

Re: World Social Forum: space or movement?

A reply to Chico Whitaker's proposals for the future of the WSF

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Introduction

In the process towards the World Social Forum (WSF) in Tunis next month, some efforts have been made to start a discussion about the future of the WSF, but have so far found little resonance, at least certainly not in the public domain.

Among of the contributions are a number of recent proposals by Chico Whitaker, one of the founding figures of the WSF. I think these proposals need attention and further discussion. Another reason to write down some thoughts on Whitaker's texts is the fact that he regularly refers to, speaks to, and even shares his dreams about the so-called new movements of Occupy and Indignados (2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2013b). As a participant in both a local social forum and Occupy related initiatives, I'm especially interested to see how relations between the two could evolve.

And one last note: I don't doubt Whitaker's intentions concerning the future of the WSF, and in fact I agree with many of the underlying thoughts and I warmly support the search for radical improvements in the WSF process. Nevertheless, here I will concentrate on some critical points, trying to get a better understanding of the ideas about movements and open spaces on which Whitaker's proposals are based.

1. The dissolution of the IC and the start of a new movement

The first step in Whitaker's proposal is to dissolve the International Council of the World Social Forum (IC). Looking at the history and context of the current crisis within the IC, I think the formal declaration of the end of the IC is just the final step in the acceptance of an accomplished fact. Whitaker argues the IC has 'already fulfilled the functions it could meet' (Whitaker, 2012c), but I think we should be more direct: the IC has failed to fulfill its role as a permanent body that will give continuity to the WSF. The reality is that the WSF 2013 is going to happen anyway, without a functioning IC.

The second step of the proposal is the establishment of a new movement that takes over the role of the IC as 'facilitator and animator' of the WSF process, assigning to itself the power to

decide about the location of the next WSF, 'the only really important decision that the IC takes' (Whitaker, 2012c).

There is much to say about Whitaker's detailed vision of how such a new movement would work (2013a, b), but here I will just mention a few observations and concerns.

First, the establishment of a new movement is clearly a step further than the earlier proposal suggesting a power shift from the Brazil-France tandem to a Canada-Mahreb tandem (Whitaker, 2012a), but at the same time the creation of a new movement within the context of the WSF has been tried before: 'The Network of the World's Social Movements'. [1] I haven't heard anything about it ever since.

Second, except from methodological adaptations, such as the participation based on individuals instead of organisations, I don't see any fundamental differences with the *intended* setup and goals of the IC, that is: analysing the political situation in the world, facilitating the WSF process and choosing the location of the next WSF. In this sense the proposal is not as radical as Whitaker wants us to believe.

Third, I see a problem with the order of things. Whitaker proposes a new movement based on a new Manifesto or Charter, initially crewed by the current IC members, and then gradually add 'people that constitute or constituted the Organization Committees of the national, regional, continental or World Social Forums, and even local ones [...]' (2013a para 1.4). After that, local chapters of the new movement can be founded.

In many ways this reminds me of a somewhat similar initiative, namely the International Organization for a Participatory Society (IOPS), which, to put it bluntly, first presents a blueprint of a new society, then forms a new organisation from within its own inner circle, and only then seeks further participation and expansion. [2] I think we should not adopt such a top-down approach if we aim for an actively involved, broader and more localized base for a global process.

As I understand it, one of Whitaker's most important motivations for his proposal is to find a way to include the latest generation of movements. I agree this is a key question in the evolution of the WSF. **But inviting others to something new, to something pre-established that is not theirs yet, is always extremely difficult.** I wouldn't expect many new people to join such a new movement, especially if they are not familiar with the WSF, its history and its possible usefulness.

Having said this, I don't have any magic answers on how to overcome these problems, but I would like to share some embryonic ideas and suggestions that popped up while reading Whitaker's discussion texts. But first I will try to give a brief reflection on Whitaker's views on the role of social movements and the WSF as open space.

2. WSF, movement and space

According to Wikipedia the WSF 'tends to meet in January at the same time as its "great capitalist rival", the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting in Davos, Switzerland. This date is consciously picked to promote their alternative answers to world economic problems in opposition to the World Economic Forum.' [3]

For the 2013 edition the tradition of the overlapping date with the WEF in Davos has been abandoned for the first time in the history of the WSF. Although this seems a trivial point, it made me realize how deep the similarities between the WSF and WEF are, where the WSF has been mimicking the WEF as an event for the leaders of, in this case, another world, while Whitaker has made opposite claims (2004b). Let me explain.

In an interview addressing Occupy Wall Street, Whitaker frames the position of social movements as follows: '[W]e are not 99% against 1%. Those who have already the courage to speak up are many, but perhaps more or less 1%, against the 1% who controls and exploits the rest of the world.' (2012b) So, we have a powerful elite (symbolized by the WEF) on the one hand, a small group who resists on the extreme opposite site (symbolized by the WSF) and in the middle there is the 98%. Whitaker continues: '[W]e need to change our strategy. We need to turn ourselves to the 98%' (2012a)

I think this vision becomes problematic exactly where it puts the social movements outside of the 98%, as those who already see, those who already know. It's a simplification of reality in which the 98% has two options: this 1% or that 1%, us or them. I think this is an elitist, exclusive, vanguardist, moralistic and alienating picture and it ignores the reality that a vast majority of the world population is engaged in a day to day struggle for a life in peace and dignity, a struggle that takes many forms, and some of them may be less visible than others. I just don't think we can 'network' all these struggles by placing ourselves outside or above them.

