

Democracy and the London European Social Forum

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Abstract

The issue of democracy is fundamental for the global justice movement, both as a focal point of its critique of the current political-economic configuration of power, and as a principle of its internal organisation. Popular demands for democracy increasingly move beyond the liberal representative model to more radical conceptions that include greater insistence on personal autonomy, individual control over life choices, and direct participation in key decisions which affect people's lives based on decentralized networks, rejection of leadership and hierarchy, and respect of diversity and subjectivity. Social Forums have recently emerged as important arenas of the global civil society where different notions of 'another world' are articulated, challenged and contested. The London European Social Forum was greatly identified with the conflict between 'vertical' organisations – that largely adhere to a model of representative democracy and operate within a relatively predetermined set of structures and processes that are firmly oriented towards effective results – and 'horizontal' networks of activists that follow more deliberative forms of democracy that that emphasise inclusiveness and quality of communication. This paper, after a brief theoretical discussion of different models of democracy, examines the conceptions and practices employed at the ESF, its preparatory process and the autonomous events that took place in opposition to it, and argues that, contrary to most accounts that have pointed at a democratic deficit, it was precisely this adherence to different models of democracy that consisted the principal source of the conflict.

1. Introduction

The issue of democracy is fundamental for the global justice movement (GJM), both as a focal point of its critique of the current political-economic configuration of power, and as a principle of its internal organisation. Global corporate power is deemed detrimental to the ability of citizens and communities to determine social, economic and political priorities, operating within a neoliberal framework that grants excessive power to oligarchically controlled markets. Political institutions, especially inter/supra-national ones, are attributed with a democratic deficit, removed from the public sphere, lacking transparency and accountability, and “violat[ing] even minimal norms of democratic practice, such as majoritarianism and representativeness” (Ross, 2002: 281).

However, popular demands for democracy increasingly move beyond the liberal representative model to more radical conceptions that include greater insistence on personal autonomy, individual control over life choices, and direct participation in key decisions which affect people's lives based on decentralized networks, rejection of leadership and hierarchy, and respect of diversity and subjectivity (Ross, 2002: 284). In contrast to political parties and the organized labour movement, collective action undertaken by 'new social movements' has, to a great extent, focused on grassroots rather than hierarchical organisation, with an emphasis on “[t]he organizational forms of movements [which] are not just ‘instrumental’ for their goals, they are a goal in themselves. Since collective action is focused on cultural codes, the form of the movement is itself a message, a symbolic challenge to the dominant codes” (Melucci, 1989: 60). This explicit rejection of instrumentalism is fundamental to many of these new forms of political practice that attempt to actualise aspired-to values and principles throughout, and put forward a kind of “activism that prefigures and embodies a wholly different kind of politics, a politics of ‘everyday life’, one that seeks to transform the way we envisage power and relate to it” (Tormey, 2005: 345). The ways in which power is inhabited, performed and distributed are of paramount importance within this context, with modes of organization and relational patterns consciously reflecting those aspirations.

The World Social Forum (WSF) first took place in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil as a grassroots alternative to the annual gathering of the global elite in Davos, Switzerland (World Economic Forum) in order to give the GJM the opportunity to discuss what it is for, as much

as what it is against, with a diverse range of organisations rallying under the banner ‘Another World is Possible’ (Klein 2001). It has since inspired a number of regional editions, among which four European Social Forums (Florence in 2002, Paris in 2003, London in 2004 and Athens in 2006).

The ESF has adopted the World Social Forum Charter of Principles (WSF, 2005). The Charter sets the overall normative and substantive framework within which the Forum operates, and stresses the pluralistic, non-hierarchical, decentralised character of the Forum. The forum is conceived not as “*a body representing world civil society*” (article 5), but as “*an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action*” (article 1). Participating groups and organisations are encouraged to “*deliberate on declarations or actions they may decide on*’, and the Forum ‘*undertakes to circulate such decisions widely ..., without directing, hierarchising, censoring or restricting them*” (article 7). It is clear, however, that any such decisions bind only the groups and organisations that participate in the specific deliberations. The Forum as an entity has no decision-making authority: “*The meetings of the WSF do not deliberate on behalf of the WSF as a body. No-one, therefore, will be authorised, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants. The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body. It thus does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings, nor does it intend to constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the organizations and movements that participate in it*” (article 6).

Recent European and World Social Forums have adopted organisational changes that further consolidated the decentralised formulation of the thematic content of the Forum, with the customary internally organised plenary sessions being reduced in number in the former, and abolished altogether in the latter. At the same time, however, this uncompromising conception of the Forum as a space/arena (‘a public square with no owner’, as Chico Whitaker has put it) has increasingly been criticised by those (including many prominent intellectuals and activists) who believe that the current format is close to exhausting its potential and the Forums, instead of being laboratories of progressive vision, run the risk of becoming feel-good but ossified political gatherings, a kind of Mecca for annual pilgrimages by the world’s Left (Engler, 2005). Putting forward a competing conception of the Forum as a movement/actor stresses the need to take the GJM forward through the articulation of concrete alternatives and the formulation of programmatic points of convergence and ideas with broad support that coalesce to a roadmap for ‘another world’ (for an overview of the ‘space’ versus ‘movement’ debate, see Whitaker 2004, Teivainen 2004, Patomaki and Teivainen 2004, Marcuse 2005, Conway 2005). While this debate at the WSF regarding the political choices, priorities and strategies of the GJM – and the role of the Forum vis-à-vis those issues – is mainly concerned with the outcomes of popular mobilization and collective action, the similarly originated, if more confrontational, dispute that was played out at the London ESF had primarily to do with issues of process and organisation.

