

The Contribution of the U.S. Social Forum:
a reply to Whitaker and Bello's debate on the Open Space

By Thomas Ponniah

Introduction

The achievements of the U.S. Social Forum experience contributes a great deal to debates concerning the future of the overall World Social Forum (WSF) process. In a recent set of interventions Walden Bello and Chico Whitaker, both representatives on the International Council of the WSF, disagreed on the future of the Forum. Bello, the Executive Director of Focus on the Global South, argued that the Forum was now at a crossroads¹. While acknowledging that the WSF had given a great deal to the struggle for global justice, Bello suggested that the Forum's Open Space methodology, which on principle, refuses to take a collective stand on issues such as the war on Iraq and the WTO, was now inhibiting substantial political agency. He argued that there was merit to the charge that the Forum was becoming "an institution unanchored in actual global political struggles, and this is turning it into an annual festival with limited social impact". The article concluded with the query: "is it time for the WSF to fold up its tent and give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation?"²

Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF, and also a member of the International Council of the World Social Forum, replied to Bello, arguing that crossroads do not have to close roads³. Whitaker noted that while the Forum's Charter of Principles precluded the International Council from making

¹ Bello, Walden. "The Forum at the Crossroads". <http://www.fpif.org/fpif.txt/4196>.

² *ibid*

³ Whitaker, Chico. "Crossroads do not always close roads (Reflection in continuity to Walden Bello)" (http://www.wsflibrary.org/index.php/Crossroads_do_not_always_close_roads).

statements representing the overall World Social Forum, the Open Space methodology left possible the opportunity for movements to independently build global coalitions that articulated common manifestos. Therefore for Whitaker the WSF's crossroads were in fact two paths that could co-exist, not as impediments to each other, but as mutual sources of inspiration. The Open Space could continue to allow movements to articulate themselves and to propose new political projects without needing to speak on behalf of all participants at the World Social Forum.

In order to thoughtfully assess the two different positions mentioned we need to reflect on what are the Social Forum process' actual achievements. No Forum in recent memory has better expressed the potential of the process than the recent U.S. Social Forum. The USSF demonstrated the accuracy of both Bello and Whitaker's arguments, affirming the importance of continuing the Social Forum process but on much more innovative, decisive, political ground.

The U.S. forum, held from June 27 to July 2, in Atlanta, Georgia, the birthplace of Martin Luther King J.R., attracted over 10 000 participants, in over 900 workshops. The slogan of the Forum was "Another World is Possible. Another U.S. is Necessary." Mirroring yet amplifying the global process, this national forum made three great contributions to the U.S. struggle.

Difference

The U.S. Social Forum created an open space that allowed different people's movements to come together from around the United States. For the first time diverse activists from around the country were able to collectively interact in a non-hierarchical, horizontal manner that emphasized mutual understanding. The Open Space infrastructure facilitated the possibility for a variety of movements to meet. If the space had been dominated by one ideology, for example socialism,

or if it had been dominated by one strategy, for example, statism, then it would not have attracted so many movements. The Open Space, as Whitaker has always contended, allowed for a multitude of ideologies and strategies to be represented at the Social Forum. This space not only facilitated dissimilar groups from across the U.S. to connect but it also enabled movements in Atlanta to connect on novel new terms.

The Open Space permitted activists to move away from focusing on the differences between social movements and instead focusing on commonalities. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s there were numerous divisions between different sides of the North American Left: such as socialists, anarchists, ecologists, feminists, anti-racists, queer activists, and indigenous activists to name a few. Movements did not want to work with each other or were endlessly frustrated with each other. The Social Forum created an arena where all of these organizations felt that they could express their agenda without having it drowned out by someone else's program. Speakers at plenaries came from communities that were directly affected by the problem at hand. Grassroots movements spoke for themselves. Thus the Forum was a common, self-representative public venue thereby allowing for trust to be built between movements.

The expression of difference was so pronounced that the USSF appeared to be more diverse than any of the World Social Forums held in the last three years. Not since the 2004 World Social Forum in India, has a Forum embodied so much diversity, not only as members of the audience, but importantly as speakers and facilitators on panels, seminars and workshops. One could argue that the Forums in India and the United States simply reflected the demographic heterogeneity of two of the most multicultural societies on the planet. Few nations in the Global South have as many religions, cultures, and languages as India. Similarly no

country in the Global North has in numerical terms as much cultural multitude as the United States. However, this interpretation of the U.S. Social Forum and the WSF in India is partial. What was remarkable about both events was not simply that they embodied their countries' cultural range but that they also demonstrated their economic diversity. Both Forums were genuinely grassroots events with participants from every economic class - especially the poor. While other editions of the World Social Forum have been moving, inspirational events, they have not substantially represented the impoverished, marginalized, and exploited members of their countries. The first great contribution of the U.S. Social Forum process then was its capacity to enable the social, cultural and economic variety of U.S. movements to come together.

