



The Forum and the Market: The Complexity of the Social and the Struggle for Democracy

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abstract

This paper starts from the observation that the very concept ‘social forum’ is to some extent predicated on a distinction between the market – the primary organisational model of neo-liberalism – and the forum, conceived as a different kind of model. It explores the different logics of social organisation implied by the competing concepts of the forum and the market, taking off from Arendt’s assertion that the transformation of the former into the latter was always the project of the tyrants of ancient Greece. It explores the complex political logics by which the collectivism and partial homogeneity required by any democratic situation have increasingly been undermined by the socio-economic processes of liberalisation and marketisation typical of post-modern capitalist societies. It goes on to explore different ways of understanding human collectivity in the light of the ‘democratic paradox’ by which individualism and egalitarianism are, at a certain level, logically incompatible. It ultimately takes issue with any attempt, such as that exhibited by Hardt and Negri, to resolve this dilemma by willing the social into a more ‘simplified’ state than that it has always hitherto existed in, but argues that by contrast the very strength of the social forum project has been its willingness to experiment with the creation of multiple and overlapping new sites of democratic representation and deliberation. It finally suggests that if this project is to have useful correlates in the UK context, it must be understood in relatively abstract terms, as the lack of a history of radical democratic invention in the UK renders any direct public critique of representative democracy unlikely to win popular support.

Two Forums?

The World Social Forum was initially launched in direct opposition to the World Economic Forum, which describes itself as “an independent international organization committed to improving the state of the world by engaging leaders in partnerships to shape global, regional and industry agendas”¹ and which is widely perceived as one of the key institutions through which the neo-liberal ‘Washington Consensus’ has been formulated and implemented. The World Social Forum charter describes the WSF as “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to

1 <http://www.weforum.org>

domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a society centred on the human person”.²

The semantics and symbolism of these contrasting self-definitions are worth considering. Firstly, the titles themselves: Economic Forum, Social Forum. The social is hereby contrasted with the economic, in a manner which might or might not be philosophically sustainable, depending on how those terms are used and understood. The question of whether there can be any form of sociality which is not constituted by certain kinds of economies is an intriguing one, although it is not exactly the question to be treated here. More important, I would suggest, is the contrast between the function of the two organisations described. The WSF’s self-description sounds like a description of a forum as the word has been understood for a very long time, the WEF’s does not. The latter makes the WEF sound like exactly what it is: a body for the implementation of common agendas by corporate and state institutions committed to the socio-political agendas of neo-liberalism, to which the WSF explicitly opposes itself. The real opposition which emerges here, then, is between the classical ideal of a forum as a democratic space and a space *for* democracy, and the neo-liberal model of elite technocratic governance in the service of global economic liberalisation.

The two key slogans of the movement associated with the WSF make much clearer what the stakes are here. The most famous and widely circulated, ‘Another World is Possible’, while positing no concrete alternative to neo-liberalism, conveys a brilliant understanding of the first necessary function of any counter-hegemonic discourse: to reject the ideological assertion that ‘there is no alternative’ to hegemonic discourses and practices. In this case, it is quite clear that it is the hegemony of neo-liberalism and the consequent erosion of democratic institutions and their capacities which is being rejected. The other great slogan of the movement is even more telling. Radical farmer Jose Bové’s slogan ‘*le monde n’est pas une marchandise*’ has come to be customarily translated into English as ‘the world is not for sale’, but would be more accurately (though far less evocatively) translated ‘the world is not a commodity’, and the etymology of the French *marchandise* links it directly to *marché*: market (Bové and Dufour, 2001). It is, the drive to commodify every aspect of social life, most vividly illustrated by the GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services) process, with its attempt to create as well as forcibly liberalise markets in the provision of essential services (Whitfield, 2001), which the World Social Forum and the movement associated with it oppose.

The forum which is a real forum opposes itself to the hegemony of the market. By contrast, the forum which is not really a forum is committed, above all else, to the substitution of a wholesale programme of marketisation implemented by means which bypass even the meagerly accountable channels of representative democracy. This dichotomy surely occasions some reflection on the differences between forums and markets, or between the forum and the market as abstract modes of social organization. In what follows I will offer some reflections on this topic, drawing particular attention to a number of issues which are not always comfortable for radical democrats to confront. Perhaps most importantly, I want to think through the implications of the

2 <http://www.wsfindia.org>

observation that liberalism – historically the cultural-political correlate of markets in all shapes and sizes (Braudel, 2001: 26) – and democracy are *not the same thing*. Democracy, whether we like this fact or not, does not necessarily produce tolerant, diverse polities and cultures. Why should it? The term ‘democracy’ does not denote and never has denoted any of these things: it refers to a principle of government which places popular sovereignty, the will of the majority, above all other sources of power and authority. This can just as well lead to fascism as any other political outcome. The problem of how to reconcile democracy with liberal values is not one which can ever be simply resolved, and it is one which becomes particularly stark at a historical moment when prevailing forms of social and cultural liberalization are bound up inextricably with the success of a particular form of post-Fordist capitalism which increasingly undermines the social bases for all established forms of institutional democracy (Crouch, 2004; Bauman, 2001). Ultimately it is this problem, and the relative strengths and weaknesses of the Social Forum project as a means to engage with it, which is the concern of this paper. In the process of considering these issues, I will also consider some classic and recent contributions to relevant philosophical debates and, finally, the relative implications for the social forum project in the UK as well as elsewhere.

The Forum and the Market

In Greece...it was the ever-frustrated ambition of all tyrants to discourage the citizens from worrying about public affairs, from idling their time away in unproductive *agoreuin* [public debate] and *politeuresthai* [civic affairs] and to transform the *agora* into an assemblage of shops, like the bazaars of oriental despotism (Arendt, 1958: 160).

