

# Why the World Social Forum Needs to Be Less Like Neoliberalism

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January is a special month for the global left. Every year at this time, progressives and activists convene at the World Social Forum, usually in Porto Alegre, Brazil. In January 2005, I too was eagerly awaiting my first trip to the Forum, imagining a week of cross-cultural communication, strategic organizing, and inspiring celebrations. Although I didn't know exactly what to expect, I did know one thing – the Forum would be an alternative to neoliberalism. So why did I walk away from Porto Alegre worried mostly about the similarities between the Forum and neoliberalism? And is there still reason to be worried, as the 2006 Forum approaches?

The World Social Forum (WSF) 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 WSF is a "people's alternative" to the elite World Economic Forum, bringing together thousands of people to fight against neoliberalism and build another world. Despite these apparent contradictions, however, the WSF and neoliberalism both claim to create unregulated "open space" – non-hierarchical physical and social space that permits free interaction. If neoliberalism strives for unregulated open space, should social forums as well? Or could social forums be more powerful forces for social change if we focused less on protecting them as unregulated open spaces, and more on planning them as equitable, educative, and democratic spaces?

## What Does the Social Forum Accomplish?

Before judging what kind of space the Forum should be, we need to look at what the Forum actually accomplishes as it is. The 2005 WSF consisted of six days of panels, workshops, meetings, concerts, rallies, art events, eating, producing, shopping, gatherings, and parties. So what are the results of all this activity? Many people say that the Forum mainly serves to bring people together to exchange ideas. This may be true, but people often came together without talking, and exchanged ideas without listening.

To be more specific, we can say that the Forum *encourages existing actions, facilitates learning, establishes new connections, and organizes new actions*. Speeches, personal testimonies, and mass rallies provide people with feelings of solidarity and excitement, encouraging them to continue in their struggles. Participants learn new information, ideas, and ways of thinking, in panels, workshops, information fairs, and informal discussions. They even learn how an alternative world might work by modeling it, through an on-site solidarity economy. The Forum establishes connections between people who otherwise might not have met, by bringing together activists from many different countries, movements, and issues. Perhaps most importantly, participants organize new networks, protests, websites, organizations, listservs, meetings and campaigns.

Sounds great, right? Unfortunately, the 2005 Forum only partly achieved these accomplishments. For example, it encouraged plenty of actions, but most of the actions were strictly Brazilian or Latin American. The vast majority of the participants were from Brazil. Asians, Africans, and low-income people from the North, however, were underrepresented. Perhaps this is not surprising, since the costs of participation, including plane tickets, were cheapest for Brazilians and most expensive for those who participated the least.

Even those who were able to attend the Forum were unable to fully participate in many of its events. Panels and workshops were often cancelled, sometimes because of competition with larger organized events. Many participants were unable to participate in chosen sessions because of insufficient translation. At least half of the sessions were in Portuguese with no translation, and the primary language of each session was not always publicized in advance. Many people had difficulty hearing or sitting through the speakers, because of the excruciating mid-summer heat, noise from the fans, and sounds

from neighboring sessions. And although there seemed to be as many women as men at the Forum, panel speakers were disproportionately male.

With the majority of sessions either cancelled, without translation, or uncomfortable, many of the Forum's activities were not very productive. People often drifted in and out of events, making focused discussion difficult. Few sessions encouraged participant mixing, networking, or dialogue. Most were dominated by panel presentations, and few provided time or space for organizing or groupwork. Participants therefore had to find time for organizing outside of the Forum's packed schedule, in informal gatherings.

The opportunities for learning were often limited. Most sessions approached learning from what popular educator Paulo Freire described as the "banking" method, with expert panelists attempting to deposit information in passive participants. People may have learned about solidarity economies by participating in one, but since there were few democratic decision-making processes, there were limited opportunities to learn about democracy. Perhaps more importantly, most decisions were therefore not very democratic, but were rather made by small groups of movement leaders meeting informally.

The WSF accomplished much, but not as much as it could have. 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. So why were the Forum's accomplishments so limited?

### **The Problems with 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 contributed to some of the problems described above: inequitable participation, unproductive activities, and undemocratic decision-making. These problems are similar to those of neoliberalism, and they can be traced to three false assumptions: *regulation inherently limits free interaction, activities are more productive when 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, for example, neoliberalism and the WSF enable existing power hierarchies to decide 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, men, loud or confident voices, and (when the social forum is in Brazil) Portuguese speakers.

Unregulated open space encourages more individual autonomy over productive activities and less coordinated planning, which can lead to wasted time and energy. As neoliberal privatization and deregulation download state planning to 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, but logistic decisions (Forum location, dates, registration fees) of the self-selected 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 overcome these limitations? 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 strives for unregulated open space, social forums should strive 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 should be spaces of equity, education, and democracy*. By creating more equitable, educative, and democratic forums, we might 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 half of speakers or facilitators at any session be women. Requesting that official speakers talk for no more than half 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. In 2005, 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. The WSF could ask session organizers 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 panels. Future forums could create 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 decisions imposed from above by the market, so alternatives need to forge more democratic decisions from below. 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. Like neoliberalism, however, the Forum's open space is not actually neutral. Its unregulated interactions and predetermined shape empower certain participants and exclude others. Without formal rules and structures, open space is only truly open for those with the power to decide the unwritten rules and control the informal structures.

Open space, though, does not need to be unregulated. Rather, planning and organization can make it more genuinely open. In fact, the Forum is already becoming more than open space. Its on-site solidarity economy empowers street vendors and cooperatives while banning corporations, in an attempt to regulate an inherently unequal playing field. 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 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 even broader questions: What kind of spaces should progressives create to communicate and work together? How can we plan spaces for social change?

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