Although some scholars argue that the GJM is closely associated with deliberative democracy (e.g. Della Porta 2005, Oelson 2005), the fact that a number of organisations involved in the ESF follow different models of democracy proved a constant source of conflict. The London ESF will be remembered by many as the battleground between ‘vertical’ organisations – that largely adhere to a model of representative democracy and operate within a relatively predetermined set of structures and processes that are firmly oriented towards effective results – and ‘horizontal’ networks of activists for whom democracy is a wide open,

inclusive process.¹ ‘Horizontal’ has recently become something of a buzzword within grassroots activist circles. Its basic principles include non-hierarchical organizational structures, rejection of leadership and representation, consensus decision-making, and respect (even celebration) of pluralism of viewpoints and actions – all of which amount to a ‘deepening’ of democracy and a conception of autonomy as both a means and an end of political praxis.

This paper looks at conceptions and practices of democracy articulated and employed by the various participating groups and organisations at the European Social Forum that took place in London in October 2004, its preparatory process and the autonomous events held contemporaneously in opposition to it, and argues that, contrary to most accounts that have pointed at a fundamental lack of democracy, it was precisely this adherence to different models of democracy that consisted the principal source of the conflict.

2. Models of democracy

Democracy is a highly contested concept. Birch argues that all three referents in the commonly used and supposedly straightforward quasi-definition ‘democracy is the government *of* the people, *by* the people, *for* the people’ can be interpreted in a variety of ways; “even Stalin could have used it to characterise his regime without doing violence to the wording; and the phrase as a whole has rhetorical rather than logical meaning” (2002:76). Before we can assess the extent to which the practices of actors within the ESF reflect allegiance to certain models of democracy and rejection of others, it is therefore necessary to outline briefly the most relevant models.

Representative democracy

Representative democracy is based on the ‘theory of the electoral mandate’, which argues that governments are democratic if they are elected by a majority of the electorate on the basis of political parties’ manifestos. Representative democracy is mimicked at the organisational level; power-holding officials are generally elected by rank-and-file members. Trade unions are a classic example, and, according to Stephan Norris and Zeitlin (1995), a democratic trade union has three features:

- 1) a democratic constitution that guarantees basic civil liberties and political rights;
- 2) institutionalised opposition which allows members freedom to debate and to organise, and to oppose and replace officials through elections; and
- 3) an active membership that participates in decisions that affect them.

In this model of democracy, participation may be limited to individual members casting votes for representatives on the basis of their private interests (rather than the common good). Individuals vote on the basis of predetermined preferences, have only limited choices, and the outcome in terms of political orientation will never be that most favourable for all voters. This type of democracy is hierarchical with leaders wielding hugely disproportional power over the organisation compared to the average member. Seidman’s statement that union democracy ‘if it means the determination of policy directly by a rank and file majority ... is to be found only in small local unions’ (1958:35) is perhaps as true today as it was when written.

The reality of political parties and those standing for office in an organisation looking predominantly after the interests of their supporters at the expense of others, as well as the fact that voters typically vote for representatives with whom they may not agree on every issue, rather qualify the ‘democratic’ scope of the representative model. For example, in 1970, only four of sixteen Labour Party policies in the Labour Manifesto had the support of a

¹ The former included the Greater London Authority (GLA), trade unions, political parties such as the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP) and Socialist Action, and NGOs and SMOs such as CND, Stop the War Coalition, Globalise Resistance and War on Want. The latter consisted of grassroots, autonomist and anti-authoritarian groups, media publications and activists such as Red Pepper and Indymedia as well as some NGOs (Friends of the Earth, World Development Movement, Attac).

majority of Labour voters (Rose 1976:309). The scope of representative democracy is clearly much narrower than the more discursive alternatives to which Social Forums aspire.

Associationalism

According to Hirst:

‘Conventional representative democracy has become little more than a plebiscite that chooses and legitimates the rules of a big governmental machine that is out of control, in that it is largely unaccountable and cannot tackle major social problems. The crisis of citizen participation and effective accountability of government to society is all too obvious. Democracy needs to be renewed. It needs to be more inclusive, to give voice not only to those who are excluded by poverty and discrimination but to many other citizens as well who see politics as a professional spoils system beyond their control and concern’ (Hirst 1993:115-6).

Associational democracy is based on the idea that ‘human welfare and liberty are both best served when as many of the affairs of society as possible are managed by voluntary and democratically self-governing associations’ (Hirst 1993:112). These associations should be publicly funded, and must be open and inclusive bodies, networked to other associations to provide overlapping planes of social identity and cleavage, thus reducing conflict between groups.

This model of democracy opposes state collectivism and free-market individualism and regards ‘property as theft’ unless it contributes to the collective welfare. For example, policing that protects the property of the ‘haves’ from the ‘have nots’ is illegitimate on the basis that it decreases the opportunities of the latter. The solution to this is “a mixture of social crusading by those ‘haves’ who care, and empowerment of the ‘have nots’. This can be realised through voluntary associations working in partnership with the poor and excluded’ (Hirst 1993:115). Thus, civil society is seen as the primary locus of democratic power and means of organising social life.

Deliberative democracy

Provided that decisions are made on a decentralised basis by small civil society-based organisations, associational democracy seems to be little concerned whether they are made by voting, or as an outcome of discursive debate. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, considers that discursive debate is the ideal means for testing policy proposals, and reaching rational decisions. However, not all deliberative democrats agree about the scope of deliberative debate. Should experts within the governmental arena carry out debate and rational decision-making? Or is decision-making, as associationalists propose, something that should be carried out by civil society?²

Whether engaged with by experts or civil society at large, deliberative democracy, at least in theory, involves a communicative process which, based on empowerment, equality, inclusiveness and transparency, employs reason to transform individual preferences and serve the public good (della Porta 2005:4-5). Transparency allows for trust to be built between interacting agents, and the model’s practical application takes the form of discussions, which are ‘open and uncoerced ... with the aim of arriving at an agreed judgement’ (Miller 1993:76). The purpose of deliberative democracy is to reach the solution that is most agreeable to all parties involved – not necessarily a correct one (cf. Habermas 1986), something which can boost political participation through strengthening the legitimacy of decisions made. For deliberative democrats, democracy is not merely about expressing political preferences as in

² Liberal democrats are content that deliberation is confined to the institutions of government, whereas Dryzek believes that intersubjective communication and contestation of discourses should take place within the public sphere (2000:55-6).

representative democracy; it is also about forming them in the public sphere – in public spaces such as the Social Forums.

