Gramsci, Polanyi and Impressions from Africa on the Social Forum Phenomenon

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Peter Marcuse is optimistic that the Social Forum phenomenon can ‘bring together elements of many social movements, afford an opportunity for coalition-building among them, frequently around urban issues, and thus make a significant contribution to achieving such change’ (this issue: abstract). But seen from South Africa, there are a great many structural problems with the model. Indeed, debate currently.rages within the independent left — led by the radical urban social movements of Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town — over whether the World Social Forum (WSF) should be embraced, or indeed rejected, if in 2007 South Africa is the host country. (The other serious contender is Kenya.)

To explore and understand the South African activists’ ambiguous sentiments about the WSF requires a scale jump, from the global to the recent Africa Social Forum continental meetings, before returning to uneven prospects for building from the bottom up, instead, via municipal-scale Social Forums or via sectorally-based forums, such as land and food, water, energy, etc, in areas that link urban/rural, red/green, North/South and gender concerns.

On the one hand, Marcuse is absolutely correct that ‘while limited direct action at the international level, e.g. Seattle, Genoa, Cancun, are important, ultimately the decisive actions will be those of national governments, both internally and acting with other national governments. To the extent the focus is on action, national targets remain critical’ (p. 420). Agreeing, Johannesburg Anti-Privatisation Forum secretary Trevor Ngwane (2003: 55) explains the limits of ‘autonomist’ strategies: ‘Some people attack the idea of targeting state power. The argument that globalisation undermines the role of the nation state gets translated into an excuse for avoiding the fight with your own national bourgeoisie. But we in South Africa cannot [fail to] confront the ANC and Mbeki. American activists can’t [fail to] confront Bush’.

On the other hand, when considering the South African case (like the US, Canada and many European countries), national-scale Forums may be premature at this stage. At least in the foreseeable future, there are far too many divisions between the key organizations representing oppressed peoples, to forge the necessary unity for a workable national Forum in many settings. However, in Zimbabwe, Zambia and several other African countries, the Social Forum has already become the venue for an extraordinary nationally regroupment of the left forces, in the spirit of coalition-building Marcuse points to.

The problems with the model to date are not based upon scale, really, but upon politics. They begin in its origins, amongst elite social democrats who, activist critics regularly point out, mirrored the Davos World Economic Forum with a top-down call for an expensive gathering in a symbolic site. In the 2003 Porto Alegre WSF, organizers were accused of systematically sidelining more radical forces such as Indymedia, the youth network Intergalactica and the ZNet network. Anarchist writer Andrej Grubacic asked after the 2003 WSF, ‘Do we really want to create a movement that will resemble a cocktail party in the lounge of the Plaza São Rafael Hotel in Porto Alegre? Do we want a movement dominated by middle-aged bureaucrats wearing Palestinian
scarves...’ (Grubacic, 2003; see also the deservedly influential writings of Naomi Klein, 2003). (This isn’t a matter, as Marcuse identifies in the Boston case, of insufficient grassroots participation; it is about the accountability, vision and militancy of the leading layers.)

Interpreting the radical political potential of the Social Forum given such beginnings is one of the most interesting dilemmas for sympathetic intellectuals. The WSF organizers are now more than a bit embarrassed that their Workers Party comrades performed so ably in the service of Brazilian neoliberalism and sub-imperialism (in Haiti for instance) that they lost elections and hence state power in the very city and province which became synonymous with the WSF.

Regardless of the venue, what is surely the main accomplishment of the WSF is the construction of dialogical spaces. These spaces might ultimately support ideological, analytical, strategic and even tactical convergence between far-flung movements which span the globe. Indeed, the Social Forum network is potentially a means by which the ‘globalization of people’ can become real, a genuine counterpoint to the ‘globalization of capital’. (Perhaps Marcuse and all of us should finally bury the awful word ‘anti-globalization’.)

In the process, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004: xii–xiii) insist that their new category, ‘the multitude’ of oppressed people (as distinct from the ‘masses’), might also ‘be conceived as a network: an open expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common’. Again, ideally, the network form provides ‘the model for an absolutely democratic organisation that corresponds to the dominant forms of economic and social production, and is also the most powerful weapon against the ruling power structure’. According to Hardt and Negri, the challenge is ‘to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different’ (ibid.: 88). Whereas previously, dissenters were divided along sectoral, geographical and other lines, ‘today network movements are able to address all of [the grievances] simultaneously’ (ibid.). Drawing upon Ashwin Desai’s (2002) pathbreaking book about South African urban social movements, We are the Poors, Hardt and Negri note both the ‘remarkable’ non-racialism through which Africans and people of Indian descent struggle in unison, and the global vision through which these movements ‘target neoliberal globalisation as the source of their poverty’ (2004: 135).

