

Social Forums, Social Movements and Social Change: A Response to Peter Marcuse on the Subject of the World Social Forum

JANET CONWAY

In the opening panel at the First Social Forum of the Americas, held in Quito, Ecuador in July 2004, Francisco Whitaker, key architect and widely-revered *eminence grise* of the World Social Forum, made an uncharacteristically caustic speech. He warned against the 'old world' present like an octopus in the 'new world' of the Social Forum. The old world is an old kind of power politics on the left that seeks to control, that distrusts plurality, and that effectively shuts down space for diversity and for debate in the name of urgency, unity and strategy (Whitaker 2004a).

Whittaker was weighing in on a debate that has been raging among organizers and observers of the World Social Forum process almost since its inception. Is the Forum a 'space' or an 'actor'? Shouldn't the Forum take positions? Issue documents? Decide on common actions? Should the Forum be considered *the* movement of movements? The next great international? Don't the Forum's organizers have a responsibility to use this force that has been created in the most effective and strategic way possible in the global struggle against capitalism?

Peter Marcuse in his article 'Are social forums the future of social movements' is also engaged in this debate, although it is unclear who exactly his interlocutors are. There are many points of both fact and representation in Marcuse's article to argue with. For instance, there have been four WSFs to date, not three. The first three were held in Porto Alegre and the fourth in Mumbai. The invitation to organize local and regional forums came as early as 2002 in Porto Alegre, not in 2004 in Mumbai.¹

The debate raging over the SF, in which Marcuse is intervening, signals: (1) a power struggle over its future; (2) profound disagreement over the *character* of its power, which is itself based in conflicting understandings and visions of power and change in the contemporary period more generally; (3) at the heart of this last conflict is a yet more basic one about the status of multiplicity and diversity — in understanding power(s), in building resistance(s), in creating alternatives, in crafting solidarities, in imagining other possible worlds as *les raisons d'être* of the Social Forum. In responding to Marcuse, I will focus on these questions of power and change and offer an alternative reading of the meaning of the WSF.

The WSF is best understood as a world-wide, movement-based, multi-scale, and multi-sited cultural process. The annual global gathering is a critical node in space and time for the consolidation and articulation of the process on a world scale, but the world process cannot be reduced to it. The annual event is growing exponentially. Hundreds

1 I am engaged in a five-year research project on the WSF which includes tracking Social Forum processes in Canada. I attended the last three WSFs and the Americas Social Forum in Quito, Ecuador in July 2004. I participated in the Ottawa-Outaouais SF in May 2003 and the Alberta SF in October 2003. I co-convened the Toronto Social Forum 2002-4 and attended and the Mid-West SF in June 2004. The numbers at the Mid-West SF were closer to 400 participants and 50 workshops than ten times that number as reported by Marcuse.

of social forums are appearing world-wide, on every continent and at every scale. As a global process and multifaceted phenomenon, the Social Forum is evolving daily. It is characterized by great ongoing creativity and dynamism and some degree of shape-shifting that presents multiple problems of representation and analysis. In this context, Marcuse's reporting on the Boston SF as an early and major expression of the World Social Forum in the US and reflection on its meaning is welcome. However, like many commentators on the left, Marcuse's reading of the significance of the SF phenomenon is politically reductionist, focused on questions of strategy and power narrowly understood, the need for linear debate and decision-making and vertically-integrated organization.

In Marcuse's assessment of the political significance of the Social Forum, 'major transformative change' is equated with seizing (electorally or otherwise) state power at the national scale. If Social Forums (or 'social movements') are not oriented to this outcome, then there is no question of 'transformative social change' on their horizon. Secondly, their political efficacy is grounded in the capacity to produce a common platform. Thirdly, there is a single system of oppression which unifies all issues and struggles.

Now just to use the most obvious example, how does feminism, as one of the world's most stunningly successful social movement, fit into this schema? Is it possible to deny the world-wide rising of women of all cultures, nations, classes, religions, sexualities, abilities and so on over the last half-century, and that something like 'major transformative change' is underway — unevenly, conflictually, but unmistakably. And furthermore, that the proliferation of feminisms and transnational feminist coalition politics has been premised on a hard-won and now foundational recognition of the irreducible diversity of women's situations, identities and visions of the future for themselves, their families and communities. This is not to occlude ongoing inequalities among women and the continuing struggles against racism, class exploitation, homophobia and religious prejudice being waged by women the world over, including within women's movements. But it is to say that feminism is changing the world through a tenacious search for convergence across difference, a reflexivity about unequal power relations within the movement and a commitment to inclusion, participation and amelioration of those conditions of inequality both within and beyond the movement. Central to this politics is the recognition of a multiplicity of oppressions, the search for ways to understand their intersection, and in so doing to build more inclusive and effective movements with more expansive and transformative visions and powers. And it is doing this without seeking state power (which is not to say that states are irrelevant) nor indulging in the dangerous fantasy of a common platform. Finally, feminists learned the hard way that there is no one trans-historical 'patriarchy' that produces a common oppression among women, let alone a unified political subject 'women', nor a unitary feminist politics. Rest assured, Marcuse is not talking about patriarchy. But what makes such claims about 'capitalism' more credible or intelligible?

