Social Forums as Space: A Response to Peter Marcuse

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Social Forums themselves are not social movements, nor wish to be. While ultimately coming to this conclusion, Peter Marcuse focuses his debate on ‘the perspective of the social forums as continuations in the line of social movements’ (p: 420) — following Manuel Castells’ (1977) most restrictive definition of social movements as vehicles to achieve basic social change. Drawing on experiences garnered from the Boston Social Forum in 2004, he develops proposals on how to approve the organizational structure of the Social Forums in order to augment their efficiency and contribute more effectively to social change.

Continuing debates about whether or not to gain more political strength through strategic institutionalization or through centralizing decentralized movements, seem to be an integral part of the history of social movements. These debates have also been a central element in the formation and preparation processes of the Social Forums since their emergence in 2000. Dissent about organizational orientation in this field — striving for a movement, NGO or political party structure and whether to shape it vertically or horizontally — may reinforce existing gaps between political groups. It may, additionally, lead to a profound debate, thereby contributing to political processes.

So, while it seems to be part of the game to ask these kinds of questions, I still would like to point out some aspects of the debate which can be considered problematic.

Successor and culmination?

First of all, referring to the Social Forums as the ‘successor and culmination’ of previous social struggles, whether accurate or not, is not just an analytical problem, but also has political implications. Seeing the Social Forum in this light, as today’s protagonists of social change and the avant-garde of social movements, suggests that all kinds of social struggles converge in this particular organizational form and also may be represented through it. This neglects the fact that important groups and activists, for various reasons, never were (nor wanted to be) part of the Social Forums and would reject that particular form of representation — examples are groups like elements of the Argentine Piqueteros or Mexican Zapatistas, as well as many urban movements. It also ignores the possibility that conflicts about substantial social transformations may be fought, not only in this kind of organizational form, but, of necessity, at various other venues.

1 Though later adaptations of this restrictive definition by Castells and a recent debate by Pickvance (2003) are acknowledged, this concept serves as starting point for further reasoning.
2 For reflections on this subject by protagonists involved in the WSF preparation processes see, for example, Anand et al. (2004).
3 For a discussion on strategic debates at the European Social Forum in London see, for example, Candeias (2004).
4 For example, the Austrian Social Forum preparation process seemed to be characterized by bridging and reinforcing such gaps.
Scales of social change

The next point relates to a rather narrow notion of social change implied by Marcuse. Dealing with political power relations in contemporary times seems to involve much more than shifting power from a government to the dispossessed. Starting from a notion of globalization as a complex rescaling and reconfiguration of politics and economy on various spatial scales, from the global to the body, a contested process of uneven demand and re-territorialization (see Swyngedouw, 1997; Brenner, 1998; Keil and Brenner, 2003), the term ‘globalization’ can be taken as an ambiguous but central metaphor for a variety of processes being contested and addressed by social movements. These processes exist simultaneously on various spatial scales, at a material, discursive, symbolic and everyday life level. ‘Social change’, consequently, would have to be thought of within this variety of scales and dimensions. The ‘complex interplay between institutions and processes on different spatial scales’ also ‘influences and provokes the search for new forms and scales of resistance’ (Köhler and Wissen, 2003: 948), the Social Forums being one such form of resistance, but not the only or most important one.

Social Forums in this sense can be interpreted as a crystallization and articulation of protest, and above all as a workspace where experiences and struggles on various spatial scales are interchanged and linked to a broader context (see Brand and Köhler, 2002). Social Forums provide an opportunity for linking different kinds of everyday life struggles and identifying the underlying system in terms of commodification, exploitation and domination on various spatial scales, as suggested by Marcuse. Of course, these are not the only places to do so. It makes a difference to a small tenants’ organization fighting for accessible housing conditions or for land rights to be linked to similar experiences in other places and to relate to debates on trade liberalization and commodification processes. Also, the strategies and scales of contestation are always determined by very concrete experiences and contexts. Struggles for access to housing, of course, take different forms depending on whether they take place in Brazil or Austria, though parts of the underlying logic may be held in common. This does not seem to be a question of being generally anti-governmental, but rather implies simultaneously organizing and politicizing the various dimensions involved. In this way ‘struggles on a global scale . . . strengthen the struggles against power relations in everyday life . . . and vice versa’ (Köhler and Wissen, 2003: 949). Social Forums can offer a space where these various forms and scales of experiences and struggles are linked and politicized — but can hardly act as actors themselves.5