Is the network format something invented by contemporary movements, and crucial to the flavor and durability of the WSF? Surely not. To consider historical examples, slavery abolition campaigning was not without emotional paternalism and indeed was often powered by British capital’s competitive drive. Still, it became one of the most important international solidarity movements ever, and continued into the twentieth century in campaigning pressure against King Leopold’s plunder of the then Belgian Congo. The continent’s nationalist movements forged Pan-Africanism and in the process, established newly empowered relations with northern critics of colonialism, apartheid and racism. Vigorous mass African movements against colonialism and imperial adventurism, stretching from the 1950s Kenyan Mau Mau and Nkrumah’s Ghanaian visions, to the liberation of South Africa in 1994, inspired leftists and anti-racists, whether militant leaders like Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael or church-basement activists. (To be sure, as Che Guevara found out during 1965, organizing and occasionally fighting in what was then Mobutu’s Congo, not all peasant societies proved ripe for the revolution.)

These are the sorts of internationalist networking traditions which Marcuse and other Social Forum strategists and allied intellectuals should periodically recall, rather than assuming Zapatismo in 1994 and Seattle in 1999 represent a brand new mode of politics, simply because these broke from an ossified 1980s–90s mould of non-governmental, ‘developmental’ activism, and turned its gaze to global norms and processes. Yet what this largely semantic problem — of the Social Forum movement as network — raises is a more serious question: do we interpret the politics of the Social Forum as a site in
which anti-neoliberal politics are a given, or is the terrain already excessively biased towards a mere reformist agenda, because of the very elements at work, namely civil society organizations?

Civil societies through the eyes of Gramsci or Polanyi?

Only a few years ago, it appeared that even post-colonial African civil society organizations which once had a more radical developmental agenda were largely civilized, tamed and channeled into serving each new incarnation of elite interest. In reaction to the excesses of exhausted, corrupt and repressive nationalist political parties, many of which were tossed from power in the early 1990s, there emerged a new generation of democratic movements, human rights advocates, NGOs, churches, youth and women’s groups and a variety of civil society groups. ‘However, before we begin to idealise this phenomenon’, warned the late Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, ‘it is well to remind ourselves that whatever else it is, it is first and foremost a child of necessity, of desperation even’ (Ake, 2000: 47). Structural adjustment meant the loss of state welfare programs, and in turn the need for civil societies to pick up the pieces. When amidst the wreckage, alternative political parties emerged from the grassroots and shopfloors (most spectacularly in Zambia, perhaps), they too often fell into the trap of deepening the market’s rule, at the expense of popular interests.

Today, a more critical approach is evident in Africa’s social movement hotspots, especially South Africa. Some scholars might recognize these dynamics as more akin to Hungarian social scientist Karl Polanyi’s view of society — as an active, countervailing force against market excesses (in The Great Transformation, 1944) — than to the pessimistic picture of civil society painted by Italian political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci (in his 1930s’ Prison Notebooks). This dichotomous reading of civil society — as a stabilizing, conservative force (Gramsci), or instead as a ‘new social movement’ challenge to neoliberalism (Polanyi) — presents the WSF with some pressing challenges. Who qualifies to join processes such as the WSF if well-funded status quo organizations — ‘co-opted NGOs’, in the South African lingo — continue to serve as combatants of the more rigorous social-change activists here?

During the 1930s, Gramsci analyzed the rise of fascism and the simultaneous failure of liberatory political movements in Italy and other Western societies, and explained that the hegemony of capitalism depended upon not merely repression, but also consent:

> When the State trembled, a sturdy structure of civil society was at once revealed. The State was only the outer ditch, behind which there stood a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks . . . The massive structures of modern democracies, both as State organisations, and as complexes of associations in civil society, constitute for the art of politics as it were the ‘trenches’ and the permanent fortifications of the front in the war of position (Gramsci, 1971: 238, 243).

Michael Burawoy (2003: 215) interprets: ‘Civil society smothers any attempt to seize state power directly, so that revolutionary activity involves the slow, patient work of reorganising associations, trade unions, parties, schools, legal system, and so forth’ — i.e. Gramsci’s ‘war of position’, in contrast to a more insurrectionary ‘war of movement’. Polanyi’s most powerful idea, meanwhile, was probably that of ‘a double movement’ in which ‘the extension of the market organization in respect to genuine commodities was accompanied by its restriction’, as society resisted excessive commodification (Polanyi, 1944: 76).

