Rejoinder

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The four responses to my piece are excellent, and cast more light on what we all agree is an important development in the contest with neoliberalism: the Social Forum phenomena. Indeed, they highlight the fact that the forums as such are only a part of a broader phenomenon, in which, across as well as within borders and across as well as within sectors, people are struggling to join forces, to find common positions, to develop coordinated strategies, against developments that affect them all profoundly and negatively, if in different ways.

Janet Conway phrases the most basic issue more concisely and more clearly than I did: ‘are Forums a space or an actor?’ (p. 425). The question comes up in all four responses. Janet is clearly on the ‘spaces’ end of the discussion. Patrick Bond would like to see them as actors, but sees difficult problems still to be overcome before they are.1 Thomas Ponniah argues that in Norway they already are effective actors. Bettina Köhler makes a point, which is obvious when stated but needs stating, that the very holding of a Social Forum is an act already. When I asked whether the Social Forums were a further development around social movements or a social movement themselves, I was asking, in Janet’s phrasing, whether they should be seen as actors, and if so, what kind, and I hedged the answer: not yet actors, in any case.

The issue is an important one. I feel only able to come to two very limited conclusions on it. One is that the situation varies widely from place to place and perhaps time to time: what Thomas describes in Norway or Patrick in Africa is light-years different from — ahead of — what I have seen in the United States, where the Boston Social Forum is a shining example, an example that efforts in New York City, Connecticut, Seattle and other places have not yet been able to emulate. [That may be different now, with efforts growing out of the 2005 Porto Alegre conference to put together a nationwide forum.] And it will vary from time to time also; the World Social Forums have each been different, and time and place matters.

The other conclusion I would come to is that experimentation is crucial, that we need to allow space for various approaches, that the long-term potential of social forums is not yet obvious but will only come from practice combined with hard thinking and discussion. My concrete suggestions for how the work of Social Forums might be furthered are really suggestions as to what further experiments might systematically be worth attempting.

The issue about the state, however, is, it seems to me at this point, a red herring. It may be a difficult question to decide whether ‘we can change the world, without taking power’. The question presumes, of course, that taking power means taking state power — at least together with other forms of power, but certainly included. Nobody is offering us power at this point. If we are disappointed with a Lula, or a Chavez, or for that matter a Castro or a Mandela, it is not because ‘we’ have taken power and its use has betrayed us, but precisely because ‘we’ have not taken power, and even good leaders like these

1 He quotes the Social Movements Indaba asking the same question, whether: ‘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’ (p. 437); see also the debate recounted at www.apf.org.za/article.php3?id_article=21).
do not and perhaps cannot under present circumstances fundamentally change the relationships of power under which we live, globally. Yet would anyone reasonably argue against supporting Lula, or Chavez, or Mandela, or Castro, against their opposition?\(^2\) Their inadequacies or limitations simply mean that the fight for social justice does not end with their election, that issues of power have not yet been resolved, that la luta continua.

The argument against a linear road to change, or that there is only one system of oppression, or that all struggles are or can be unified, is against a straw man. On the other hand, the prevalent systems of oppression are linked; few feminists, or workers, or environmentalists, or ‘anti-globalization’ activists, would deny that. And few would consider state action irrelevant: laws and policies against gender discrimination, pollution, sweatshop conditions, are after all actions of the state, and forms of social transformation. They need to be pursued, separately and together.

But that we must be involved with questions of state power, who has it, how it is exercised, seems to me beyond question. In this sense all social movements are, or wish to be, actors, influencing state power. Influencing does not necessarily mean taking over; the debates of the 1960s, the APO discussions in Germany, the civil rights movement in the United States, many feminists everywhere, might well oppose ‘taking power’ as the goal — but that isn’t the question today. On the other hand, that the US state should stop its imperialist policies, that third-world debt to states should be cancelled, that health care should be a state-protected right, that anti-privatization movements, movements of the landless, civil rights movements, women’s rights movements, want to influence state policy as a major objective, is clear.

Thomas speaks of ‘an autonomist electoral politics. Such a politics combines short-term electoral tactics with long-term social movement autonomy’ (p. 447). Is that a compromise position that could be widely applicable? It is certainly worth exploring in detail.

The worry about ‘Leninist organization’ seems to me misplaced. I have not encountered any move in that direction, nor even advocacy of such a move, and the commitment to open and grass-roots democracy within all of the Social Forums seems to me so overwhelming that the epithet might well be given a decent burial, at least as a current concern.

That is not to say that a little more organization might not be a bad thing. Janet speaks of ‘unprecedented political convergence and capacity to act on a world scale’ (p. 426);\(^3\) Patrick speaks of the Social Forums helping movements become more ‘coherently aligned’, acting as a source of ‘coordination and consensus-building’ (p. 437). No one wants ‘Leninist’ organization, but just how to combine grass-roots participatory democracy with effective action is a dilemma (a ‘paradox’?) not yet solved. The large-scale participatory assembly about the reconstruction of the World Trade Center site held at the New York Convention Center, with 5,000 people sitting in front of computers reacting to proposals, is one attempt, but with severe limitations.\(^4\) Others are optimistic about the use of the internet to link grass-roots organizations, and actions, internationally, as in the global protests against the war in Iraq. But many are excluded from such a process, nor is it likely to resolve any issue more complicated than ‘for or against x’. But a real answer remains elusive; again, experimentation, practice, in an open learning process, are needed. I suspect we all agree on that.

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2 Naomi Klein (2003) is a little unfair when she criticizes the Third world Social Forum for inviting Lula and Chavez to speak. Certainly they should not have received adulation from ‘swooning crowds’, but you can hardly blame people for celebrating some of the very few major victories their movements have supported, even if those victories were hardly complete. Patrick Bond cites her discussion at www.nologo.org, 30 January.

3 But she also speaks of ‘the dangerous fantasy of a common platform’; on just what should there be convergence?

4 For a critique of the process, see Marcuse with Van Kempen (2002) and Marcuse (2002).
Likewise, ultimately, the debate as to the handling of power is a difficult one, and remains unresolved. The problem is precisely how, at the same time, to end existing relationships of power, both in ‘private’ economic affairs and in government, without substituting new relations of power; how to act effectively and yet stay open and democratic in the process. It is hardly a new issue: power corrupts, but avoiding power leaves its present holders to continue exercising it. Thomas speaks of building ‘the other superpower’; is another superpower really what we want? Or some as yet undiscovered model of international governance, or self-governance?

This is being written on the eve of the fifth World Social Forum, about to be held in Porto Alegre [a few brief interjections written afterwards are in square brackets]. Clearly many of the issues raised in our discussion, and more importantly raised in Mumbai and by many of the organizers and participants, have arisen there. [The debate about the Porto Alegre Manifesto, written by a ‘high-profile’ group of 19 on the last day of the conference, was both greeted and criticized; the response that it was only one of 352 proposals does not seem to resolve the question of forging unity either, though. And Francisco Whitaker, whom Janet cites as warning against the ‘old kind of power politics’, was one of the signers.] Learning in practice, what all of us hope for, is clearly taking place. All the answers are not yet apparent.

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References