

Reflections on the European Social Forum¹

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Broad dismissals and romantic celebrations of the European Social Forum (ESF) abound but don't suffice. I will review each before making a case for refraining from final judgements in favour of 'thick description'. The task is to better 'see' the processes of interaction operating within the ESF. What do participants do? How does the ESF help them to do this? How could the process be improved? Such an approach may be 'typically' academic but holds I will argue important political implications.

Dismissal

On many readings the ESF represents an unhappy alliance of disparate, often conflicting voices. In any one of the hundreds of seminars one could find Marxists, Social Democrats, liberal reformists, environmentalists, anarchists and exponents of radical dance to name a few. More importantly the critics argue, if the make up of the ESF is diverse, confusion is exacerbated by a lack of common aim. Subjects under consideration were strategies of resistance to capitalist globalisation, American imperialism and/or European imperialism, the politics of the European Union and the growing disquiet over liberalisation of public services. Beyond this many sought the global promotion of rights of women, children, the environment and labour in the face of neo-liberalism. With such a large mandate for discussion what possibility is there for broad and credible political positions to be taken?

Moreover, it is easy to identify conflicts. In opposition to the Development NGO's who seek to break protection of European and American agriculture Jose Bove and the French Confederation of Farmers lobby for the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy to create jobs in Europe.² In opposition to ATTAC's advocacy of the Tobin Tax to curb global financial speculation and raise revenues for development one delegate spoke of the *pointlessness* of such a venture because it merely "legitimises the right of investors to speculate against a currency, a country, the producers, the workers and its people".³ Indeed a dichotomy can be identified between those who seek to overthrow capitalist globalisation – the "anti-globalisation" protesters of populist discourse – and those who seek to reform globalisation in solidarity with its losers – the "alter-globalisation" reformers of the NGO's, the charities and some of the unions.

In this light, sentences that begin "the ESF is..." are largely redundant because they ignore the internal differences and conflicts over the legitimate aims and purposes of the

¹ This piece represents some broad reflections based upon the author's recent participation in the ESF held in Paris, November 2003.

² Bove does however oppose the subsidisation of exports to the South and his support for the arguably protectionist CAP should not be read outside the context of his broader critiques of the current trading system and the effects of the WTO on Southern agricultural producers. See <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/intarch/x-bove-june2002.html>

³ Seminar on the Tobin Tax by Bruno Jetin of ATTAC France and David Hillman of War on Want. The question came from a participant in the discussion.

forum. For every view of the ESF – *including the one presented here* - there are 49,999 others which all stake a legitimate claim to the truth about this new institution.

Celebration

To these critiques of the internal diversity and differences within the ESF the organisers and supporters respond “Just so!” It is just such social differences and indeed conflicts that have been systematically silenced in the increasingly technocratic processes of achieving political consensus within and between states. The rhetorical celebration of democracy by a broad swathe of politicians must – if it is to maintain any semblance of credibility - recognise and respond to the experiences of ordinary people leading ‘real’ lives. On this view the question is to what extent can the ESF and the social forum movement more generally democratise through public education (or “*sensibilisation*”)⁴ of the effects of globalisation and the range of responses to it? As the ESF website states:

“As in Porto Alegre and Florence, there must be an open gathering space where delegates from several organisations can get together for in-depth debate affirming that “another world is possible” and opposing “a process of capitalist globalisation, led by large multinationals and governments and international institutions for self-serving interests” (Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum). This process speeds up the concentration of wealth, gives rise to wars, economic, social and cultural exclusion and destruction of the environment. It restrains individual rights and freedoms, allowing the extreme-right to flourish. It then becomes a question of building, through confrontation and democratic debate, alternatives in the real world and formulating articulate concrete proposals for effective action so that fundamental human rights prevail over financial and commercial interests.”⁵

On this point of building an alternative democratic space some basic achievements can be celebrated. Firstly, over the four days of the conference the ESF attracted around 40 – 50 thousand delegates from all over Europe and the world. For the march on Saturday estimates range from 50-100 thousand. Secondly, activists from different countries were allowed the chance to meet and discuss common agendas and problems via the provision of simultaneous translation into four languages. And thirdly, concrete proposals like the Tobin Tax, reform of tax havens, reform of concentration of media capital, and positions on the UN’s Millenium development Goals were discussed.

