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**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**THE CHALLENGE OF DIVERSITY: THE SOCIAL FORUM  
MOVEMENT, 2001-2005**

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*“a new democratic imaginary – post-liberal and post-Marxist – is taking shape and, with it, other possible futures are coming into view.”<sup>682</sup>*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Social forums aim to provide a discursive context in which individuals and groups active within the current cycle of contention can identify problems and envisage solutions. The creation of social forums at every level from the local to the global signifies two developments: first, it marks a shift in focus from events that directly confront centres of economic and political power to ones that seek positive alternatives; second, it self-consciously encourages a diversity of political perspectives. In the first section of this chapter I will build on work from chapter two in order to detail the broad continuities and changes that confirm that “the explosion of social forums can be seen as a new stage in the development of what was initially termed the ‘anti-globalisation movement’.”<sup>683</sup> In examining the particular path taken by a group working towards a Sheffield Social Forum I will suggest that, in contrast with the anti-war movement, the diversity of participants’ worldviews created barriers to action from the outset. I argue that alternative conceptions of the purpose and potential structure of the forum were related to the three orientational frames identified in this thesis. These conceptions did, however, find a number of points of convergence. Examination of the relationship of the Sheffield Social Forum to others around the UK highlights these convergences.

The arrival of the European Social Forum in the UK in 2004 was a highly significant event for UK movements and the process of organisation was fraught with contestation. Many of the debates seen within the local social forum were now played out on this

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<sup>682</sup> Conway, J., 2005, “Social Forums, Social Movements and Social Change: A Response to Peter Marcuse on the Subject of the World Social Forum” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(2), p. 427.

<sup>683</sup> Anheier, H. & Glasius, M., 2003, “Global Civil Society in an Era of Regressive Globalisation: the State of Global Civil Society in 2003” in Glasius, Kaldor & Anheier, eds., *Global Civil Society Yearbook*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford), p. 24.

larger stage and thrown into sharper relief by the increase in scale and scope. Clearly drawn battle lines emerged between groups who became known as the ‘verticals’ and the ‘horizontal’. Tracing the ideational stakes of these disputes, it will become apparent that the horizontal-vertical axis does not map neatly onto the orientational frames as described elsewhere. Reconnecting the understandings of the social forum at the local and global levels highlights a widespread claim to novelty. This is oriented to the idea of the social forum as an ‘open space’ where the protection of diversity and encouragement of pluralism create a new mode of action and understanding in the movements contesting globalisation. Such claims suggest the hypothesis that the ‘horizontal’ position represents a new orientational frame. Tentatively labelling this set of ideas ‘participatory pluralism’ I will examine this hypothesis. Participatory pluralism may be best understood as a combination of elements from the radical liberal (RL) and direct action (DA) frames. The shifted emphasis produced by this particular combination of ideas does appear as relatively novel and impacts on the meanings signified by other key ideational elements. The prominence of these ideas may be understood as flowing from an alliance between proponents of the RL and DA frames. How long that alliance will last, and whether the particular understandings it has thrown up will develop further are open questions.

## 2. GLOBAL INSPIRATION: THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SOCIAL FORUM MOVEMENT

In chapter two I contrasted the slogan of the WSF, ‘another world is possible’, with the prevalent understanding of neoliberalism as a dogmatic claim that ‘there is no alternative’. A second slogan of the WSF translates as “no to singular/hegemonic thinking” (*pensée unique*),<sup>684</sup> and highlights the central value placed on ideational diversity within WSF events.<sup>685</sup> The key characteristic of WSF became the notion of an ‘open space’, as enshrined in the *WSF Charter of Principles*, created after the first international event. The WSF is described as:

“an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a

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<sup>684</sup> Keraghel, C. & Sen, J., 2004, “Explorations in Open Space. The World Social Forum and Cultures Of Politics.” in *International Journal of Social Science* 56(4), pp. 483.

<sup>685</sup> Cock, J., 2003, “A Better or Worse World? The Third World Social Forum, Porto Alegre 2003” in *Centre for Civil Society, Research Report 5*, p. 3. Available at: <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,45,10,723>; last accessed: 12/11/05.

planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Mankind and between it and the Earth.”<sup>686</sup>

Furthermore, the WSF bars itself from making proclamations as a body, and forbids anyone to represent the forum as a whole. As such, WSF

“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... [it] is a plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party context that, in a decentralized fashion, interrelates organizations and movements engaged in concrete action at levels from the local to the international to build another world.”<sup>687</sup>

The influence of these short texts should not be underestimated. They are very widely cited by organisations creating regional or local social forums, by commentators both inside and outside the social forum movement and by participants in debate around the actions and meaning of the social forum. They loosely define the political analyses and the ambition of the WSF and, to that degree, restrict participation.

### ***Finding the ‘Open Space’***

Comparison of WSF with People’s Global Action (PGA) was used in chapter two to demonstrate continuities within the cycle of contention.<sup>688</sup> Further comparison illustrates differences which represent broader changes and lesson-learning within the movement of movements. That is, the range of political perspectives involved in the key events and organisations has continually broadened. The June 1999 ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ for instance, was an anarchic, direct-action focused set of protests. The involvement of both large NGOs and far-left organisations was minimal. This partly reflects the influence of the PGA, who had initially called the ‘global day of action’ and whose *Hallmarks* contain ideational elements that do not fit easily within the radical liberal (RL) or revolutionary socialist (RS) frames. In opposition to the former, they claim “confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organisations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker.” In relation to the latter, the *Hallmarks* claim “an

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<sup>686</sup> WSF, 2001, *Charter of Principles*, principle 1. Available at [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=2); last accessed: 12/12/05.

<sup>687</sup> WSF, *Charter...*, principles 6 and 8.

<sup>688</sup> PGA was one of a range of international networking initiatives which together formed part of the foundation on which WSF was built and was itself inspired by inspired by the ‘Intercontinental Enceuntro’ (encounters) organised in Mexico since 1997 by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN); Juris, J.S., 2005, “Social Forums and Their Margins: Networking Logics and the Cultural Politics of Autonomous Space” in *Emphemera. Theory and Politics in Organization* 5(2), p. 258. For the present purposes PGA is a particularly useful comparator as several participants in Sheffield Social Forum saw it as a potential alternative source of inspiration for local organising.

organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy”.<sup>689</sup> Their *Organising Principles* describe the ways in which decentralisation and autonomy will be achieved.<sup>690</sup> These principles are clearly opposed to the democratic centralism of the RS frame. That such principles were taken seriously, and were a source of exclusivity, was proven at the Milan meeting of PGA during which activists from Socialist Workers Party and Workers’ Power had attended but been denied speaking rights on the grounds that they worked within a hierarchical organisation.<sup>691</sup> Conversely, “The World Social Forum will always be a forum open to pluralism and to the diversity of activities and ways of engaging of the organizations and movements that decide to participate in it.”<sup>692</sup> The reference to ‘ways of engaging’ suggests a greater openness on tactical matters than PGA’s *Hallmarks*. In addition, the WSF document is scattered with references to ‘civil society’ and ‘human rights’ which suggests greater potential for those working within the RL frame to be included. Similarly, references to ‘solidarity’ and ‘equality’ indicate some appeal to the language of the RS frame while references to ‘participatory democracy’ and ‘decentralisation’ may attract those working within the DA frame. The effort to imagine another world within the structure of the WSF appears, therefore, to be centred on diversity and pluralism to a greater degree than previous deliberative spaces.

The French campaigning group ATTAC was centrally involved in the initiation and planning of the first WSF. Its focus is regulation of global finance markets, primarily through lobbying for the implementation of the ‘Tobin Tax’ on currency speculation using the combination of methods I have described as typical of the RL frame. Its centrality thus assured that WSF would not follow the narrower definition of methods exemplified by PGA’s *Hallmarks*. Throughout the process of organising the various international events such civil society organisations<sup>693</sup> have become increasingly important, offering paid staff, financial backing and positive publicity to the events. This may reflect a broader trend in which such organisations have increasingly become disaffected with the limits of participation found in international governance

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<sup>689</sup> PGA, *Hallmarks*, points 3 and 5, available at <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/pga/hallm.htm>; last accessed: 12/12/05..

<sup>690</sup> PGA, *Organising Principles*, points 2, 6, 7 and 11, available at <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/cocha/principles.htm>; last accessed: 12/12/05.

<sup>691</sup> Anon., 2002, “Anti Capitalism as Ideology... And as Movement?” in *Aufheben 10*, available at: [http://www.geocities.com/aufheben2/auf\\_10\\_anticapital.html](http://www.geocities.com/aufheben2/auf_10_anticapital.html); last accessed: 12/12/05.

<sup>692</sup> WSF, “Charter...”, point 9.

<sup>693</sup> This term lacks a clearly agreed definition. Discussions within social forums tend to differentiate professionalized, relatively hierarchical ‘civil society organisations’ from more grassroots, relatively non-hierarchical ‘social movements’. While recognising that there is a significant boundary-drawing problem, this convention will be utilised, where helpful, in this chapter.

processes.<sup>694</sup> It must also be understood as an increasing preference by organisations once primarily focused on lobbying through ‘official’ channels to turn to popular movements in order to promote change. However, the increased involvement of civil society groups has not been universally acclaimed. PGA’s response to what they see as a great potential for domination from the more hierarchical and professionalized participants to the social forums was, during the organisation of the first edition of the European Social Forum (ESF I), to work towards organising autonomous spaces on the fringe of the events.<sup>695</sup> It was within such spaces that the claims that ‘Another ESF is possible’ were first heard.<sup>696</sup>

The WSF evinces inclusion of both a broader set of political perspectives and a broader set of substantive concerns. Chapter two describes the recognition of common targets across a variety of different issues as a key feature of the globalisation-focused phase of the current cycle. This explains the frequent interpretation of demonstrations against IFIs, particularly those in Seattle, 1999, as creating an alliance between diverse campaigns including environmentalists, trade unionists, anti-sweat shop activists, and indigenous people’s movements. WSF is expressly committed to including a multiplicity of struggles as is demonstrated by the breadth of themes defined for the event. WSF III, for instance, defined the following five themes of discussions: democratic sustainable development; principles and values, human rights, diversity and equality; media, culture and counter-hegemony; political power, civil society and democracy; democratic world order, fight against militarism and promoting peace.<sup>697</sup> These themes are clearly selected in order to offer a wide inclusively for social movements operating in a range of fields of struggle. The 114 seminars and nearly 1,300 workshops at WSF III demonstrates a huge breadth of targets, tactics and analyses.<sup>698</sup> By WSF V, in 2005, the number of thematic areas had been redefined and expanded to

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<sup>694</sup> Biagiotti, I., 2004, “The World Social Forums. A Paradoxical Application of Participatory Doctrine” in *International Social Science Journal* 56(4), pp. 529-532.

<sup>695</sup> Juris, “Social Forums and their Margins...”, p. 264.

<sup>696</sup> Hodkinson, S., 2002, “Another European Social Forum is Necessary: Reflections on Florence” on *Red Pepper Online*, available at: <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/intarch/x-anotheresf.htm>; last accessed: 12/12/05.

<sup>697</sup> WSF, 2003, *WSF Memorial: Themes*, available at: [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=temas\\_fsm2003\\_ing](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic.php?pagina=temas_fsm2003_ing); last accessed: 25/10/05.

