

Planning Open Space: The World Social Forum and Neoliberalism

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The World Social Forum and neoliberalism seem to have little in common. Neoliberalism is the world's dominant political and economic ideology, promoting a system of competitive individuals governed only by the invisible hand of the almighty market. The World Social Forum is a "people's alternative" to the neoliberal-leaning World Economic Forum. This January's 5th annual WSF, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, brought together over 155,000 people from 135 countries, all driven by a shared rejection of neoliberalism and fighting for another "social" world.

Despite fundamental contradictions, however, the WSF and neoliberalism both claim to create unregulated "open space" – non-hierarchical and uncontrolled physical and social space that permits free interaction. If neoliberalism stands for unregulated open space, should social forums as well? How can the Forum experience help us learn how to better plan spaces that promote social change? To answer these questions, we need to first take a full look at what people did at the Forum, and then assess what these activities accomplished. Based on this assessment, I propose that the WSF and other progressive forums can be more powerful forces for social change if we focus less on protecting them as unregulated open spaces and more on planning them as equitable, educative and democratic spaces.

The View from Inside: What Happened at the Forum

This year's 5th annual WSF encompassed 6 days of panels, workshops, meetings, concerts, rallies, art events, eating, producing, shopping, gatherings and parties. People's experiences varied greatly and there is no single way to describe the Forum, but I will try to provide a general account of how many participants experienced it.

For many people, the WSF process began before arrival in Porto Alegre. Organizations that wanted to arrange events were required to submit proposals two months in advance. Unlike in previous years, the proposals were posted in searchable databases on the WSF website, and organizations were asked to communicate with groups planning similar activities, in order to combine events. This process was gradually and often cryptically explained in WSF emails: "The aggregation process is volunteer and comprehends at least four action modalities that may be matched." Some organizations began collaborating and later hosted joint sessions, while others did not.

To register for the Forum, participants paid \$12 per person and \$100 per organization if from the North, or \$4 and \$50 if from the South. There is little official demographic information about participants, but it appeared that at least 75% were Brazilian. Asians, Africans and racial minorities from the North seemed very underrepresented. The costs of participation, including plane tickets, were cheapest for those who participated the most (Brazilians) and most expensive for those who participated the least (Asians and Africans). Although the participants seemed to be gender balanced, panel speakers were disproportionately male.

The Forum took place along a 10 km stretch of the Guaíba River bank, in hundreds of tents and buildings. It was divided into 11 themes (e.g. communication, human rights, sovereign economies), each housed in its own area. Each theme area contained a WSF information center, internet and communications tent, information fair with organization booths, food and beverage vendors, and discussion areas. In between the theme areas, there were performance stages, exhibits, discussion circles and special tents. This year, the Forum introduced the "Mural of Proposals", a wall in each theme area on which organizations could publicize action plans or conclusions reached during sessions. According to Forum planners, the site was carefully arranged to encourage social interaction between participants and create a sense of community within and between each area.

Besides the opening and closing ceremonies, the Forum schedule consisted of over 2500 diverse self-organized workshops and panels, spread out over four days. Some sessions addressed specific issues, while others had a broad scope. Some focused on a specific organization or program while others attempted to bring together different initiatives. The sessions were between two and nine hours long, scheduled over four time slots each day. Most events were in panel or seminar format, with speakers followed by audience questions. A few workshops included small group discussions or popular education techniques to facilitate participation and dialogue, but most networking and collaboration took place before or after each workshop.

Many people were unable to participate in the full diversity of events. Numerous sessions were cancelled or simply did not happen, sometimes because of competition with larger organized events. Participants were often unable to participate in chosen sessions because of non-existent or insufficient translation. Simultaneous translation services were provided in some sessions, but not the majority. At least half of the sessions were in Portuguese with no translation, and the primary language of each session was not listed in the printed program. Many people had difficulty hearing or sitting through the speakers, because of the excruciating heat, noise from the fans and sounds from neighboring tents.

Discussions and structured activities were often impaired by the constantly changing and diverse participants. With the majority of sessions either cancelled, without translation, or uncomfortable, most people browsed events, drifting in and out of tents. The mix of participants also presented obstacles to groupwork. For example, a typical discussion group might include 10 campesinos from a Brazilian grassroots movement, 3 Brazilian NGO professionals, 2 Argentinean activists, 2 curious American youth, and 2 representatives of NGO coalitions in India. The different participants approached discussions with different, and often conflicting, interests, knowledge and ways of communicating.

Outside of the workshops and panels, people participated in a sea of movies, art exhibits, concerts, theater and other cultural activities. The Forum program included listings of these activities, and the site was covered with posters, flyers and promoters advertising different events. Much of the art and activities provided different perspectives on issues that were discussed throughout the Forum, such as refugees, factory occupations and disability rights. Some events encouraged active participation and discussion, and many participants initiated their own independent artistic projects. Participants frustrated with the workshops and panels often opted to participate in the cultural and artistic activities instead.

