

The London ESF and the Politics of Autonomous Space

The third ESF has officially ended, but the barrage of attacks and counter-attacks around the autonomous actions and arrests continues to rage. The simmering conflict between the horizontal and verticals became fully visible when a group of activists from Beyond ESF, including the Wombles and many others, rushed the stage during an anti-Racism plenary Saturday night to denounce Ken Livingstone and the lack of democracy within the forum. Tensions grew after several activists were arrested on the way out, and resurfaced yet again when a highly respected Indymedia activist, who happened to have also played a key role in NOMAD and the broader ESF process, was dragged away by the police after trying to make a statement following the march on Sunday afternoon. Things have since come to a boil as SWP members, the mayor's allies, and others dismiss such direct actions as violent, anti-democratic, and even racist, while their critics continue to defend their right to take direct action to publicly voice their concerns. Debates that once pitted activists against mainstream politicians and bureaucrats in the WTO, World Bank, and IMF now rage within the very heart of the Global Justice Movement itself.

Before making too much of this situation, it is important to take a step back and reflect on the London ESF experience and the broader politics of autonomous space. Although perhaps more exaggerated this time around because of the nature of London's political culture- most notably the presence of SWP and Socialist Action- the tension between grassroots network-based movements and their more traditional organizational counterparts has been a constant since the beginning of the forums, and was present within earlier mass direct action mobilizations, including Seattle, as well. Intense struggles over political vision, tactics, and organizational form are not cause for alarm; indeed, they are constitutive of the convergence process that characterizes the forums and the broader movement from which they emerged. The important question is thus how to best manage such conflicts, rather than erase them entirely. And this is precisely where the politics of autonomous space has the most to offer.

Before describing my own experience in London, I should confess that I fully side with the horizontals. Not in the sense of an unrealistic utopia, but rather as a guiding vision, an ideal we should always aspire to. Horizontalism does not ignore informal hierarchies, but rather seeks mechanisms to control them, without reinscribing vertical structures into our formal organizational architectures. At the same time, horizontalism means always remaining open and flexible to diversity and difference- within certain limits, of course. Whereas those with divergent organizational practices may be welcome, those who support war and neoliberalism are not. I consider myself left libertarian and anti-capitalist, but I realize I form part of a much larger, complex, and contradictory whole. Building autonomous spaces, "separate, yet connected" as we used to say in Barcelona, becomes a way to manage conflict, respecting differences while sometimes acting together, and at other times taking critical action apart. Such a politics recognizes the importance of open space, but radically questions boundaries and clear demarcations. Rather than open space, we need to start thinking about multiple spaces, open not just internally, but also with respect to one another. Open space thus becomes networked space, physically manifest within and around the forum.

With respect to the politics of autonomous space, the London ESF was a tremendous success. Never before have there been so many diverse, disjunctive, yet complementary initiatives not entirely within or without, but rather straddling various mobile and often elusive boundaries. Some, like Beyond ESF, were more confrontational, while others, like the Indymedia Center

or Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination were neither for or against, but rather involved their own innovative forms of political and cultural production across the terrain of the forum and, indeed, the entire city itself. Although autonomous, these spaces were not entirely cut off from official events. In addition to the highly public oppositional actions, many of us moved fluidly- as much as London's expansive Underground system would allow- from Alexander Palace to Middlesex University, from the Camden Center to the LSE, and back again.

For me the London Forum began with Beyond ESF's opening of plenary on Wednesday night at Middlesex University, where spokespeople from each of the autonomous spaces presented their projects to an enthusiastic group of 200 grassroots activists. Over the next several days, Beyond ESF would be transformed into an electric hive of activity and encounter, involving thematic sessions, direct action planning, tactical workshops, and project coordination. Even more important were the informal exchanges among hundreds of activists gathered in the bar and canteen, or waiting on line at the vegan kitchen. I noticed a certain glow on the faces of old friends and comrades, which I instantly recognized from previous convergence centers, No Border camps, and PGA meetings. However, whereas such spaces often create a sense of living in a radical ghetto, this time we were mobile, reaching thousands of others within the official forum, while tactically intervening within the broader city as well.

