

The Social Forum as a means and an end

Notes on the strategy of the WSF

By Mikael Bööck*

I.

The definition of the World Social Forum¹ as an 'open space' is seen by many as an obstacle to politically effective action. Thus Eric Toussaint, the influential and prolific researcher of the *Comité pour l'annulation de la dette du Tiers Monde* (CADTM), recently complained that the WSF does not function as an *instrument of mobilisation*. Exemplifies Toussaint:

*We have seen that Brazilian youth in the state of Pará were keenly interested, they were massively present at Belém's Social Forum in January 2009. They participated in debates about radical alternatives. But as the World Social Forum is not a tool for mobilization, it stopped there.*²

But what do we mean by mobilisation? If by mobilisation is meant that people get politically active, discuss and do things together to change society and themselves, then I would like to maintain that the Social Forum has been a very good mobiliser indeed.

What would it mean to *go further* instead of, like Toussaint says, "stopping there"? On this point, we should expect Toussaint to come up with some new ideas. However, the ideas which he has in mind are relatively old and outdated. Examine what he says closely, and you will find that his strategic concept goes back to the time between the two world wars and, more precisely, to the 'united fronts' and 'the people's fronts' of that time (and thus of the Third, Communist, International).

That 'frontist' strategic concept, however, has been obsolete ever since the end of World War II. The turning point was 1945, which marks the advent of the weapons systems, which endanger life on this planet, and of electronic computers. The former broke the previous relationship between war and politics; the latter would ultimately break the factory system and 'the organic capacities' (Gramsci) of the industrial working class.

1 The WSF is a) a series of *events*, starting with the WSF in Porto Alegre 2001, 2002 and 2003; which were followed by the Mumbai WSF 2004, the Porto Alegre WSF 2005, the polycentric WSF in Bamako, Caracas and Karachi 2006, the Nairobi WSF 2007, the Belem WSF 2009, and the (forthcoming) Dakar WSF 2011; and b) a continuous global *process*, which also includes the regional, country-wide and local Social Forums events, as well as the preparation, planning, documentation etc. in between the events. I use the generic term "Social Forum" to denote the global process. A reader who is not familiar with the Social Forum may want to take a look at the websites <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/> and <http://www.wsflibrary.org>. See also: Ferreira, Francisco Whitaker: *Towards a New Politics. What Future for the World Social Forum* (New Delhi 2006). Francisco "Chico" Whitaker is one of the Social Forum's founders.

2 Quoted from: "Beyond the World Social Forum... the Fifth International", an interview with Eric Toussaint for the Brazilian weekly paper *Brasil de Fato*, February 2010; <http://www.cadtm.org/Beyond-the-World-Social-Forum-the>.

Of course, much of what Toussaint says, his observations on the Latin American states, for instance, is interesting and may help to understand what happens. But when he proposes 'a fifth international' to build 'a front', then I cannot but object that, in terms of political strategy, the thinking of Toussaint belongs to the 1930s, not to the 2010s. Toussaint's idea of 'mobilisation' only makes sense in contexts where the actions of the mobilised are mediated by a political party, which is in possession of the correct science or religion and, therefore, knows how to mobilise the masses in the correct way. But such political parties saw their best days and, hopefully, their worst days, more than half a century ago.

The Social Forum, in the form it was founded at the beginning of the 2000s, that is, as an 'open space', indeed represents a more advanced strategic thinking than the old 'frontist' formula of Toussaint.

A decisive difference between the Social Forum and the political party is that the party is only a tool, while the social forum is both tool and product; the party is a means, but the Social Forum is also an end in itself, and not only a means. It is tempting, here, to quote what Gregory Bateson (paraphrasing the anthropologist Margaret Mead) wrote in the 1940s:

“We have learnt, in our cultural setting, to classify behaviour into 'means' and 'ends', and if we go on defining ends as separate from means and apply the social sciences as crudely instrumental means, using the recipes of science to manipulate people, we shall arrive at a totalitarian rather than a democratic system of life”³

The double nature of the 'open space' of the Social Forum (as means *and* end) may be understood in these terms as a necessary feature of an organisation, which strives towards global democracy. Such an organisation has to break with what Mead and Bateson called “our cultural setting”. It must be prefigurative, that is, it must already be what it aims to become.