The place

Social Forums also operate in very real places. As mega-events they interfere in very specific ways with local structures and political cultures. Particularly in the cases of the World and Continental Social Forums, a strong involvement and broad support through the local technical and political structures was a precondition for the proceeding of the event. This involvement of activists from movements, NGOs, unions, local state institutions and the active assistance of local people, as well as the contribution of movement infrastructure (Mayer, 2003) like organizational experiences, networks and meeting places, was absolutely essential. The extent of involvement of different actors was regularly a subject of contestation. Accusations of orchestrating the event for their own political campaigns were made against groups, parties or unions. The preparation processes, however, also created opportunities for internal political debate and rapprochement.

5 For a detailed debate on considering the Social Forums as a movement or as an open space see, for example, Whitaker (2004).
Consequently, the political culture of the particular place also becomes visible in the event. Interesting examples include contributions on local experiences with participatory budgets, a widely debated model of democratizing local politics (see Leupolt, 2003), experimented in the city of Porto Alegre, but also in the small communist suburb communities of Paris, like St Denis or Bobigny, where the Second European Social Forum took place.

Place, in terms of travel distance and expenses, leads inevitably to the exclusion of many, and invariably to a strong involvement of local groups who would be unlikely to attend a similar meeting on another continent. Examples of this would include, in Porto Alegre, the strong presence of members of the landless movement (MST); in Florence, activists of the social centres; or in Paris, the farmers’ movement (Confédération Paysanne). This enhancement of local involvement and debate on one hand, while visualizing and exchanging specific experiences with people from other contexts, could be another modest but significant effect of Social Forums. In that sense the choice of place, like organizing the 4th WSF 2004 in India and recent debates about moving the WSF 2007 to Africa, has far more than symbolic implications.

Possible strategies?

Although permanent improvement of the structures seems to be a major part of Social Forum processes, there remains the delicate problem of who controls and decides where to start and how to proceed (see Brand and Görg, 2003). Returning to Marcuse’s proposals, it might, in some cases, be an important first step to ‘hammer out’ some common principles (p. 423). It is certainly not a lack of general principles and statements which makes emancipatory politics so slow and difficult. Today, most conferences and institutions have some ambitious and sometimes far-reaching general principles in their policy field: for example, urban problems are dealt with even at UN-Habitat conferences; and at a general level, even the World Bank might agree on a general principle such as the right to water. At past Social Forums, agreement on common alternative declarations regarding, for example, the right to the city, housing, health, food, water, etc., was frequently a prominent part of working groups and seminars. When it comes to details, however, agreement on common principles and strategies is generally difficult to obtain and also may lead to exclusions. A culture of debate, where differences can be handled, and a space for exchange and learning processes therefore seems to be crucial.

Still, I would not agree that there is no linkage to ‘immediate action outcomes’ (p. 421). On the contrary, most movements present and represented at the Social Forums stem from direct action contexts. Every group or network acts in its specific form and field: some focusing on practical everyday life struggles such as access to housing, land rights, food, health, water, etc., some campaigning against transnational agreements, while others are working on abstract analysis. Many of these examples demonstrate that there exist innumerable alternative approaches. Interactions at Social Forums can strengthen, inspire and inform such movements, creating resonances between them, but will hardly create new movements. If networks use the occasion to meet at a Social Forum, it is up to the involved parties to apply these new experiences to their different realities — and thereby contribute to a spatialization of the network.7 The Social Forum can offer just a space.

6 The installation of ‘autonomous spaces’ at some Continental Forums, organized by groups claiming difference and independence from the official organizing committee, also can be read as an internal struggle for a plurality of spaces and space definition. Anyhow, if Social Forums are conceived as an open space for a variety of actors, it becomes clear that there is not a uniform reading of the event but it produces as many perspectives as participants.

7 For urban related issues examples are the seminars of the Habitat International Coalition (HIC) or of the International Network of Urban Research and Action (INURA) at the WSF.
References