Deliberative democracy can take place within established power structures. Indeed, some commentators argue that deliberative democracy should be practised within institutions of power, such as the executive or parliament. Dryzek (2000:2) however prefers a more robust definition of deliberative democracy, which he calls ‘discursive democracy’. This form of democracy is, unlike deliberative democracy in general, critical of established power structures. It also involves ‘reflection on preferences in non-coercive fashion’. This requirement rules out certain behavioural patterns that are symptomatic of a model of representative democracy that includes ‘domination via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expressions of mere self-interest, threats (of the sort that characterise bargaining), and attempts to impose ideological conformity’.

Whilst della Porta (2005) suggests that deliberative democracy characterises the GJM, it is clear, as we shall see, that different organisations within the GJM follow the model of deliberative democracy to varying degrees. Some GJMOs follow exactly that kind of ‘exercise of power’ that Dryzek so deplors. Indeed, Young (1996:123) argues that power relations are inevitable even in discursive settings; competition, rather than reflexivity and mutual understanding, is an inevitable outcome of deliberation because those involved in the discussion strive to win the argument.

Democracy from below

Falk (2000:171) has introduced a theory of ‘normative democracy’, ‘a proposal for a unifying ideology capable of mobilizing and unifying the disparate social forces that constitute global civil society and to galvanise the political energy that is associated with globalisation from below’. While ‘globalisation from above’ operates in a democratically deficient environment in which global economic markets take precedence over sustainability, justice, public will and local cultures, ‘globalisation from below’ and ‘normative democracy’ represent civil society’s call for legitimate governance with the consent of local people, with local direct democracy and a rule of law which balances the legislative, executive and judicial functions. It emphasises non-violence and human rights, public empowerment and participation, transparency and accountability, and, like deliberative democracy, calls for orientation towards the public good.

Whereas the power structures that constitute the main targets of discursive democracy may be local, national, regional or international, normative democracy primarily challenges the unaccountable power of international financial institutions (IFIs) and can therefore be considered a specialist subcategory of discursive democracy. According to Falk, his normative theory of democracy ‘provides an alternative, or series of convergent alternatives, that has not yet been posited as a coherent body of theory and practice, but remains the inarticulate common ground of an emergent global civil society’ (*ibid*:175). ‘Often, this convergence is concealed beneath the more particularised banners of human rights, environmental protection, feminism and social justice that have been unfurled within global civil society by issue-oriented social movements’ (*ibid*:165).

3. Research methods

In order to explore the concepts and practices of democracy within the London ESF, we employed methods of participant observation, supplemented by scrutiny of the email discussions posted on various relevant web-sites before, during and after the Forum, while also taking into consideration the various accounts of the Forum published in periodicals and on web-sites. The impossibility to directly observe more than a small part of the lengthy, dense and not always easily discernible interactions that constituted the preparatory process necessitated a rather heavy reliance on various web sources, particularly the two main mailing

lists that effectively acted as the public agora of the structure and, consequently, provided the field on which many conflicts were played out. However, our observations of the Forum itself, and of the alternative events that accompanied it, is largely based on the participant observations of a eleven-member team of academics assembled for the purpose and employing an observation guide prepared and discussed in advance of the event³.

It is impossible even for such a team to systematically cover an event as large and geographically dispersed as the ESF. There were more than 500 plenary sessions, workshops, seminars, and cultural events on the official programme, as well as many seminars and workshops in the unofficial, ‘autonomous spaces’ established by groups acting outside the official ESF. Although most of the larger official events took place at a single venue (Alexandra Palace, in North London), others – especially smaller seminars and workshops – took place at a wide range of sites in and around central London.

The focus of our observations was predominantly adjusted in relation to sessions whose title suggested they were concerned with issues of democracy, and/or where it was most reasonable to expect that some kind of deliberative debate might take place – e.g. ‘future of the movement’ sessions, and the concluding Assembly of the Social Movements. It was, however, difficult, on the basis of the provisional programme, reliably to select sessions in advance, and logistically impossible to cover all possibly relevant meetings, and so, in practice a degree of flexibility was necessary. Because there was no greatly reliable way of determining the shape and content of the Forum in advance, and given the practical obstacles, we cannot claim that our account is strictly representative of everything that went on during the London ESF. However, by the combination of direct observation and critical examination of other participants’ accounts, we are confident that it is based upon as broad and representative a cross-section of ESF-related events as was practicable.

4. The London ESF preparatory process

The conflict between the Verticals and the Horizontals was evident even before it was officially decided that London would host the 2004 ESF. In wake of the first European Preparatory Assembly (EPA) that would assess the conditions of the London bid, the Horizontals were already complaining that a few organizations (GLA, SWP, War on Want, CND, Stop the War Coalition, and some trade unions) had taken the process upon themselves, without consulting or seeking to involve others, with many only finding out through their European contacts. The fact that this was happening at such an early stage shows the deep mistrust of big organizations, to the point that the London Social Forum not only criticized the bid as closed and exclusive, but also proposed that, in order for the process to be built properly, the UK (and not necessarily London) should not host the forum until the following year, as they had initially proposed (Sullivan, 2005: 346).