Therefore, the problem of the WSF is not that it is an open space, or politically “ineffective” (as it might appear to those who measure it by the traditional standards of political parties and 'frontism'), *but that it is not enough open.*

From these preliminary reflections, a strategical corollary may already be deduced. The Social Forum should to a greater extent than hitherto open up itself to professional groups and their existing international organisations: doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, librarians and scientists, just to name a few. The Social Forum can only “win” on the condition that it gains the solidarity from the side of the professionals; and the solidarity of the professionals with the Social Forum must actually become *stronger* than with the governments of the States. Otherwise, *the global civil society*, which is not yet really existing, but which is prefigured by the Social Forum, will not grow and develop.

Fortunately, a number of professional associations -- not to speak of trade unions and farmers' organisations -- do already participate in the Social Forum events, but the situation in this regard is far from good. For instance, the efforts to engage professional scientists into the WSF has barely begun⁴; the same must be said about the LIS (library and information specialists), which I shall return to later in this article.

3 Quoted from “Social Planning and the Concept of Deutero-Learning”, one of the papers collected in: Bateson, G.: *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Ballantine pocket edition 1972, p 160).

4 See <http://fm-sciences.org/>

The political system of nation-states under the hegemony of one, two or three 'superpowers', which are, as always, *preparing for war*, has to go. It is one of the main obstacles, if not *the* main obstacle, of what the governments have piously, but hypocritically, started to call a *sustainable development*. If we shall have sustainable development, then an organisation of society which is like the social forum, a global "open space", shall have to prevail over the system of nation-states, which is the skeleton of the "permanent war economy"⁵ and the main cause of humanity's drift towards self-extermination.⁶

To blame it all on "Capitalism" is not very intelligent, however sharp and useful the analysis of Capital by Karl Marx has been and still is. The Social Forum has been and it still is too fixated to the criticizing and opposing of Capitalism. After the demise of the "really existing Socialism", there was a moment when Capitalism was able to present itself as "the only way". The Social Forum was born precisely in opposition to this pretentious Capitalist *pensée unique*, which we call Neoliberalism, and it has, with the slogan "another world is possible", successfully contributed to bringing the domination of the Neoliberal ideology to an end. However, because they have hitherto too often limited their perspective to opposing Capitalism and Neoliberalism, the peoples of the Social Forum have neglected to take on the military-industrial-academical complex⁷ and failed to demand the *unconditional and unilateral abolition* of the weapons of mass destruction, and the new weapons systems, which the Complex is pouring out and proliferating all over the world. The ongoing production of new genetics-, nanotechnology- and robotics based weapons systems⁸ must be criminalized and loudly condemned. "Disarm the financial markets", by all means, but don't forget to disarm WMD, please.

Although one particular nation, the USA, still appears to be the only military 'superpower', we need to understand *the military-industrial-academic complex as a global phenomenon and tendency*⁹, to be

5 Seymour S. Melman has coined this expression and used it to describe, in the first place, the American economy. See his article "In the Grip of a Permanent War Economy" Counter Punch, March 15, 2003.

6 The deep structures of what was called the Cold War were never really transformed, or abolished. They are still in place. For instance, "nuclear weapons form, from the point of view of their ultimate nature, political technology, in such a way that they create similar authoritarian and submissive relations regardless of the social system" (see Väyrynen, R: "Arms Race: Theory and Action", in Harle, V & Sivonen, P: *Europe in Transition. Politics and Nuclear Security* (London and New York 1989), p 23 n7.

7 For a recent journalistic overview of the American "Complex", see Turse, Nick: *The Complex. How the Military Invades Our Everyday Life*. Faber & Faber 2008 (Paperback 2009).

8 The drones used by the US army in Afghanistan give only an inkling of the robotic military systems to come; and the collapses at the WTC on 9/11 might have been achieved with the help of nanothermite; on this, see Niels H. Harrit, et al: "Active Thermite Material Discovered in Dust from the 9/11 World Trade Center Catastrophe, The Open Chemical Physics Journal Volume 2, pp.7-31. ; for a general overview of the military uses of nanotechnology, see Gartner, J.: "Military Reloads with Nanotech", in Technology Review (published by MIT), January 21, 2005; http://www.technologyreview.com/read_article.aspx?id=14105&ch=nanotech&a=f).

