



# Social Forums and their Margins: Networking Logics and the Cultural Politics of Autonomous Space<sup>\*</sup>

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## abstract

The World Social Forum (WSF) emerged in the wake of a global wave of protest against capitalism characterized, in part, by the expression of broader political ideals through network-based organizational forms. The WSF was thus conceived as an “open space” for exchanging ideas, resources, and information; promoting initiatives; and generating concrete alternatives. At the same time, many grassroots activists have criticized the forums for being organized in a top-down fashion, including political parties despite their formal prohibition, and favoring prominent intellectuals. Radicals thus face a continual dilemma: participate in the forums as a way to reach a broader public, or remain outside given their political differences? Based on my participation as activist and ethnographer with the (-ex) Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Barcelona and Peoples Global Action (PGA), this article explores the cultural politics of autonomous space at the margins of the world and regional social forums on three levels. Empirically, it provides an ethno-genealogy of the emergence, diffusion, and proliferation of the concept of autonomous space. Theoretically, it argues that the cultural politics of autonomous space express the broader networking logics and politics increasingly inscribed into emerging organizational architectures. Politically, it suggests that the proliferation of autonomous spaces represents a promising model for rethinking the Forum as an innovative network-based organizational form.

## Introduction

There were two different worlds in Porto Alegre, one slow moving, totally grassroots and self-managed, and another organized along completely different lines, two worlds coming together at different velocities. (Nuria, activist: Movement for Global Resistance)<sup>1</sup>

On the evening of October 17, 2004, the second day of the third European Social Forum (ESF) in London, 200 activists stormed the stage of an anti-Fascist plenary at London’s Alexander Palace, where Mayor Ken Livingstone had been scheduled to speak. After a brief scuffle, organizers from several radical groups that helped produce a series of

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\* I would like to thank the special editors of this issue and two anonymous external reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, my own. I am also grateful to my fellow activists, particularly from (-ex) MRG, without whom these reflections would not have been possible. Indeed, all knowledge production is a collective endeavour.

1 Personal Interview, conducted June 11, 2002.

autonomous spaces during the forum, including the Wombles, Indymedia, Yo Mango, and others, occupied the stage for roughly thirty minutes. Their intention was not to stop the plenary, but rather to publicly denounce what they perceived as the non-democratic, top-down way the Forum had been organized, including the exclusionary practices of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Mayor's Socialist Action faction (e.g. see Emma Dowling's and Laura Sullivan's pieces in this issue). To that end, activists read a statement released by Babels translators earlier in the week, including the following, "Perhaps our most important principle is that of self-organization... However, many opportunities of experimentation and innovation have been missed... resulting in the exclusion of many people, organizations, networks, groups, and even countries".<sup>2</sup>

As protesters left the Palace several were beaten and arrested by the London police. More conflict occurred the following day when anti-capitalists were harassed prior to the mass march, and as police dragged away two radical activists when they tried to access the podium to speak out during the final rally. An intense debate ensued in the London Guardian and forum listserves, Members of the SWP and the Mayor's allies denounced their critics as illegitimate, non-democratic, and even racist, while radicals defended their right to make their voices heard.

By staging such a highly visible direct action, grassroots activists succeeded in provoking a heated public debate, and thus bringing two interrelated conflicts within and around the Forum into full view. On the one hand, their critique reflected the long simmering contest inside the London organizing process pitting the self-ascribed 'horizontals', who support more open and participatory forms of organization, against their more traditional institutional counterparts, who they dub the 'verticals'.<sup>3</sup> Although particularly pronounced in London, this tension has long characterized the forum process, corresponding to an ongoing conflict between what I refer to as 'networking' and 'command' logics within the broader anti-corporate globalization movements from which the forums emerged (see below; Juris, 2004a).<sup>4</sup> Despite popular conceptions among radicals, the forums cannot be dismissed as attempts by mainstream political parties, NGOs, and the older left to co-opt grassroots movements. These traditional formations are certainly present, in Porto Alegre and elsewhere, and arguably to a greater degree than during earlier mass direct actions, yet so too are newer network-based movements. Indeed, horizontal networking logics are inscribed into the

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2 The entire statement can be downloaded from [www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/10/299292.html](http://www.indymedia.org.uk/en/2004/10/299292.html), retrieved on April 13, 2005.