To illustrate, South Africans fighting for ‘decommodification’ in recent years have established interlocking, overlapping campaigns to turn basic needs into genuine human rights. These include demands for anti-retroviral medicines to fight AIDS; at least 50 liters of free water and 1 kilowatt hour of free electricity for each individual every day; extensive land reform; prohibitions on service disconnections and evictions; free
education; and even a monthly ‘Basic Income Grant’. Social movements, women’s groups, churches, NGOs and trade unions are all basically committed to this agenda, even if there are temporary divisions over political-party alignments which prevent, in the foreseeable future, a South African Social Forum from arising with all the necessary forces. The main trade union movement, the Treatment Action Campaign and most church activists have strong loyalties to the ruling party. In contrast, the urban and rural social movements, Jubilee South Africa, solidarity groups working on Palestine and Burma, and the Environmental Justice Networking Forum are all vigorous critics of the South African government, and formed the ‘Social Movements Indaba’ as a prototype for a national Social Forum — but of a more explicitly left style than the standard WSF.

These campaigns seem to throw up the possibility of ‘universal’ programmatic work, perhaps via a national WSF process at some stage, or via a human-rights agenda being extended to socio-economic rights (as in South Africa’s 1996 Constitution, still largely unimplemented), or more immediately in the spirit of the African National Congress’ uneven but potentially radical ‘Freedom Charter’, which will celebrate its 50th birthday amongst much political debate in June 2005. While there are all manner of problems with ‘rights discourses’ (see, for example, Tushnet, 1984), they do parallel the kinds of reactions to rampant market penetration now underway across the world, since civil society organizations are expected to stand in when neoliberal policies shrink the state. But here arises another dilemma for the Social Forum strategists: under conditions of never-ending structural adjustment, most Africans who lobby for democracy and basic socio-economic services from their state regimes are, and will continue to be, frustrated. Progress will be forged not from good ideas and polite advocacy, technicist interventions and insider persuasion tactics, but in mass-movement campaigns emanating from well-organized, democratic communities and shopfloors.

Lessons from Africa

Across Africa, the heroic anti-colonial movements of the last century have their echo, today, in a diverse set of ecological, community, feminist and labor struggles. In addition to South Africa, in recent years, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Senegal, Zambia and Zimbabwe have been among the most intense sites of conflicts between social activists, repressive ruling parties and big capital. The destruction of democratic possibilities was perhaps preordained, in many cases, by the character of the colonial inheritance (Mamdani, 1996: 111, 287). But the continuation of ‘IMF Riots’ in many African countries confirms that the global justice movement’s critique of neoliberalism remains valid and relevant.

It is crucial to point out, however, that the activists’ critique of neoliberalism is not limited to globalization, ‘Washington Consensus’ macroeconomic policies, debt peonage and unfair terms of trade. (The Africa Trade Network, the Gender and Trade Network and Jubilee Africa’s affiliates are regular intellectual critics — and active protesters — at the sites of global-scale negotiations and African elite summits.) In addition, the micro-developmental and ecological damage done through market-centered policies is now also widely recognized, notwithstanding some co-opted NGOs’ flirtation with high-interest microfinance, public-private partnership ideology and the like.

Some of the most notable recent upsurges of micro-developmental protest have been in areas of environmental justice, perhaps beginning with the militant example of 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai two decades ago, building Kenya’s Greenbelt Movement against the interests of the corrupt national state and big capital. More recently, women in the oil rich Nigerian Delta have regularly conducted sit-ins at the local offices of multinationals. Oil workers vigorously protest at several Delta platforms over not only wages but also broader community eco-social demands, and even took corporate managers hostage for a time.
In Botswana, indigenous-rights campaigners lobby the DeBeers diamond corporation, the World Bank and the Botswana government against the displacement of Basarwa/San Bushmen from the central Kalahari. Elsewhere, activists resist large dams that threaten mass displacement in Namibia (Epupa), Lesotho (Highlands Water Project), Uganda (Bujagali) and Mozambique (Mphanda Nkuwa), as well as the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline. Support from northern environmentalists has been crucial. Solidarity has also been a feature of reparations campaigners, led by South Africa’s Jubilee and Khulumani, who reacted to 2004 court defeats with pledges to campaign yet harder.