Critics who would question: “Where is the statement of position?” “What is the direct political impact?” miss a central point which is that the groups meeting at the ESF maintain ongoing operations throughout the year. NGO’s like War on Want provide expert position papers to Gordon Brown, unions like the RMT represent the interests of their members through state level bargaining and EU level lobbying, and the Stop the

⁴ Coming from french “sensibilisation” is a term that means *to make sensitive to*. It was interesting to note that a number of delegates I spoke with use the same word in English.

⁵ Statement of the French organizing committee of the European Social Forum which can be accessed at <http://www.fse-esf.org/article567.html>

War Coalition have successfully organised protests against the War in Iraq and the subsequent occupation by US and allied troops.

In Favor of ‘Thick Description’

While dismissal/celebration of the ESF serves a purpose in opening up proceedings for both public and scholarly deliberation it may nevertheless suffer the criticism that: “It is too soon to judge”. On the one hand, those who would dismiss the ESF as too confused and internally conflicted to make a serious contribution in political debate are working on assumptions about what the ESF and the forum movement more generally *should be* – i.e. a unitary, bureaucratically effective, political lobby. In many cases these are the very criteria of political discourse that activists reject because of their propensity to silence different alternatives. On the other hand, those who would celebrate the ESF as a democratic space where thousands can come to hear and be heard could address the following (more commonly academic) questions:

1. Why do groups/individuals attend the ESF? What do they hope to achieve from it?
2. What is the potential power of the ESF – *or groups operating within the ESF* – and how is it used?
3. How democratic is the ESF? Could the organisation of future forums benefit from an internal voting procedure?⁶

Such questions may seem banal. However, they point to the need for a more reflexive position both on the ESF and from its organisers/participants. Granted no-one can organise a survey of the interests/attitudes of all 50,000 delegates but an ongoing record of the motivations of participating groups and perhaps some statement of what they feel they gained from it could provide necessary knowledge for the organisation of future forums. Likewise, a thicker description of the ways in which different organisations and individuals operate within the ESF – what kind of power they exert on decision making – could lead to greater awareness of the nature of the forum: its problems and potential.

Finally, any attempt to open up democratic space for popular activism must face up to the corollary question: How democratic is that space? This is not simply the response of a distant and sometimes over literal academy. It is also a pressing debate among activists. The dichotomy highlighted between anti- and alter-globalisation activists has led to some real political tensions within the ESF. The alter-globalists seek reforms of state and global institutions via lobbying tactics. A principal ingredient of successful lobbying is credibility with those who you seek to influence and such credibility is arguably undermined by a more radical wing of the ESF in the guise of Globalise Resistance and certain prominent intellectuals. Their success in mobilising millions to protest against the War in Iraq presents a major dilemma within the ESF – broad popular involvement with

⁶ Of the six seminars I attended delegates were not asked to vote for any alternatives or future strategic objectives. In part this is because the groups present are largely self-organising, but such pragmatism does rather ignore the democratic possibility of the broad constituency that attended the ESF. In fact future directions were actually debated/decided upon at the “European Social Movements Assembly” held *after* the ESF. See <http://www.opendemocracy.net/debates/article-6-91-1594.jsp>

radical/direct action vs. targeted lobbying backed by more moderate *sensibilising* activities in communities.

In this way the extension of democratic voting rights to delegates – on issues such as where to site the next forum, how to co-ordinate with elected politicians, or whether to produce ESF position papers – could touch on a difficult question for both factions: *who would win?* Such tensions are by no means a fundamental threat to the ESF *per se* because there is every reason to believe that both radical and moderate strategies of resistance can co-exist in the long run. But they do nevertheless point to important questions about the democratic nature, scope, and future direction of social forums.

Conclusion

The (brief) account given here offers but one way of regarding the political processes inherent to the ESF. It is neither a comprehensive nor a fixed statement. The ESF and the social forum movement more generally are by definition dynamic and sometimes amorphous affairs. Attempts to gain analytical purchase on their content must face up to this fact and the difficulties entailed for meaningful political research. In many ways then this is a call for ongoing qualitative research that seeks to better describe the actors and processes within the ESF. Only in this way can political judgements about the broader significance of the forums lay claim to veracity. Only then can we move beyond the myopia of analyses that either dismiss or celebrate the forum movement.