In the absence of any bid to hold the ESF elsewhere, this proposal might seem particularly counter-productive for the European movement, but it also revealed a fundamental clash of political cultures between those who saw the whole undertaking as mainly holding an *event* that would champion global justice and outreach into the mainstream of British civil society, and those for whom it was a participatory *process* concerned with building a movement through the creation of new forms of political practice that reject instrumentalism and embody aspired-to values and principles throughout.

The first EPA took place in December 2003 in a tense atmosphere amid accusations that Vertical representatives were manipulating and controlling the process. Even the fact that many seemed to consider London as the only possible city to host the ESF was deemed

³ Observer team: Andrea Conte, Marlies Glasius, Jeff Juris, Raffaele Marchetti, Tasos Papadimitriou, Alex Plows, Ruth Reitan, Christopher Rootes, Clare Saunders, Jill Timms. For a report of the team’s observations and insights, see Smith, 2005.

undemocratic, although there was clearly no alternative on offer. Many activists were adamant at a perceived attempt for the organisational framework of the ‘process’ (horizontal-speak for internal democracy and transparency) to be sidelined, while for them it should be discussed separately and before anything else. The verticals, on the other hand, wanted to integrate that discussion with the various agenda topics (which was what, after a rather long and acrimonious stalemate, finally happened), arguing that such a compartmentalisation would be counterproductive. The two-day meeting, during which the working groups of the ESF were established ended with the provisional decision that London should host the ESF, and gave the British the three months until the next EPA to effect outreach, and secure venues and funding. It was agreed that all relevant bodies should meet in public, publish their agendas and discussion documents, and make available full minutes of meetings, in order to ensure an open, transparent and inclusive process. This, however, would not always be the case in practice.

Most of the preparatory process was dominated by that conflict. Babels and Nomad (the volunteer networks responsible for translation at the ESF), in a open letter addressed to the Organizing Committee some months into the process, accused it of having steadfastly refused to tackle practical issues in a transparent and participatory manner and accept them as political in their very nature. For them, the practical ways in which the material and financial needs of an event of this scale are met are of primary political relevance, and – in accordance with associationalist thought – voluntary, creative and sustainable solutions should be prioritised over commercial service providers. In that letter, they claimed that ‘the lack of transparency, participatory process and communication channels prevent individuals and organisations with alternative solutions and energies from offering alternatives to the socially and environmentally destructive capitalist sector. [...] Sadly, it is now clear [...] that interpretation, translation and all other related communications issues are considered as purely technical issues that ought to be approached in a technocratic manner’ (Babels and Nomad, 2004). It is interesting that the letter concludes with a denunciation of bureaucratic organisational models as, apart from everything else, inefficient; it is exactly this concern about efficiency that was greatly responsible for the reluctance of organisations such as the GLA and trade unions to delegate organisational decisions. Babels, who enjoy considerable credibility and respect for the service they provide, repeated their grievances after the end of the forum, claiming, for example, that ‘neo-liberal practices of organisation, management and service delivery have been employed, with the result that the forum has been entirely dependent on the state’. This was seized upon by critics of the outsourcing of ESF functions (from security to catering to computer software) to private companies that sidelined not-for-profit collectivities, greatly increased the cost of the event, and altered its character (Babels, 2004).

Despite the accusations, the desire to decentralise the thematic formulation of the event was apparent and shared by the majority, including the Verticals. The centrally organised plenaries (as opposed to the self-organised seminars and workshops) came under sustained and rather consensual criticism as extremely time-consuming to organise⁴, and often consisting of big panels that offer a diet of repetitive monologues and platitudes with no real debate and very little time for audience contribution. Following the establishment of the Programme Group (PG), a letter inviting groups and organisations to participate was widely circulated (Programme Group, 2004), and a bottom-up on-line consultation about the thematic content of the forum was established, in order to accommodate people who did not participate regularly at meetings⁵.

⁴ They are customarily based on a national quota system that generates endless deliberations and haggling to determine the order of speakers.

⁵ Although, in practice, this did not happen in a very systematic manner.

The considerable openness in formulating the thematic content of the ESF contrasted to what many participants in the preparatory process perceived as a lack of transparency around organisational matters. The ‘core’ organisations were accused of meeting in private for months and being extremely reticent about issues such as budgeting, venue and services hire, and legal frameworks. Decisions were sometimes ‘presented as *faits accomplis* to the [Organizing] Committee and objections were thwarted as being petty, time-wasting or even malicious obstructions by people “obsessed with process” or [...] “wanting to wreck the ESF”’ (Dowling, 2005: 210). A particular point of friction was the fact that the December EPA had decided that a ‘volunteers group’ would take all practical steps to ensure that the London ESF could take place. Representatives of those organisations were accused of ‘sitting on’ the contact details and not activating the mailing list that was supposed to facilitate the open formulation of the proposal by the volunteer group, but instead drafted a proposal themselves that they presented at the next UK Assembly. Over this period, the Practicalities Group repeatedly, but unavailingly, asked the GLA for information, a fact that at least in part reflected the GLA’s unease about public opinion regarding the use of public resources to fund the ESF (Becker, 2004a; Dowling, 2005: 213).

Such attitudes were criticised as ‘control freakery’ that fundamentally undermined democracy in the ESF process. But complaints by union representatives about the ‘structurelessness’ of the process should not be interpreted as an expression of their ‘disdain for democratic debate and disagreement’, but rather as a manifestation of a certain bureaucratic and managerial mentality that focuses on representation, formal decision making and efficiency. People whose involvement was part of their job and voluntary activists had completely different expectations from the process (Harrison, 2006: 3). Moreover, union officials who participated in the process clearly saw themselves as the elected representatives of mass democratic, albeit hierarchical, institutions, which, as far as they were concerned, conveyed a legitimacy that individuals with varying degrees of connection to horizontal groups lacked.