<sup>698</sup> Cock, J., 2003, “A Better or Worse World? The Third World Social Forum, Porto Alegre 2003” the *Centre for Civil Society, Research Report 5*; available at: <http://www.nu.ac.za/ccs/default.asp?3,45,10,723>; last accessed: 20/10/05.

include references to “reappropriation and socialization of knowledge”, “arts and creation”, “sovereign economies” and “ethics, cosmovisions and spiritualities”.<sup>699</sup>

In sum, the WSF marks a particular direction of development within the current cycle of contention. By 2002 there appeared some consensus that alternative globalisation movements needed to focus on the creation of positive solutions to the problems that more confrontational activities had highlighted.<sup>700</sup> Participation continued to be defined in opposition to neoliberal globalisation as a dogmatic and inherently unjust process through which powerful elites maintained their dominance. WSF self-consciously provided a focus for a greater diversity of participation in which there was no intention to form a wide consensus on analyses, alternatives or modes of action but rather to increase the interrelations between diverse alternatives: “the Forum’s intention [is] not to offer the locus of alternative visions, but rather a model for their dispersion.”<sup>701</sup>

### ***From the Global to the Local***

Despite the global appellation, participation in WSF is clearly drawn primarily from nearby countries. However, the idea of the ‘open space’ has had much wider resonance. From 2002 multiple social forum events occurred on different scales. Some were defined by supranational regions: Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, the Mediterranean, Oceania, Pan-Amazon, and the Transatlantic. A further series of ‘thematic’ social forums dealt with issues such as health, education, women, local authorities, and the particular problems of Argentina, Columbia and Palestine. Over twenty different countries have also seen national level social forum events. In taking both the name ‘social forum’ and the slogan ‘Another World is Possible’ such events apparently aimed to recreate both the structure and the experience of the WSF events. They were therefore comprised of a combination of large-scale conferences and rallies, medium-scale seminars and small-scale workshops. Increasingly the agenda for discussions is set by participants themselves in a two-way process of communication and negotiation with organisers. The various discursive events are mixed with

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<sup>699</sup> Allahwala, A. & Keil, R., 2005, “Introduction to a Debate on the World Social Forum” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(2), p. 410.

<sup>700</sup> Cock, “A Better or Worse World...”.

<sup>701</sup> Olivers, D., 2004, “Counter Hegemonic Dispersions: The World Social Forum Model” in *Antipode* 36(2), p. 175.

performance, art and parties on the one hand, and more concrete planning for future protests on the other.<sup>702</sup>

For Chomsky, “What's interesting about the World Social Forum more than the annual events, is that it has spawned lots of regional social forums. Regional, local and small towns have their own social forums and they adapt the general concerns into their own life interests... then it feeds back into the general system.”<sup>703</sup> Local social forums number in their hundreds in Europe alone and smaller numbers have appeared in North America, Canada, Australia, South Africa and across South America.<sup>704</sup> In the Italian context, Genoa Social Forum took place just six months after WSF I. Coinciding with massive demonstrations against the G8 in that city it gained much attention for the role it played in hosting spaces for planning, deliberation and providing accommodation and food.<sup>705</sup> Attracting people with a wide range of different political perspectives and affiliations from across Europe it is an important moment in the story of the spread of social forums on the continent.

There are several indications that WSF has served as an inspiration to the majority of local social forums. First, the websites of many social forums refer directly to the WSF. Sometimes the WSF *Charter of Principles* is adopted in its entirety; more often groups define themselves citing the ‘open space’ principle quoted above. In examining the debate within Sheffield Social Forum below I will show that even where activists rejected parts of the WSF *Charter* it nevertheless provided an important starting points for discussion. A second indication is a tendency for local social forums to copy the format of the international events at the local level,<sup>706</sup> with local activists creating days or weekends of conferences, seminars and workshops on a broad range of issues both

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<sup>702</sup> For a typical report: Klein, N., 2001, “A Fete for the End of the End of History” in *World Social Forum: Memorial*. Available at: [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/eng\\_bnaomi.php](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/dinamic/eng_bnaomi.php); last accessed: 20/10/05.

<sup>703</sup> Chomsky, N., 2004, “On The Strength of Movements” at a meeting of the Another World is Possible! Network, April 2004, Budapest.

<sup>704</sup> From a range of sources, including: Anheier et al., 2003: 22-3; London Social Forum, undated, “Local Social Forums” available on *London Social Forum Website* at <http://www.londonsocialforum.org.uk/links-forums.htm>; last accessed: 25/05/03; Reyes, O. & Hodkinson, S., 2004, “A Democratic Forum is Possible” in *Red Pepper, January 2004*; list of Italian forums on *Abruzzo Social Forum Website*, available at: <http://www.abruzzosocialforum.org/socialforum.htm>; last accessed: 25/05/03.

<sup>705</sup> Schnews, 2001, “G-Hate” in *Schnews 314/315, 27/07/2001*.

<sup>706</sup> Anheier, Glasius & Kaldor, “Global Civil Society ...”; Glasius, M., 2005, “Deliberation or Struggle? Civil Society Traditions Behind the Social Forums” in *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization 5(2)*, pp.240-252. Available at: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org>; last accessed: 25/10/05.

global and local in nature.<sup>707</sup> Third, in the European context at least, the location of a regional social forum event has a noticeable effect on local organising. Italy and France are the only countries boasting local social forums in triple figures and their emergence was also clearly related to hosting the first and second ESFs. A participant in St. Denis Social Forum, for instance, noted that the original purpose of their group was to mobilise for ESF II, but like other social forums in and around Paris, the group became more interested in developing their own activity and existed long after the ESF II had ended.<sup>708</sup> Furthermore, since ESF II such local social forums have increasingly sought to network with other local social forums, independently of the larger events. In the preparation for ESF III in the UK the emergence of local social forums was also notable, albeit in smaller numbers than seen elsewhere.

International organisers have demonstrated awareness of the local effect of hosting regional events. In justifying the London 'bid' to host ESF III, one argued that "it will give us - the social forum movement, independent and libertarian left - an opportunity to build the local social forums."<sup>709</sup> However, this is by no means the primary concern in the organisation of supranational events. For instance, among the sixty-eight English language articles discussing the various editions of the World Social Forum, stored as the *WSF Memorial*, I can only find two brief references to local social forums.<sup>710</sup> Two edited volumes have emerged from the WSF process – *Another World is Possible* and more recently *Challenging Empires* – both are similarly globally-focused.<sup>711</sup> Among contributors to a special issue of the online journal *Ephemera* called *The Organisation and Politics of Social Forums* which appeared shortly after ESF III, only one gives the local social forums sustained attention.<sup>712</sup> More telling of the gap between local and global, participants of French local social forums reported feeling sidelined at ESF II

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<sup>707</sup> Indications can be found on the many website of local social forums world wide; in the European context additional confirmation was found in discussions at European Social Forum events, particularly the local social forum space at ESF III; field notes, November 2004.

<sup>708</sup> Field notes, European Preparatory Assembly for ESF III, London, January 2004.

<sup>709</sup> Stuart Hodkinson, cited approvingly by 'Darell', email to SSF list, October 2003.

<sup>710</sup> WSF, 2005, *WSF Memorial*, available at: [http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=14\\_1&cd\\_language=2](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=14_1&cd_language=2); last accessed: 26/10/05.

<sup>711</sup> Fisher, W.F. & Ponniah, T., eds., 2003, *Another World is Possible. Popular Alternatives to Globalization at the World Social Forum*, (Zed Books, New York); Sen, J., Anand, A., Escobar, A. & Waterman, P., eds., 2004, *World Social Forum – Challenging Empires*, (Viveka Foundation, New Delhi).

<sup>712</sup> Glasius, M., 2005, "Deliberation or Struggle? Civil Society Traditions Behind the Social Forums" in *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization* 5(2): 240-252. Available at: <http://www.ephemeraweb.org/journal/5-2/5-2glasius.pdf>; last accessed: 26/10/05.

events<sup>713</sup> and, as will be detailed in section four below, there were serious conflicts between the central organisers of ESF III and the burgeoning UK local social forum movement. The global and local social forum trends, therefore, have a degree of independence; the rise in local social forum organising is not the result of any form of direction from the ‘leaders’ of the WSF or ESF.

This interpretation of the local-global connection has relevance to two strands of commentary on social forums. First, any claims that the social forum is, or could become, an international vanguard in the tradition of the four historic socialist internationals must be tempered by this fundamental structural difference.<sup>714</sup> In earlier forms, national socialist organisations, as members of an international, have always been subordinates of the international. The social forum movement, conversely, contains no membership structure and no formal mechanisms for ‘higher’ level processes to affect ‘lower’ ones. Second, there is a more ambiguous ramification for those who describe the global events as a process of ‘bottom-up’ or ‘grassroots’ globalization.<sup>715</sup> The creation of local social forums without top-down planning does imply grassroots action. However, to the extent that participants at the local level feel disconnected from the events at the global level this does not resemble the ‘globalization from below’ that such authors apparently long for. There is a continuing danger that, “a gathering that was supposed to be a showcase for new grassroots movements [has] become a celebration of men with a penchant for three hour speeches about smashing the oligarchy... participatory democracy is being usurped at the WSF by big men and swooning crowds.”<sup>716</sup> For the present purposes, these points serve as a warning against mapping the ideas emerging at the global and regional levels onto those at the local level or *vice versa*.

In the remainder of this chapter I present the results of locally-focused ethnographic research. This enables consideration of the relationships between the Sheffield Social Forum (SSF) and both the ESF and the other UK local social forums. I will argue that the SSF was inspired by the larger events which created a particular

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<sup>713</sup> Levidow, L., 2004, “Making Another World Possible? The European Social Forum” in *Radical Philosophy* 128. Available at: [http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel\\_id=2187&editorial\\_id=16577](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=16577); last accessed: 05/11/05;

<sup>714</sup> Löwy, for instance, recognises the ideational diversity that counts against interpreting the WSF as socialist international but does not reflect on organisational form; Löwy, M., 2004[2003], “Towards a New International?” in Sen, et al., eds., *Challenging Empires*, pp. 19-25.

<sup>715</sup> For instance, Brecher, J., Costello, T., & Smith, B., 2004[2001], “The Road from Genoa” in Sen, et al., eds., *Challenging Empires*, pp. 16-20.

<sup>716</sup> Klein, N., 2003, “Cut the Strings” in *The Guardian*, 01/02/03.

framework within which local events were organised. However, it is equally clear that participants have felt free to experiment with and criticise the framework offered from the global level. The orientational frames that participants bring to this experimentation informs the directions in which individuals criticise and attempt to adapt the WSF structure at the local level. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate throughout, debates at the local level have much in common with those taking place at regional and international levels. To the extent that similar positions are arrived at independently in different contexts the orientational frames identified within this thesis take on a broader significance.

### 3. LOCAL ACTION: TOWARDS A SHEFFIELD SOCIAL FORUM

#### ***First Impressions: Divisions and Commonalties***

The first public meeting around the notion of a social forum in Sheffield, billed as ‘Towards a Sheffield Social Forum’, was attended by around 40 local activists and campaigners. Most were familiar with the phrase ‘social forum’ and the related slogan ‘Another World is Possible’ but few had attended the international events and less were intimate with the particular principles embodied by them. Early discussions made it clear that there were a wide range of hopes and expectations raised by the term.<sup>717</sup> The early development of SSF was marked by a search for a definition for the group, which took place against a backdrop of pre-existing political perspectives. In particular, it is possible to see the influence of each of the orientational frames identified in Part II. There were, however, two key general assumptions clearly in operation: first, the SSF would be autonomous from other organisations using the ‘social forum’ name; second, the SSF should be as broadly inclusive as possible. This section considers both the divisions and shared assumptions that appeared throughout the period of group formation.