9 Even during the iciest periods of the Cold War, the respective Complexes of the USA and the USSR not only continued to influence and condition each other in innumerable ways, but even to do business with each other. In his book "Vodka-Cola", published in 1979, the trade-unionist Charles Levinson "demonstrated the complicitous interaction between transnational corporate power and what was then the Soviet empire, and predicted what he called the "hybridization and consolidation of the worst features of both systems". Today, the present writer was made aware by an article in *Hymy* (a popular monthly magazine) of the fact that the "European" military-industrial-academic complex has not only been allowed to test unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV = drones) at Rovajärvi in Finnish Lapland, but also enjoys the financial support of the local authorities! (See Sven Pahajoki's articles in *Hymy*, March 2010; and my article "Affronter le complexe militaro-industriel en Europe" at <http://www.kaapeli.fi/book/end/co-auteur.html>). I would not hesitate to call those local authorities *brain-washed*. But I certainly think that, say, the analyses of the cold war and its "exterminism", which were made by the late social historian E.P. Thompson in the 1980s, go far beyond the discussions I have overheard at the Social Forum in their understanding of *what* those local authorities have been brain-washed

combated, teared apart, and converted to activities, which increase the social and economic security of the citizens instead of threatening their life. But firstly, the professionals who dedicate their lives to serving the military-industrial-academic complex, must “convert”. Therefore, the Social Forum must develop in a direction which makes their “conversion” possible.

The military men themselves are not the enemy. The basic reason for the existence of “the military” should be, and of course many military men still think that it is, to protect and defend the citizens. Therefore, it is not at all surprising to find many officers and soldiers among those who demand the abolition of the WMD. Let us hear ever more generals issue warnings for the military industrial complex, as did the war hero Dwight D. Eisenhower. (As is remembered, it was Eisenhower who introduced this term into the political language in his farewell speech as US president 1961.)

2.

"In fact, the biggest challenge for the organizers of the World Social Forum does not consist in defining new and better contents that could lead to even more concrete proposals, but to guarantee the continuity of the form the Forum was given - a case in which the means are determinant for the aim to be reached",

wrote Chico Whitaker years ago. Why has the Social Forum has not lived up to this challenge? The reason lies in our narrow-mindedness, which makes us look upon the WSF as only a means to an end, instead of letting it be an end in itself.

There is a generic 'means', which exists precisely for the particular purpose of guaranteeing the continuity. It is called *the library*. Once we start speaking of the *social forum of the world*, we should therefore also start to speak about *the library of the world*, if we intend to guarantee its continuity.

The library is a very peculiar institution of the state(s) and of the society (societies) -- one of the oldest and most basic. As a rule of thumb, people who say that we must first have food and schools before we can have libraries may be suspected of not knowing what they are talking about. And people who believe that libraries are instruments and products of the Western Civilisation, certainly have no inkling of world history. The old Sumers, Indians and Chinese all had libraries well before anybody had uttered the name of 'Europe'.

“The library is a growing organism”, stated Indian mathematician and library scientist S.R. Ranganathan in the 5th law of library science¹⁰.

with; thus it would not make sense to me, to call the sponge “Neoliberalism”, or even “Capitalism”. (E.P. Thompson's “Notes on Exterminism, the Last Stage of Civilization” are found in, for instance, Thompson, E.P.: *Zero Option* (London 1982).)

10 Ranganathan's five laws of library science belong to the basic education of professional librarians. These laws are:

1. Books are for use.
2. Every reader his [or her] book.
3. Every book its reader.
4. Save the time of the reader.
5. The library is a growing organism.

In our time, the library grows and extends itself through the world-wide digital communication network. The library becomes the internet, and vice versa. Temporarily, this process which is now well underway, may lead to strange and pathological phenomena, such as “One Company's Audacious Plan to Organize Everything We Know”¹¹. However, the present Googlean vision of the library as a centralized American “bookshop” will hardly last; nor is the agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) of the WTO sustainable. The global civil society and the library are of an entirely different order, so to speak, than the WTO and Google Inc.¹²

Add, that both library and internet are also 'open spaces' in a sense which is not very different from the sense of the 'open space' of the Social Forum. Both the library and the internet (the latter seen as an extension of the former) are also ends *and* means.

The Social Forum cannot “win” without the library or the internet. The Social Forum needs to understand itself as the process whereby the human species constructs a common library for itself, thereby guaranteeing the continuity of itself as a society and even as a species.

From this general thesis follow a number of strategic propositions:

1. The process of the Social forum should be organised and developed in close cooperation with the library profession, the public libraries and the scientific libraries. The social forum events need to be documented and the memory (documents, recordings, discussions etc) should be deposited in public libraries and archives. As a public service, the library should serve the Social Forum and support its “open space”. In accordance with its information ethics¹³, the library must refuse to serve the military-industrial-academic complex.
2. In order to become more library-like and to guarantee its own continuity, the Social Forum needs to adopt a general classification (taxonomy) of the activities which make up its global process. Such a classification tends to add up to a descriptive listing of the most pressing of the present “issues” of humankind. The 21 “actionable themes”, which were adopted before the Nairobi WSF, does, in fact, provide a reasonable and sufficiently stable “catalog”. The 21 “actionable themes” are, in alphabetical order:

- * Alternative economies
- * Children
- * Culture
- * Debt, taxation and public finance
- * Dignity, human being diversity, discriminations
- * Education

11 This is the sub-title of Stross, Randall: *Planet Google* (New York-London-Toronto-Sydney 2008).

12 While the WTO, imbued as it is from the start with “Neoliberalism” (Capitalist market fundamentalism), is an adversary to be combated, the case of Google is more complex. In the end, Google may prove to become an ally of the Social Forum and the library.

