists – some against the forum, others promoting reform – decided to organise a series of autonomous spaces, including the anti-authoritarian forums: Beyond ESF, Radical Theory Forum, Indymedia Center, a direct-action project called the Laboratory for Insurrectionary Imagination, Mobile Carnival Forum, Solidarity Village, Women's Open Day, and a conference called Life Despite Capitalism.

Despite differences in vision and position vis-à-vis ESF, these diverse projects, which involved thousands of participants in an array of projects, actions, and debates, were united in their commitment to a horizontal, directly democratic process and form. Activists associated with various autonomous spaces also carried out non-violent direct action, occupying a stage where the Mayor of London was scheduled to speak, to denounce his heavy-handed tactics during the organising process.

Mass-based movements are always diverse phenomena shot through with internal conflict and differentiation. Building alternative spaces within and beyond the forums represents an effective strategy for coordinating across diversity and difference, thus maintaining a certain unity in debate and action without ideological uniformity or hegemonic control. Indeed, the 2003 edition of the WSF in Porto Alegre incorporated some of these lessons by moving away from a centralised format towards a more horizontal design involving a series of thematic terrains, consultation process, and increased emphasis on self-organised workshops. Moreover, rather than remaining on the margins of the forum, the 2005 Youth Camp, which housed numerous grassroots projects, including the Caracol Intergalactika, was situated squarely at the centre. In this limited sense, the contamination strategy may be working, as alternative spaces, within and beyond social forums, help move them towards greater internal democracy and decentralisation.

Jeff Juris, University of Southern California