3 For an insider analysis of this conflict, see Rodrigo Nunes "Territory and Deterritory: Inside and Outside the ESF 2004", [<http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=04/10/29/1410226&mode=nested&tid=14>], accessed 13 April 2005.

4 This tension reflects traditional debates between socialists and anarchists over the nature of organization within movements of the radical left dating back to at least the First International and the conflict between Marx and Bakunin. However, the rise of new digital technologies and emergence of a broader networking logic have reinforced anarchist-inspired ideas and practices with respect to decentralized coordination and directly democratic decision-making. In this sense, horizontal forms of organization are diffusing rapidly, even among many forces of the traditional left. At the same time, contemporary activists would do well to avoid the rancorous sectarianism of the past. Indeed, the social forums may be emerging as an interesting hybrid form, involving both horizontal and vertical elements.

organizational architectures of the forums themselves, perhaps most clearly expressed in the concept of 'open space' (Sen, 2004). The main point is that the forums, and the organizing processes surrounding them, are highly uneven, contradictory, and contested terrains.

On the other hand, by staging direct action protest at the London Forum, activists also expressed and physically embodied the conflictual relationship between radical anti-capitalists and the broader social forum process. Belying facile inside-outside dichotomies, diverse radical networks have alternatively participated within the forums, boycotted them entirely, or created autonomous spaces straddling the porous boundaries separating official and alternative events. Indeed, the social forums have largely eclipsed mass protests as the primary vehicles where diverse movement networks converge across urban space to make themselves visible, generate affective attachments, and communicate alternatives and critiques. Many radicals thus implicitly recognize that complete disengagement from the forums means exclusion from the broader movement field. By creating autonomous spaces at the margins of the Forum, radicals generate their own horizontal practices, while staying connected to mainstream currents and pressuring official spaces to live up to their expressed ideals. Moreover, this cultural politics of autonomous space reflects a broader networking logic, and demonstrates how contemporary ideological struggles are increasingly waged through battles over organizational process and form.

This article explores the cultural politics of autonomous space along three distinct levels. Empirically, it provides an ethno-genealogy of the emergence, diffusion, and proliferation of the concept of autonomous space.<sup>5</sup> Theoretically, it argues that the cultural politics of autonomous space express the broader networking logics and politics that increasingly are inscribed within emerging organizational architectures. Finally, on a political level, it suggests the proliferation of autonomous spaces represents a promising model for rethinking the Forum as an innovative network-based organizational form. In this sense, the Forum is best viewed not as a singular open space, but rather as a congeries of shifting, overlapping networked spaces that converge across a particular urban terrain during a specific point in time.

I am both an activist and ethnographer who has participated actively within the world and regional social forum process, as well as activist networks in the United States and Catalonia, including the (ex-) Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Barcelona and Peoples Global Action (PGA).<sup>6</sup> The analysis for this paper was based on activism and research carried out in Barcelona from June 2001 to September 2002, and participation in subsequent forums.<sup>7</sup> I have taken part in the organization and

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5 I use genealogy in the Foucauldian sense as a specific, situated history of the present rather than an overarching view from above. The ethno- side of the equation refers to the fact that my analysis is based on thick description rooted in my own particular experience as activist and ethnographer.

6 MRG-Catalonia ultimately 'self-dissolved' in January 2003 due to declining participation and a broader political statement against reproducing rigid structures in response to an official invitation to participate within the World Social Forum International Council.

