

A Contribution to the WSF Strategy Consultation from the discussions of 'Networked Politics'

Networked Politics is a contribution to the continuing debates and practical experiments concerning new forms of political organisation. Its purpose is to help all of us who act in movements, collectives, associations, parties, trade unions to develop a deeper understanding of the innovations of which we are all a part. We have held two seminars: one in Barcelona in 2006, the other in Berlin in June 2007, as well as several smaller workshops on particular lines of inquiry. (see www.networked-politics.info). Discussions in the two seminars have focused on issues and case studies that relate either directly or indirectly to the WSF process: the free software movement, internet governance, feminism and political organization, trade unionism, ownership and the commons, representation and institutions, web communities and techno-political tools. This text summarizes the points of relevance to the debate on strategy within the WSF with the aim of making a modest contribution to the consultation process that is currently under way. Our discussions have often ended up with more questions than answers. Yet, we believe that our questions could be equally useful for the debate about the future of the WSF; we have found that they help us to focus our reflection to the issues of importance.

1. A way out of the 'space or actor' dilemma

The debate on the future and strategy of the WSF has historically been posed in somewhat dichotomous terms. For some the WSF should remain an 'open space' for movement participants to meet and debate. For others, it should morph into a 'movement or actor' with clearer strategies and positions. What both sides agree on is that the WSF has so far:

- offered a space for our diverse networks to meet and gather their energies, for new networks and campaigns to emerge, and for the elaboration and debate of visions, values and institutions for another world within the framework of common principles.
- constituted a micro-site of participatory and direct democracy; the solidarity economy; networking and horizontal organisation in action' and thus an illustration that 'another world is possible'.

However, for the 'actor' proponents, the WSF seems to be lacking an anchor in actual political struggles (see Walden Bello's contribution to the consultation process). Thus, they argue, the

WSF may have to give way to new modes of global organization and resistance that can help forge a common strategy while drawing strength from diversity. But how can the WSF define a shared strategy and assume more decisive positions without restricting its reach and breadth of participation?

For the believers in the 'open space' concept, the purpose of the WSF is to facilitate the convergence of a plurality of social movements (See Chico Whitaker's contribution to the consultation process). It should not aim to replace the path to action but to 'give it support, creating conditions so that those who resist and fight can be articulated and reinforced more and more'. Therefore, the path of the WSF does not necessarily have to cross with the 'path of action'. Yet, how can those two paths not cross if the WSF is intended to provide support to efforts of resistance?

Instead of debating either or , a more productive way to reflect on the future of the WSF would be to think about the mechanisms, the formal structures, the methodology by which it would be possible to keep the Social Forum process open and, at the same time, maximise the possibility of action. What is the service that the WSF is supposed to provide to the numerous struggles around the world? Is it offering this service and, if not, where is it failing? What sort of infrastructure should be put in place? These are the issues we attempt to address in this paper.

2. Rethinking the Strategy of the WSF as a Process of Articulation

First of all, we need to question the subject itself of this consultation and the terms in which it is posed. What do we mean by strategy and do we all have a shared definition of the term? Should the notion of strategy be re-thought and re-defined in a way that better suits the nature of the WSF and its component parts? In our discussions in the Networked Politics project, participants often had difficulty thinking about strategy, preferring instead to talk about local tactics. For some, the term 'strategy' carried military connotations and implied a specific philosophy: that in order for a goal to be reached different battles should be planned and organized on the way to victory (Christophe Aguiton and Joanne Richardson). However, this idea of strategy as a common programme does not apply to today's contingent, temporary and heterogeneous coalitions (Carlo Formenti). Instead, social movements have come away from a notion of strategy based on universality - the possibility of achieving a single point of unity and of developing through a process

of linear accumulation. The logic of action now is one of multiplicity - implying a recognition of the particularities and autonomy of different actors - and of *connection* between autonomous actors.