Other people went shopping, browsing through the vast array of food, clothing, crafts, and merchandise, all sold by small street vendors. This "solidarity economy" was designed according to principles of democracy and equity. The Forum employed over 1200 workers through solidarity enterprises, which were required to use "collective management and property of the means of production of goods or rendering of services with the democratic participation of the organization or enterprise members in the decision making process." A Supply Center provided fresh, organic non-processed foods to vendors, and an exchange market allowed people to swap goods and services. Vendors were prohibited from selling Coca Cola, and almost all of the food and beverages was locally produced. The internet tents only used open source software.

Although not part of the organized Forum activities, many of the most productive meetings and networking took place in informal and often spontaneous gatherings. During the day, clusters of people converged at the picnic tables and discussion spaces scattered throughout the Forum. Every night, individual organizations or delegations hosted parties or dinners in the city. Porto Alegre's sidewalk cafes and bistros were full of Forum participants. In these informal spaces, small groups of people socialized, networked, shared experiences and sometimes discussed ways of collaborating.

What Was Accomplished at the Forum?

Assessing what the Forum accomplishes now can help us determine how it might accomplish more. Many people say that the Forum serves to "bring people together and exchange ideas." People often came together without talking, however, and exchanged ideas without listening. So what comes out of the

Forum? To be more concrete, we can think of four main accomplishments: encouraging existing actions, facilitating learning, establishing new connections, and organizing new actions. By evaluating to what extent these were accomplished, we can learn from the successes and problems, and envision ways of achieving more through social forums.

1) Encouraging existing actions

The Forum provided people with feelings of solidarity, encouraging them to continue in their struggles. The frequent polemical speeches, personal testimonials, and mass rallies brought people together to offer and receive support from each other. Although these events may not have offered new ideas or facilitated networking, they appeared to energize many participants and strengthen their convictions. This encouragement may be especially valuable for relatively weak or marginalized groups and movements.

2) Facilitating learning

Participants learned new information, ideas and ways of thinking. The information fairs and discussion spaces provided comfortable opportunities for informal learning. Working through the logistic challenges of hot, loud, multi-lingual workshops was a learning experience for dealing with real world challenges to communication and collaboration. Participating in the solidarity economy helped people envision how an alternative economic model might work. This learning through action, however, only extended as far as the action - with few democratic decision-making processes, for example, participants often learned little about democracy. Most sessions approached learning from what Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire described as the "banking" method, with expert panelists attempting to deposit information in passive participants. These panels offered few opportunities for informal, social or dialogical learning.

3) Establishing new connections

The Forum established connections between people who otherwise might not have met. By bringing together activists from many different countries, movements and issues, the Forum created a unique mix of people. The many informal spaces, social events, and thematic gatherings in Porto Alegre provided welcoming environments for social interaction, although most workshop sessions did not facilitate much mixing. Some of the connections created between participants opened new doors for future collaboration, communication, and resource sharing.

4) Organizing new actions

Participants developed new action plans and strategies at informal gatherings and some of the structured workshops. They organized new networks, protests, websites, organizations, listservs, meetings and campaigns. The Mural of Proposals helped groups publicize and broaden these new actions. It is not clear, however, how many actions were actually developed in Porto Alegre, since few sessions provided time or a forum for organizing or groupwork.

The WSF clearly accomplished much, and yet not as much as it could have. Unfortunately, it is difficult to more precisely assess what was accomplished since there was little measurement or evaluation of the results, besides the Mural of Proposals. It seemed that most people were inspired, learned new information and established new connections. Many people also expressed frustration at not learning as much information, meeting as many contacts or engaging in as many productive discussions as expected.

The Limitations of Unregulated Open Space

The Forum's achievements and limitations are largely a result of the type of physical and social space that organizers planned. The WSF attempted to create unregulated open space for free and non-hierarchical communication, and to some extent it succeeded. Most events were organized independently by individual organizations or coalitions, with little external control. People were free to enter and leave any event and participate as desired. This freedom was at times empowering, inspiring and magical.

The Forum's emphasis on unregulated open space, however, also led to some of its main limitations: inequitable participation, unproductive activities and undemocratic decision-making. These limitations are similar to those of neoliberalism and the idealized "free public sphere," and they can be traced to three

assumptions: regulation inherently impairs free interaction, productive activities are best left to individual discretion, and the guiding hands are neutral and benevolent. Because these assumptions are not always accurate, neither neoliberalism nor the WSF actually create spaces that are as open as claimed.

By discouraging regulation, neoliberalism and the WSF enable existing power hierarchies to dictate economic and social interactions. For neoliberalism, reducing trade quotas, tariffs and regulations creates a more open, but not level, playing field on which more developed corporations of the North can more easily exploit less developed economies of the South. In Porto Alegre, unregulated workshop discussions and decision-making often enabled the most powerful participants to dominate – panelists, NGO experts, loud or confident voices, Portuguese speakers. In contrast, the Forum's regulated solidarity economy empowered street vendors and cooperatives while disempowering corporations.