In general, one of the problems was the inability or unwillingness to problematise modes of organising of difference by people very firmly and uncompromisingly attached to purist visions and certain ways of doing things. As Diani (2003) points out, the crisis of confidence in established patterns of interest intermediation, distrust of bureaucratic organisation and formal representation, and reluctance to recognise authoritative leadership, have led to a struggle to reconcile aspirations to autonomous and independent action with persistent needs of coordination and decision-making. Therefore the productive synergy of the horizontal and the vertical mode (the ‘diagonalisation’ process) proved extremely difficult (Becker, 2004b; De Angelis, 2004; Callinicos, 2004; Kingsnorth, 2004; Wainwright, 2004). Instead, mindsets seemed to be inflexibly predisposed in such a way that preconceptions about other’s motives and actions could only be reinforced.⁶

In the January UK Assembly, a proposal regarding the organising structure of the ESF mainly drafted by trade unionists was put forward. Based on the model employed at previous European and World Social Forums, it proposed the establishment of an Organizing Committee (OC) to make all arrangements to host the ESF in London and that all appropriate collectivities should be invited to participate. Groups and organisations could affiliate at various local, regional and national rates, depending on their membership and overall financial clout, and could then have one representative at OC meetings where decisions would be taken by consensus. It was also proposed that meetings of the OC should be open to individual observers and the affiliation process should be on-going.

⁶ For example, during a weekend EPA meeting at the GLA headquarters, the main room’s seating was rearranged into a circle, in accordance to the horizontal rejection of hierarchy and encouragement of participation. Finding the room converted back to its initial state the next morning was interpreted as another proof of elitism, while in fact it was only the result of the cleaners having had visited the room overnight.

As had come to be the norm in most UK and European Assemblies, the meeting took place in a hostile atmosphere with regular disruptions and mutual recriminations. Many people, despite appreciating the organisational progress that had been achieved, criticised the ‘closed, unaccountable and secretive way’ in which practical aspects of the bid were put together (Hennig, 2004). The Horizontals resisted the proposal, favouring the Assembly as the paramount decision-making body and objecting to the affiliation process and the associated fees, due to their disregard for representation as well as because they were seen as inhibiting the involvement of individuals and loose networks of activists (although from a financial point of view, the proposed fees could hardly be considered exclusionary, especially since provisions were made for reduced rates for groups with limited resources⁷).

Other than merely replicating a tried formula, the establishment of an Organizing Committee was a means for raising finances, since it made it easier for affiliated organisations to justify financial support for the ESF to their members. But it was also, undoubtedly, a way to avoid the often chaotic assemblies where decision-making was slow, inconclusive and generally problematic. It did not help matters when union officials declared that ‘there is only one organisational proposal on the table and, if people don’t accept it, there won’t be an ESF’. However true this might have been⁸, this attitude, similar to the GLA’s alleged threat at a later stage to withdraw their sponsorship if a plenary session on strategies against racism and neo-fascism was not included in the programme with Mayor Livingstone on the panel⁹, only further fuelled accusations of oligarchic tendencies within the process.

In the March EPA the financial, organisational and infrastructural capabilities of the British ‘movement’ (fragmentation and acrimony notwithstanding) were officially deemed sufficient for London to host the ESF. Communication, however, between the various working groups and the GLA in particular continued to be problematic, and meetings were predominantly chaired by representatives of a few organisations who were occasionally accused of directing, even manipulating, proceedings instead of merely facilitating them (Sullivan, 2005). Failure to circulate agendas well in advance meant that representatives were unable to discuss issues with their organisations and, therefore, could only speak for themselves. That, as well as unreliable and erratic minute-taking and dissemination, gave power to the ‘inner circle’ that followed the process closely and alienated the rest. Decisions taken in meetings across Europe were often lost in translation, with different individuals and groups having diverse understandings of what was decided.

Nevertheless, the tensions that were to resurface during and after the ESF, eased considerably during the following few months. The Horizontals started focusing on the parallel processes that would produce a wide range of autonomous spaces and events, with varying degrees of connection to the main ESF. Their main demands were to have resources and spaces inside the ESF, that the autonomous spaces should be included in the main programme, and that decision-making processes (including those with regard to the allocation of resources) should be open, participatory and accessible.¹⁰

The debate on the themes and titles of the plenary sessions, as well as the overall thematic axes of the ESF was prolonged. One could reasonably expect this to be the main battleground of the process, in which competing orientations and philosophies of the various strands of the movement contended over the political direction, priorities and strategies of the ESF. In that sense, any purposeful attempt on the part of the Verticals to manipulate and

⁷ Affiliation fees were £250-1,500 for national, £100-500 for regional, and £50-250 for local organisations.

⁸ At the end, critics just proposed minor amendments – no-one blocked the proposal

⁹ It is rather ironic, but certainly not a coincidence, that this was to be one of the disrupted and eventually abandoned sessions at the ESF.

¹⁰ There were exceptions: groups such as the radical anti-authoritarian Wombles expressed their total rejection of the official process by explicitly asking that their activities not be included in the main programme.

control the process according to their agenda would focus on the ideological outlook of the Forum instead of organisational issues with no explicit political significance.

Arguments, however, had more to do with subtle phrasing nuances and resonated national priorities and framings rather than major political disagreements. For example, the centrality of the issue of war in general – and Iraq in particular – met some resistance from other Europeans, but it was more a reflection of British social and political realities, rather than a self-serving strategy on behalf of the Stop the War Coalition. For their part, the Horizontals’ preoccupation with issues of ‘process’ meant that the thematic content of the ESF hardly attracted the same confrontational involvement.¹¹

In the end the themes reflected what everyone within the movement is for (democracy, equality, sustainability) or against (war, injustice, racism), and were sufficiently generic and open that virtually any seminar and workshop proposal could be included. Accommodating a volume of proposals that vastly outnumbered the available session slots was a huge undertaking that had to be completed within a short period of time. Voluntary mergers were followed by compulsory ones, which did not always work out equitably, depending on the relative standing and authority of the organisations. On the whole, however, there were no deliberate exclusions and the final ESF programme broadly reflected an open, democratic and pluralistic process.