The emphasis on *multiplicity* recognizes the 'omnipresence of the capacity to transform' (Hilary Wainwright). Participants in the Networked Politics project have criticised the notion of a 'single subject of revolution' as a Western idea (Judy Rebick and others). Instead, there are multiple subjectivities and strategies developing from the bottom up. It was thus suggested that rather than identifying the key or real subjects of revolution, our efforts should concentrate on understanding the processes of emergence of these different subjects and of the structures that dominate them (Frieder Otto Wolf).

The logic of *connection* - and closely associated with it, the idea of networks - highlights the interrelation between these diverse struggles and subjectivities. It is based on the acknowledgment that 'no struggle is either exclusively local or exclusively global, but all struggles can communicate on different levels while no struggle can subsume all others; that there are no partial, 'local' solutions that can stand in isolation, and there is no 'global' solution unless this one is understood as a certain possible configuration of local ones' (Rodrigo Nunes.) The process of connection thus involves the identification of the commonalities between these struggles and subjectivities. But how should we define these commonalities? Should we call them shared values (connoting an ethical stance) or shared principles (which are more axiomatic than ethical)? (Joanne Richardson).

According to many of the participants in the Networked Politics project, it is in this process of connection and articulation that the WSF is not realising its potential. Or rather there is plenty of evidence that informally, this process of connection and articulation takes place but it is somewhat hit and miss and dependent on the resources and existing networks of the group or individual concerned which can be a form of the 'tyranny of structureless' . It needs to be systematised in some way. There has been a process of development in this direction but it is insufficient. The initial format of the WSF was one where the moments of universality – the plenary meetings where the keynote speakers would address the 'big picture' - were distinguished from those of diversity and particularity – the workshops or self-organised activities. Eliminating plenary meetings from the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre and organizing thematic spaces went some way in fostering interrelations among participants in the forum. In addition, the decision for proposals to be presented in the end, on the Mural of Proposals, rather than in the beginning by those addressing the 'masses' at the plenaries, was a step towards a more bottom-up way of defining strategy. In

this way, the IC showed that it was responsive to the needs of those who participate in the space of the WSF. However, the format was still lacking those focal points that would allow a genuine move from the particulars towards something that would not be universal, but would be *common* to a relatively large extent. In that respect, the proposals aggregated in the Mural lacked a process of discovering their connections and interrelations.

This weakness in providing an infrastructure for interconnection puts the WSF in danger of becoming 'a simple receptacle for a multifaceted reality bordering on indistinctness, where the loose, fragmented, rather unstable structures present in real life are simply reproduced in other shapes and forms. The risk is one of excessive information with no real communication; a multiplicity of relations with no real commitment.' (Marco Berlinguer – Barcelona pamphlet). Instead, looking for shared principles and values can constitute the preconditions for the emergence of a sense of commons.

In fact, this idea of the commons enters rather inevitably into the debate once we think outside of the 'space or actor' dilemma and consider the role of the WSF as offering a sort of service or infrastructure to the 'movement for alternative globalization'. This is because it invites us to reflect on people's needs and on the resources that should be provided and held in common in order for those needs to be fulfilled (Mayo Fuster). What are the common resources that the WSF should offer? Do they include knowledge, contacts, technology, money? Do the resources that are offered fulfill the activists' needs? Are they accessible and useful? For instance, such questions can be asked about the WSF workspace that is designed as a resource for networking and coordination among activists in the forum. Do participants find it accessible, understandable, and useful? What we should also take into account here is that historically the commons were enclosed in order to increase efficiency and that the market was considered as the best mechanism for stimulating human creativity (Oscar Reyes). In our efforts to secure the common goods and resources needed by activists in the movement we need to think imaginatively about the mechanisms through which we can collectively create, manage and sustain these resources.