7 I have also taken part in numerous mass direct actions in cities such as Seattle, Los Angeles, Prague, Barcelona, Genoa, Brussels, Seville, and Geneva.

implementation of diverse autonomous spaces during several World and European Social Forums, as well as early discussions where the concept was first debated with respect to the Forum. My research is practically engaged, based on the refusal to separate observation from participation, constituting what I call a 'militant ethnography' (Juris, 2004b). I feel this is the best way to generate useful analyses and interpretations, designed to make interventions into ongoing political, tactical, and strategic debates. I situate myself within more radical grassroots movement sectors precisely because they most clearly express an emerging networking logic, which is among my primary analytical *and* political concerns.

## Emerging Organizational Architectures

Facilitated by new information technologies, and inspired by earlier Zapatista solidarity activism and anti-Free Trade Campaigns, anti-corporate globalization movements have emerged through the rapid proliferation of decentralized network forms. New Social Movement (NSM) theorists have long argued that in contrast to the centralized, vertically integrated, working-class movements, newer feminist, ecological, and student movements are organized around flexible, dispersed, and horizontal networks (Cohen, 1984). Mario Diani (1995) defines social movements more generally as network formations. Similarly, borrowing terms used to describe kin networks and other elements of pre-modern social organization, anthropologists Gerlach and Hine (1970) argued years ago that social movements are decentralized, segmentary, and reticulate. However, by promoting peer-to-peer communication and allowing for communication across space in real time, new information technologies have significantly enhanced the most radically decentralized network configurations, facilitating transnational coordination and communication.

As I argue elsewhere (Juris, 2004a), contemporary social movement networks involve an emerging 'cultural logic of networking': entailing a series of broad guiding principles, shaped, perhaps counter-intuitively, by the logic of informational capitalism, that are internalized by activists, and generate concrete networking practices. These include; 1) forging horizontal ties and connections among diverse, autonomous elements; 2) the free and open circulation of information; 3) collaboration through decentralized coordination and consensus decision-making; and 4) self-directed networking.<sup>8</sup> Networking logics have given rise to what grassroots activists call a new way of doing politics. While the command-oriented logic of parties and unions is based on recruiting new members, building unified strategies, political representation, and the

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8 Manuel Castells identifies a "networking, decentred form of organization and intervention, characteristic of the new social movements, mirroring, and counteracting, the networking logic of domination in the information society" (1997: 362). My own work builds on this insight by further theorizing how networking logics shape, and are generated by, concrete networking practices. Indeed, contemporary anti-corporate globalization movements involve an increasing confluence among network technologies, organizational forms, and political norms, mediated by activist practice (Juris, 2004a). For an ethnographic account of how networking logics, practices, and politics play out in Barcelona and within transnational networks, such as PGA and the world and regional social forums, as well as how they are expressed via embodied action during mass protests, see Juris (2004b).

struggle for hegemony, network politics involve the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse movements and collectives converge around common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity. Rather than recruitment, the objective becomes horizontal expansion through articulating diverse movements within flexible structures that facilitate maximal coordination and communication.

At the same time, networking logics are never completely dominant, and always exist in dynamic tension with other competing logics, often giving rise to a complex 'cultural politics of networking' within particular spheres. This is precisely how we can best understand the conflict involving 'horizontals' and 'verticals' surrounding the London ESF, the former guided by an emerging networking logic and the latter more influenced by a traditional logic of command. This is not the first time such conflict has occurred. In fact, struggles between network-based movements and their traditional organizational counterparts are constitutive of the forum process itself, and the broader anti-corporate globalization movements from which the forums emerged. Indeed, similar dynamics were present during earlier mass mobilizations in Seattle or Genoa, and during Campaigns against the World Bank and European Union in Barcelona.