The ancient Greek word *agora* is usually translated as ‘market-place’, this being the apparent original function of Athens’ central public space. However, from early on in the classical literature, the term is understood to designate the space in its role as an arena for political debate and public discussion over issues affecting the life of the whole city: a forum, in other words. Even so early in the imagination of the West and the history of political democracy, the public realm could be seen to have this dual aspect.

The great question facing us today is that of the extent to which these two aspects can be reconciled and how far they must come into conflict with each other. While the agents of the ‘Washington Consensus’ pursue the relentless dismantling of public services and any governmental institution which might stand in the way of full-blown marketisation, its opponents increasingly see themselves as defending the very principle of democracy. On the other hand, explicitly or implicitly, the neo-liberals argue that ancient methods of collective decision-making – from direct democracy in small communities to party politics and representative government – are no longer adequate to the fluid complexity of post-modern capitalism. In this context, they argue, the market is the only effective form which the public sphere can take. Rightly or wrongly, it is this version of reality – in which every space of collective discussion and consensus-seeking is transformed into a marketplace – which is being constructed violently and forcibly by the collusion of the G8 governments, transnational organisations such as the WTO, and the major corporations (Frank, 2001). Arendt’s evocation of ancient Greece perfectly

encapsulates the fundamental logic of this tyranny. While it is possible to understand the project of neo-liberalism in terms of its relentless hostility to any form of public space or public good whatsoever, it is perhaps more useful to see the great struggle of our times as a struggle between two models of public space: a struggle to realise or to prevent the transformation of every forum into a marketplace.

What is at stake here, in part, is a recognition of the fact that neo-liberalism does have a view of the public sphere and how it can best operate, and it is an idea which is impressive in its internal consistency. According to this model, the market is the most effective means for general decision-making in a complex and fluid social situation, and as far as possible market mechanisms should be introduced into any situation in which individual, collective or institutional decisions need to be taken, in particular over questions of resource allocation (Whitfield, 2001). The current manifestations of this view can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of liberal democracy, which has always regarded the protection of individual rights and property as the *sine qua non* – both the limit and the ground – of any desirable form of democracy. However, it can also be seen as the limit point of that tradition, the point at which the long-term compromise between liberalism and democracy comes unstuck.

Chantal Mouffe has recently drawn attention to the contemporary relevance of Carl Schmitt's analysis of liberal democracy (Mouffe, 2000: 36-57). Schmitt (later to become a fascist sympathiser, but nonetheless prescient in his analysis) argued that there was a long-term contradiction between liberalism, with its privileging of individual rights and personal freedom as the supreme politico-ethical goods, and democracy, which tends towards the constitution of a homogenous community of opinions and actors. One can certainly see why Schmitt, writing in the 1920s, would draw such a conclusion: it should never be forgotten that one of the first obvious results of the emergence of mass democracy in Europe was the rise of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes put in place by popular movements enjoying widespread popular support, at least in their initial stages. Simply to notice this fact is not necessarily to rehearse the old canard about all types of totalitarianism being the same, or the implicit assertion of much liberal ideology that all forms of collectivist politics tend towards such totalitarianism, but it is to try to discern the grain of truth in such views which makes them so pervasive and persuasive. There is a logical contradiction between the democratic will to constitute the *demos* as a singular consensual body capable of making definite decisions with the liberal desire to free the individual from the constraints of tradition, from unwanted interference by other individuals and, most importantly, from 'the tyranny of the majority'. Mouffe argues that the challenge of liberal democracy is precisely to hold these two sides of the liberal democratic equation – liberal individualism and democratic collectivism – in a creative tension, preventing either from collapsing or from coming to dominate the entire scene of democratic politics, via a process which can never be finally resolved or concluded (Mouffe, 2000).

It is useful to pay some attention to the precise social reasons as to why this task has become so difficult in recent times and to the extra ammunition which these factors give to the cause of anti-democratic liberalism. The characteristic features of post-modern, advanced capitalist societies are widely understood. A general complexification of social life accompanies a widespread weakening of social bonds and an erosion of

traditional structures and roles, resulting in the ‘individualisation’ of many areas of life and a general decline in the capacity of societies to achieve consensus over significant political and ethical issues, while in many cases obviating the requirement for them to do so by enabling them to accommodate a proliferating range of diverse lifestyles. What is not so often observed is the extent to which all of this tends to further the objectives of the liberal project while rendering those of any kind of democracy increasingly remote and tenuous. In a culture whose fundamental logic seems to be the proliferation of heterogeneity, even the temporary and delimited homogeneity of a democratic body is increasingly difficult to realise. The result is the widespread sense of a crisis in representative democracy, indicated in the developed world by plummeting voter turn-outs, by the demonstrable willingness and ability of governing elites to ignore the express opinions of their publics (on issues such as the invasion of Iraq or the privatisation of rail services in the UK) and by the consensus amongst all major parties and major corporations as to the limits and aims of macro-economic policy, a consensus which in many cases diverges from the majority view amongst the governed populations.

It is in this context that the ideologues of neo-liberalism make their boldest claims – implicit and explicit – as to the superiority of markets over any other system of collective decision-making. For example, the Blair government in the UK has made the introduction of market forces the central element of its programme of public-service reform. The insistence that offering users a choice of products and services, encouraging a degree of competition between different sections of the education or health service, is more important than raising general levels of investment, characterises the pronouncements and policy assumptions of the most resolutely neo-liberal wing of New Labour, while provoking enormous hostility from even the most moderately social democratic sections of the Labour party. Although they are rarely reckless enough to make their contempt for traditional democracy explicit, the promoters of this agenda implicitly argue that it is only through the introduction of markets that services can be made adequately accountable and adaptable to the needs of an increasingly diverse and complex user base. More conventionally democratic mechanisms of consultation and accountability, in particular those relying on input from locally elected representatives – for example, the community health councils and local education authorities – are largely dismissed and their traditional powers frequently curtailed (Gilbert, 2004).