A number of notable attempts were made to offer some guiding principles on which the SSF might be based, each of which included a set of issues on which it would work. The orientational frames described in Part II appeared to offer direction for some of those present in these debates. The Workers’ Power members who initiated the first meeting had prepared a list of positions on which, they felt, any ‘progressive’ group

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<sup>717</sup> The following paragraphs reflect on debates that emerged in the first, exploratory phase of the social forum. Activity at this time included four meetings of 30-40 participants between July and October 2003; frequent debate on the group’s email discussion list and the setting up of a number of sub-groups focused on outreach, publicity, creative events, and issue research. Field notes, July – October, 2003.

ought to be able to easily agree. These defined positions against various forms of domination and discrimination, exploitation, gross inequality and war. While the majority of participants may broadly have agreed with these stances, the detailed enunciation of such claims and competition among alternative priorities made solid agreement difficult. In any case the presentation was widely criticised for making assumptions about how SSF would operate and, for instance, its attempt to focus on globally articulated issues rather than the particularities of the local situation. The issues proposed certainly implied leftist political positions, but the proponents seemingly made a conscious decision not to portray a specifically Trotskyist agenda. Nevertheless, in the choice of targets and, more significantly, the nature of the presentation there are strong echoes of the RS frame.

Subsequently the *PGA Hallmarks* were recommended as a potential set of action guidelines.<sup>718</sup> However, their exclusionary potential was immediately recognised: “Unless we can all compromise then the classic leftist split could happen... someone says autonomy isn’t compatible with the trade unions [and] so the whole [PGA] thing is scrapped.”<sup>719</sup> ‘Jasper’ recommended modifications to the *Hallmarks* to offer a greater local focus and the possibility of positive engagement with mainstream political institutions. However, it was precisely the emphases on autonomy and direct action that had attracted those motivated by the DA frame.

A third set of recommendations attempted to synthesise preceding discussions. Its foci were social justice, democracy and community and its language moralistic in tone. For instance, rather than discussing issues in terms of relationships of power or class, it referred to “the absolute dignity of the individual ... [and] the right and need for local people to articulate Sheffield’s problems.”<sup>720</sup> The document was interpreted by one participant as “a bit wishy washy. By that I mean almost anyone could join in including new Labour or various money making capitalist charities that already exist in the city.”<sup>721</sup> Beyond the tone, perhaps the key offence was the non-exclusive list of ways of acting for social change, reminiscent of the *WSF Charter*. This debate highlights the influence of the sets of ideas laid out in this thesis. However, a deeper set of questions were simultaneously being addressed, and offered some potential for transcending this clash of perspectives.

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<sup>718</sup> ‘Callista’, ‘Isadore’, field notes, July 2003.

<sup>719</sup> ‘Jasper’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

<sup>720</sup> ‘Basil’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

<sup>721</sup> ‘Isadore’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

There were two major threads of agreement that seemed to form the common assumptions of those who began building a social forum in Sheffield. Despite the description of inspiration from the World and European Social Forums on the initial flyer, in the early meetings very little consideration was given to attempting to repeat the form of the WSF on a local scale. Over time, individual participants did begin to focus more on the detail of the WSF, yet the grounding assumption was always that SSF would be free to decide its own mode of operation, and its own issue areas on which to act: “none of us know what this Social Forum is going to be. That's what's so exciting - its an idea whose time has obviously come... but what the bloody hell is it?”<sup>722</sup> This fact deserves some consideration. The majority of campaigning organisations that have both a local and international presence have some form of hierarchy. Friends of the Earth, for instance, is widely considered to be one of the more participatory, ‘bottom-up’ lobby groups. Yet it has methods of deciding on a set of campaigns on which, nationally and internationally, to focus. Local groups may well be allowed to take action on other campaigns, especially if they are particularly local. However, they may be encouraged that they do so under another name.<sup>723</sup> Direct action oriented groups routinely describe themselves as autonomous, but very few identifiable networks can claim both a high international profile and wide participation.<sup>724</sup> As a result, for the majority of participants most high-profile campaign organisations with which they were familiar would involve a direct flow of information and campaign resources from a national decision making centre to local groups. Many participants to the early SSF meetings, and all of the initiators, had played some role in anti-war organising, either within the central Sheffield Against War (SAW) or smaller local groups. While many of the local groups did act autonomously it was clear that, as described in the previous chapter, the importance of national events largely set the agenda for local groups, even without a formal hierarchy. Given this general background, the simple starting point that a nominal Sheffield Social Forum would be free to choose its own structure and set its own agenda is quite remarkable. In addition to indicating a belief in decentralisation, it implies that, for many, the social forum was an experimental form of organising political action.

A second common understanding within the early social forum meetings was that the social forum must be self-consciously inclusive. The desire for diversity in terms of

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<sup>722</sup> ‘Edgar’, email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

<sup>723</sup> An important example of this was cited in relation to the anti-roads movement in chapter four.

<sup>724</sup> The Earth First! network mentioned in chapter four is the most prominent exception to this rule.

both participants' backgrounds and their political perspectives, so central to the international social forums, clearly emerged as important in the local context too. Thus the first sub-group that formed within SSF took on the role of 'outreach' through finding and developing contacts and inviting participation. The combination of inclusivity and participation is demanding. Inclusivity produced a desire that a wider range of people would become involved. However, because the nature of operation of the group must be decided in a participatory manner, such decisions could not be made until inclusivity had been addressed. Even the choice of name for the group became influenced by this, and so the group continued to use the title 'Towards a Sheffield Social Forum' for some time. The inclusivity-participation tension re-emerged in a number of concrete debates. As recognised in relation to the WSF, however, inclusivity can never be all encompassing. The group always defined itself around a very broad notion of critical, progressive political action. In its most obvious incarnation, therefore, this notion would exclude participation from the far right. For instance, 'Al' saw the social forum as a democratic project and argued, "I honestly don't think you can claim democracy in a (planning meeting for a) social forum if you're going to exclude certain groups, unless you're talking about the BNP or something that is obviously anti-democratic in itself."<sup>725</sup> While there was a common assumption of inclusivity, therefore, there also appeared to be a broad agreement on where the boundaries of that inclusivity would end.

### ***Setting Boundaries: SSF and SWP***

Consensus on the notion of a decentralised, participatory SSF was not quite complete, however. Members of the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) attending the earliest SSF meetings took a position that lay outside of the general assumptions described above. They argued that the only, or at least primary, purpose of the SSF should be to mobilise participation for European Social Forum events.<sup>726</sup> This was clearly in opposition to the general tendency for participants with visions for a locally autonomous organisation. While many participants expressed a positive view of the ESF and accepted that mobilisation for the ESF could form a part of the work of SSF, there was also a stress on the need for the development of local solutions to local problems. This educated a more fundamental point from the SWP members in the room who considered that the local social forum was not connected with a deep, working class struggle. At times this focused on the use of the name 'Sheffield Social Forum':

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<sup>725</sup> 'Al', email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

<sup>726</sup> At this point, arguments referred to ESFII in Paris. However, given that it was the SWP that first presented the 'bid' for London to host ESF III the following year, it is quite likely that such plans were already known within the SWP.

“how can this group call itself Sheffield anything? It’s a self-selected elite and you can’t claim to represent the wishes of Sheffield.”<sup>727</sup> This position was explicated in its local newsletter, distributed among the SWP membership:

“Some people in Sheffield have taken it upon themselves to declare themselves the Sheffield Social Forum! Whilst the Social Forums that have sprung up in Italy are an absolute inspiration they came from a much...higher level of struggle and are an organic part of the movement. Forty people in a room is not representative of the movement in Sheffield. Unsurprisingly the people who are arguing for Social Forums now are the same people that abstained from building the anti-war movement and blame the Stop the War Coalition for not bringing down Blair on February 15th!”<sup>728</sup>

The inaccurate slur in the last sentence had come after SWP members had walked out of the second meeting under the social forum banner and caused considerable anger when the newsletter was leaked to the SSF email discussion list.<sup>729</sup> The more substantial preceding points connect with the notion of class consciousness within the RS frame. The level of consciousness in the Sheffield context was evaluated as insufficient for a genuine attempt at creating a new organ of working class struggle. However, such arguments did not pass muster in the social forum meetings. Few participants understood the world in primarily class terms. The idea that the local social forum must emerge organically from a broad base of working class people beginning to understand the inherent contradictions of capitalism, therefore, simply did not make sense.

On this reading, the only participants who could potentially be convinced by the SWP position would be those from Workers’ Power; an organisation with an intense rivalry with the SWP. The SWP’s central involvement in the national StWC, and many of the city-based anti-war groups, appeared highly successful. In particular, it spawned the new political party, Respect, from an alliance of the far left and politically active Muslims. Workers’ Power’s involvement in the setting up of local social forums<sup>730</sup> was therefore understood as “attempts by the sectarian left to supplant the Stop the War Coalition by social forums”. These endeavors, “have failed and deserve to fail. Such attempts, portrayed as a programmatic shift to left (because social forums raise issues of economic exploitation as well as war), would in practice be a move to the right

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<sup>727</sup> ‘Floyd’, field notes, July, 2003.

<sup>728</sup> Sheffield SWP Newsletter, July 2003.

<sup>729</sup> Clearly demonstrating the practical application of ‘democratic centralism’ the local full-time organiser had walked out singly, after which other SWP members received text messages and left the room.

<sup>730</sup> Sheffield was not the only city with influential Workers’ Power representation in the building of local social forums; Manchester, Leeds and Cardiff, at least, have all had strong Workers’ Power representation within local social forums, as emerged in networking meetings of the UK local social forums; field notes, Network Meeting of the UK Local Social Forums, Manchester, June 2004.

because they undermine the attempt to break the Blair government over the issue on which it is most vulnerable.”<sup>731</sup> The SWP have long been described as unable to accept the presence of any rival centres of revolutionary action; this quotation clearly demonstrates such an attitude.<sup>732</sup>

Interestingly, both the SWP and Workers’ Power positions can be understood from within the RS frame. The SWP emphasised class consciousness and the central importance of the vanguard party. Workers’ Power tended to emphasise the potential of decision-making bodies that emerge from the working class to challenge political and economic elites. These differences demonstrate clearly that concrete political positions do not emerge with determined force from the propositions within orientational frames. Significantly, it is quite possible that both Workers’ Power and the SWP were engaged in united front strategies: Workers’ Power in the social forums and SWP in the anti-war groups. They are both, therefore, in competition to attract participation in their relevant organisations, understood as spaces in which politically active people could become increasingly conscious of class struggle, and ultimately recruited to the vanguard. However, because the vanguard party is understood as the protector of truths concerning revolutionary action, and because of a perceived need for efficient central control, it is inconceivable that more than one vanguard organisation could be operational. The result is that conflict appears as a product of the similarities, rather than the differences in the sets of ideas used by the rival groups. Whereas we might expect that a shared analyses and targets ought to lead to unity in action, here the contents of the worldview promotes competition with others on the basis of their ideational similarity. This goes some way to understanding the factionalism and rivalry that has long been rife in the British far left.

While the direct involvement of the SWP with the SSF was short-lived, its influence continued to be strongly felt and shaped consideration of the notions of diversity, representation and democracy within the SSF. The belief that, as SSF grew in size and influence, the SWP would again become interested, and attempt to dominate the group to further their own agenda was frequently aired. Furthermore, this was often used as a justification for taking certain positions on, for example: methods of decision-

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<sup>731</sup> SWP, 2004, “Socialist Workers’ Party. Post-Conference Bulletin, December 2004” in *SWP Resources*. Available at: <http://www.swp.org.uk/resources/Conference2004.pdf>; last accessed: 12/10/05.