Unregulated open space encourages more individual autonomy over productive activities and less central planning, which often leads to wasted time and energy. As neoliberal privatization and deregulation download state planning to the whims of the market, increasingly independent corporations become increasingly wasteful (Enron, Bechtel, the US healthcare system). At the WSF, insufficient coordination between sessions led to many repetitive or cancelled workshops, while the lack of structure within sessions often made it more difficult to learn, network and organize together.

For both neoliberalism and the WSF, the power of small coordinating groups deters democratic decision-making. The architects of neoliberalism (WTO, IMF, World Bank) claim that they only facilitate the natural and inevitable course of international development, even as their decisions shape the basic conditions of this development. The WSF is allegedly driven by its participants, even though logistic decisions (Forum location, dates, registration fees) of the self-selected Brazilian Organizing Committee and International Council dramatically affect participation. For example, the main session organized to discuss the future of the WSF was only in Portuguese.

What Kind of Space Should a Social Forum Be?

If the emphasis on unregulated open space limits what the WSF can accomplish, what other kinds of space could help us overcome these limitations? More broadly speaking, if social forums are meant to model and lead us towards the world we want, would this world be anything more than an unregulated open space?

If neoliberalism stands for unregulated open space, let us stand for something more. The forum participants may not agree on specific goals, but after five years we should be able to say something about another world besides that it is possible. To start, let us say that social forums and the world they seek to create are spaces of equity, education, and democracy. What we learn from social forums depends on what we try to accomplish through them. By creating more equitable, educative, and democratic forums, we can therefore learn how to build a more equitable, educative, and democratic world.

1) Equitable Space

Social forums should correct resource and power inequities by promoting equitable participation. They can encourage more equitable attendance by charging higher registration fees for those with the greatest ability to attend and offering subsidies for those with the least ability to attend. This means not only charging higher fees for participants from the North, but also higher fees for participants with low travel costs and more subsidies for those coming from far away. Locating forums in cities that are cheap airline destinations would enable more people with few resources to attend.

Forums could also facilitate more equitable participation amongst participants. They could promote gender equity by asking that 50% of speakers or facilitators at any session be women, +/- one person. Requesting that official speakers talk for no more than a third of the session time would enable more people to participate in discussion. Higher registration fees or more volunteers could be used to provide interpreters at every event, so that participants have a more equal opportunity to understand and contribute.

2) Educative Space

The spaces and activities of forums should be designed to actively facilitate learning. This year, the Forum moved towards more educative spaces by eliminating large plenaries; next it could request that sessions include small group discussions or activities, to encourage social learning through dialogue and deliberation. Sessions could be asked to provide written or visual materials (handouts, flipcharts, pictures, powerpoint presentations) to make information more accessible to more people in more ways.

We might also recognize that formal sessions are not the only way to learn, and do more to facilitate informal social interactions throughout the Forum site and host city. The site's discussion spaces, information tents, art exhibits, and vendors fostered more learning than many sessions. Future forums could add more opportunities for informal education by further integrating educational art, movies, and popular theater into the world of panels and workshops. We could also think more about how forums could better facilitate the education of those not present, in the surrounding city and world.

3) Democratic Space

Social forums should encourage and facilitate democratic decision-making. Neoliberalism is based on politics imposed from above, and alternative politics from below require more participatory democratic processes. To democratize decision-making *within* forums, the forum coordinators could provide session organizers with information on democratic decision-making processes, and then ask them to identify not only their session's format but also its decision-making process.

To democratize decision-making *about* forums, we could draw on the multi-layered decision-making of Porto Alegre's other acclaimed innovation, participatory budgeting. For example, participants of local forums could elect delegates to regional forum councils and participants of regional forums could elect delegates to an international forum council, to help decision-making filter from the local to the global.

So why has the WSF not more actively promoted equitable, educative, and democratic space? Some of its leaders have strongly opposed the Forum being anything but neutral space. The Forum's open space, however, is not neutral. Its unregulated interactions and predetermined contours empower certain participants and exclude others. Open space, though, does not need to be unregulated. Rather, planning and organization can make it more genuinely open. Moreover, the Forum is already more than open space – its solidarity economy demonstrates the power of upholding other basic principles. To become a more powerful force for social change, the Forum must recognize and move beyond the limitations of unregulated open space.

This debate is not only about the WSF, however. Local, regional, and national social forums that have recently emerged face similar challenges. Other civil society and people's convergences, even if they are not called social forums, must also decide what kind of spaces to be. The debate over the WSF's open space therefore points to broader questions for discussion: What kind of spaces should progressives create to communicate and work together? How can we plan spaces for social change?

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