Market (Post) Modernity

This victory of the market over other types of deliberative body should be understood in a global political context. In very real terms, the international hegemony of neo-liberalism is the direct result of the defeat of the Soviet system at the end of the 1980s. It is hard to imagine the WTO coming into existence in its present form or exercising anything like its current influence in a truly bi-polar or multi-polar world: the Soviet Union, notwithstanding its unquestionably appalling features, would have presented a major geo-political obstacle to the forced implementation of the ‘Washington Consensus’ and arguably did forestall its implementation outside of the English-speaking world up until its demise. Indeed, it is possible to understand post-modernity

simply as the historical condition in which capitalism has overcome all organised systemic resistance: the victory of one version of modernity and its associated notion of public space over another. If the USA is the capital of political and cultural liberalism (notwithstanding the marginalisation of that particular term in mainstream US political discourse) and the extreme example of a culture produced by unregulated market capitalism, then the USSR's command economy represented it diametric opposite.

Modernity was always a complex and contradictory phenomenon, but both negative and positive responses to it have tended to understand it in one of two aspects. On the one hand, modernity has been understood in terms of a general process of rationalisation, whereby the capacity of human beings to control their environment, themselves and each other has increased with the development of new technologies, new machines and new organisational techniques. Both optimistic believers in the reality of social progress and pessimistic critics of the regulation and bureaucratisation of modern societies (Weber, Foucault, Adorno, etc.) have understood this as the essential feature of modernity. This dimension of modernity might be understood in neutral terms as a general increase in the power of human beings to control their destinies, a power absolutely necessary to the achievement of modern democracy – which depends on the capacity of the community, embodied in the state, to take and effect major decisions – but also prone to abuses with potentially disastrous consequences. On the other hand, modernity has been understood as a condition of perpetual upheaval, that endless condition of change and changeability wherein 'all that is solid melts into air' in the formulation of Marx and Engels made famous by Marshall Berman (Berman, 1983). The most persuasive analysts in the latter tradition have tended to see this process as entirely coterminous with the deterritorialising progress of capitalism, whose fundamental logic of commodification extends to more and more areas of social life the processes of 'creative destruction', (Schumpeter, 1992) and 'separation' (Jameson, 1991) produces effects of detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1991) and dislocation (Laclau, 1990).

We might say, from a contemporary vantage point, that both views of modernity were correct, and that the history of modernity was precisely the history of capitalism *and* the history of attempts to use the new technologies which capitalism gave rise to in an effort to control the direction of social change, to replace the communities it destroyed with the new imagined communities of nation, class, and political party (cf. Hardt and Negri, 2000: 74).

According to this formulation, it is at precisely the point where the deterritorializing force of capitalism (Deleuze and Guattari, 1983: 224-48) overwhelms even the modern mechanisms of control and the social structures which underpinned the invented communities of modernity that post-modernity begins. At this moment, anxiety as to the consequences of modernisation and the uncertain and apparently uncontrollable consequences of social and technological change becomes the underlying fact of contemporary political discourse, the point at which we enter the era of 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), wherein it is the minimisation of the risks generated by the process of modernisation which becomes the primary objective of state politics, corporate strategy and personal life-management. This is the moment when, as Jameson puts it, nature disappears and the project of modernisation reaches its completion (Jameson, 1991: 9).

It is also the moment when the modern ideal of control – the idea that human beings, collectively or individually, might acquire full control over their physical, economic, social and cultural destinies – is abandoned. It is surely the failure of the Soviet experiment which marks this most decisively. The communist ideal was always a fully consensual society in which the community acted as one body, through the state, to direct its future according to a rational plan. The defeat of such Apollonian collectivism by the mercurial violence of capitalism clearly represents, on one level, a victory of the market over the forum, a defeat of the ideal of the public as the space of rational discussion and clear-minded decision-making by the idea of the *agora* as an assemblage of shops.

Democracy in America

This is certainly true to an extent, but such a simple schematisation is bound to generate problems, and in this case these problems can be themselves revealing. The eclipse of all other world powers by the US must focus the minds of radical democrats on the contradictions and multiplicities of the US itself, as both a cultural model and political tradition. Hardt and Negri, in both *Empire* and *Multitude*, give a good deal of attention to the history of American political theory and republican practice, praising the originality of its break with ‘European conceptions of sovereignty, which consigned political power to a transcendent realm and thus estranged and alienated the sources of power from society’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 164). US political culture is historically characterised not only by a commitment to the free market but also to the liberal principle of free speech and to the democratic ideal of collective self-government. In his classic account, *Democracy in America*, published in the 1830s, Alex de Tocqueville writes that

The citizen of the United States is taught from infancy to rely upon his own exertions in order to resist the evils and the difficulties of life; he looks upon the social authority with an eye of mistrust and anxiety, and he claims its assistance only when he is unable to do without it. This habit may be traced even in the schools, where the children in their games are wont to submit to rules which they have themselves established, and to punish misdemeanors which they have themselves defined. The same spirit pervades every act of social life. If a stoppage occurs in a thoroughfare and the circulation of vehicles is hindered, the neighbors immediately form themselves into a deliberative body; and this extemporaneous assembly gives rise to an executive power which remedies the inconvenience before anybody has thought of recurring to a pre-existing authority superior to that of the persons immediately concerned. If some public pleasure is concerned, an association is formed to give more splendor and regularity to the entertainment. Societies are formed to resist evils that are exclusively of a moral nature, as to diminish the vice of intemperance. In the United States associations are established to promote the public safety, commerce, industry, morality, and religion. There is no end which the human will despairs of attaining through the combined power of individuals united into a society.³