Horizontal networks should not be romanticized. Specific networks involve varying degrees of organizational hierarchy,<sup>9</sup> ranging from relatively horizontal relations within radical networks like PGA to more centralized processes, such as the world and regional social forums. Horizontal relations do not suggest the complete absence of hierarchy, but rather the lack of formal hierarchical designs. This does not necessarily prevent, and may even encourage, the formation of informal hierarchies (Freeman, 1973; cf. King, 2004). What activists increasingly call 'horizontalism' thus precisely involves an attempt to build collective processes while managing internal struggles through decentralized coordination, open participation, and organizational transparency rather than representative structures and centralized command. At the same time, the broadest convergence spaces (Routledge, 2004), including the social forums, involve a complex amalgam of diverse organizational forms.

Horizontalism is perhaps best understood as a guiding vision. Beyond social morphology, networks have more generally emerged as a broader cultural ideal, a model of and model for new forms of directly democratic politics at local, regional, and global scales. Moreover, such values are increasingly inscribed directly into emerging organizational architectures. Decentralized communication structures, such as PGA or the (ex-) MRG in Barcelona, may be more or less effective at coordinating grassroots struggles and initiatives, but even more importantly, they also physically manifest horizontal network ideals. Indeed, activists increasingly express utopian political imaginaries directly through concrete political, organizational, and technological practice. As Geert Lovink suggests, "Ideas that matter are hardwired into software and network architectures" (2002: 34). This is precisely why contemporary political and

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9 Specifically, diverse network formations include hierarchical 'circle' patterns, intermediate 'wheel' configurations, and the most decentralized 'all-channel' networks, which refer to those where every node is connected to every other (Kapferer, 1973). New digital technologies specifically enhance the latter.

ideological debates are so often coded as conflict over organizational process and form (cf. Juris, 2005).<sup>10</sup>

## Social Forums as Contested Terrains

According to official accounts, the idea for the World Social Forum (WSF) as a space for reflection and debate about alternatives to neoliberal globalization originated with Oded Grajew, who, together with Brazilian compatriot Francisco Whitaker, presented the proposal to Bernard Cassen, President of ATTAC-France (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) and Director of the *Le Monde Diplomatique*, in February 2000. Cassen liked the idea and suggested the Forum be held in Porto Alegre, given its location in the Global South, renowned model of participatory budgets, and the organizational resources provided by the ruling Workers Party (PT). Although following on the heels of the recent mass anti-corporate mobilizations in places like Seattle, Washington, D.C., and Prague, the WSF would specifically provide an opportunity to generate concrete alternatives to neoliberal globalization, coinciding with the annual World Economic Forum in Davos. The WSF built on previous convergence processes, including Zapatista Encounters in Chiapas and Spain, global PGA gatherings, U.N. civil society forums, and NGO-led counter-summit conferences organized by networks such as San Francisco-based International Forum on Globalization. The Brazilian Organizing Committee (CO) was soon formed, involving the main Brazilian Labor Federation (CUT), Landless Workers Movement (MST), and six smaller organizations.<sup>11</sup> The International Committee (IC) was created after the first WSF to oversee the global expansion of the process.

Although to a certain extent the WSF provided an opportunity for the traditional left, including many reformists, Marxists and Trotskyists, to regain their protagonism within an emerging global wave of resistance, radical network-based movements from Europe, North, and South America, also participated from the beginning. Moreover, the Charter of Principles, drafted after the initial WSF to provide guidelines for a permanent

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10 The concept 'coding' refers to how activists communicate their broader political visions, ideologies, and values about the world through expressions of and debates over organizational structure and process. Organizational form thus operates as a synecdoche, pointing to wider models for (re-)organizing social relations more generally. I am arguing that ideology is increasingly expressed through organizational practice and design as opposed to discourse, which contradicts the view that network-based movements are 'ideologically thin' (Bennett, 2003). Osterweil (2004b) makes a related claim about the expressly 'political' nature of social movement practices among radical activists within and around the forums, which involve a 'cultural-political' approach. For more on the relationship between cultural politics and the WSF, see the special edition of the *International Social Science Journal* 182: 'Explorations in Open Space: the World Social Forum and Cultures of Politics', edited by C. Kheragel and J. Sen (2004). While I fully agree with this general claim, I am identifying a much more specific mechanism through which contrasting ideas and values are expressed through conflict over organizational architectures.