There are similar campaigns elsewhere in Africa against environmental racism, toxic dumping, asbestos damage, incinerators, biopiracy, genetically modified food, carbon trading and air pollution. Movements against privatization of Africa’s basic urban services — mainly water and electricity, but also municipal waste, health and education — began in Accra and Johannesburg in 2000 and quickly attracted global solidarity. A Pan-African Treatment network of AIDS activists is taking forward the work of South Africa’s Treatment Action Campaign, to challenge unfair monopoly patents on life-saving medicines.

Can such efforts become more coherently aligned? If so, the African Social Forum (ASF) might be the source of such coordination and consensus-building. From 10–14 December 2004, several hundred African grassroots, labor, women’s and student leaders gathered for the network’s summit in Lusaka. The ASF’s emergence has not been easy, because of regional differences, languages, cultural styles and different political priorities. In January 2002, dozens of African organizations met in Bamako, Mali, in preparation for the Porto Alegre World Social Forum. Bamako was one of the first-ever substantial conferences to combine progressive NGOs, labor, activist churches and social movements from all parts of the continent. It was followed by ASF sessions in Johannesburg (August 2002), Addis Ababa (January 2003), Maputo (December 2003), Mumbai (January 2004) and now Lusaka.

In the spirit of Polanyi, the original Bamako Declaration insisted that ‘the values, practices, structures and institutions of the currently dominant neoliberal order are inimical to and incompatible with the realization of Africa’s dignity, values and aspirations’ (Africa Social Forum, 2002: 1). Of particular concern was the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD, a program driven by the South African government re-legitimizing multilateral agencies in the context of Pretoria’s sub-imperial commercial and geopolitical ambitions):

The Forum rejected neoliberal globalisation and further integration of Africa into an unjust system as a basis for its growth and development. In this context, there was a strong consensus that initiatives such as NEPAD that are inspired by the IMF-WB strategies of Structural Adjustment Programs, trade liberalization that continues to subject Africa to an unequal exchange, and strictures on governance borrowed from the practices of Western countries, are not rooted in the culture and history of the peoples of Africa (ibid.).

However, reflecting Gramscian concerns, a critique of the ASF emerged in Lusaka from South Africa’s Social Movements Indaba: ‘The under-representation of social movements in relation to NGOs is reflected in the political content of the forum. It manifests in the persistence of the notion that the ASF is nothing other than a space, in contrast to the perspective that it should have a program to advance our struggle against neoliberalism’ (cited in Alexander and Mbali, 2004). Hence, as Amanda Alexander and Mandisa Mbali wrote of the ASF: ‘Capturing Social Forums and blunting their impact is a tantalising outcome for the World Bank and “third-way” politicians’. Yet they also point out that because of strong advocacy by social movements, the danger was averted in Lusaka (Alexander and Mbali, 2004). As Console Tleane of the Johannesburg-based Freedom of Expression Institute reported in the ASF’s daily African Flame newspaper, ‘The message was clear: there [was] no way that the ASF would entertain any dealings with the World Bank’ (Tleane, 2004: 1), notwithstanding a poignant appeal by the
Johannesburg-based secretary of Civicus International. Observed Alexander and Mbali, ‘Activists in the NEPAD session came to the same conclusions on the potential of neoliberal institutions and policies’.

One of the main reasons why the ASF has such a feisty spirit against Mbeki’s NEPAD initiative, is the increasingly common experience that Social Forum organizations faced from their respective states during the prior few months: in a word, repression. The most obvious case was Zimbabwe, where Social Forum member groups and allies active on human rights and governance are threatened with outright closure. In Zambia, too, the ASF hosts in the group Women for Change were harassed and arrested by the state shortly after the ASF meeting ended. The new Kenyan government clamped down hard on Maasai land activists. And even the South African state — basking in its tenth anniversary of freedom — regularly used force and bannings to prevent protests during 2004, such as on March 21 (Human Rights Day) when the Anti-Privatisation Forum was prevented from having a peaceful protest at, ironically, the opening of the Constitutional Court’s Hillbrow headquarters; on election day, April 14, when the Landless Peoples Movement faced mass arrest and torture; and on various other occasions when excessive use of police force was used to break up protests against genuine grievances.¹

A challenge for intellectuals in solidarity

The forces on one side of the double movement — the penetration of economic values — are immensely powerful, as Social Forum critics of neoliberalism and repression are finding. For African civil societies to avoid the Gramscian role, serving as a trench to protect the state from challenges by oppressed people, it is increasingly important that the neoliberal philosophy is contested more visibly amongst the continent’s intellectuals, with ever stronger ties to democratic organizations.