I spent all day on Thursday at the Radical Theory Forum. Although the formal discussions were somewhat disappointing, the opportunity to meet dozens of others struggling to unite theory and practice, thus moving beyond anti-intellectualism within our movements and the lack of critical engagement within the academy, was extremely exciting. On Friday I made my first and only appearance at Alexander Palace. Although I was mainly interested in the parallel initiatives, I did not want to miss out on the main spectacle, which I do not mean in a derogatory sense. The value of the forums in a world where mass actions are increasingly difficult to pull off is that they allow us to come together to physically represent ourselves, embody our networks, generate affective ties, and perform our politics. It is perhaps too easy to dismiss such collective rituals in critical-rational terms, but how else to explain why they remain such important poles of attraction? Indeed, there have been calls for non-authoritarian anti-capitalists to abandon the forums since the first World Social Forum in 2000. Yet we continue to show up along the margins, and if this year is any indication, in ever greater numbers. Will London be the definitive break?

The overall feeling of the official forum this year did leave a lot to be desired. It was not so much the massive cathedral dimensions of the Palace, which can actually be quite stimulating, but the way the internal space was organized. It felt more like a massive trade fair, with political ideologies, study programs, and volunteer opportunities on offer, rather than a true space of dialogue, encounter, and exchange. Not that previous forums lived up to this ideal either, but this was perhaps the furthest away. Whether the forum's commercial feel was a direct result of the influence of the GLA or the SWP, I'll leave for others to decide. On a positive note, however, the bitter conflict within the organizing process was certainly a major factor in the proliferation of autonomous spaces. As for the panel I attended on the future of the ESF, there was a definite sense of having arrived at a Crossroads, that we are beginning to reproduce the same events and actions, year after year. I sensed nostalgia for the excitement and novelty of Genoa or Florence, and a distinct lack of ability to envision an alternative path. Perhaps it is time to let go, and reinvent the forum as something entirely new.

On Friday afternoon I went back to Beyond ESF, where I spent the afternoon meeting with PGA-inspired folks. Our most interesting discussion involved a new direct action concept: the

“Chain Re-Flaction”. While many of our friends were busy planning for the upcoming G8 actions in Scotland, we decided to take up a discussion that was begun at the last European PGA conference in Belgrade. The idea is to move beyond the Global Day of Action, which is in danger of becoming a tired cliché, toward a new vision of locally rooted, yet globally linked actions coordinated through a webpage. For example, the first action might be held in South America somewhere, say Cochabamba or Buenos Aires, and the torch of resistance would then be passed along to another continent, perhaps Asia, where an action might be organized in Mumbai. After each action, activists would send reports and reflections to the website, generating an accumulation of knowledge and experience: hence “Re-Flaction.” Whether or not this particular concept works, the main point is the need for innovation. Either we begin to recreate ourselves, or the train will soon stall out.

That same evening I joined several hundred others from Beyond ESF for a Yo Mango Tube Party. We tried to maintain a low profile until arriving at the Circle Line, but the authorities caught on at Victoria Station. We were forced outside and reorganized into an impromptu Reclaim the Streets. Unfortunately, we were herded toward a nearby police station, where many were registered and eventually let free. I then went over to the Camden Center to check out the Indymedia Space. Unlike previous actions and gatherings where Indymedia was only a tool for reporting about other events, this year media activists organized their own schedule of activities, including a four day conference on Communication Rights. I was lucky enough to catch the end of a roundtable presentation in the main theater by activists from local struggles around the world, including Africa, Asia, and Latin America. There was also food, music, and dancing. In addition to the several hundred people gathered in the theater, hundreds more were drinking beer and sending e-mails in the bar, uploading news stories and videos upstairs, or chatting informally in the halls. Incredibly, there were just as many, or perhaps even more people than at Beyond ESF. The autonomous spaces were not only exciting and lively, they were simply overflowing, one into the other.

On Saturday and Sunday, although I also attended workshops and discussions at Bloomsbury, including an informal discussion about activist research, I spent most of my time at the Life Desite Capitalism conference. Together with several hundred friends and colleagues, many of whom had also moved between and among different locales, we explored the concept of the Commons in different spheres: land, labor, communication, etc. Although the opening and closing plenaries reproduced some of the hierarchical structure many of us criticize within the main forum, the smaller workshop discussions were interesting and worthwhile. I particularly enjoyed the Saturday afternoon session on moments of excess, where our conversation ranged from mass direct actions to collaborative networking within open source development models. That evening I translated for a small group of Spanish activists at an ESF seminar discussion with Michael Hardt, who had just come from a gathering at Beyond ESF to found the first ever Assembly of Precarious Workers. Indeed, autonomous spaces are also excessive, bursting through the boundaries of the official forum, and the boundaries dividing one another.