<sup>732</sup> Callaghan, J., 1987, *The Far Left in British Politics* (Blackwell, Oxford), pp. 102-3. More recently, an article by Nick Cohen was approvingly sent to the SSF email list, including the following claim: “the SWP is constitutionally incapable of working with others on an equal, honest and transparent basis. In the end, their aim is dominance, and anything that threatens or undermines that dominance will always, in their eyes, be suspect.” Marqusee, M., quoted in Cohen, N., 2003, “The Lesson the Left has Never Learnt” in *The New Statesman*, 21/07/03.

making,<sup>733</sup> the concrete issues to which the forum should be oriented<sup>734</sup> and whether the SSF should aim to enunciate a political programme at all.<sup>735</sup> Because the SWP were seen as antagonistic to the project envisaged by most within the group, therefore, they provided a boundary within which to find an identity.

### ***What is the Sheffield Social Forum?***

In seeking a political identity the SSF drew a number of boundaries. Inclusivity, participation and autonomy were all broadly agreed upon, with limits drawn by variously specified, 'progressive' propositions on certain concrete issues. These notions, however, were too broad to offer specific direction for what the nominal Sheffield Social Forum could be, or should do. The terrain of debate on this question, once the SWP's position was discounted, polarised along a number of dimensions that each cut across orientational frames. Some of these dimensions are very familiar to those involved in contestatory politics: the deliberative 'talking shop' versus the action focused protest group; the 'radical' objectives versus the 'reformist' ones; and the local sphere of interest versus the global. The most significant dimension envisioned, at one end, a social forum as a decision-making, corporate body that would campaign with an agreed political programme, and at the other, a group dedicated to the facilitation of entirely open networking spaces for a range of political groups.

For the Workers' Power activists present, the local social forum was considered as a democratic space in which decisions could be made on campaign priorities. Inclusivity and democracy were valued because there was potential perceived in the notion that the local social forum could become a body that would represent the views of 'ordinary people' or the working class. The long-term vision saw the social forum forming a centre of power that was separate from local councils. The desire to create an alternative power to that of the local council can best be understood in relation to the view of liberal representative democracy within the RS frame. That is, the various institutions of government in a capitalist state are understood as indelibly marred by association with economic elites. Instead, "the left believes we can one day live in a world where the community will gather together locally and debate and decide on the issues that affect them... Why not start experimenting now with that?"<sup>736</sup> This is a structure strongly reminiscent of the soviets that developed in the early stages of the Russian revolution and, for a time, were in a position of 'dual power' with local

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<sup>733</sup> 'Edgar', email to SSF discussion list, February 2004.

<sup>734</sup> 'Jasper', email to SSF discussion list, February 2004.

<sup>735</sup> 'Isadore' email to SSF discussion list, February 2004.

<sup>736</sup> 'Hamilton', email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

authorities. The term 'soviet' was assiduously avoided during public meetings; however, when pressed 'Gareth' explained, "the word 'soviet' has got loads of bad connotations for people, but yes, there is a model there of people taking control for themselves, a model of democracy that we can use... you've got to change it for the present, but its a pretty good place to start."<sup>737</sup> The Workers' Power position therefore reflects a number of ideational elements associated with the RS frame: it is based on the need to put the working class in control of political power; it rejects the use of liberal representative democratic institutions in order to do so; and it has a vision of an alternative mode of acquiring power that is strongly inspired by the Russian revolution. It should be noted that the basic argument of the Workers' Power members – that the SSF should work towards deciding on common ambitions and frameworks for action – was one taken more broadly. 'Darell', for instance, who describes himself as a 'libertarian socialist', argued that "the idea of the social forum as well as highlighting global injustices, is to create a kind of local 'dual power' structure, where we contest council decisions, ... initiate our own innovative projects and respond to injustices/abuses, corruption etc, with measured, highly visible direct critiques and action."<sup>738</sup> This view can be summarised as envisaging SSF as a kind of political party: a corporate body with procedures for making collective decisions that would discuss a variety of campaign issues and decide on priorities and strategies for action. It would be following the social forum model to the degree that it emphasised making links with groups already active around issues; an openness to newcomers; and an apparent willingness to consider novel analyses and strategies.

The second position was partially associated with those working within the direct action (DA) frame. A number of activists argued that SSF need not agree on any particular campaign positions in order to be effective. Rather, the social forum was conceptualised as a space for networking, deliberation and proposals for action. Even where most participants in SSF found particular ideas inspiring, detailed development and planning would occur away from SSF itself. This view developed in important ways over the first few months of debate. Recognising the lack of consensus around the *PGA Hallmarks*, as described above, the *WSF Charter of Principles* soon began to receive more considered attention. The *Hallmarks* were perceived, despite the claim to be purely a space for coordination, as giving too much definition to the politics of the space. 'Isadore' cited *WSF Charter* principle six (quoted in section two above) to argue,

"I'm more in favour of the SSF being organised along the lines of the WSF... This would mean the only role and decisions for us would be to

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<sup>737</sup> 'Gareth', field notes, September 2003.

<sup>738</sup> 'Darell', email, July 2003.

organize the time and space for the forums. It would also mean we could avoid making any statements about what we are (like say the PGA guidelines) and the forum would be open to the widest number of people.”<sup>739</sup>

The attraction of the WSF thus became precisely the notion of an ‘open space’ free from the requirement to decide among competing analyses and strategies and therefore available to a diversity of participants. In chapter four I argued that in its most positive incarnations the DA frame contained a belief in the transformatory power of the creation of spaces for political engagement. Such spaces are valuable if they are potential areas of empowerment for participants and if they are prefigurative of a better future society. The social forum may be empowering in its concrete goal: that of linking up individuals and collectives for effective actions. It may also be empowering in its acceptance of diversity; because there are few prescribed opinions participants should, in principle, feel safe to develop their own understandings and thus realise the benefits of individual freedom. Acceptance of diversity may also be linked with prefiguration. The centrality of individual freedom and autonomy within the anarchist-inspired DA frame are served well by a group situation that neither prescribes nor proscribes particular views.

The use of the idea of autonomy within the SSF requires some further explication. All the SSF participants now saw the group as autonomous from the ESF, partly in reaction to the arguments of the SWP. Additionally, it was assumed that it would always remain autonomous from any other political organisation. This clearly does not imply, however, that all were working within the DA frame. The understanding of the social forum as a cohesive body assumes the surrender of a degree of individual autonomy to the group as a whole. This would particularly be the case if the group made regular use of voting where the decisions would effect all group members. In practice the group always used an unspecified form of consensus decision-making. The ‘open space’ idea therefore came to be strongly connected with the main propositions in the DA frame because it appeared to offer maximum individual freedom at the same time as encouraging and improving radical action contesting identified targets. Furthermore, to the degree that it would be built on principles understood as a guide to a better world, the construction of the social forum as a political space may be understood as direct action in and of itself.

The debate on the nature that SSF could take was always informed by a number of practical concerns about the survival and growth of the group and, centrally, its potential for efficacy. In one direction the perceived dilemma was that without a

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<sup>739</sup> ‘Isadore’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

coherent identity it would be difficult to attract newcomers because “when I speak to people they always ask what SSF is about and all I can do is give examples of other social forums that exist.”<sup>740</sup> Furthermore, some considered that a projected group identity would have to make strong political claims in order to be effective. In the context of a debate over a campaign on debt, described below, one participant argued that “without articulating a coherent alternative to neo-liberal capitalism and the political, social, economic frameworks that it requires to reproduce itself ... then we all end up in a reformist agenda which simply underlines the dominance of capital.”<sup>741</sup> The concern with efficacy also related to the talking shop-action dimension. On this argument the RS and DA frames are often found in concert, arguing that it is essential that any meetings have, as part of their purpose, plans for concrete action.<sup>742</sup> The strongest argument for the intrinsic value of talk and discussion is usually found within the RL frame:

“Talking shops’ and political action are not exclusive. History shows the reverse: a prime example would be the suffragettes, who started out in bloody reading groups... don't knock talking, and don't knock actions or groups you might consider non-radical. In my (woolly liberal) view of things, all local/political engagement and discussion is good; and a talking shop could lead to anything, given time.”<sup>743</sup>

This quotation gives a clue to the alignment of the RL frame in relation to the party-space debate. The RL frame is inherently plural with respect to both analyses of society and strategies for change. As such, where the RS frame uses recruitment and the DA frame uses propaganda, the RL frame includes an ambition to ‘make people think’. The efficacy of a group is therefore measured more by its promotion of diverse discussions than by its ability to convince people of a particular set of ideas. The open space therefore fits well with the anti-dogma position in relation to knowledge. In addition the decentralised structure fits well with the related arguments against the centralisation of power.

Containing many areas of diversity, and without a formal decision making procedure, the SSF never reached a definitive position on these debates. Rather, the SSF must be understood as a process of exploration. In sections four and five I will argue that the processes elsewhere in the UK, as well as on the grander regional and international scales, covered very similar ground. The diversity of conceptions of the

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<sup>740</sup> ‘Jasper’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

<sup>741</sup> ‘Rafe’, email to SSF discussion list, April 2004.

<sup>742</sup> ‘Gareth’, field notes, July 2003.

<sup>743</sup> ‘Edgar’, email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

social forum did not, however, forestall certain forms of collective action. It is to an examination of the concrete actions of the group that I now turn.

### ***SSF Projects: Diversity in Action?***

Despite an inability to resolve a wide range of debates the SSF group did come to agree on the notion of creating a WSF-styled event. After wrangling over the use of the name 'Sheffield Social Forum' it was decided that this event would represent the launch of the social forum. SSF was thereby conceived to have a more permanent existence than the WSF: rather, the big networking event that it would hold would form the beginning of a continuous form of organisation. The character of the launch event reflected a number of criticisms of the ESF as seen from the local perspective. The emphasis on 'star' speakers in huge conferences with little interaction was criticised as not giving sufficient focus on the smaller workshops that were organised in a relatively decentralised and autonomous fashion. At the SSF launch, therefore, there would just be two platform speakers considered necessary to attract participants and to provide a starting point for discussions throughout the day. The decision to invite Hilary Wainwright brought up, once again, the relationship between SSF and ESF. While some felt that her involvement in organising the forthcoming ESF III in London, given its connections with Ken Livingstone and the Greater London Authority (GLA), should exclude her from the event most considered her involvement as offering potential for a valuable communication channel with the larger event.<sup>744</sup> This debate took place well within the area of common understanding within the SSF as nobody suggested that SSF should in any way subordinate its independence to the organisation of ESF.