An interesting tension already animates this early account, between the individualism it describes as constitutive of the American personality and the tendency to *collective* self-organisation which it also posits as characteristically American. This illustrates nicely

3 http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/1_ch12.htm

the ‘democratic paradox’ described by Mouffe and by Schmitt (and memorably addressed by de Tocqueville himself) while demonstrating how deeply it organises the political traditions of the US. Clearly, American republican democracy emerged in part as a critique of the first, European, model of Enlightenment politics, which posited the ‘Enlightened despot’ and not the *demos* as the guarantor of individual liberty, and in the process raised the possibility that the market form – in which isolated individuals compete and trade – might not be the only possible form of modern socio-political organisation. While a common emphasis on the value of autonomy can be seen to animate both the collectivism and the individualism referred to in de Tocqueville’s account, there is nonetheless an implicit tension between these two elements, which problematises any understanding of the US as simply the model of a fully marketised society. At this moment of global American hegemony, it becomes more necessary than ever to emphasise the extent to which it is the objective of the neo-liberal project *in the US* precisely to promote such a vision and to marginalise all possible alternatives, while paying attention to what those alternatives are.

Such attention should leave us feeling both inspired and frightened, depending on exactly where, or when, it is focussed. While the long history of American democracy suggests that it is by no means inevitable that the US should be an agent of liberal marketisation against any form of democratisation, the current most powerful manifestation of that democratic tradition is not one which anyone on the left can be happy with. In many ways, the current neo-conservative reaction against political and cultural liberalism can be understood as a democratic response to the individualism of neo-liberal culture and its social consequences. There may be no element of economic democracy in the neo-con view of the good life, but there is a strong emphasis on the importance of shared values, shared culture, and the capacity of the community to act to enforce its views. Of course, this is wholly articulated to an aggressive free market, anti-redistributionist economic agenda, but the resulting formation nonetheless represents the only significant force opposed to liberal individualism in US politics and culture today. On the other hand, an ideal of inclusive and egalitarian democracy is clearly present as a key element of the American political tradition, and it is one which is routinely activated in local contexts, as opaque as they may often be to observers outside the U.S. As Mouffe demonstrates, the problem of how to reconcile liberal individualism with democracy is never going to be simply resolved (Mouffe, 2000). It is a problem which can be approached in any number of possible ways, by limiting both the democratic power of the collective and the personal autonomy of the individual in specific regards. The neo-con model is one way of achieving this. Indeed, and this is a crucial, sobering, strategic point to grasp, the neo-cons and their fundamentalist counterparts elsewhere in the world today represent the most powerful defenders of one key aspect of the ‘forum’ – the ideal of the community as collectively self-governing – against the deterritorializing power of the market.

Liberal Post-Democracy

By contrast, the model pursued by ‘Third Way’ governments such as Blair’s and Clinton’s can be understood as more radically liberal and conversely less democratic,

tending as far as it can towards the minimisation of democratic participation, reducing elections to plebiscites making minor adjustments to the personnel of technocratic elites while encouraging the development of a highly individualised and competitive culture. This is the political situation described by Colin Crouch as 'post-democracy' (Crouch, 2004), and alongside the various rising fundamentalisms (Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Zionist, and ethno-nationalist) the project to implement it represents the most widespread response to the crisis of liberal democracy, and that clearly most favoured by a majority amongst the elites of the developed world. Neither set of responses is particularly welcome from the perspective of more radically democratic and egalitarian political traditions, and we can see the range of new types of democratic engagement to have emerged from the 'new social movements', and in particular the ecological movement and Latin American struggles against neo-liberalism and authoritarian dictatorship, as attempts to renew these traditions in the post-modern context.

It is worth reflecting here, however, that this new radical movement and the agents of post-democratic neo-liberalism do share some core assumptions that are rejected by the 'forces of conservatism' (to use Blair's own notorious phrase) and even by the residual organs of social democracy. Both neo-liberals and radical democrats recognise that many social changes of the past 3 decades – the emancipation of women, the decolonisation of the world, the proliferation of lifestyle choices and the development of a global cosmopolitanism – as both welcome and irreversible. Both perspectives recognise that the institutions of representative democracy and the welfare state which grew up during the high phase of Fordist capitalism are no longer capable of representing or supporting populations as diverse and mobile as those which these social changes have created. Both recognise that any attempt to turn back the clock to the 1950s – be it the Europe of post-war social democratic hegemony or the America of Eisenhower and McCarthy – is doomed to failure.

In the face of these assumption, it is easy to see the appeal of the neo-liberal argument. Implicitly it offers a vision of a world in which both the real and formal freedom of individuals reaches historically unimagined levels. Freeing citizens even from the burden of real democratic participation – instead conferring more-or-less permanent power to administer the state and the economy on a range of hypothetically benign institutions hampered by only very limited degrees of accountability to the public (central banks, the European Union, government ministries) – it offers them unprecedented opportunities to explore all forms of consumption and private self-fulfilment. Increasingly, the relationship between citizens and all public agencies – from national governments down – is modelled on that between corporations and their customers or shareholders, a model which Anthony Barnett describes as 'Corporate populism' (Barnett, 2000). Against this model, radical democratic movements tend to promote an ideal of a deepened and more generally participatory form of democracy, as most famously manifested in the participatory budget-making process implemented by the Workers' Party government of Porto Alegre. It is an ideal which invariably involves some commitment to economic redistribution, if only to the extent that significant redistribution from the wealthiest to the rest of the population would be required if ordinary citizens even in the wealthy countries were to be enabled to cut down their working hours sufficiently to participate meaningfully in any substantial democratic process.

