

Autonomy and Political Strategy: Building the Other Superpower

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From 21–25 October 2004, I participated in the Norway Social Forum (NSF). It was the most successful regional social forum that I have attended. The forum expressed what I call an *autonomist electoral politics*. Such a politics combines short-term electoral tactics with long-term social movement autonomy. Autonomist electoral politics outlines the direction that forthcoming local, regional and national forums should take.¹ I use the example of the NSF to respond to Peter Marcuse's article on social forums and social movements.

The Norway Social Forum

The 2003 United Nations Development Program report stated that Norway had scored highest in the world on its Human Development Index.² The country's women and men, on average, have the premier levels of education, healthcare and social programs among all countries in the world. Norwegian society, despite social democracy's inherent limitations, has achieved the highest overall quality of life on the planet. Historically, Norway and the other Scandinavian countries have been the finest examples of twentieth century social democracy. The 2004 NSF demonstrated the creative muscle that has made Scandinavia's progressives the most far-sighted radicals in the Global North.

This NSF was the fifth annual gathering of Norwegian leftists. During the past struggle against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) a network of labour unions, farmers' groups and non-governmental organizations was formed. After the MAI was defeated, this collection of about 35 associations was transformed into a network focused on the World Trade Organization and neoliberal globalization. In September 2000 this coalition, in cooperation with other networks such as For the Welfare State, Forum for Environment and Development, and women's organizations, organized a conference under the slogan: 'Democratic Governance — Not Elite power'. About 600 people took part in the event. A year later the organizers of the previous conference decided to name the event the Norway Social Forum. They defined it according to the World Social Forum open space methodology. New networks took part and about 1,200 people attended 30 seminars. The following year, 2002, the same networks organized the conference with 1,400 participants attending 55 seminars. Then in 2003 the structure of the NSF was transformed. The various networks formed an 'organization of organizations' with simple bylaws and a national platform in addition to the WSF platform. This new formation was named 'Another World is Possible', and its main task

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1 Due to space limitations I will leave discussion concerning the future direction of the World Social Forum (WSF) to another article. For a review of my preliminary thoughts on the WSF see Fisher and Ponniah (2003).

2 See www.undp.org/annualreports/2003/English/.

was to coordinate the Forum. The 2003 conference had about 1,200 participants attending 60 seminars. Forty-four organizations are now members of 'Another World is Possible' and they facilitated the recent 2004 Forum.

According to interviews with organizers and many participants, the latest NSF was the most successful: 1,700 people attended 85 seminars and workshops, 15 cultural workshops, 15 cultural performances and a rally calling for the return of Norway's troops from Iraq. The 2004 NSF was titled 'Supermakt' meaning 'superpower'. The name was chosen in reference to the *New York Times*' statement that there now exist two superpowers in the world: the American Empire and global civil society (*New York Times*, 17 February 2003). The NSF's goal was to build the latter in order to combat the former.

The 2004 strategy of developing the 'other superpower' was a great success. Norway is currently governed by a centre-right coalition that has symbolically supported the war on Iraq. The government's actions have incited activists to mobilize. Norway's next election is in 2005 and progressive forces, including the Socialist Left, have an opportunity to enter government. Movements at the NSF agreed to come together and develop a non-partisan, practical strategy for making politicians accountable during national elections and beyond. This strategy empowers groups, such as Attac-Norway and others, to challenge local politicians that ask for support. Social movements have created a collective mandate to discipline political parties — especially in terms of condemning their neoliberalism.

The theme of building the other superpower, that is, building the sovereignty of social movements in relation to political parties, was the guiding thread of the seminars, workshops and panels at NSF 2004. One such event, ironically, was a discussion of the Workers' Party in Brazil. The question for the panel was whether radicals should still support President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's policies. Some argued that activists should remain patient with Lula's party. Others contended that Lula had abandoned progressives and that radicals should now jettison him. The discussion culminated with a loose consensus that support for the PT was not predicated on the notion that the ruling party would bring Brazil to utopia. Support for political parties at this stage of history are strategic actions.³ Radicals temporarily support Lula not because he will bring them to socialism, but in order to prevent the right wing from taking the country back to feudalism. Yet while many recognized that contemporary electoral tactics needed to be defensive, they also agreed that social movement campaigns should pursue the opposite. Movements must confidently aim for long-term, visionary goals.

The overall theme culminated at the final plenary on 24 October, when social movements agreed to work towards electing a progressive parliament while maintaining a non-partisan stance. This autonomist politics, coordinating electoral defence and social movement offence articulated two time frames: immediate deployment with eventual rebellion. Such an approach aims at radical transformation by instrumentalizing electoral politics while simultaneously building a social movements-based society. In the long run this strategy will be far more effective at bringing progressive parties further to the left because it pursues the total societal order. Mobilizations that permeate the social fabric shift the entire political spectrum.

During the final day plenary of the NSF, half of the organizations that spoke were youth-oriented, demonstrating a tremendous mobilization of new activists. Eight youth organizations joined forces, marshalling young people from all over the country. Youth were prominent not only as volunteers but also in terms of overall organization. Thus the NSF not only built a mobilization for the next election but has also articulated one for the next generation. The 2004 NSF demonstrated why Norway has been a model for the twentieth century and why it could also be a paradigm for a more radical politics in the twenty-first century.

3 For further discussion of the notion that electoral politics now demand a defensive strategy, see Wallerstein (2003).

Conclusion: social forums and social movements

Peter Marcuse correctly notes that the effective vehicle for democratic public action remains at the national level. He states, however, that social forums are intuitively anti-governmental, protest-oriented and single-issue focused. His diagnosis may be true of forums that have been held in the United States. These events are shaped by the broader history of American social movements. The past generation of US identity movements have been momentous culturally, yet feeble politically. To be fair, their weakness has not been due simply to their myopic internal logic. The powerlessness of the US Left has had as much to do with the strength of the US Right. The latter are without a doubt the most affluent, innovative and nefarious regime in the world. The internal and external limitations of US radicalism have temporarily shaped the social forums that the left has presided over.

Yet, as the case of Norway illustrates, social forums can produce more decisive outcomes. The NSF allowed movements to rearticulate themselves in solidarity with progressive political parties, according to a visionary national agenda.⁴ Perhaps what the NSF suggests is that successful social democracies breed social movements that know to never forfeit the progressive possibilities of state intervention. While many social forums have been intuitively suspicious of political parties, Norway's mobilizations are not naïve about electoral power. While many militants no longer see state control as sufficient to produce social revolution, they still recognize that political parties are necessary to build another world. The path to that new world is engendered by a long-term social vision simultaneous with a pre-emptive political strike.

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4 For more on the impact of social forums on national political parties, see Hardt and Negri (2003).