A further general critique of ESF was the degree of control coming from the centre in terms of decisions over the agenda for events, choice of speakers, location of and times of workshops and so on were seen to be taken in a top-down manner. One simple attempt to avoid this was found in the notion that workshops would not have leaders, but that a number of 'key participants' would be invited to attend, who would have significant experience in that relevant field. Finding themselves in a position analogous to the ESF Organising Committee they criticised, however, as the event drew closer there was a perceived need for the small organising group to set the agenda for workshops in a reasonably formal manner. Despite the terminological change, 'key participants' often became workshop leaders, and their availability became the determining factor in whether a topic would be covered. Furthermore, tensions among the ten to fifteen participants centrally involved in the SSF launch grew. A technological

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<sup>744</sup> 'Rafe', 'Edgar', emails to SSF discussion list, February 2004.

divide had emerged through the use of relatively novel 'Wiki' software, a product of the free software movement. This enabled the construction of a website used for planning the event that was, in principle, open to anybody to edit or post comments on. However, having made significant changes to the programme online, those with easy internet access and a higher level of technical proficiency and confidence were criticised for over-reliance on tools that not everybody, in practice, could use. Thus, some of the critiques aimed at the organisation of the ESF came to be used against a section of the small group organising the SSF launch.<sup>745</sup>

Nevertheless, the most novel features of the launch event resulted from an attempt to overcome the tendency to centralise control for the event. The final session of the day was left open for topics to be decided by the full range of attendees. Suggestions were taken in a variety of forms throughout the day, and by mid-afternoon a list of about a dozen potential topics was compiled. These were read out to the group as a whole and any topics that had several interested parties would be discussed. In the event, among the 60-80 attendees present at the time (approximately 150 had passed through the event during the day) six topics were chosen and the final session given over to their discussion. The groups were intended to bridge the gap between talk and action, as the groups that met in this final session were encouraged to discuss plans for action and to sow the seeds for more continuous work. Additionally, as this process was explained as an experiment in democracy it demonstrates clearly the most solid point of convergence within the SSF organising group. Whatever position the SSF would take on the overarching debates over the concept of the social forum, its process would be democratic. Moreover, the nature of that democracy ought to be participatory and the method for achieving results would be novel.

The SSF launch met a degree of success, in both its objectives of providing useful space for bringing together activists who might usefully work together and in ensuring that discussions led to concrete action. Evidencing the former objective, a chance meeting in the 'Indymedia lab' where free software and technical knowledge were exchanged led to the creation of the 'Sheffield Distributed Library Project'. Ostensibly this project gives individual users a tool by which they can find people willing to lend books, videos or recorded music they would like to use. One free software activist explained that more importantly it represented a new way of using the internet to build communities: "usually the point of websites is to connect people who are geographically distant and can't meet in person, but with this, the whole point is to contact people who

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<sup>745</sup> 'Jasper', 'Darell', emails to SSF discussion list, March 2004.

live nearby, who you may never have spoken to ... it's a way of using the internet to build real-life communities.”<sup>746</sup>

Among the other outcomes of the launch event one particular is worthy of note. In the final, open session of the SSF launch one topic of discussion was around debt. The issue was raised by a member of the local Green Party in response to the actions of the household goods shop Brighthouse, which had recently been highlighted for exorbitant credit conditions on BBC Radio Four. Around a dozen participants of the launch joined the group, which discussed the possibility for protesting outside the city centre branch of the company. Further planning and debate occurred within the regular meetings of the SSF and on its email discussion list. In its networking mode, a meeting brought together a number of campaigners from groups concerned with poverty. Information from Sheffield Debtline on the extent of the problem locally and the particular role of Brighthouse was provided. Speakers from Sheffield's credit unions – local co-operative organisations that encourage people to save small amounts every week and can offer small loans with little interest - were also invited. SSF participants, in keeping with the ‘another world is possible slogan’, were keen to be able to present some alternative rather than simply condemn a particular organisation. The protest was held in early May 2005, the main purpose of which was to hand out informational flyers to as many potential customers of Brighthouse as possible. In addition, there was drumming from the Sheffield Samba Band and street theatre dramatising the ‘debt trap’ organised by a participant of SSF. The message of the demonstration was that “many people with poor or no credit histories are forced to borrow or buy from companies who offer loans at crippling rates of interest ... There is an alternative! Credit Unions are good for your pocket and where you live.”<sup>747</sup> At the end of the protest the Samba drummers spontaneously led others involved into the shop itself, where they stayed until the police threatened arrests. This was a deliberately confrontational end to the protest that attempted to cause economic damage to a particular organisation through putting off its customers, and therefore added an element of direct action. While the debt protest managed to bring in a number of groups to work together it was nevertheless controversial within the SSF group, as some interpreted it as advocating consumerism which was at the root of social and environmental ills.<sup>748</sup> Nevertheless, the SSF name was included among the list of supporters of the protest on the flyer thus, for the first

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<sup>746</sup> ‘Manuel’, field notes, April 2004.

<sup>747</sup> SSF, 2004, “Want a loan? Get hard sell, small print and lies”, flyer from Sheffield Social Forum, distributed May 2004.

<sup>748</sup> ‘Isadore’, email to SSF list, April 2004.

time, publicly taking a political position. In this way it stepped outside of the conception of the 'open space' described in relation to the WSF above.

#### 4. FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

By the time of the SSF launch it had become clear that the 2004 edition of the European Social Forum (ESF III) would be held in London. The fact that attendees decided to hold one of the final, open workshops on the upcoming ESF signalled a regained focus on the relationship of the local social forum to the international events. Furthermore, the arrival of ESF in the UK prompted an increase in numbers of local social forums and a desire for the disparate groups to connect, both to learn from each others' experiences and to organise intervention in the ESF planning process. The organisation of ESF III was marred by deep divisions over the nature and importance of democratic process in planning the event. Examination of the polarisation that occurred between the SWP, GLA, CND and several trade unions (the 'verticals') on the one hand and a variety of NGOs and autonomous groups (the 'horizontals' or 'democratic opposition') on the other throws the combination of ideas being utilised within the social forum movement into sharp relief.

The focus on process appears as a central theme of the thinking of the horizontals and they made repeated claims to be upholding the true 'spirit of Porto Alegre' through emphasising openness, inclusiveness and participation. The horizontals may, on the one hand, be interpreted as an alliance of people operating within the RL frame, with those operating within the DA frame. On the other hand, to the degree that this alliance has created a particular worldview that participants adhere to, it potentially heralds the emergence of an analytically distinguishable orientational frame. I refer to 'participatory pluralism' to emphasise the important areas of agreement and apparently novel ideas. This particular period of activity within the social forum movement enables two dimensions of comparison: between the beliefs and values operational in the various local social forums, in one direction; and between those working at the local level and those at the international, on the other. In relation to the former I will argue that participatory pluralism is useful in understanding the interconnections and interventions of the UK local social forums. In relation to the latter, I argue that the outlines of the participatory pluralist frame can additionally be perceived in a significant strand of thought found within both the ESF and WSF.

## ***Connecting the UK Social Forums***

After initial contacts had been made from a range of local social forums a first networking meeting was hosted by Manchester Social Forum in early June 2004. UK participants from London, Liverpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester were joined by participants from St Denis Social Forum (France) and Madrid Social Forum. A lengthy written statement was offered by Cardiff Social Forum. The three themes of the two-day meeting were: sharing experiences, constructing a durable network, and intervening in the London ESF process.<sup>749</sup>

In sharing experiences it became obvious that many of the debates seen within the Sheffield Social Forum occurred elsewhere. The theme of ‘are we a body or a space?’ was discussed in depth, and was clearly not limited to the UK. Many participants noted the somewhat contradictory practice of the local social forums where even those who wanted to preserve the notion of the ‘open space’ sometimes acted with the group as a body with its own substantive political projects. However, rather than seeking immediate solution to this question, those involved in the debate were prepared to accept this as an important dynamic within the social forum movement that would only be solved through reflective practice. The controversy surrounding the banning of political parties from involvement in social forums, by principles 8 and 9 of the *WSF Charter*, was also raised. While this had been a minor theme of debate within SSF, the written representation from Cardiff Social Forum had raised its profile within the UK networking meeting. Workers’ Power members in particular, saw the ban as unprincipled and unworkable. It was clear in the WSF processes, as well as the ESF processes, that political parties were represented within the organising committees and the forum events. However, members generally had to disguise their affiliations causing confusion and accusations of dishonesty. Distrust for the traditional left organisations was only increased, however, when it emerged that the Cardiff Social Forum written statement, which was presented as the consensus of the group as a whole, in fact only represented one strand of thought within the group, i.e. that associated with Workers’ Power. This was taken as confirmation of their views for those within the group who stressed the importance of participatory, rather than representative politics. By their own admission, however, “Workers’ Power are far too small to try to dominate the social forum movement”<sup>750</sup> and more serious concerns faced the SWP.

Many of the UK local social forums had similar experiences with the SWP, where members of the local branch first expressed interest in the local social forums.

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<sup>749</sup> Field notes, June 2004.

<sup>750</sup> ‘Hamilton’, field notes, April 2004.

However, in each city these members argued that ‘the movement isn’t ready’ for local social forums and the group should restrict itself to mobilization for the ESF. Failure led SWP members to walk out. In the build up to ESF III a new local organisation emerged under the name ‘Sheffield ESF’.<sup>751</sup> This new group, headed by the SWP and local members of the National Union of Journalists, made no attempt to inform the SSF of its existence or its planned public meetings. SSF participants attended its first public meeting in order to begin some coordination. Concrete suggestions about publicity from the SSF – that informational leaflets could be produced with national information on one side, leaving space on the other for local groups to print whatever highlights of the programme they feel would be of interest to the networks and organisations they were involved in – were discussed positively in the meeting but never came to fruition.<sup>752</sup> This publicity idea was an interesting embodiment of the link between diversity and coordination, positively encouraging the formation of connections according to the particular interests of particular groups while remaining within a larger framework. Such ideas are understood as being of greater importance than simply a convenient way to arouse the interests of the maximum number of people. The creation of the Sheffield ESF, together with perceived power struggle within the ESF process, prompted ‘Edgar’ to address the following comments to Alex Callinicos via a public email list:

“Why is there so much anger at 'London Central?' Because it is becoming a locus of power. It's turning the SF movement into just another power structure, and HAS constituted itself as the only option for inter-relation for participants [*contra* WSF Charter principle 1] ... an easy way to move on is for the rest of us to organise within and between social forum movements - build webs that will mitigate against centralised power, and build computer systems that enable this... Will you back this?”<sup>753</sup>

The difficulties within the ESF process will be examined shortly. For immediate purposes, this quotation demonstrates the idea of the network as the dispersal of power, and the important role of information technology within creating such networks.

The focus on the creation of durable networks therefore indicates more than a particular mode of organising, but a particular understanding of power. Action based on this belief was begun at the Manchester gathering of local social forums, continued when participants again met in Sheffield, and was an important focus during the ESF

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<sup>751</sup> That name, at some point, became ‘ESF Mobilisation Collective’ where the use of the word ‘collective’ clearly attempts to tap into those with suspicions of centralised committees. Field notes, June 2004.

<sup>752</sup> Field notes, June 2004.

<sup>753</sup> ‘Edgar’, email to ESF discussion list, June 2004.

itself.<sup>754</sup> In planning for the SSF launch event it was recognised that “we need to have plenty of space for people to just hang out, have a coffee and chat because that is where the real benefits come from.”<sup>755</sup> Indeed, this mode of action was particularly evident at the, often frantic, European Preparatory Assemblies through which formed a part of the ESF organising process. One personal experience demonstrates the nature of networking at such events. In conversation with ‘Hazel’, from Manchester Social Forum, during a short break from a large meeting I expressed an interest in the newly emerging network of ‘horizontals’ within the ESF process. As several hundred people filed out of the meeting, through a crowded lobby, ‘Hazel’ propelled me towards ‘Niles’ with the instruction, ‘Kevin wants to meet the horizontals’. As people filed passed ‘Niles’ would interrupt their rapid conversations in order to introduce me. Far from identifying them because of their affiliation to the ‘horizontals’, ‘Niles’ would describe their geographical location and the movements or struggles in which they were involved. The later conversations these introductions enabled meant that the following day, during the lunch break from a large and fractious meeting, I was embroiled in an *ad hoc* technological fix required to help an Oxford-based media activist (‘Oli’) transfer a series of short films into a format that could be supplied to ‘Nichola’, a social forum activist from Hungary. The films would then be shown by the Another World is Possible! Network (AWPN), who would also sell CD copies in order to raise funds for their own organisation. Through ‘Nichola’ I learned that the ‘body-space’ debate also took place in Hungary, where it had actually led to an organisational split, producing two Hungarian Social Forums (hence the unwieldy name of the AWPN). She also provided a video of a speech by Noam Chomsky to the AWPN, from which the quotation in section two of this chapter originates.<sup>756</sup> This small example illustrates the purpose and form of networking that occurs at such events. The large conference meetings of hundreds of activists sink into the background where participants do not feel a need to create ideational unity; instead any opportunity to make productive connections across a number of dimensions is grasped. Many of those connections are primarily informational, sharing knowledge, skills, analyses, media presentations or software. Because information resources can often be reproduced at very little cost they can be shared freely and without need for negotiation. By engaging in relatively simply sharing of resources, connections are strengthened and may lead to further shared resources in the future, whether further information, finances for particular campaigns,

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<sup>754</sup> Field notes, December 2004.; field notes, October 2004.