5. The main event¹²

Following the templates of other social forums, the main program was divided into plenaries, seminars, and workshops. In theory, workshops are spaces where the most discursive analysis can take place between presenters and audience, and seminars devote more time to audience questions and responses than plenaries do. In practice, the skills and planning of facilitators, and the numbers of people attending, determine how effective participation is in these sessions.

Genuine deliberation during the ESF, especially the plenary sessions and the big seminars, was admittedly rather scarce. Poor acoustics and a chaotic floor plan at the main venue (Alexandra Palace), as well as regularly malfunctioning translation equipment did not help matters. More crucially, panel contributions were often disconnected and consisting of clichéd slogans designed to attract applause, rather than stimulate discursive debate (Levidow, 2004). The time allocated to audience participation was hardly enough to accommodate real discussion, and audience participation was often reduced to a random sequence of individual floor speakers who took the opportunity to advertise causes and air grievances representing various groups or, more usually, none, in no logical order. This, and the generally large numbers of people present, meant that in many cases there was little dialogue – less like a conversation than a very formal and poorly chaired academic seminar or lecture or even a political rally.

The plenary ‘Towards a Social Europe’ demonstrates some of these issues. It consisted of three guest speakers, followed by a ‘discussion’ introduced with a statement from the chair that “we should say yes to another Europe that we can construct together, but ‘no’ to the constitution that we have today”, which was merely a summary of the speakers’ arguments, rather than any attempt to stimulate reflexive discussion. The ensuing ‘discussion’ was less a deliberative debate than a series of disconnected speeches, some of which made reference to pre-formed ideologies. A member of the Scottish Socialist Party, for example, read a prepared speech which did not reflexively draw upon the arguments of the speakers, and included the statement: “I want to defend the concept of a social Europe and a socialist

¹¹ A five-page “Statement from groups, networks and individuals to the ESF Organizing Committee” that was issued in March articulates a wholesale critique of the organization of the preparatory process, but contains no more than a few lines on the programme of the forum (Horizontals, 2004).

¹² This section draws heavily on the observer team report (Smith, 2005)

Europe as a necessary precept to a socialist world, which is actually what we need in the long run”.

But while there was a number of sessions that allowed for some discussion of the challenges and tensions involved in organizing social forums, there was little in the way of sustained or systematic discussion of the internal democracy of the social forum movement itself. Thus, throughout the Forum one heard assorted grumbles about inadequate representation of particular groups, especially women, youth and the disabled, and about the disproportionate influence of trades unions upon the ESF agenda. The larger, better-organized and better resourced interests are most likely to be heard and to dictate agenda.

The conflict that was seething for months culminated into the ‘storming’ of the ESF venue by a few hundred activists aiming to publicise their grievances and disrupt a plenary session at which the London Mayor, Ken Livingstone was scheduled to speak (but from which he withdrew, after being informed of the planned action). One of the 300 activists who occupied the stage during the ESF session seized the microphone from the speaker and claimed: ‘never again must a social forum be organised like this. It has been a travesty of democracy’ (Kingsnorth 2004b). However, many social forum attendees considered that disrupting the ESF session was itself undemocratic. Only a few people walked out of the plenary in solidarity with the disrupters, and there was much negative feedback on the post-event list-serve, evidence that considered that the action stifled rather than opened dialogue.

Besides the criticisms that have already been discussed, some Horizontals were extremely critical of the dependency on GLA funding, the perceived commercialisation and corporate character of the ESF, and particularly the registration fees, which, they argued, excluded the poor, immigrants and refugees.¹³ Local authorities have probably been the single largest donor during the ESF’s short history, and it is difficult to imagine that so large and complex an event could have been staged without the auspices – and the financial support – of the GLA (or another such bureaucratic organisation).¹⁴ In addition, some associational democrats accept state funding, provided that civil society, not governmental administration, is responsible for providing the services. For them, the problem was not accepting funding from the local government, but rather the control that the GLA allegedly exerted.

6. The Autonomous Spaces

The London Social Forum (LSF), a network of London-based activists established in 2003, was one of the key players involved in the attempts to ‘democratise the ESF’ and in the establishment of a broader horizontal network. In an open meeting later that year, a discussion of the proposal to hold the next ESF in London. It concluded that whilst the ESF was an important meeting that could serve to ‘energise’ UK activists:

It should only be supported [in 2004] if the organisational process of the ESF is to be plural, open and transparent, with a commitment to the inclusion of political diversity. There must be also a Europe-wide accountability for decision making over political content and budgets. We are very concerned that the planning for this bid has so far been closed.

The LSF was not only an attempt to democratise what was perceived to be a closed preparatory process for the ESF, which one activist referred to as a ‘European Socialist Forum’, but also an attempt to practice the social forum model at local level. As LSF states on

¹³ Besides the entrance fee (advance booking: £20 unwaged, £30 waged, £30 for a delegate, £50 for an organisation; on the door: £30 unwaged, £40 waged, £40 for a delegate, £60 for an organisation; £10 for participants from the ‘Global South’), organisations wanting to run seminars and workshops also had to pay £75-250. It has to be said that the starting price of the fee was slightly higher than the cost of the three-day London transport pass it included.

¹⁴ The Greater London Authority (GLA) contributed £480,000, roughly one third of the overall budget of £1.4 million (Lee, 2004:3).

its website, ‘what is the point of attending the ESF if we don’t have a local basis on which to build it?’ (LSF, 2004).