Consider the once great tradition that conjoined liberatory thinkers and activists (and occasionally national leaders), exemplified by Claude Ake, Steve Biko, A.M. Babu, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Ruth First, Patrice Lumumba, Samora Machel, Archie Mafeje, Ben Magubane, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Oginga Odinga, Bade Onimode, Walter Rodney, Thomas Sankara and others who, mainly, were in their prime during the 1960s-70s. Perhaps the Martinique-born philosopher Frantz Fanon put it best, in his discussion of intellectuals in liberated zones of Algeria, circa 1961:

One of the greatest services that the Algerian revolution will have rendered to the intellectuals of Algeria will be to have placed them in contact with the people, to have allowed them to see the extreme, ineffable poverty of the people, at the same time allowing them to watch the awakening of the people’s intelligence and the onward progress of their consciousness . . . Today, the people’s tribunals are functioning at every level, and local planning commissions are organising the division of large-scale holdings, and working out the Algeria of tomorrow. An isolated individual may obstinately refuse to understand a problem, but the group or the village understands with disconcerting rapidity. It is true that if care is taken to use only a language that is understood by graduates in law and economics, you can easily prove that the masses have to be managed from above. But if you speak the language of everyday, if you are not obsessed by the perverse desire to spread confusion and to rid yourself of the people, then you will realise that the masses are quick to seize every shade of meaning and to learn all the tricks of the trade (Fanon, 1963: 189).

This legacy has been kept alive and well today in the writings of Africa’s independent-minded nationalists, feminists, critical political economists and anti-imperialists, including Jimi Adesina, Neville Alexander, Samir Amin, Dennis Brutus, Fantu Cheru, Demba Dembele, Yasmine Fall, Dot Keet, Sara Longwe, Amina Mama, Mahmood Mamdani, Thandika Mkandawire, Dani Nabudere, Njoki Njehu, Adebayo Olukoshi, ¹ The Freedom of Expression Institute (www.fxi.org.za) has been doing superb work, monitoring and contesting Pretoria’s periodic repression of civil society.
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Mohau Pheko, Brian Raftopoulos, Issa Shivji, Yash Tandon and many others who have helped to shape ASF constituents’ strategies. (Of course, conditions are not easy in most sites of African intellectual work, with many academics surviving on less than US $100 a month pay. Even in once proud universities like Dar es Salaam and Makerere, former progressive intellectuals are prone to taking jobs or consultancies with multilateral agencies, donors, corporations and wealthy Northern NGOs, instead of devoting time and energies to unremunerated, risky work on behalf of civil societies.)

Nevertheless, what is encouraging is how well new layers of organic intellectuals are arising from the struggles in various sectors referred to above — so much so that it today seems much more likely for profound critiques and strategies aimed at overthrowing existing power relations to emanate from cross-border coalitions of activists working sector-by-sector. International solidarity carefully pursued with respect and understanding is a crucial component of this process, as suggested by experiences in various radically-oriented rights-based sectoral networks. These include land (Via Campesino), healthcare (International Peoples Health Council), free schooling (Global Campaign for Education), water (the People’s World Water Forum), energy/climate change (the Durban Declaration), debt (Jubilee South) and democratic development finance (IFIs-Out! and the World Bank Bonds Boycott), trade (Our World is Not for Sale!) and the like. Regrettably, what the two major South African cross-sectoral municipal-scale Social Forum organizing efforts have shown, in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, is that limits are quickly reached when small, multi-hatted activist gatherings convene without a critical mass or urgently compelling cause.

In these regards, we must hope Marcuse is correct ‘that the groupings/movements represented at the Forums might coalesce around a single set of demands, most plausibly a political platform’. But in the meantime, the responsibility of applied intellectuals is surely to help develop issues and identify sites of interrelationship between sectors, spaces and scales of radical politics. An April 2002 conference of two such committed organizations — the Council for Development and Social Research in Africa and Third World Network-Africa — called upon ‘scholars and activist intellectuals within Africa and in the Diaspora, to join forces with social groups whose interests and needs are central to the development of Africa’.2 This is the mandate here now, if intellectuals are to become and remain aware of the many creative ways the Social Forum forces can transcend the difficulties posed by the Gramsci/Polanyi dichotomy.

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