The move towards a culture of interrelation also requires a willingness to listen to each other, a greater empathy towards others and an understanding of those who are different. The process of interrelation involves the translation of ideas, concepts and struggles in terms that are intelligible by people from diverse political and national cultures. One participant referred to Zygmunt Bauman's idea that 'translation is a process of crossing borders'. Another one noted however that within

intercultural relationships a subject can appropriate another subject's meaning through creative misunderstanding. In other words, misunderstandings and ambiguities open a space that allows that crossing of borders (Carlo Formenti). Yet, it is worth keeping in mind that such ambiguities are useful only so long as they enable us to collaborate creatively and respectfully, bringing together our different experiences and what they mean in our contexts.

3. Constructing an Infrastructure for Interrelation

But how can the WSF offer this infrastructure for articulation and interrelation? Here, our discussions on technopolitical tools, web 2.0 and free software can offer some useful suggestions. Constituting an infrastructure where molecular identities can have massive effects (Jamie King), social network platforms invite us to think of infrastructure in quite radical ways. Such platforms make very little demands on their users and are based on a simple set of principles. The secret of their success is precisely that they don't ask anything except that you give your information and get an account (Jamie King). Thus, people find them very attractive as they can use them without subsuming their identity to them (Jamie King).

This implies a new relational model that is distinct from that of a traditional community. It is rather based on a kind of weak cooperation which is not a pre-requisite for joining a platform but occurs afterwards. The motivation to cooperate is driven neither by self-interest, nor by a community feeling. Instead, the possibility for weak cooperation involves first a sort of conversational model where people expose themselves in order for the collaboration to start. Christophe Aguiton calls this relational model 'public individualism', noting its application in current modes of activism in the Western world. There we have passed from a type of activism favouring long-term affiliation – 'stamp on a card' activism – to one that is temporary and contingent - 'note on the fridge' activism.

However, our movement faces certain limitations in considering and constructing infrastructures in this way. First of all, such platforms are inherently apolitical. This goes against the traditional logic of the Left which is quite value-laden and driven by an impetus to indoctrinate (Judy Rebick). They

are also vulnerable to capture by commercial or other interests rather than used for the purpose they were designed for. They further face many difficulties in terms of financing and resources. In addition, these platforms are not suited for the development of cohesive identities, at least not like the identities that we are familiar with in social movements. Furthermore, and this is particularly the case for online platforms – interactions and exchanges leave information traces that makes such systems vulnerable to surveillance and control.

Some of these ideas are nothing new. They are implicit in the concept of the WSF as an ‘open space’ – of a space not of indoctrination but of self-organizing, networking and discussion. However, what we can take away from this discussion of other networking platforms of networking is that they do not lead to a cohesive identity and to strong cooperation. This is their strength but also their limitation. However, if we think of those spaces not on their own but in connection to the networks, initiatives and campaigns that use them to meet, make connections and sustain themselves, in other words, if we think of them as offering a service to the movement, then what we should be reflecting on is whether a space with these strengths and limitations can play a useful role in this process. Do we need an open space of interaction and weak cooperation among diverse movement actors?

How we answer this question will determine how we design and organize these spaces both online and offline. This is because an open, discursive, networking space should be designed and regulated differently than that of a goal-oriented project. The latter may need a more closed space, focused on coordinating action effectively rather than sustaining open-ended interaction. It is also worth noting here the parallels between physical and virtual space and how they should be thought and designed with the same principles. (Jeff Juris)

Our discussion of other self-organizing communities, such as the free software one, point to another shortcoming of the WSF as a process of articulation and interrelation. Similarly to the WSF, cooperation in the free software community involves the voluntary contributions of participants without their being regulated by a central authority. However, there is a second stage

to this process of cooperation that seems to be missing from the WSF, that of ‘the collective and public appreciation and evaluation of what has been done and what has been said’ (Dominique Cardon). This process of collective memory and evaluation has been only partly developed by the WSF. Thus far, the WSF websites have served as repositories of information and reports about the activities and workshops. However, they resemble more an archive while the ‘collective evaluation’ component is absent. This evaluation would provide some sort of connection among the different reports and help to bring to life this kaleidoscope of information. Such an analysis could aim to answer the following questions: What is being done? What is being proposed? What is the agenda of all those individuals who want to contribute to the forum? (Note: this is what seems to be missing from the ‘Mural of proposals’ – this process of collective evaluation and making connections)

4. ‘Direct Democracy in Action’ ?