Both the complex negotiations around the Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum and the recent philosophical work of Hardt and Negri can be understood as attempts to re-imagine relationships between individuals and collectives in such a way as to make it possible to push forward liberalisation and democratisation across a range of social, political and cultural spheres, without collapsing either side of the democratic paradox. At the same time, it is worth noting that neo-liberal ideologues are themselves engaged in interesting and at times surprising attempts to reconcile their fundamental individualism with a perspective which allows for the effectiveness of some form of democracy. James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (2004) – a transatlantic bestseller aimed squarely at the middle-brow management theory market – presents a fascinating example of a neo-liberal *critique of individualism*. In a certain sense this should not come as a great surprise. The basic tenet of free-market ideology is the idea that markets can determine efficient and universally-beneficial distributions of resources more effectively than any other mechanism. In this, it has always appealed to a certain notion of collective intelligence: certainly, the political objective of liberal economics has always been to persuade governments of the superior intelligence of markets, compared to any conceivable policy-maker or small group thereof. Surowiecki makes an intriguing critique of the individualist cult of the celebrity CEO-as-superhero, which characterised US business culture in the 1980s and 1990s, and points to the well-known fact that virtually no stock market analyst ever actually manages to make investment decisions which are superior to those of the market in general over the course of a whole career (despite the fact that this is precisely and almost exclusively what they are paid to do).

However, Surowiecki's ideological commitment to neo-liberal individualism comes through in a number of telling ways. His book does not so much argue for the intelligence of groups in general as set out the conditions under which he thinks groups tends to make intelligent decisions. Unsurprisingly, these turn out to be exactly those conditions which enable them to behave as the ideal markets of liberal economic theory, composed entirely of rational, self-interested and bounded actors in possession of perfect information whose only interaction consists of buying and selling. Any departure from these norms is judged – generally on the basis of wholly anecdotal evidence – to render groups far less intelligent. Worst of all are those situations – from stock market bubbles to riots to ineffective committees – in which group members influence each other. Instances of such actual collective decision making are only cited where they appear to prove this general thesis, that “the more influence a group's members exert on each other, and the more personal contact they have with each other, the less likely it is that the group's decisions will be wise ones” (Surowiecki, 2004: 42). Most telling of all, Surowiecki does describe, a few pages away from the book's inconclusive final pages, experiments in deliberative democracy designed deliberately to raise the level of their participants' engagement with political questions, but pointedly fails to say anything at all about their results, merely offering the existence of those experiments and the fact that they have their critics as evidence that there is a debate to be had about what democracy is and how it should work. The silence speaks volumes: we can be fairly confident that if the experiments had found that collective sustained deliberation does not improve the quality of participants' opinions, as the book's general hypothesis maintains that it should not, we would have been told (Surowiecki, 2004: 259-62).

This passage constitutes the last part of Surowiecki's wholly confused and inconclusive section on the implications of his hypothesis for thinking about democracy, the persistent absence of reflections on this topic being a marked feature of the book. In particular, Surowiecki is full of praise for the capacity of 'decisions markets' – artificial trading environments in which participants speculate on possible decisions to specified problems as if they were shares on a stock market – but pays no attention at all to the fact that the most ancient and traditional form of democratic procedure – the secret ballot – seems to fulfil all of his stated criteria for effective group decision-making mechanisms, the most important criterion of which being the capacity to aggregate a set of individual positions which are stated simultaneously without being subject to direct influence from other group members (Surowiecki, 2004: 66-83). His vague assertion that democracy doesn't result in good decisions because the kinds of decisions made by governments are not of the same order of those made by markets, being long-term, open-ended and substantive in nature, in addition to being based on a highly tenuous distinction between 'cognition', 'coordination' and 'cooperation' problems, entirely overlooks the widespread use of referenda to decide specific issues in US local and state politics, this being one of the most obvious examples of the use of secret ballots to determine specific issues in a highly developed society today.

The Market vs. the Multitude

The ideal form of collectivity for Surowiecki is a diverse collection of autonomous agents who find a way to aggregate their views without actually communicating with each other. There could hardly be a more perfect description of the ideal liberal 'community', as the tradition of Anglo-American political philosophy has imagined it ever since Hobbes. Most specifically, this is an ideal of a collective which lacks any *horizontal* connections, in which mutual communication is simply absent from the collective. It is by contrast with this that the recent contributions of Hardt and Negri can be seen as particularly important. Their central concept of 'multitude' is precisely an attempt to name the collective agency which emerges in the communicative networks which constitute post-modern systems of communication and production to challenge 'imperial' power. Thus:

The fact is that we participate in a productive world made up of communication and social networks, interactive services, and common languages. Our economic and social reality is defined less by the material objects that are made and consumed than by co-produced services and relationships. Producing increasingly means constructing cooperation and communicative commonalities. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 302)

The problem we have to confront now is how concrete instances of class struggle can actually arise, and moreover how they can form a coherent programme of struggle, a constituent power adequate to the destruction of the enemy and the construction of a new society. The question is really how the body of the multitude can configure itself as a telos... The first aspect of the telos of the multitude has to do with the senses of language and communication. If communication has increasingly become the fabric of production, and if linguistic cooperation has increasingly become the structure of productive corporeality, then the control over linguistic sense and meaning becomes an ever more central issue for political struggle. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 404)

Since we have begun to realize (from the standpoint of the critique of political economy) how the singular figures of post-modern labour do not remain fragmented and dispersed but tend through communication and collaboration to converge toward a common social being, we must now immerse ourselves in this social being as in something that is at once both rich and miserable, full of productivity and suffering and yet devoid of form. This common social being is the powerful matrix that is central in the production and reproduction of contemporary society and has the potential to create a new, alternative society. (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 159)

We can see from these passages, along with their deployment of Marx's concept of 'general intellect' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 29, 364) to name the collective social intelligence which capitalism enables and thrives on that they have a radically different idea of collectivity to that regarded as 'intelligent' by Surowiecki. Whereas mutual communication is more-or-less wholly inimical to group intelligence as conceived by Surowiecki, for Hardt and Negri it is its very substance.