<sup>755</sup> ‘Darell’, email to SSF discussion list, March 2004.

<sup>756</sup> Field notes, European Preparatory Assembly, London, January 2004.

or free accommodation during a meeting or protest. The ideational impact of this mode of organisation will be examined in the following section.

A final, point on the networking of local social forums relates to their intervention in the ESF process. During the Manchester meeting a proposal was worked out that:

“for the whole duration of the European Social Forum events there be one dedicated space for the use of the local social forums of Europe. We believe that the interlinking of local social forums holds huge potential for positive social change in terms of learning, sharing and coordination around issue based campaigns and working methods. It is essential that those networks are created to be durable and independent of the spectacular moments of gathering represented by ESF.”<sup>757</sup>

The form of meeting being requested by the local social forums was notably different to that usually seen within the ESF. Participants envisioned a permanent site in which local social forums could organise their own workshops and cultural events. While particular themes within ESF would often be continued through a large number of different meetings the disconnection between them was perceived to mitigate against carrying out work for social change. Rather, the consumer of the ESF would select their own highlights from the programme and become involved in events in a relatively passive way. This increased the power of those in the centre of the organising process and would create competition over the times and spaces that were expected to be most popular. All activist meetings provide opportunities for both the discussion of issues and the creation of network connections. However, where the seminar or workshop prioritised discussion, leaving networking as a beneficial epiphenomenon, the local social forums aimed to reverse those priorities. While the proposal, signed by individuals and local social forums from across Europe, was supported within the European Preparatory Assembly it was later rejected within British ESF Organising Committee. Rather, the local social forums were provided with one slot in the programme for a workshop and one plenary speaker. As a result, the local social forums moved out of the ‘official’ ESF and into the ‘autonomous spaces’ that resulted from the divisions between the ‘horizontals’ and the ‘verticals’ in the ESF organising process. An examination of that process offers the clearest understanding of the ideational importance of networks, and its connection with values on participation, consensus and democracy.

### ***ESF III: Horizontal Versus Vertical***

By October 2003, a month before ESF II took place in Paris, a small group of activists had put forward a proposal that London host ESF III in 2004. This was

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<sup>757</sup> Field notes, June 2004.

apparently the result of months of negotiations between the SWP, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the Greater London Authority (GLA).<sup>758</sup> In an inauspicious start, given the social forum movements' focus on participation and inclusivity, "the 2004 bid has been made without any consultation across the UK movements, has never been discussed in a general ESF meeting and thus has no mandate."<sup>759</sup> Nevertheless, the bid was additionally backed by a number of influential NGOs (including Greenpeace and War on Want) and several trade unions (including UNISON, and the National Union of Journalists). When the London ESF took place in mid-October 2004, attracting 20-25,000 participants from across Europe the events were celebrated for their depth of discussion, range of political issues and diversity of participation.<sup>760</sup> However, the tensions within the organising process had led to a direct action by some of those centrally involved in the ESF process against one of the plenary sessions of the ESF itself. The protesters made two claims: first, the organisational process of the ESF had been unacceptable; second, the London Mayor should not be allowed to give a platform speech at the occasion. Among the sites where the subsequent 'internal' debate erupted was the letters pages of *The Guardian*. At first a GLA employee, Lee Jasper, accused the direct action group of racism and violence.<sup>761</sup> A number of UK anti-racist organisations and members of the UK ESF Organising Committee countered that Jasper was "playing the race card to silence these voices"<sup>762</sup> who "were not alone in the belief that the London ESF dramatically parted company from the democratic, transparent, non-party and consensual principles upon which the World Social Forum movement was established."<sup>763</sup> Indeed, many reports note the enthusiastic applause of much of the audience after the direct intervention.<sup>764</sup> This protest was merely the most visible evidence of a conflict between the 'verticals' and 'horizontal'. The former group encompassed parts of the Trotskyist and communist left, together with a number of major trade unions and employees of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in addition to some of the larger NGOs, most actively, CND. The latter was comprised of a large number of individuals and smaller activist group, a

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<sup>758</sup> Becker, T., 2003, "The ESF comes to London - or does it?" in *Weekly Worker* 498, 02/10/2003.

<sup>759</sup> Email from London-based social forum activist, forwarded to SSF discussion list, October 2003.

<sup>760</sup> Anon., 2004, "New Politics Takes a Bow" in *The Guardian*, 18/10/2004.

<sup>761</sup> Jasper, L., *et al.*, 2004, "Unwelcome Anarchy at the European Social Forum" in *The Guardian*, 19/10/2004.

<sup>762</sup> Piara Power, *et al.*, 2004, "ESF Protest was Not Racist" in *The Guardian*, 19/10/2004.

<sup>763</sup> Rehman, A., *et al.*, 2004, "Consensus Breaks Down at the Social Forum" in *The Guardian*, 21/10/2004.

<sup>764</sup> Both of the letters cited above described the audience's response as positive, as did, for example, Anon., 2004, "Endless Shit Flinging" in *Schnews* 470, 22/10/04.

significant section of the local social forum movement and a variety of NGOs including the World Development Movement (WDM) and Friends of the Earth (FoE). It is among the latter group that we find the clearest evidence for a developing ideational construction, distinct from the orientational frames identified thus far.

The scale of the ESF clearly demands continuous work, detailed planning and financial resources. Among the more contentious, though ostensibly 'non political' decisions were the choice of venues, the number of plenary speakers as compared with workshops, arrangements for travel and accommodation, the nature of the publicity effort, the selection of full time administrative staff, the provision of information technology during the organisation and the event itself and the provision of translation services. More obviously political decisions needed to be made about sources of funding, the choice of thematic areas and the method by which to choose plenary speakers. The process involved weekly meetings of the ESF Organising Committee (OC). These 'open meetings' were almost always held in central London during office hours, which offered convenience for the full time staff of the trade unions, GLA, larger NGOs and political parties but inconvenience and financial cost for non-professional organisers. After repeated complaints one OC meeting was held during a weekend in Birmingham and around seventy people attended. In addition were the monthly, peripatetic 'European Preparatory Assembly' meetings, which, when held in the UK, attracted up to 3-400 people. Decision-making was nominally by consensus although the method by which consensus would be achieved or measured was never formalised, leaving enormous scope for the personal judgement of the chair. "The modus operandi was that all organisational matters ... were presented as *faits accomplis* to the 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'."<sup>765</sup>

In relation to every area I have listed there were vociferous complaints about the process of decision making. For instance, the decision on venues was to be made at a European Preparatory Assembly. However, only one detailed proposal was put forward by the OC. Oscar Reyes, whose work with *Red Pepper* magazine gave him the opportunity to regularly attend OC meetings, was keen for people to know about the rival proposals. However, speaking from the floor rather than the platform he had just two or three minutes to read out as many details, from his own notes, as possible. While the alternative of an ESF distributed around the Bloomsbury area of London sounded

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<sup>765</sup> Dowling, E., 2005, "The Ethics of Engagement Revisited" in *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization* 5(2), p. 210.

promising to many attendees, there was clearly not enough information to make a sensible comparison; time pressures required confirmation of one proposal, so in the event there was simply no decision to be made.<sup>766</sup> Accessibility of meetings, flow of information, and the domination of meetings through the blunt instruments of invented procedural rules, accusations and slurs, and threats that finances would be withdrawn were the most common complaints in the process.<sup>767</sup>

To increase the chance of influencing the process a disparate range of actors organised among themselves. In so doing they were required to embrace the challenge of coordinating diversity:

“[There is] a bunch of anarchists, reformist NGOs, local social forum types and even some of the far left parties and we’re all trying to get our voices heard so we’ve got to coordinate. Its like trying to herd cats ... The verticals have this single idea of huge conferences where the great and the good can make big speeches and the SWP can flog papers, but we’ve got ... all sorts of ideas.”<sup>768</sup>

This broad cooperation was clearly an unintended but novel result of the ESF process, “Who would have thought only 10 months ago, that members of the CPGB, Indymedia, Attac UK, the London Social Forum and the Green Party would work out joint tactics on the way to a meeting in Birmingham?”<sup>769</sup> These quotations demonstrate the positive evaluation of an ability for a diverse set of actors to work together, and this clearly reflects the notion of the ‘open space’ described above. Some of the larger NGOs were less inclined to intervene frequently within in the process. However, evidence of occasional interventions demonstrates at least some affinity with the cause of the ‘horizontals’. Three instances in particular stand out. First, in February 2004, a representative of Friends of the Earth noted with disappointment the process of decision-making, making a number of concrete proposals including the use of rotating chairs and the commitment to consensus decision-making and creative problem solving. Second, in mid-April there was a concrete proposal, “For a Participatory ESF 2004” put forward by a coalition of NGOs and think tanks. The primary purpose of the

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<sup>766</sup> Field notes, European Preparatory Assembly, London, January 2004.

<sup>767</sup> The list of complaints against the verticals is, in fact, much more extensive. Some documentation can be found in contributions to the *Ephemera* special issue, particularly: Dowling, “The Ethics of Engagement ...”; Böhm, S., 2005, “Ground Zero of the Forum: Notes on a Personal Journey” in *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization 5(2)*, pp. 134-145; Sullivan, L.L., 2005, “Activism, Affect and Abuse: Emotional Contexts and the Consequences of the ESF 2004 Organising Process” in *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization 5(2)*, pp. 344-369. In addition, many criticisms were documented on the website *ESFnet* which was heavily used by the horizontals; available at: <http://esf2004.net>; last accessed: 12/11/05.

<sup>768</sup> ‘Hazel’, field notes, first Network Meeting of the UK Local Social Forums, Manchester, June 2004.

<sup>769</sup> CPGB, 2004, “European Social Forum – Control and ‘Consensus’” in *Weekly Worker 521, 01/04/2004*.

proposals was to increase the level of self-organisation within the ESF process by facilitating the merging of proposed workshops and seminars by participants themselves, rather than by the OC, or a subgroup of that body. The intended result would be “a radical break from the idea that the Host Organising Committee... decides the themes and organises the mergers of seminars. Instead, the European Preparatory Process would merely 'facilitate' the formulation of ESF themes as the outcome of a long and dedicated bottom-up process of consultation, facilitation and outreach.”<sup>770</sup> Third, in September, ten of the biggest NGOs (including Oxfam, FoE, Greenpeace, War on Want and WDM) published an open letter criticising the ESF process. In particular they report disappointment that the decision on plenary speakers had been voted without deliberation in a meeting ‘packed’ with more than the usual number of members of the far left.<sup>771</sup> The methods by which the horizontals worked together were mostly open and attempted to be inclusive and participatory. The overriding message of the horizontals was that the principles of the ‘open space’, set out by the WSF Organising Committee, should govern the organisation of the event as well as the event itself.