The Horizontals were officially born as a loosely co-ordinated network after a series of meetings between organisations and individuals who felt that the official ESF preparatory process was marginalizing their interests, and was being unacceptably hierarchical and non-democratic. It took a number of sessions to reach a consensus on a draft position statement, acceptable to two types of ‘horizontal’ actors: those seeking to democratise the process, and those, like the Wombles, who considered the ESF to be ‘fundamentally illegitimate’. Despite their open differences, they believed in:

“Grassroots self-organisation, horizontality, ... diversity and inclusion, ... direct democracy, collective decision making based upon consensus, and [was] against the false consensus in which power is used to silence others” (Horizontals, 2004).

Although some continued to engage in the official ESF process, the Horizontals proceeded to prepare a series of self-organised events in what would be known as the ‘Autonomous Spaces’. Beyond ESF was an anti-authoritarian programme held at Middlesex University in north London; the Solidarity Village was a mix of events organised by a LETS (local exchange trading systems) collective at Conway Hall, Bloomsbury; the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination was a hotbed of creative art-inspired radical activism at a squatted social centre in east London; the European Forum of Communication Rights, a joint initiative of the Campaign for Information Rights and Indymedia held at the hired Camden Centre, consisted of conferences and a temporary Indymedia centre with live web streaming and public internet access; and Life Despite Capitalism was organised by academics and took place at London School of Economics (LSE) in central London.

Each space was independent, but the organisations involved met from time to time, collaborated in producing a joint brochure detailing the autonomous events and carried out workshops and presentations within one another’s events. There was no ownership of the autonomous spaces, and individuals and groups were free to add their own events to the agenda, or to help build those events that had already been proposed.

Reflecting a comprehensive model of discursive democracy, the aim of Beyond ESF was to create a radical arena of discussion at which institutions of domination could be critiqued. The Wombles were directly critical of the model of normative democracy espoused by Falk (2000), arguing that a focus on international financial institutions (IFIs) failed to address the repressive power of the state and local government, which, as anti-authoritarians, they would rather see replaced by autonomous community structures. Thus Dryzek’s model of discursive democracy better characterises the practice of radical anti-authoritarians, as it allows for a systemic critique at all levels of government.

The sessions at Beyond ESF often consisted of an informal presentation, followed by a discussion geared towards planning direct actions. Decisions were made largely by consensus, although decision-making was a very informal. There was no designated facilitator and there was minimal use of hand signalling. In a session focused on reclaiming (stealing) goods and services from the capitalist system, two activists wearing ‘Beyond ESF crew’ badges became de facto leaders. Even though the panel was, in a very low-key manner, leading the discussion, these de facto leaders stepped in and began summarising discussions in an effort to keep to the time schedule. The decision-making process was very longwinded; it took 35 minutes to agree that another meeting needed to be held to make a proper decision about how the action would proceed. Initially, the lack of proactive leadership meant that participants kept making wildly different suggestions from previous contributors rather than reflexive discussion expected in a deliberative setting.

As well as attempting to promote consensus, there were efforts made for Beyond ESF sessions to be inclusive and interactive, another characteristic of deliberative democracy. The Dissent! workshop, which was aimed at potential workshop organisers at the G8 protests the following summer, was fully interactive and drew on the experiences and knowledge of all

participants. With games, quizzes and practical tasks, it was a valuable learning experience and a good means for fostering relationships between participants. The final activity of the workshop involved participants standing in a different part of the room according to their answers to questions such as ‘Can the Kyoto treaty solve climate change?’ and ‘Should all third world debt be cancelled?’. The idea was for the people who were standing in a different position from the majority to try to convince others that their opinion was correct. Although the majority of people agreed on the answers, three or four people disagreed and were asked to defend their points of view. This led to a healthy discussion, and in at least one case to a transformation of preferences based on rational argument. However, with regard to the Kyoto protocol, there was some conflict between one of the workshop facilitators and a participant. They were locked in a dead end debate upon which they could not agree. The participant argued that a step-by-step approach to climate change is an effective means of beginning to tackle the issue, whereas the facilitator almost shouted his point of view, which was that ‘we need to abolish states and have radical change’. He was met with the reply of ‘yes, but that’s not feasible in the short-term’. It was clear that the workshop organisers were expecting everyone to agree that radical social change is the only effective means of solving the myriad social, economic and environmental problems that the GJM addresses, and were surprised if not mortally offended that this view was challenged.¹⁵

This was by no means an isolated incident of autonomous space discussions failing to reflect deliberative ideals in practice. For example, at a meeting on ‘police brutality in custody’ at Middlesex University, one participant stifled the discussion by announcing ‘I am from the Global Women’s Strike and we are holding a meeting at 6pm on Saturday if any one is interested in coming ... our organization is concerned with the rights of women ...’, followed by a long silence and a number of sighs from the audience.

The autonomous events included both plenaries and workshops. The former were similar in many ways to the plenaries of the official forum and were much less productive than the workshops, which allowed activists to interact with one another and discuss issues and proposals more fully. Many of the meetings took place in informal social centres, where participants usually sat on chairs or on the floor in a circular pattern, which contrasted significantly with the formal accommodation and room lay out of the sessions at the official ESF and its preparatory process. However, some sessions took place in more formal settings, and were not particularly conducive to deliberation. Unidirectional speeches from big-name experts to passive listeners were less common in the autonomous spaces, but some were delivered, with most activists reading their contributions off from scripts.

The European Forum of Communication Rights session, for example, consisted of keynote speeches by ‘experts’ from NGOs and academic institutions addressing the audience through a microphone, with little reflexive discussion afterwards. The room was laid out with a stage (which speakers used) and the audience was seated on straight rows of chairs, which served to stress the distinction between the ‘speakers’ and the ‘spoken to’.