Marcuse's perceptions about what the SF is and his arguments about what it should be are haunted by the political imaginary of an old left, in which all social struggles can be understood in terms of a unified and linear counter-narrative to the development of capitalism, in which 'basic social transformation' is implicitly or explicitly understood as a once-and-for-all revolutionary transformation of 'the system', in which the state and the national scale remains at the centre of political vision and strategy. In Marcuse's account, 'social movements' have replaced the organized working class as a unified collective actor. The only question is the status of the Social Forum in this familiar narrative of social transformation.

In Whitaker's words, the Social Forum is 'a grand experiment,' the outcomes of which are uncertain and which needs time to unfold. But what is indisputable is that the Social Forum is already producing historically-unprecedented political convergence and capacity to act on a world scale, notably without benefit of common platform or Leninist organization. In January 2003, at the third WSF in Porto Alegre, over 100,000 people

marched against the American Empire, to affirm the existence of political and economic alternatives to neoliberalism, and to assert that 'another world is possible'. This massive convergence of opinion and collective action occurred without a 'resolution' opposing the war. Several weeks later, the February 15th day of global protest against war mobilized millions around the world. It had been hatched the previous November, at the European Social Forum in Florence, Italy. That event drew 60,000 participants and mobilized one million people in its own massive anti-war demonstration. In these and similar events, we witnessed the explosion of an unprecedented anti-war movement that emerged with astonishing speed and coherence. It was bigger, more global, more multicultural and multinational than the 'anti-globalization' movement which preceded it, created the conditions for its possibility, and then helped constitute it.

The World Social Forum has been central to the convergence of both anti-globalization and anti-war movements. The Social Forum is successfully fostering *convergence* among movements world-wide through the promotion of *pluralism*. It is this extraordinary paradox — that embracing diversity is producing unprecedented coordinated action on a global scale — that is key to the generative power of the Social Forum and suggestive of a new democratic politics on a world scale. Increasingly, the power of the Social Forum lies also in its global diffusion as a *process* for the creation of *non-deliberative* political spaces where a wide range of movements converge and where the only requirement is their shared opposition to neoliberalism. Movements, networks and organizations can and do use the space of the Social Forum to advance campaign-organizing and action-planning in the most concrete ways. But the non-deliberative character of the gathering as a whole preserves it as a space of mutual encounter and learning, of multiple discourses, modes and activities, rather than centring on a single, deliberative and, by definition, unitary political process.

Whitaker has argued vigorously for the WSF as 'open space' against those who, like Marcuse, would turn it into a 'movement'. In Whitaker's view, they risk that which is most powerful and creative about the process — its openness, its horizontal structures and self-activity. A movement, in his view, implies definition of strategies, formulation of programs, assigned divisions of labour and pyramid-like structures. The WSF exists to incubate and nurture plural and diverse movements opposed to neoliberalism, *not to become the movement itself* — a critical distinction. It promotes the formation of movements and the generation of alternatives *in and through* its open space methodology (Whitaker 2004b).

In my view, the power and potential of the Social Forum as a new political form and process rests on four features: its character as a non-deliberative yet highly participatory and inclusive 'space of spaces' with multiple centres; its global diffusion as a form and method through the proliferation of local and regional social forums; the increasing internationalization, inter- and multi-culturalism of the global process, signalled by the WSF's move from Brazil to India in 2004; and a growing recognition of multiplicity, of diversity and pluralism as organizing principles in fostering a new politics for a new world with the space for many worlds within it. These features have emerged in practice and become definitive even as their significance can only as yet be dimly perceived. Their possible meanings depend on how future political practice, experimentation and debates over the future of the WSF unfold (Conway 2003a; 2003b; 2004a; 2004b).

The central claim of the WSF is that another world is possible. As important is the WSF's explicit resistance to the hegemony of any single way of thinking. In its foundational valuing of diversity and participation, the WSF is helping knit together a worldwide movement premised on the values of solidarity and dialogue in the midst of infinite diversity. In the evolving practice of the World Social Forum, a new democratic imaginary — post-liberal and post-Marxist — is taking shape and, with it, other possible futures are coming into view.

Janet Conway (jconway@ryerson.ca), Department of Politics and Public Administration, Ryerson University, 350 Victoria Street, Toronto, Ontario M5B 2K3, Canada.

References

- Conway, J. (2003a) Power of Social Forum is its global diffusion. *Humanity and Society: Journal for the Association of Humanist Sociology* 26.3, 254–56.
- (2003b) Feminist views are necessary for global change. www.rabble.ca (posted 26 June 2003).
- (2004a) Citizenship in a time of empire: the World Social Forum as a new public space. In J. Brodie (ed.), *Beyond national citizenship*, Special Issue, *Citizenship Studies* 8.4, 323–332.
- (2004b) Place matters: India's challenge to Brazil at the World Social Forum. *Antipode* 36.3, 357–60.
- Whitaker, F. (2004a) Public address: Gender and diversity: the transversality of the World Social Forum. Opening panel of the 1st Social Forum of the Americas, Quito, Ecuador, 26 July.
- (2004b) The WSF as open space. In Jai Sen et al. (eds.), *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, Viveka Foundation, New Dehli.