What we have here is two distinctly competing models of sociality, one stressing the irreducibility of atomised individuality and the other stressing the constitutive nature of those lateral connections which can exist between the members of a group or social network. In this, these two models can be seen as figuring the fundamental differences between the neo-liberal ideal of collectivity and that promoted by the movement for alternative globalisation, wherein a stress on the value of 'horizontal' relationships between members of groups, organisations, and forums has become one of the hallmarks of its political novelty, and one of the consistent features of its diverse constituent elements. A fear of the 'madness of crowds', a conviction that collectives wherein such lateral relationships obtain are necessarily dangerous, stupid, and violent, the idea of the unruly mob as the only form which any true collectivity can take, has been a feature of Western culture for several thousand years (McClelland, 1989). The conflict between this view and a more democratic one becomes urgent today as never before, as Hardt and Negri call on us to will the multitude into political existence while Surowiecki warns his readership of cautious investors that "the process by which a violent mob actually comes together seems curiously similar to the way in which a stock-market bubble works" (Surowiecki, 2004: 257), both identifying the communicative matrix of capitalism as a potentially dangerous site for the elaboration of unruly collectivities, but from diametrically opposed perspectives.

The Complexity of the Social

These opposed perspectives can be seen as differing responses to the increased complexity of post-modern social life. Where Hardt and Negri stress the democratic potential of the multiple communicative connections which now link people, places, and institutions, and the alternative globalisation movement dreams of a fuller and more participatory democracy emerging from these networks, neo-liberalism warns that only market mechanisms can cope adequately with the dynamic unpredictability of post-modernity, and that their efficient operation requires the implementation of a wholly individualised mode of sociality. It is worth reflecting at this stage that the complexity of social life is not a new phenomenon. Arendt, in fact, argues that a certain complexity

is inherent in all social life, constituting a field of relationality which can never be fully circumscribed either cognitively or institutionally.

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts in a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action within a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation...Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries. (Arendt, 1958: 190)

The implications of this passage are profound. While demonstrating that social life is inherently complex, it also makes clear that any attempt to map fully the relations which constitute it will fail. Any aspiration to render the social fully transparent to itself, depending as it does on the assumption that human relationality can be cognitively bounded and resolved in the singular moment of, for example, an absolute collective will, is undermined by this view. This might be thought to provide some ammunition for the view of post-modern neo-liberalism, which seeks to abandon democracy, with its search for consensual homogeneity, in favour of mechanisms which can cope with the complexity of the social. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, however, Arendt makes a categorical distinction between the forum and the market as modes of sociality, as well as denouncing any autarchic solution to the problem of social complexity, or any attempt to reduce its plurality and its inherent contingency (Arendt, 1958: 220-1). For Arendt, this contingent complexity is the condition of possibility of democracy itself, and the reduction of public space to a sphere of commodity exchange is no better than a form of tyranny.

If, as most commentators agree, post-modern capitalism intensifies the complexity of social life, then it similarly magnifies the relevance of these reflections. The emergence of the Social Forum project can be seen as the most substantial attempt yet to create new democratic forms which can rise to the challenge of this complexity without reducing the public to a sphere of atomisation and commodification. The stress which the WSF charter and the practices of the movement place on diversity of opinion and the right to dissent manifest just that commitment to plurality which Arendt’s perspective recommends.⁴ At the same time, the WSF charter’s prohibition on participation by political parties – the paradigmatic political form of modernity – can be understood as an attempt to prevent the concentration of power into the type of singular and homogenous formation which the enemies of plurality have sought to build at least since Hobbes dreamed of the Leviathan, the meta-subject, the community-as-individual.

4 http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4_2&cd_language=2

There is a problem here, however, with the social forum as a model of post-modern democracy. I don't propose to enter into the debate around the success or failure of the forums to constitute the basis for a global 'movement of movements' or to constitute sufficiently participatory democratic spaces. Both might or might not be judged significant failings, but given how far the forums have come in simply coming into existence, it is clearly too early to tell. Instead I want to address a specific problem raised by the general critique of representative democracy which seems to inform the prohibition on parties and much of the rhetoric and politics of the social forum movement (e.g. Borrits, 2002).

