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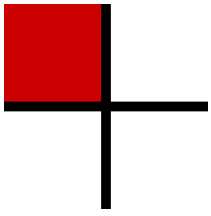
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The Organisation and Politics of Social Forums

Steffen Böhm, Sian Sullivan and Oscar Reyes

Social Forums have become key spaces for the articulation of discontent and radical politics today. The first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, and since then numerous other Social Forums have been organised in many different locations at local, regional and global levels. As articulated in the guiding document for the WSF – the Charter of Principles¹ – a Social Forum is intended to provide a space that brings together multiple actors that are part of, or at least connected to and interested in, the so-called anti-capitalist or global justice movement(s). While there is a burgeoning literature on these movements, rather little has been written specifically on Social Forums (although see bibliography by Reyes, this issue).

This special issue of *ephemera* focuses particularly on the close relationship between the organisation and politics of Social Forum spaces. That is, since many people regard Social Forums as important political spaces, with the potential to radically transform politics – and therefore society itself – we feel it is important to consider the way these events are organised as a window into the politics, i.e. the power relations, they produce. The aim of this special issue is thus to engage with aspects of the organisation and politics – and more precisely the interface between organisation and politics – of Social Forums.

The starting point of this engagement is an understanding that politics is always already connected to questions of organisation. Here we do not merely mean the organisation of political institutions. If one understands the constitution of the social – of life as such – as in itself political, then this constitutional act is linked inherently to questions of social organisation. The political slogan of the Social Forum movement is: ‘Another World Is Possible’. Although there are multiple, sometimes contradictory, voices within this movement, clearly it aims at the transformation of the world – of life as such. It is for this ambition of a political transformation of life that it becomes of utmost importance to engage with – that is, describe, critique and translate – the organisation of the Social Forum movement. The rationale is that, if we understand the organisation of this

1 www.forumsocialmundial.org.br

movement, we are potentially better equipped to critique the type of life that this movement hopes to constitute.

It goes without saying that this engagement with the Social Forum movement cannot be done from 'afar'; we are not artificially – in the name of science and objectivity – disconnected from its politics. The contributions included in this special issue are always already political; that is, the texts, images and sounds presented in this space are activist contributions that seek to engage with and influence the organisation and politics of the Social Forum movement. And since the politics of this movement is one that aims at the transformation of life as such, the contributions to this special issue are not merely representations: instead, they are ontological interventions in a political project of the radical transformation of being.

As the contributions to this special issue started to come in, it seemed to us that a number of themes recurred. In other words, individual contributors were nevertheless collectively iterating a range of critical and cross-cutting concerns. It is around these concerns that we have organised this special issue. Most of the contributions are linked to two or three of these themes:



(Self)Organisation: as noted above, organisational processes are key to the production of politics, i.e. to the dynamic distribution of power. And in the organisation of Social Forums some key organisational debates have been reproduced: namely those between the distributed power hoped for by participants of an organisational culture that emphasises autonomy, consensus decision-making and (self)organisation, in contrast to the hierarchical political style associated with conventional left party-politics, and seemingly reproduced in the organisation of the 'formal' Forum events.

Representation: critical to issues of organisation are questions of representation and democracy. Of who gains the power to represent – to speak for – others; and of whose voices are occluded – clouded over – in this process of representation. Here we include contributions that speak to the critical disjuncture between power-over-others, i.e. as reproduced in representational democracy, and the power-to-become, i.e. as sought by

those participating in and desiring greater autonomy and empowered spaces for organising social life.

Proliferation: an intention of Social Forums is to proliferate beyond Forum events and 'boundaries' its conversations and intentions regarding the production of 'another world'. A number of contributions here consider the possibility for Forum 'culture(s)' to grow and proliferate. Here we also include a review of an educational project outside the Forum that is inspired explicitly by the radical pedagogical or learning space that the Forum hopes to produce.

Alterity: in a (neoliberal) world that brings people in by processes of proletarianisation, homogenisation and control a crucial question is that of the sustenance and claiming of spaces that permit diversity and difference: that are enabling for the 'the other'. This issue also is key for Social Forums and in this theme contributors ask the question of to what extent the organisational culture of the 'formal' Forum can hear, include and be shaped by those who desire the participation in, and production of, radically different political cultures: the constitution of *other* possible worlds. Of interest here is that as these themes began to emerge we realised that those dealing most critically with the question of alterity – of 'the other' – in relation to Social Forums were written by women; in other words, by those othered by the organisational culture of patriarchal modernity (which underwrites the current neoliberal project that Social Forums seek to contest). Perhaps this in itself says something about what possibilities are embraced and what are excluded in the organisation and politics of Social Forums?

Open space: a significant debate regarding Forum organisation and intent revolves around the stated aim of the Forum to provide an 'open space' for the production of a different, and globally relevant, political culture. Here we include a range of pieces that consider the emergence of the concept of 'open space' in relation to Social Forums, civil society and the public sphere.

Record: a number of contributions to this special issue provide important first-hand records of Forum events and organisational processes. These are pieces by participants in Forum events and by organisers of various aspects of Social Forums. They become interventions in the production of our own contemporary history and memory. Here we have attempted to provide something more than written accounts and analyses. Personal records, images, transcripts and soundscapes are included in an effort to highlight the Forum as sensual and embodied experience.

This special issue has been some time in the making. It is the largest issue of *ephemera* to date and its range and number of contributions say something of the compelling magnet of Social Forums in contemporary critical political culture. We offer this issue as both record and analysis of the Social Forum 'movement', and hope that it will provide relevant reading in the lead up to the next 'round' of Forum events early in 2006.

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