The Identity of Difference

The second contribution of the USSF dealt with identity. Following the Open Space concept, the U.S. Social Forum has helped articulate common self-identifications among progressives. What began in Seattle in 1999 as the U.S. wing of the anti-globalization movement has now become a set of alternative national globalization movements. North American activists who took part in the USSF process, were able to even more clearly recognize that diverse forms of dissent such as rallies against racism, demonstrations against debt, and protests against privatization, are not separate events but instances of one overarching dynamic: the demand for global justice. The Social Forum process consolidated numerous common identities of difference: black/brown, student/labor, and environmental/social justice alliances. These coalitions are being built on the desire for another world that is free of the discrimination evidenced by Katrina, of the militarism exhibited by perpetual war, of the neoliberalism that prevents health care access to over forty million U.S. citizens, and of the biodevastation embodied by global warming. In sum, the Forum facilitated the creation of

common, unified identities that encompass the plethora of movements that aspire to a world where all life is respected.

Autonomy

Third, the World Social Forum, and now the U.S. Social Forum, has promoted a revolution in how progressives imagine their opponent and thus themselves. From its inception the organizers of the World Social Forum dynamic and thus the USSF process understood that people's movements have needed a space of articulation that was autonomous of corporations and political parties. This has been a significant departure from the past.

Historically most progressives have imagined their primary adversary to be the market. The left has always understood the danger that free markets, corporations, and capitalism, posed to society. Progressives have always known that commodification inevitably led to alienation. The market, in Marcuse's memorable phrase, makes the human one-dimensional. To restrain commodification, past leftwing movements have called for the state to regulate the economy. In the first world, social democrats, such as the New Deal politicians in the United States in the 1930s, tried to regulate the industry for the benefit of the public. In the second world, Soviet Communism tried to regulate production, and in the third world, the national liberation state, for example Cuba, tried to regulate its economic activity⁴. So the dominant strand of the left has always thought that the state could regulate the market and thus liberate the population from exploitation.

The faith in leftist statism was tested numerous times throughout the twentieth century. It finally broke in the early 1990s with the rollback of the welfare state in

⁴ For a substantial explanation of this point see Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Decline of American Power*.

the first world, the dissolution of the Soviet state in the second world, and the loss of legitimacy of the national liberation state in the third world. Progressives ever since have been contending with the loss of belief in the state as the primary instrument of social liberation.

Learning from history, the proponents of the Social Forum process have understood that whether the state increased its power over the market or whether the market increases its power over the state, in both cases disaffection has inevitably deepened. Both the modes of production and administration, both capital and the contemporary state, have become proponents of heteronomy, of estrangement, of immiseration, rather than public self-governance.

Against this two-headed adversary, the peoples' movements at the USSF demonstrated the power of self-organized human solidarity. These movements over and over throughout the Forum called for a participatory society to develop independently of the market and the state. At this Forum, U.S. social movements increased their capacity for sovereign, collective self-reflection.

The activists at the USSF collectively liberated themselves from the mental hegemony of the state and market by proposing a new imagination: liberation can only be discovered, explored and expressed by grounding social change in radical new forms of democracy. Movements can pressure states, sometimes even work with states, yet retain autonomous from the state. The collective consolidation of the importance of autonomy was the third great achievement of the U.S. Social Forum.

The Future of the Forum process

The achievements of the USSF lend credence to Chico Whitaker's consistent principled defense of the Forum. The challenge that remains, and that Walden

Bello has recognized clearly, is that while the Forum process at the global and local level is facilitating collective self-reflection – it has not yet produced effective, collective self-organization. There have been numerous discussions of global social movement projects, such as the Bamako Appeal⁵ and proposals for global political parties⁶, but there has been no actual implementation. The war on Iraq continues, climate change has not been halted, worldwide inequality persists and corporations continue to rule the world. While the Open Space of the Forum has allowed for the creation of new networks it has not yet facilitated visionary projects. There have been great reactive events, such as demonstrations against the WTO negotiations– but there have been few alternatives that have actually been implemented by the global justice movements. That is the great overarching trial that the Forum faces. While the Forum has facilitated the capacity for local, national and global social movement reflection, it has not yet given birth to comparable forms of achievement. The essence of Walden Bello’s argument is correct: the facilitators of the World Social Forum process must devise more innovative processes that will actually enable decisive political change.

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⁵ See <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=BamakoAppeal>

⁶ See <http://www.nigd.org/globalparties>