Despite the vast number of innovative discussions, projects, and initiatives that came out of the numerous autonomous spaces, the focus of most post-Forum discussions has returned to the conflict between horizontals and verticals, and in particular, the direct actions and arrests at the Saturday evening plenary and Sunday’s march. Once again, this is not entirely negative. Indeed, the aim of direct action is precisely to make conflicts visible, provoke discomfort, and challenge commonly accepted ideas. Direct Action is transformative, both for the targets and participants alike. The important thing is what happens between now and the next ESF.

This isn't the first time an autonomous action has stirred up controversy among the ranks of forum organizers and participants. During the WSF in 2002 in Porto Alegre a large group of international activists from the Intergalactic Laboratory of Disobedience in the youth camp and Brazilian anarchists occupied the VIP room at the Catholic University. Although we clearly articulated that our action was not against the forum, but rather the top-down way it had been organized, Brazilian Organizing Committee members were livid. Luckily, our strategically situated allies were able to calm their nerves, and conflict with the police was avoided. Unfortunately, the same did not happen this time around.

Moreover, the 2002 action had a concrete impact. At the International Commission meeting that spring in Barcelona, we learned there were no plans for a VIP room the following year. On our side, many of us in the Movement for Global Resistance in Barcelona realized we could have a positive effect by creatively engaging the forum from the outside. Thus began our part in a series of discussions at the Strasbourg Border Camp, Leiden PGA conference, and elsewhere around creating an autonomous space in Florence with "one foot in, and one foot out." Several different spaces ultimately emerged, including the Hub and projects organized by the Disobedientes and Cobas. Although the Hub in particular was perhaps more outside than inside, and was also widely criticized for its marginality, the autonomous space concept had caught on, and would be reproduced in different guises and to varying degrees at subsequent forums in Porto Alegre, Paris, and Mumbai. The autonomous space model has perhaps come to its fullest fruition this year in London.

Unfortunately, rather than accept the basic legitimacy of direct action to make publicly visible contradictions and disagreements within the forum process, some ESF organizers have chosen instead to denounce the recent actions as undemocratic and, even more alarming, racist. Their discourse sounds eerily like past statements from James Wolfensohn, George Bush, or Tony Blair. Why do they support direct action only when directed against others? On the other hand, it is unfortunate that activists chose an anti-Racist workshop to make their demands heard on Saturday night, although this has more to do with the fact that Ken Livingstone was speaking than anything else. There is simply no justification for the arrests on Saturday night or Sunday, and even less for the subsequent campaign of delegitimation. Yet all is not lost. There is still plenty of time for ESF organizers to react more constructively, and begin to incorporate the lessons learned leading up to the next forum in Athens. On the other side, before the inevitable calls for abandoning the forum come again, we might wait and see, recognizing that the politics of autonomous space allow us to remain true to our own values, forms, and practices, while tactically intervening within the official forum to move out from our radical ghettos and simultaneously spark constructive change.

What I am ultimately suggesting is that we renew our vision of the forum itself, recognizing that our movements are too diverse, even contradictory, to be contained within a single space, however open it may be. This does not mean abandoning the process, but rather building on the London experience to recast the forum as a network of interconnected, yet autonomous spaces converging across a single urban terrain at a particular point in time. Some spaces may be larger, and thus generate more gravity than others, while the boundaries are always blurry, diffuse, and permeable. Moreover, there will necessarily be contradiction and struggle, even within and between our networks. Such conflict should not be feared, but rather recognized as an integral part of the forum itself. In places like Prague and Genoa urban space was divided among diverse forms of direct action practice. In London we finally began to incorporate a similar logic on our own terms, without reacting to an enemy. As for we critics, rather than

return to our bunkers to recreate an imagined state of pure horizontality, we would do better to recognize that mass movements are always conflictual and contradictory, that horizontalism is about learning to manage conflict without reintroducing formal centers of command. This is the lesson I learned in London, and why I support the politics of autonomous space.