### ***‘Another ESF is Possible’***

The specificity of many of the most heated debates between the verticals and the horizontals, and the horizontals’ focus on process, obscures the alternative vision of the ESF that motivated the latter. However, one particular text, widely circulated by email and reproduced on several websites since December 2003, offers a particularly detailed vision for the ESF. While praising some aspects of ESF II, Phil McLeish suggested two failings: first “to maximise – from the point of view of the participant – relevant productive and potentially enduring political exchanges”, and second, “to integrate individuals into the Forum as deliberating and creative collective agents.”<sup>772</sup> The majority of ESF participants could only take the role of passive consumers of ideas, and interaction was reduced to a peripheral feature of the event. This critique is based on a heightened value of the ‘network’ as an organisational form, “the organisation we need to run the Social Forum only needs to do one thing... It needs to foster, nurture and

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<sup>770</sup> Hodkinson, S., et al., “For a Participatory ESF 2004: a Process Proposal”, circulated widely through email discussion lists, April 2004.

<sup>771</sup> Reclaim Our Forum, 2004, “Major UK NGO's Criticise ESF Organising Process + SWP/SA” on *Indymedia UK*, 01/09/2004. Available at: <http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/09/297118.html>; last accessed: 12/11/05.

<sup>772</sup> McLeish, P., 2003, “Listen Up! Act Up! Serve the Needs of the Hive Mind! Towards an Effective and Participatory European Social Forum” in *The Commoner*, available at: <http://www.thecommoner.org.uk/01-12groundzero.htm>; last accessed: 18/11/05.

encourage the emergence of a new Europe as a ‘network of networks’.”<sup>773</sup> McLeish therefore proposes a radically decentred structure for the ESF. Rather than utilising broad thematic areas chosen for ideational convenience, work streams would be calculated from a database of information given by participants before the events. Work streams would be composed along a number of dimensions: geographic area and range; social sector or class; identities or movements; and enemies. Given such information in advance connections could be suggested by the ‘arbitrary fairness’ of an internet-based database using keywords from participants self-descriptions to match them to others. Matching would be used to bring people together along the different dimensions of ‘strategic proximity’ at different points during the forum. Through that system, McLeish hoped to increase the potential for creating multiple solidarities. Solidarity resulting from some relevant similarity between participants would increase the chances of connections along other dimensions, potentially creating new unities. So, for instance, people meeting in spaces defined by geographical area would work within, and share information about, a wide range of movements; people meeting in spaces defined by particular identities would have a wide range of geographic and social backgrounds. With groups defined throughout the lead up to the ESF they could begin work on self-organising sessions. These become most useful, in terms of stimulating concrete action, when particular workshops and events can be adjusted throughout the events to take account of newly emerging themes, lessons and connections.

While these ideas never came to fruition, they do offer an interesting understanding of the purpose of the ESF, that seems to articulate with various visions put forward by a range of critics of the ESF III process. This may be understood as a clear description of a ‘participatory pluralist’ view. By emphasising the network form McLeish argues that the flows of information and interaction between groups and individuals are more important than the points of convergence. The ‘nodes’ – points at which multiple flows connect – may represent a key moment during a movement’s history but have a tendency to create ossified traditions, incapable of reacting to changing political opportunities. “Organisers thrown up by events, who find themselves serving or surfing these waves of history narcissistically imagine themselves their authors. Last year’s bright creative movement becomes a fossilized bureaucracy or an inert ritualistic subculture.”<sup>774</sup> This introduces the deep gulf between participatory pluralism and the understanding of organisations and social change within the RS frame. In the latter, class conflict may be understood as arising inevitably from the contradictions of

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<sup>773</sup> McLeish, “Listen Up!...”, section 2.

<sup>774</sup> McLeish, “Listen Up!...”, section 2.

capitalism. However, for this to become revolution requires strategic knowledge applied to a particular historical moment. To that degree, within the RS frame, those who ‘surf the waves of history’ are indeed understood as the authors of historic events. The revolutionary organisation must transmit the lessons of the past, interpreted through a Marxist lens, to the future; during lulls in activity the organisation protects knowledge in order to educate a new generation of activists when opportunity arises. The RS frame contains a vision of a linear progression of history, punctuated by events which may, given accumulated knowledge, be utilised by revolutionary forces. Massimo De Angelis, conversely argues,

“we must abandon linear thinking, since social transformation emerges out of our actions, subjectivities, desires, organizational capability, ingenuity and struggles in unpredictable ways. Indeed, we must be very wary of thinking that the achievement of a victory, of *any* victory, is a move towards the promised land. And this is because what we call victories (or defeats for that matter) represent turning points for *both* us and our opponents.”<sup>775</sup>

De Angelis does not deny that it is possible to learn from history, but rather claims, “we do not know how, whether and to what extent our victory will bring about a re-alignment of social forces that helps to redefine a new era of capital accumulation, with its inevitable injustices, exclusions, stupidity, and madness.”<sup>776</sup> Flexibility and the distribution of knowledge production are, therefore, two of the key advantageous features of the network structure and it is from these bases that diversity and participation gain their value.

Coordination amongst the horizontals led to a number of perceptible ‘victories’ against the verticals in the Preparatory Assemblies. The most significant organisations from France and Italy openly criticised the inability of the UK verticals to be inclusive, and at one point threatened to withdraw their support.<sup>777</sup> However, in the perception of some, “the outcome of the battle was pretty much determined at the outset, given that some (the ‘verticals’) had more access to resources and political clout than others (the ‘horizontals’).”<sup>778</sup> The process was therefore understood as deeply effected by the inequities of wealth and power so often criticised in the global political economy. Despite temporary victories in the process, alternative visions for ESF failed to gain a significant influence and the process continued to be criticised as lacking in transparency, accountability and participation. A further disappointment to the

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<sup>775</sup> De Angelis, M., 2005, “PR Like Process! Strategy from the Bottom-Up” in *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organization* 5(2), p. 201.

<sup>776</sup> De Angelis, “PR Like Process!...”, p. 201.

<sup>777</sup> ‘Italian Report on the Paris Programme Meeting’, widely circulated by email, June 2004.

<sup>778</sup> Dowling, “The Ethics of Engagement...”, p. 207.

horizontals was the use of private-sector companies to provide information technology, events management services and food and drinks. An obvious complaint was the simple fact of funnelling funds from the ticket fees, which were considerably higher than previous ESF meetings, into the profits of shareholders. This was also understood as a lack of faith in the abilities of the various social movement organisations involved. From within the DA frame, these decisions were particularly offensive. Since the late 1990s, the emergence of Indymedia demonstrated the ability of those within movements contesting globalisation to produce new internet technologies that were both cutting edge and participatory. The divide was clearly represented when one of the autonomous spaces chose the name 'Life Despite Capitalism' in counterpoise to the plenary session titled 'Life After Capitalism'.

After significant failure to influence the ESF process it was on the 'autonomous spaces' outside of the 'official' ESF events that many of the horizontals focused. These were already becoming an important feature of the ESF and had emerged in Florence as soon as the ESF was proposed.<sup>779</sup> A brief examination of the autonomous events helps to fill out the details of the political discourse of the horizontals.

The proposal for locating ESF in Bloomsbury had a number of attractions. There were a wide variety of university rooms available for a range of different sizes. However, these were expected to focus attention on the smaller events since none of the spaces would be anywhere near as big as the giant conference venue in Alexandra Palace. The distributed nature of the event would offer the potential for different spaces having different identities, while still being close enough to encourage people to move between them. Furthermore, there was sufficient public space for street activities that would encourage independent cultural activities and break down boundaries between ESF participants and the general public. While the official events took place in Alexandra Palace, therefore, spaces were organised within the University Colleges of London for various different autonomous events. The events taking place in autonomous spaces included the Solidarity Village (cooperative organising, alternative economics), Beyond ESF (anti-authoritarian ideas and direct action), The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination (carnival and creative direct action), and The European Forum on Communication Rights (alternative media, copyright and copyleft). Each of these demonstrates, at least, concerns with self-organisation and the direct creation of alternatives that are familiar from the DA frame and a critique of the official ESF

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<sup>779</sup> This is evidenced by the actions of PGA, described above. Similarly, in Paris some groups attempted to work within the process but felt that their views were excluded and subsequently joined the autonomous spaces. For instance, NextGENDERation Network, 2004, "Refusing to be 'The Women's Question'... Embodied Practices of a Feminist Intervention at the European Social forum 2003" in *Feminist Review* 77, pp. 141-151.

organising process as undemocratic. The Local Social Forum Space and Life Despite Capitalism both demonstrate more obvious connections with the ideas presented as participatory pluralism in this section. The latter is evidenced through its claims:

“to articulate the different values and practices we adhere to in our diverse struggles and therefore to develop and weave together new political discourses ... grounded in the belief that if other worlds are possible, it is people themselves who create them and not some transcendent power with a "correct" line such as parties, states, or gods ... We call this stream ‘life despite capitalism’ instead of ‘life after capitalism’, in order to problematise alternatives as something in the here and now ... This means reclaiming the exercise of our many powers to do and to produce things, affects and relations; it means to relate and learn from each other in ways rooted in dignity, respect and common access to resources.”<sup>780</sup>

This quotation connects many of the elements of the horizontals’ critique of the verticals throughout the ESF process: it juxtaposes the creation of new understandings with the dogma of the organised left; insists on a plurality of other worlds that must be created from the bottom-up; it rejects the linearity of the RS frame that finds justice only after the revolution; it thereby implies a notion of prefiguration that is repeated in the expressed need to base social relations on dignity and respect; it includes a notion of empowerment; and finally, it includes an implication of equality through ‘common access to resources’. Many of these aspects are recognisable from the frames outlined in Part II of the thesis. In the next, final, section I will summarise the development of these ideas through activists’ statements in the local, regional and global contexts in order to suggest that the particular combination of these elements transcends some of the divisions noted throughout the thesis.

### ***Towards a New Orientational Frame?***

It is the ‘highly original’ notion of the ‘open space’ that has received the greatest amount of attention within both movement-produced commentary and scholarly analysis.<sup>781</sup> The structure devised for organising the first WSF was a result of “the underlying assumption ... that the World Social Forum is not a deliberative body or actor that would take political stands and thereby need rigorous decision-making

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<sup>780</sup> Publicity information for ‘Life Despite Capitalism’ at ESF III, distributed widely, September 2004.

<sup>781</sup> Wallerstein, “The dilemmas of the open space...”. This is evidenced throughout the special issue of the *International Journal of Social Science* in which Chloé Keraghel and Jai Sen note that despite offering a wide remit to contributors, the majority focused on “interrogating the WSF’s self-defined culture of politics, the concept of ‘open space’.” Keraghel, C. & Sen, J., 2004, “Explorations in open space. The World Social Forum and cultures of politics.” in *International Journal of Social Science* 56(4), pp. 492.

procedures.”<sup>782</sup> Much the same argument was used locally when the vision of SSF as networking space was justified because “the only decisions we’d have to make would be on providing a regular space and facilitation, and publicising SSF... since they’re practical rather than political in nature I think getting consensus would be pretty easy.”<sup>783</sup> At every level it has become clear that there are rival visions for the social forum and that, in any case, the provision of such a space does involve intensely political decisions. Among proponents of the ‘open space’ this is often understood as a battle of new against old. Janet Conway, citing Francisco Whitaker, warns “against the ‘old world’ present like an octopus in the ‘new world’ of the Social Forum. The old world is an old kind of power politics on the left that seeks to control, that distrusts plurality, and that effectively shuts down space for diversity and for debate in the name of urgency, unity and strategy”<sup>784</sup>. The perceived novelty of the ‘open space’ is, therefore, its emphasis on diversity.