In the Life Despite Capitalism event, key speakers, mostly from academic institutions and social movement organizations dominated the plenaries. Some participants were passively critical of and frustrated by these sessions, believing that they mimicked the vertical style that had attracted so much criticism. The lack of interactivity was in part due to the physical configuration of the space (a university lecture hall with all seats facing front), and was exacerbated by an open microphone scheme for the final session, which allowed anyone - even those who had not participated in the workshops - to contribute to the discussion. The result was a series of unidirectional interventions that were often not directed to other speakers or to the issues at hand, some verging on being manipulative.¹⁶

¹⁵ See the Trapese website (www.trapese.org/), which contains all the material used at these workshops.

¹⁶ One woman asked for money, and a man who had not participated in the workshops tried to promote the SWP by advertising a book he was selling, which finally prompted the the hall to voice its discontent.

The Life Despite Capitalism workshops were much more facilitative of discussion, allowing analyses and experiences to be shared. Participants sat in a circle, discussion was well focused from the start, everyone seemed comfortable with the way the session was run, and participants appeared sensitive to issues of horizontal participation: affirmative statements, speaking from personal experience, responding directly to the person who had spoken earlier, eye contact, friendly tone of voice, taking care to make sure no one else wanted to speak before speaking twice, and so on. There was no visible tension in this group, and afterwards people commented on how positive the workshop had been, and broke into small groups to chat and exchange contact information.¹⁷

A Beyond ESF session, run by the direct action training organisation ‘Seeds of Change’, was dedicated to educating participants about, and practising the process of, consensus decision-making. Part of this workshop explored problems that participants have experienced in previous attempts to make decisions by consensus, including instances from the ESF preparatory process. These included concerns about facilitators exercising too much control, domination by a vanguard, consensus by attrition, drifting away from the subject, ideological clashes, the difficulties of teaching the procedures to people who are used to vertical decision-making, and poor acoustics.

Another factor distinguishing the autonomous spaces from the official ESF was their tendency to cohere with associational conceptions of decentralised service provision. Unlike in the official forum, movement services were gratefully received within the autonomous spaces. Fair trade Zapatista coffee was on sale outside the main meeting room at Middlesex University, a small grassy glade between university buildings hosted the marquees of the Anarchist Teapot, a workers’ cooperative which provided vegan breakfast, lunch and dinner in return for a donation, and cheap vegan meals were also available at the Rampart Social Centre and at Camden Hall. Screenings and live music were provided free, as were computer facilities and a self-organised creche at the Indymedia Centre. The loosely networked horizontal collective consisted of organisations and individuals with overlapping identities, with organisations managing their own affairs but in a networked manner without a centre of power.

The model of overlapping identities between networked organisations is supposed to reduce the scope for conflict. However, given the diversity of spaces, and different levels of resources required to make the places of the autonomous spaces functional, there was inevitably some conflict between actors. The organisers of the Solidarity Village, for example, paid a relatively handsome sum for the hire of Conway Hall, and were, at one point, considering charging entrance fees. When the organisers of Life Despite Capitalism who, as academics at the institution, were able to secure the space at LSE for free, criticised the policy of charging admission fees at the Solidarity village, a short-lived bitter exchange ensued.

7. Concluding remarks

The London ESF was greatly identified with the conflict between two clusters of groups and organizations that came to be known as ‘Verticals’ and ‘Horizontals’. While the former follow the precepts of representative democracy, operate through relatively formal organisational frameworks and are oriented towards effectiveness and results, the latter reject hierarchy and leadership, promote openness and participation and strive for consensus. Therefore, the Inter-organisational conflict in the ESF was not so much the result of tension between democratic and non-democratic organisations, but rather the result of tension between organisations’ and activists’ adherence to different models of democracy.

¹⁷ We are grateful to Cristina Eguiarte for her observation notes on the Life Despite Capitalism event, which we have drawn upon here.

It has to be noted that some of the principles of direct democracy such as open participation, consensus decision-making, and decentralisation of thematic content are enshrined into Social Forum practices and were not formally challenged by the ‘Verticals’. It becomes, therefore, rather problematic to speak of the ‘hijacking’ of the London ESF, as the “Horizontals” routinely did, in a substantial way. In that sense, the extent to which the ESF structures were objectively closed to participation from the broader movement or not matters less than the horizontals’ normative perception of the preparatory process as closed, and dominated by hierarchically organised organisations whose vision of a better society is radically different from the bottom-up discursive method of organising espoused by themselves, and the ‘another world’ that they want to create, in which loosely networked autonomous groups in associationalist fashion fulfil the needs of society. The two different ‘ideals’ of democracy proved to a great extent irreconcilable and set the tone of the process by permeating actions, attitudes, perceptions, and interpretations on both sides – with mutual suspicion often condemning preconceptions to be reinforced.

Finally, a short mention to an important issue which we have not had the opportunity to explore at length in this paper. Democratic participation can be stifled through indirect means even within the most formally open organizational settings and frameworks. The democratic credentials of the ‘horizontal’ way of doing things can not, therefore, be taken for granted, but instead need to be problematised and interrogated. Resources – material and symbolic – and the extent to which they are equally distributed between participants are a crucial determinant (Doerr, 2006). Certain groups and organizations benefit from permanent memberships, financial resources and militancy that afford them the opportunity to be involved in all aspects and stages of a decision-making process and “are able to act as vanguards by default” (Ross, 2003: 282). That was certainly the case with the ESF process – which apart from everything else was geographically dispersed across Europe – and a reason why it was perceived to be controlled by the ‘Verticals’. Moreover, we saw how *de facto* leadership can emerge within non-hierarchical structures; discursive and rhetorical skills can also be very unequally distributed (della Porta, 2005: 81-84), as can access to information. As Epstein argues “An anti-leadership ideology can not eliminate leaders, but it can lead a movement to deny that it has leaders, thus undermining democratic constraints on those who assume the roles of leadership” (2001: 7).

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