The resistance to any form of representation in favour of an ideal of participation springs in the main from an appreciation of the limits of representation under precisely the condition of social complexity which I have been discussing. It is easy to see how this comes about. The increasing complexity of contemporary culture creates a situation in which the social identities of individuals are less and less firmly tied to particular roles within homogenous 'imagined communities'. As such, it is less and less likely that given individuals will feel confident that any other can represent the complex multiplicity of their own unique social situation with any adequacy. This is a phenomenon which is likely to persist even in a context wherein Ernesto Laclau's important analysis of the logic of representation is fully understood. Laclau argues that, because every identity is incomplete, it can never be represented in a full and transparent way, as a singular political will to be channelled in its entirety by the 'empty vessel' of the representative. As such, in fact, the very act of representation itself always adds something to the identity which is being represented. This is a view fully in accordance with Arendt's understanding of the complex relationality of social action: the simple fact of being put into a relationship with a representative will alter, however slightly, the identity of the represented. More than this, every representation involves elevating particular elements of a subject's identity as the basis for representation: I am represented by my MP as a British citizen, and to some extent as a Labour voter, but not at all as a fan of house music and not, in theory, as a white man; I am represented by my trade union branch secretary as a union member and working university lecturer, not as a resident of Leytonstone or as a member of my particular family, etc. As such it is increasingly apparent today that every act of representation is at best partial, as well as effectively reconstituting the identity of the represented within the particular sphere of representation. To make this clearer: 50 years ago my identity as a working man might have been taken to define almost every aspect of my identity, allowing a stranger to predict with some accuracy my political views, by mode of dress, my lifestyle, etc., and as such I might have expected my Labour MP to thereby represent almost the totality of my subjectivity with some success. Today, this cannot apply, as the differences in lifestyle and values between working men are much greater than at that time. Laclau's political conclusion from such observations is that "we cannot escape the framework of the representative processes, and that democratic alternatives must be constructed that multiply the points from and around which representation operates rather than attempt to limit its scope and area of operation" (Laclau, 1996: 99).

At first glance, the social forum project may seem to be based on a naïve rejection of Laclau's position in favour of a simplistic belief in the power of self-representation to achieve a state of absolute transparency. However, I would suggest that this is not the

case, for three reasons. Firstly, the anti-representative bias of the social forum movement is largely concerned with the operation of democracy in singular contexts, in which all of the issues confronting human beings today are up for a discussion in a single space, and in which binding decisions are not to be taken. Social forums are not generally proposing themselves as substitutes for representative legislative bodies (yet – although who knows what the future holds?), but as deliberative spaces within a complex network of political institutions, constituencies and networks. *Within* the boundaries of such a forum, Laclau's call for the proliferation of democratic spaces has no logical purchase (only because the forum is a space defined by its singularity), and the simple fact of representation's constitutive impossibility must be confronted head on. The implicit logic of the social forum solution is to recognise that under post-modern conditions the problems which social complexity poses for any form of representation become so great that representative mechanisms cannot be expected to function with any degree of legitimacy, and so to conclude that the full participation of concrete subjects is the only mechanism – albeit still an imperfect one – able to cope with the complexity of individual identities and collective situations. There are objections to make to this, but we will let those pass for the moment, simply observing that there is nothing illogical in drawing this conclusion from Laclau's premises. The second observation to make is that the social forum movement's own proliferation of different thematic and regional forums to some extent manifests Laclau's own ideal solution of a proliferation of public spaces for democratic contestation. The third is that the participatory budget process in Porto Alegre – the process which to some extent gave birth to the WSF, and which is the best actual example of participatory democracy actually administering which the movement has produced – operates entirely according to a process of delegation and representation, proliferating rather than contracting sites of representation much as Laclau recommends (Wainwright, 2003).

The conclusion to be drawn here is that the social forum process should not be seen as one by which a new and simpler mode of sociality replaces the imperfect complexity of advanced liberal democracy, nor as a new version of the Soviet model of democracy, whereby a homogenous community becomes fully transparent to itself. Rather, it should be seen as a process by which the democratic ideal of human relationality is defended against both the conservative will to simplify the social through a process of cultural homogenisation (be it a moral crusade or wholesale ethnic cleansing) and the neo-liberal will to reduce the complex relationality of the social to a set of atomised individuals relating only through the mechanisms of the market. Now, it would be setting up straw men to suggest that anyone really ever has argued explicitly for the social forums, or even the workers' soviets, as agencies by which the a homogenous community could become fully transparent to itself. Rather, I wish merely to draw attention to the fact that some of the rhetoric around the alternative globalisation movement is frequently in danger of falling into this trap, in particular with its characteristic references to representation as an inherent evil, and in the notions of 'self-organisation' and 'constituent power' typical of writers influenced by complexity theory on the one hand and Italian Autonomism on the other (e.g. Escobar, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 2000). My point is that any notion of the community, organisation, network or multitude as simply self-constituting risks occluding precisely that dimension of boundless relationality which we have seen to be necessary to any effective democratic thought, especially in the context of complex post-modern societies. In practice, it risks avoiding the difficult

but necessary task of *proliferating* sites of political representation in the attempt to radicalise existing democratic institutions, as has happened in Porto Alegre, for the sake of a naïve understanding of what a ‘participative’ rather than a ‘representative’ democracy might actually look like.

This problem is at its clearest in Hardt and Negri’s own reflections on political representation as a ‘disjunctive synthesis’ which ‘simultaneously connects and cuts’ the represented and the representatives, the people and the state. After considering a series of strategies by which democracy can be rendered more and more genuinely participative in nature, by introducing such measures as the direct accountability of delegates, they conclude wistfully that “such attempts can undoubtedly improve our contemporary political situation but they can never succeed in realizing the promise of modern democracy, the rule of everyone by everyone. Each of these forms...brings us back to the fundamental dual nature of representation” (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 246).