I'm not only having trouble with this narrow definition of movements, I also would like to discuss the meaning of open space. Much has been written about the WSF as an open space for movements. Here I will limit myself by just looking at some of the Whitaker's (maybe outdated, I don't know) hypotheses on the WSF as open space:

'A space has *no leaders*. It is only a place, basically a horizontal space, just like the earth's surface, even if it has some ups and downs, It is like a *square without an owner*.

If the square has an owner other than the collectivity, it fails to be a square, and becomes private territory. Squares are generally open spaces that can be visited by all those who find any kind of interest in using it. Their purpose is solely being a square, whatever service they render to its users. The longer they last as squares the better it is for those who use them for what they offer for the realisation of their respective objectives.'

(Whitaker, 2004a, p.113, author's emphasis)

This vision contradicts with almost everything I was taught in human geography courses at university. But here I won't go into the historical and theoretical analysis of the relations between people and space, it's enough to have a look at the recent experiences of Tahrir, Sol, Zucotti and hundreds of other squares around the world. Here we have learned that the creation of a safe and open space, trying to realize a glimpse of another world, often right at a central point in the 'normality' of the dominant logic, is not that easy. We have learned that open spaces are always a product of a complex interaction between many different interests, intentions and expectations, both within the occupied squares and in relation to the rest of the world. Therefore, we can not just simply declare a space open and horizontal, and expect it to behave according to a certain set of principles forever. Instead, in the struggle for open spaces we always have to take into account questions of power, ownership and directions.

In the debate between those who have seen the WSF as movement, and those who have seen it as a space, Whitaker always sided with the latter: 'For me, there is no doubt that it is fundamental to ensure at all costs the continuity of the Forum as a space and to not yield to the temptation of transforming it now or even later, into a movement.' (Whitaker 2004a)

Now, nearly a decade later, Whitaker proposes to wrap the WSF space up in a new movement, saying that 'we should have the WSF as space and a new movement (the APW – Another Possible World) as movement, in parallel, without mixing both. We should nevertheless link them [...]' (Whitaker 2013c para 1).

If we want to come to a widely shared vision of the future of the WSF, can we base it on abstract and theoretical interpretations of spaces and movements? Can we draw strict lines between spaces and movements, and at the same time try to link them? Or can we develop new forms of global movement meetings based on practical experiences from the social forums, the occupied squares, and elsewhere?

3. Some suggestions

On charters and principles

While Whitaker repeatedly states that 'it's not a question of modifying the WSF Charter of Principles' (2012a, 2013a para 1.1), I think the Charter of Principles and its meaning within the WSF process should be rediscussed at some point. Without concluding that the text is not

relevant or valuable anymore, I see many reasons to have another look at it, not only because of its limitations (and violations), but most importantly because I think anything should be open to discussion, always.

A next WSF in cyberspace?

If the location of the next WSF is such a delicate matter, why not have an edition of the WSF in cyberspace, as an experiment? I see many opportunities here. First, it could improve the online infrastructure of the WSF and many participating social movements. Second, this could trigger the organisation of interconnected local events around the world, building a base for the future of the WSF process. Third, it could attract new types of participants, especially the ones that are not already engaged in any existing organisation or movement (the 98 percenters?). Fourth, it automatically gives new generations and new movements a position at the forefront, since they were born in a landscape shaped by online social networking. Fifth, it doesn't have the enormous environmental costs and it doesn't need a concentration of financial resources. Well, there are more arguments for (and against) a WSF in cyberspace, but it's just another option that can be considered.

Opening up the spaces for debate

I think, when talking about the future of the WSF and the futures of social movements, we need to communicate and discuss our various needs and expectations regarding meetings on the global scale. Only then we are able to build a collective and practical framework to organize such meetings. The WSF in Tunis offers us another moment to do this and we have to make sure that these debates are not kept inside the exclusive spaces of IC mailinglists and IC meetings.

Notes

[1] See: Ezequiel Adamovsky, 2003, 'The World Social Forum's New Project: The Network of the World's Social Movements' <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/wsf/newproject.htm>

[2] See: <http://www.iopsociety.org/>

[3] See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum

References

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Chico Whitaker, March 2004b, 'World Social Forum – A Process in Construction', <http://www.pekea-fr.org/PubliSurNLetter/Whitaker-En-NL13.pdf>

Chico Whitaker, November 2011, 'Inverted tale – from the end to the beginning (imagine is possible)', <http://www.e-joussour.net/en/node/12054>

Chico Whitaker, January 2012a, 'New Perspectives in the WSF Process', <http://www.ciranda.net/article6100.html>

Chico Whitaker, February 2012b, 'A View From Brazil: World Social Forum Co-founder Chico Whitaker Offers an International Perspective on the Occupy Wall Street Movement', <http://www.ussocialforum.net/node/373>

Chico Whitaker, December 2012c, 'World Social Forum: space or movement? Thinking about the WSF International Council future in new perspectives', December 2012, http://chicowhitaker.net/artigo_eng.php?artigo=44

Chico Whitaker, January 2013a 'Additional notes to the text proposing the dissolution of the WSF IC', http://chicowhitaker.net/artigo_eng.php?artigo=45

Chico Whitaker, January 2013b, 'More notes about my proposal on the WSF IC ', January 2013 http://chicowhitaker.net/artigo_eng.php?artigo=66