Another question that we should be asking when it comes to the future of the WSF is whether it adequately performs its role as ‘direct democracy in action’. Where is the WSF failing? Do its democratic limitations constrain its transformative potential? How does it compare with other open, horizontal, consensus-based systems? Here, our discussion of the free software communities and internet governance can offer some useful pointers about the problems and limitations facing such systems and the solutions that have been provided.

Similarly to the WSF, in free software communities and in internet governance bodies heterogeneous participants need to take decisions by consensus in a relatively bottom-up way. In that respect, having a shared culture – for internet governance a North-American, for free software an engineering one – helps the smooth functioning of the decision-making process. Still decisions regarding technical matters are much easier to make than those concerning political issues. This invites us to think about the shared principles and cultures in the WSF process. Is there a shared culture? Or should the WSF act as a laboratory for creating it?

Such basic principles are really important for accountability particularly in times of crisis. As one Networked Politics participant put it 'I think it is all very well to learn as we walk, but what happens when your walking comes to the edge of a cliff? If you haven't talked about things beforehand, what happens is what I think happened to the anti-globalisation movement. When the going was good, everything was easy. But when we had problems, because we didn't have prior agreements, we just all went home, because we didn't know how to react to a stone in the way' (Gemma) This is a key question and one that is intimately related with the issue of collective reflection and evaluation mentioned earlier. It raises the wider question of the difficulties and the importance of having debates and facing difficulties; in that sense the present debate about the future of the WSF could be formative experience providing lessons for conducting further debates in the future.

Further parallels between the WSF and the free software movement concerned the issue of exclusions. While both of them are essentially open to participation, exclusions are unavoidable. In the case of free software, participation depends on the availability of free time as well as on the familiarity with this 'engineering culture'. In other words, exclusions from these systems are not planned or intentional but they are perpetuated and consolidated once they are not properly addressed. What are the barriers to participation in the WSF? Do some groups or individuals have a greater capacity to participate? How active should we be in providing the conditions for them to participate? What sort of measures should be taken?

The issue of exclusions relates to that of the formulation of elites within the WSF and the 'alter-globalization' movement in general. Networked Politics participants have remarked that the horizontal and vertical types of organizing are ideal types and that all movements have horizontal and vertical elements. (Jeff Juris) It is thus important to think clearly about these contradictions instead of disregarding the vertical elements in the movement that blemish our ideal image of horizontality. We should also keep in mind that horizontal systems are not necessarily more democratic than vertical ones.

For instance, the free software movement has clear voluntary hierarchies but power does not accumulate at the top. In fact, those hierarchical silos provide a degree of stability to free software groups, as they have formal procedures and roles that further allow them to interface with institutions (Felix Stalder). Do we have such clear voluntary hierarchies within the WSF? In that respect, one could argue that those with the time and willingness to actually organize the WSF constitute one such voluntary hierarchy. However, do we have any measures to ensure that power does not accumulate at the top? Participants in the Networked Politics project mentioned both the rotation in empowering roles, as well as ensuring that those already empowered exercise some self-control. We also need to reflect on the informal elites within the WSF and of the processes through which they are formed. Is it through personal charisma? Through expertise or access to resources? Through assuming the role of the spokesperson? Through acting as a connector, the one who opens doors and passes information? (Christophe Aguiton).