What is this ‘rule of everyone by everyone’? What would it look like? Hardt and Negri cannot tell us. Instead they spend the remainder of the book cataloguing some of the well-known manifestations of the alternative globalisation movement – the Seattle events, the activities of the ‘White Overalls’ – and suggesting some reforms to make the UN and other international bodies...(wait for it)... genuinely *representative* of the global population. So having bemoaned the inadequacy of all forms of representation to their ideal of pure democracy, the only solution they can propose is to increase the power, scope and scale of representative institutions. Surely this combination of millenarian rhetoric and self-contradiction reveals that Hardt and Negri cannot get past the fact that they themselves announce as irreducible in all thinking of democracy to date: the fact that the logic of representation simply *is* ambivalent and complexifying and that it simply *is* at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of any ‘true’ democracy. They nonetheless assert the possibility of some ‘true’ and simpler democracy but cannot substantiate this assertion at even a hypothetical level. As such Hardt and Negri seem, like the conservatives, to be partly blinded by the fantasy that the social can be simplified, even though they cannot imagine what such a simplification would look like. What’s more, Hardt and Negri’s formulation here should make us very uncomfortable. It echoes precisely Hobbes’ famous assertion that the human ‘state of nature’ is a ‘war of all against all’, arguably the founding statement of bourgeois individualism. In simply reversing Hobbes’ formulation when proposing an ideal alternative, Hardt and Negri actually preserve its logic: both formulations equally deny the constitutive, contingent, irreducibly relational and boundless complexity of the social.

What is at stake here is a matter of some considerable philosophical and practical importance. Ultimately, Hardt and Negri seem to dream of a world in which the social is made simple: ‘the rule of everyone by everyone’. Arendt’s highly persuasive arguments suggest that the social cannot be made simple, that it is inherently complex in its boundless relationality, and that all attempts to stabilise it are tyrannical in nature. This is in fact very close to the thinking of Derrida, who from his earliest writings warned against the authoritarian implications of Western philosophy’s habitual desire to stabilise the undecidability and unpredictability which the radical relationality of language and all phenomenal experience produce (Derrida, 1976; 1978; 1982 etc.). We

have already seen how it is close to Laclau's thought, which is in turn directly influenced by Derrida's. In all cases, I would suggest that what is at stake here is a particular way of thinking the social, or rather, *sociality itself*, which does not dream of reducing its inherent complexity and contingency. According to this logic, sociality is a condition of irreducible complexity. As such a *social forum* should be understood as distinct from the classical model of the forum precisely in that it constitutes a space wherein this complexity can proliferate in unpredictable ways, unhindered (as far as possible) by hierarchy or by the ancient dream of simplifying the social, a dream which can only ever be realised in some version of that violence which founds the very idea of the private, the proper, the owned.

This is a crucial point. According to its logic, the *common*, which Hardt and Negri and many other thinkers of the alternative globalisation movement are committed to defending from the neo-liberal drive for privatisation and individualisation, must be understood as constituted by Arendt's boundless relationality. It must therefore be understood as destroyed (in being privatised) at exactly the points where that relationality is bounded. Boundaries are precisely what turn the commons into private property through the act of enclosure (Lindenschmidt, 2004).

This is not to promote some naïve ethic of pure deterritorialisation. Boundaries are also what make identities, communities, politics and democracy possible: no forum without a square, no democracy without a *demos*. But they are at the same time that which is always threatened by the destabilising force of sociality as such, and if the social forum has a characteristic feature it is its constitutive willingness to let that force work in it and on it as far as can be allowed. If another name for that force is 'Multitude', then by the same logic we would do well to modify Hardt and Negri's position and stop dreaming of a perfect forum wherein the Multitude becomes wholly present to itself, and accept that the ambivalent logic of representation is never going to be finally resolved. The alternative? Keep dreaming of the simplified social, and find ourselves on the same side as the other dreamers of that dream: the neo-cons and fundamentalists.

Does any of this matter, outside the world of academic political philosophy? I think it does, and I will offer one example as to why. Much of the theoretical and practical critique of representative democracy which informs the rhetoric of thinkers such as Hardt and Negri has come from national political traditions – Italy, Argentina, Brazil – wherein there is very little positive experience of representative democracy and a long history of its failure to function in any meaningful way. In a country like the UK, from where I write now, there is no such historical experience for proponents of more radical forms of democracy to draw on. Put very simply, the history of democratic struggles in Britain has been a history of struggles for the right to representation, and historically when that right has been won, it has tended to prove relatively effective at delivering social benefits to the newly victorious constituencies. Britain simply does not have the history of authoritarian rule or endemic corruption which characterises many other countries.

Now, I do not say this in order to sing my homeland's praises. In fact, it may be that at the current historical juncture this will prove a major obstacle to democratic progress in the UK. With a long history of political and economic liberalism and no historical

experience of participatory democracy to draw on (even amongst the most radical sections of the labour movement), the opportunities are many for neo-liberalism to remain hegemonic, articulating its presuppositions to long-established and still potent elements of the national culture. For example, the British tradition of personal liberty and religious freedom is easily articulated to a neo-liberal discourse of ‘small government’ and low public spending, even without the racist and authoritarian elements which characterised Thatcherite discourse in the 1980s. Under these circumstances, without even the democratic history of institutions such as the town meetings traditionally common in many parts of the USA, there is virtually no chance of bodies such as the local social forums which have sprung up in Italy and France proving successful. Under such circumstances, it is only through attempts to radicalise the existing institutions of representative democracy, and, through the attempt to substitute neo-liberal reforms for democratic reforms, by proliferating sites of representation within the public services, that we are likely to have any success at resisting neo-liberal hegemony. A vast range of sites across British society – schools, universities, Health Service institutions, media outlets, local government – are being progressively transformed from ‘forums’ into ‘markets’, a project legitimated by the claim that only market mechanisms can render them responsive and efficient in the context of post-modern capitalism, capable of meeting the needs of a diverse constituency which will never come together consensually in the forum. Against this claim, what is required is a constant effort of invention guided by the principles of the social forum, allowing the creativity inherent in the complex dynamic of the social to work and proliferating sites of representation and maximum participation, whether that means defending local councils, demanding more power for student representatives, or setting up non-commercial media outlets. Democracy has a future, and the forum can resist the market, but only where the boundlessness of human sociality is acknowledged and encouraged, and where the dream of its final simplification is abandoned once and for all.

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