11 These included the Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (ABONG), ATTAC-Brazil, Brazilian Justice & Peace Commission (CBJP), Brazilian Business Association for Citizenship (CIVES), the Brazilian Institute for Social and economic Studies (IBASE), and the Center for Global Justice (CJG).

process, reflected the network principles prevailing within the broader movement. The Forum is thus defined as “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective action”,<sup>12</sup> the Charter further states, “The meetings of the World Social Forum do not deliberate on behalf of the World Social Forum as a body... it does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants... nor does it constitute the only option for interrelation and action by the organizations and movements that participate in it”. This should be taken more as an ideal than actuality (cf. Waterman, 2002: 4), and perhaps more importantly, as a reflection of a much broader horizontal networking ethic. Indeed, as Jai Sen has consistently maintained, the WSF should be viewed as an open space:

The Forum... is not an organization or a movement, or a world federation, but a *space*- a non-directed space, from and within which movements and other civil initiatives of many kinds can meet, exchange views, and... take forward their work, locally, nationally, and globally.<sup>13</sup>

Again, this vision should be understood as a guiding ideal, not an empirical depiction, and is often contradicted in practice. For example, the hierarchical format of the main plenary sessions undermines a horizontal networking logic, while the prominent role of the organizing committees in determining program content belies the idea of non-directed space.<sup>14</sup> In addition, social movement assemblies at World and European Social Forums serve as de facto deliberative bodies (cf. Whitaker, 2004), while the Organizing and International Committees constitute arenas for power struggle. Furthermore the injunction against political parties is rendered meaningless by the close relationship between the forums and the Workers Party in Brazil, *Refundazione Comunista* in Italy, or the Labour Party in London. Still, the ideal of open space does represent the inscription of a broader network ideal within the Forums’ organizational architecture. At the same time, differently situated actors hold contrasting views of the forum, often setting horizontal network movements against their traditional organizational counterparts. Indeed, the Forum is a ‘hotly contested political space’ (Ponniah and Fisher, 2003), and nowhere has this been more evident than within the International Committee (IC).

This was made abundantly clear at an IC meeting in Barcelona in April 2002. Numerous grassroots groups were invited to attend as guest observers, but MRG had received an invitation to become an official member, presumably based on its reputation as an exemplar of the new radicalism. Since its organizational principles precluded taking part in this kind of representative structure, MRG decided to offer its delegate status to an open assembly of grassroots movements in Barcelona. The assembly drafted a statement criticizing the IC for its lack of transparency, which, given my command of English, I

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12 Cited from [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), accessed 13 April 2005.

13 Cited from <http://www.choike.org/PDFs/introduc.pdf>, accessed 13 April 2005.

14 This appears to be changing, however, as the fifth edition of the WSF in Porto Alegre moved away from an emphasis on large plenaries in favour of more self-organized spaces and workshops. Moreover, organizers sponsored a consultation process allowing participants from diverse movements, networks, and groups to participate in the process of selecting the broad thematic areas (see Nunes, this issue).

was entrusted to record, translate, and read aloud on April 17, the second day of the meeting.<sup>15</sup> The text included the following charge:

MRG is part of a new political culture involving network-based organizational forms, direct democracy, open participation, and direct action. A top-down process, involving a closed, non-transparent, non-democratic, and highly institutional central committee will never attract collectives and networks searching for a new way of doing politics.