Of itself, however, acceptance of diversity hardly seems particularly novel. It is notable that the RS frame, with its notion of the united front, also positively values working with those with a different political outlook. However, the united front is merely one stage to a politically homogenous vanguard and unity is expected to overcome diversity. The libertarianism inherent within the DA frame is tolerant of difference, while its ecologically derived elements create an negative understanding of monoculture in the natural world, and by extension, the valorisation of diversity within the social. However, within efforts for social change there is also a continuing value on finding consensus, which clearly implies unity. Indeed, in the context of affinity group decision making, “If one person continually finds him/herself at odds with the rest of the group... Is this really the right group to be in? A group may ask a member to leave.”<sup>785</sup> The RL frame, while seeking to find consensus on some basic moral claims (exemplified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), seeks to defend diversity within these broad bounds. However, social change is often understood as the result of increasing the scope of agreements on fundamental moral points of view, hence the appreciation of the potential efficacy of protest that makes moral claims on public figures. What appears as new within participatory pluralism is not, therefore, the

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<sup>782</sup> Teivanen, “The World Social Forum ...”, p. 626.

<sup>783</sup> ‘Isadore’, email to SSF discussion list, August 2003.

<sup>784</sup> Conway, J., 2005, “Social Forums, Social Movements and Social Change: A Response to Peter Marcuse on the Subject of the World Social Forum” in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 29(2), pp. 425.

<sup>785</sup> Seeds for Change, undated, “Consensus Decision Making”, p. 5; available on *Seeds for Change Website* at: <http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/consensus.pdf>; last accessed: 08/08/05.

acceptance of diversity of participation, but the belief in the protection and even production of diversity as a motor of social change.

The debate of unity against diversity thereby takes on a deeper significance. At the beginning of organising for SSF ‘Edgar’ asked, “Is the Sheffield Social Forum going to be open enough to accommodate a large array of differing opinion?”<sup>786</sup> The following response can be considered a reasonable summary of the consensus of the group: “I think this has to be the underlying principle of any social forum ... [it] must be something we are constantly striving for, and if we get it right will make us a very powerful force.”<sup>787</sup> To a similar end, Conway describes the debate over the ‘social forum’ as signalling:

“(1) a power struggle over its future; (2) profound disagreement over the *character* of its power, which is itself based in conflicting understandings and visions of power and change in the contemporary period more generally; (3) at the heart of this last conflict is a yet more basic one about the status of multiplicity and diversity – in understanding power(s), in building resistance(s), in creating alternatives, in crafting solidarities, in imagining other possible worlds as *les raisons d’être* of the Social Forum.”<sup>788</sup>

Both quotations demonstrate a link between diversity and power that is not immediately recognisable from either the DA or RL frames. Conway’s argument takes this further, demonstrating a conception of social change as requiring a multiplicity of alternative worlds, and this is understood as both the power of the ‘movement of movements’ and the purpose of the social forum. Exploring the connections within this argument, i.e. how exactly diversity creates power, points to several significant convergences between proponents of the DA and RL frames.

The power of networked diversity can be understood, with reference to a conception of knowledge that is familiar from the RL frame. De Angelis, for instance, presents an understanding of the traditional far left as presenting a unified vision of the future to which ‘there is no alternative’, thus mobilising the same critique used widely against the knowledge structure of neoliberalism. He argues rather that the ‘open space’ of the social forum must institute a political culture in which ‘there are many alternatives’. The critique of dogma that is, I have argued, central to the RL frame is presented in a new form: “the key problem of capitalist markets is not so much the creation of ‘losers’, but a mode of articulation of productive ‘nodes’ across the social body that constantly

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<sup>786</sup> ‘Edgar’, email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

<sup>787</sup> ‘Gareth’, email to SSF discussion list, July 2003.

<sup>788</sup> Conway, “Social Forums, Social Movements ...”, p. 425.

creates ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.<sup>789</sup> In other words, the effect of top-down institutions of global governance which embody dogmatic knowledge in order to act on the world necessarily produce a range of inequalities and injustices. It is not any one or other of these institutions that is a primary enemy, but rather the top-down nature of governance solutions. Further, the communicative, networked production of knowledge is required in order to build alternatives to capitalism in the present, rather than to defer them to a period after a mass confrontation of powers.<sup>790</sup> Participatory pluralism thereby articulates the anti-dogma position central to the RL frame with the strong notion of prefiguration within the DA frame. Prefiguration appears in an extended form, however, as the enclaves of resistance that are acceptable to the DA frame must be constantly connected with other struggles. By doing so it offers to temper the emphasis on momentary confrontations with power that can lie within DA understandings of the objective of action; increasing the value of positive engagement on the basis of its increased efficacy.

The value on diversity may be understood as akin to the value of diversity within ecology. Here, the presence of multiple strategies ensures that some will survive. The trend, taken overall, is to survival, reproduction and the creation of new diversity. This can only be translated to the social and political world if the individual elements are appropriately related. The movement of movements becomes a swarm, or a multitude, when densely networked.<sup>791</sup> Rapid information and resource flow ensures that multiple strategies are enacted with the same broad aims. Appropriate responses can be devised to meet changing structures of power. Taken to the level of the individual or collective, participatory pluralism offers a vision of empowerment that is recognisable from the DA frame. The creation of open spaces of interaction serves to enable horizontal connections among many different groups, sharing resources, information, understandings and culture. Both the notion of the creation of space as action for social change, and the associated understanding of the empowerment offered by connections within these spaces seem to flow from the DA frame as described above. This articulates with a broader notion, within the RL frame, of purposively designing structures for positive social change, that is evident by, for instance, focus on the cooperative form of economic enterprise.

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<sup>789</sup> De Angelis, M., 2005, “Opposing Fetishism by Reclaiming Our Powers” on *The Open Space Forum*. Available at: [http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-print\\_article.php?articleId=23](http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-print_article.php?articleId=23); last accessed: 11/11/05, p. 3.

<sup>790</sup> De Angelis, “Opposing Fetishism ...”, p. 2.

<sup>791</sup> McLeish, like many others within the ‘horizontal’ group, borrows the terminology of empire and multitude; Hardt, M. & Negri, A., 2000, *Empire*, (Harvard University Press, Massachusetts).

Understanding the network as an effective and just mode of social organisation offers two elements of particular benefit to proponents of the RL frame. The first relates to democracy. The network conception of the social forum, as described here, is strongly opposed to representative politics which “generates pyramidal bodies in which information flows up and decisions flow down.”<sup>792</sup> Clearly, democracy is conceived as essentially participatory and consensual. I have given indications in chapters five and six that those working within the RL frame have increasingly gained a scepticism concerning representative democracy. Indeed, the latter appears as a check on the power of elites that is valued because it is presently available. In its more idealistic guise, the RL frame seeks alternative forms of participation through the creation of structures that mitigate against the accumulation of power. Participatory pluralism, through its conception of the dispersal of power through the network, which itself increases, rather than dissipates efficacy, may be conceived as offering one solution to this dilemma.

The second benefit for RL frame proponents relates to the mass movement. Conceptually, the praise for diversity offers a way out of the ambivalence over mass movements sensed within the RL frame. McLeish argues that “a mass is not a certain quantity of people, it is a certain quality of social relationship in which the constituent individuals are powerless and behave as an amorphous, undifferentiated amoeba *vis-à-vis* the whole... The whole needs to be experienced by each person not as a huge summation of individuals but as a richly textured ensemble of overlapping levels and scales of organisation across space, time and content.”<sup>793</sup> Of itself, this argument does not answer the strategic problems of the mass movement, concerning, for instance, mainstream media images of social movements oversimplifying messages. However, the critique of the mass movement from within the RL frame is at least as focused on the direct transformative potential for participants as it is on the image the mass portrays. Among my interviewees, for instance, emerged criticisms of the mass demonstration as being “about as brain-switched-off as you can get”<sup>794</sup> and hopes for future work that “is more about opening people’s eyes, getting people to question things”.<sup>795</sup> That is, the RL frame is concerned with mass participation in knowledge production as a remedy to dogma; the network conception of the social forum offers the promise of a thought-provoking environment in which questions are opened rather than closed.

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<sup>792</sup> McLeish, “Listen Up!...”, section 2.

<sup>793</sup> McLeish, “Listen Up!...”, section 2.

<sup>794</sup> ‘Kenneth’, interview, January 2005.

<sup>795</sup> ‘Orson’, interview, December 2004.

Participatory pluralism describes a particular combination of elements from the RL and DA frames. It is apparent, however, articulating these ideas in a novel structure modifies the precise meaning of the component parts. This is the conclusion expected from a morphological analysis of belief-structures, as explained in chapter one. In a number of senses participatory pluralism appears as a positive engagement between the two frames in which ambiguities within each are addressed. The indications from this chapter suggest that the dynamics of the social forum movement have led to this particular merging of beliefs previously associated with the DA and RL frames. The status of the claim that participatory pluralism represents a new orientational frame will be considered in chapter nine.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In general terms it is clear that we should consider the emergence of social forums on every level as a continuation of the contest over globalisation. It is, therefore, possible to understand the dynamics of the social forum movement through an examination of its relation to the orientational frames already being utilised within the current cycle of contention. At the local level it is clear that these orientational frames do offer activists a way of interpreting the 'social forum'. Because activists perceived the nature of the social forum as open to contestation, pre-existing worldviews impacted on aspirations for what the social forum should be or could do. The 'open space' is a challenging idea and in all contexts it is possible to perceive difficulties in implementation. The Sheffield Social Forum, while at times constituting an 'open space', at others appeared to act as a body. The fact that while, in name, the SSF acted as a campaigning body on the debt issue, the objectives of that campaign remained contested is illustrative of an openness to continued debate over both the concrete issues and the nature of the social forum itself. In the interrelation of local social forums a number of notable common themes emerged. First, the forums considered their organisations autonomous of the wider movement, though linked by a common inspiration in the acceptance of diversity. Second, each contained continuing debates over the nature of the social forum, especially over the body-space dimension. Third, each felt the need to relate to each other, and to the process for the ESF, but only the grounds of retained autonomy.

The larger scale, wider inclusivity, and extra attention received by the process to create ESF III sharpened debate. The local social forums, to the degree that they had reached agreement, fitted more closely with the horizontals than the verticals in the contest over the ESF. In some respects, experiments in participation at the Sheffield

Social Forum prefigured the horizontals' view of a participatory process for the ESF. Division within the ESF process clearly relates to the ideational backgrounds that participants bring with them. It may be possible to understand the development of the ESF process as a result of a clash between individuals utilising elements of the RS frame, on the one hand, and an alliance of those informed by the DA frame with those using the RL frame on the other. However, I have argued that rather than a strategic alliance between ideationally distinct groups, the 'horizontals' ability to work together may be understood as premised on a number of different elements drawn together from those two frames. That is, the battle of the horizontals versus the verticals went hand-in-hand with the development of the development of a new structure of beliefs out of ingredients of the old. The distinguishing features of participatory pluralism are the valorisation of diversity on the grounds of an opposition to dogma and a preference for many alternatives promoted by autonomous but intensely networked actors. The latter is valued for being both inherently more democratic and more efficacious.