13 See Buchanan, Elizabet A. & Henderson, Kathrine: *Case Studies in Library and Information Sciences Ethics* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London 2009), p 11, where one of the fundamental issues of information ethics is identified as “the creation of new power structures in the information field”. In the speeches and writings of librarians one can find ample evidence of their will to dissociate themselves from the preparations for war. (Personally, I am using bookmarks, printed and issued by a public library in Italy, with the inscriptions “La biblioteca ripudia la guerra” and “Books not Bombs”.)

- * Environment and energy
- * Food sovereignty, peasants and land reform
- * Gender issues and women struggles
- * Health
- * Housing and human habitat
- * Human rights
- * Knowledge, information and communication
- * Labor and workers
- * Migration
- * Peace and war
- * Political institutions and democracy
- * Trade and transportation
- * Transnational Corporations
- * Water
- * Youth

The order of these themes is *not* one of political priority. Each one of these categories is both a problem-area for research, cooperation and action, and an “issue” on which there is inevitably a variety of opinions. Another important feature of these “themes” is, that none of them can be (nor should they be) strictly delimited from the others. In reality, the themes will overlap so that most (?) of the activities of the Social Forum will have to be placed in, or considered under, more than one theme. Yet we cannot escape the necessity to keep things separate; nor can we do without providing ourselves with an overview of all our activities, even if that overview must to a great extent be illusory. (If asked why, I will admit that I do not know.)

The “21 actionable themes” of the WSF can be compared with the list of Ministries of a modern nation-state. If we carry out the comparison, we will find some obvious similarities; for the theme named “Education”, there is the “Department of Education” (or the “Ministry of Education”); the same goes for “health”, “housing”, “labour”, “culture” and “environment”, depending, of course, to some extent upon which country we look upon. “Peace and war” correspond to “Ministry of Foreign affairs” and “Ministry of Defence”, respectively, and so on.

The WSF will not become “a State” just by adopting and maintaining a “taxonomy” like the “21 actionable themes”, but it will certainly be an act of great significance if and when it finally settles for one. It will give the WSF greater stability and authority, which it needs in order to be able to check and balance the informational authorities, i.e. the mainstream media, which are mostly subordinated to corporate business interests and governments. A relatively stable set of actionable themes will help us to establish a problem-oriented common library of the world, or a global public library of the problems of our common world, if you like.

To build such a library is to build a global informational power.

Many people react spontaneously to the WSF Library proposal by saying that such relatively permanent taxonomies are not, or cannot be, enough *comprehensive*. Where do “social movements” fit in? they ask. Or, where to put “globalisation” ?

The point is that the “21 actionable themes” *are* fairly comprehensive if only we want them to be so. It should be noted that a classification of *activities* differs from classifications of *knowledge*. The Decimal Classification, for instance which has been and is used by many librarians to classify and shelve printed matter, is a classification of knowledge, and it is based on theories about how different disciplines and pieces of knowledge relate to each other. A classification of activities like the “21 actionable themes”, on the other hand, is a direct outgrowth of the activities themselves.

We classify the activities of the Social Forum *anyway*, for the simple reason that we would otherwise not be able to explain to ourselves and to others what the WSF is about. (The program of a WSF event needs a Table of Contents, otherwise it would not be very user-friendly.)

The number of the classes should be small enough to permit easy overview and memorisation, but large enough to guarantee both separation and comprehensiveness. The exact wording of the description of the classes should be brief and clear. The “21 actionable themes” already meet these criteria fairly well. The great challenge is not to make up a list of “actionable themes”, but to guarantee the continuity of the actionable themes we already have, and with them, to guarantee the continuity of our actions. Will the work at the Dakar WSF 2011 continue the work at the Nairobi WSF 2007 and the Belem WSF 2009? In order to grow and accumulate, the Social Forum needs to become more like a library. And the library, in turn, needs to become more like the Social Forum.

Lovisa (Finland), March 2010

* Contact:

book@kaapeli.fi

+358 445511324

<http://www.kaapeli.fi/book>