What are the institutions emerging within our movements? Institutions are just a set of social relationships that are produced and reproduced over time. Therefore, even within the WSF we are continuously generating institutions. The question here is how we can create sustainable institutions of our own that incorporate these open principles in a relatively more sustainable way than what has been possible up until now. For instance, some participants remarked on the inability to build a reasonable and modest system to appoint the people who make decisions in the WSF . This would have allowed us to bring together in a more coherent or permanent way different social movements from different parts of the world. This also raises the question of accountability towards those who cannot attend the process but who are informally represented but those who can. (Ezequiel)

A further line of enquiry deriving from the free software movement concerns the phenomenon of forking. This occurs when the community of engineers cannot reach consensus about a technical solution, so a minority makes a new project that arises out of the code of a previous one. The WSF has experienced similar cases when consensus fails. What should be done in cases like that? Should people divide, formulate their own alternatives and those with the stronger alternative prevail? Or should we try to reach consensus at all costs? Is it a case of 'divide and conquer' or of fragmentation that weakens the movement? (Note: in a way this has happened with the

'Autonomous Spaces') How do we engage critically with each other without falling into the pattern of two polarised alternatives? This process of critical engagement in which we recognise the strengths as well as the weaknesses of each others ideas has been part of the experiment of Networked Politics.

5. Engaging with our environment: the public, institutions and the media

Engaging with the environment, the public, the media or institutions brings to the fore issues of representation. How can actors governed by horizontal logic engage with institutions based on a representative one? Our discussions in the Networked Politics project attempted to rethink the concept of representation. What we considered problematic in systems of representation is that representatives are removed from those that they claim to represent and are incorporated into a power structure which they then have an interest to sustain (Judy Rebick). We argued that instead representation can be considered as some sort of cultural capital that can be owned and shared. We can thus have a greater awareness of the political economy of representative capital within our movement tracing the inequalities and imbalances in how this capital is distributed (Christophe Spehr). There are also ways of depersonalizing the role of the representative, of separating the role from the person. For instance, the use of masks by the Zapatistas means that anyone can be their figurehead, Marcos. In other words, every one can assume that role as it is a role cleverly separated from the person that inhabits it.

Another question that concerned is the interface between social movements and institutions. How can social movements be in contact with institutions without being absorbed or swamped by them? (Hilary Wainwright) One long-term strategy could be the classic *anarchist* one of 'creating a new society in the shell of the old. As we build up our self-managed institutions, and challenge state representative institutions, at some point we will have a sufficient level of organisation to extend those practices outward' (Jeff Juris). However, will that ever happen and when? Another way of thinking about it is related to a *viral* logic, to an idea of exploding this radical distinction between us and them. Then the question is how can this logic of horizontal networking migrate into the logic of state institutions themselves? This is a fundamental but unexplored question which points away

from the either or of the past : either protesting against the state or making demands on it; either taking over the state or creating an alternative. For example, what would a political party look like if it wasn't based on a hierarchical list of candidates, or a hierarchical electoral mechanism completely dominated by capital?

When it comes to engaging with the public, the role of activists as translators mentioned earlier acquires particular resonance. Interacting with people requires an open mind and a willingness to listen. Our discussions in the Networked Politics project often mentioned the inability of the Left to listen and its vanguard tendencies. This becomes more of a problem nowadays when the increasing access to information and knowledge means that the traditional aspect of political organisation of teaching people and providing information is more unpopular. People do not like being addressed to as a mass. As a Networked Politics participant put it 'We don't need mass sometimes anymore, and so the mass starts looking archaic (...), like searching for an identity while the identity-less are taking over the world' (Jamie King)

Concluding notes - for now

It is not in the nature of this paper to produce a conclusion; only to report some threads of thinking which hopefully take the debate beyond the actor or space dichotomy . The thinking reported here tends to imagine the WSF as a sort of service, resource or infrastructure that can be provided and used in common. This of course leads to a new set of questions about the needs that network activists have in common? what kind of infrastructure should be developed and how? This implies a constant process of inquiry and investigation and feedback built into the WSF process. How can this be done? With what combination of online and offline means of communication and organisation? To be continued.