The declaration was meant as a provocation, a kind of communicative direct action from within the heart of the IC. We expected a cold, if not downright hostile reception. Much to our surprise, however, many Council members were extremely supportive. A prominent European-based figure later suggested, “We have to figure out a way to include this new political culture despite their unique organizational form”.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, beyond an attempt to co-opt our movements, others recognized the validity of our critique, expressing support for a process based on openness, transparency, and diversity, which reflected a broader networking logic. In fact, the IC was internally divided. Some wanted to change the Charter of Principles, allowing for the development of collective strategies through the political leadership of the IC. Others were steadfastly opposed to this view, as one member argued, “In response to the radicalization of the right, we have to radicalize our process of diversity and participation. We are not a central committee!” Much like the broader forum, the IC was a contested space, not in terms of formal quotas of power, but rather over the underlying vision of the Forum. As we have seen, the same has also been true within the European process. The main point here is that the conflict between networking and command logics does not so much position the forum against its external critics, as constitute the very process itself, involving heated debates over the Forum’s organizational architecture among those espousing very different ideological perspectives.

## The Intergalactika Laboratory of Disobedience

After the unexpected success of the first WSF in Porto Alegre in 2001, several hundred Barcelona-based activists made the trip across the ocean for the second edition of the Forum, including dozens, like myself, from grassroots networks such as MRG. Although many of us were critical of the Forum given the key role played by traditional parties, unions, and NGOs, we also recognized it had become a major pole of attraction among movements, networks, and groups opposed to neo-liberal globalization. Beyond simply providing a space for debating and constructing alternatives, the Forum is also an opportunity for diverse networks to physically converge, generate affective ties, communicate alternative messages, and physically represent themselves to each other and the public. More than an arena for rational discourse, the WSF is also, and perhaps

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15 For a traditional social scientist, this kind of participation would constitute an unacceptable breach of normative objectivity, which is itself a politically normative construct and ideal. However, as a militant ethnographer, it allowed me to gain valuable first-hand knowledge of the complex logic of social interaction and micro-level cultural politics within the IC.

16 Unless otherwise specified, direct quotations were recorded during public meetings by the author on the date indicated within the text. Names have been omitted or changed to maintain anonymity.



primarily, a collective ritual where alternative social movement networks become embodied. Indeed, the innumerable self-organized workshops, cultural events, and constant flow of networking activity within the corridors, plazas, streets, and cafes around the Catholic University generated a rush of stimulation, excitement, and bewilderment. As an MRG-based colleague suggested after the Forum, “I didn’t learn anything new, but it was an amazing experience. You really felt part of a huge global movement (February 5, 2002)!” Indeed, since mass actions are increasingly difficult to organize given waning enthusiasm and growing repression, the Forum has become a key organizational platform for broader movement and identity building, which is why so many radicals feel obliged to engage the process.

Many of us from MRG helped organize and coordinate the *Intergalactika* Laboratory of Disobedience, which would become a prototypical model for future autonomous spaces at the forums, even if not originally conceived as such.<sup>17</sup> *Intergalactika* provided an informal, participatory forum of exchange among grassroots activists from Europe, South, and North America, many of whom felt ambivalent about participating in the larger institutional forum. Moreover, because it was situated in the International Youth Camp (see Nunes, this issue), many young Brazilian anarchists explicitly opposed to the official Forum could also take part. On the other hand, many of us moved fluidly between alternative and official spaces.

*Intergalactika* thus provided an arena for engaging in grassroots, participatory forms of political exchange, while also creatively and sometimes confrontationally intervening within the official Forum to make its contradictions visible. Indeed, the ideal of the Forum as open space was perhaps most fully expressed along the margins, particularly within the Youth Camp. Though relatively marginal, *Intergalactika* prefigured the strategy of organizing autonomous, yet connected spaces within the larger Forum, reflecting a networking strategy MRG had already employed in Barcelona, and would promote leading up to the European Social Forum. It was here where the broader movement’s horizontal networking logic was most clearly apparent.

For example, on February 4, 2002, the penultimate day of the Forum, *Intergalactika* sponsored an excellent discussion of strategies and tactics, one of the few sessions in Porto Alegre to address direct action. A large crowd assembled in a circle around a well-known activist from London, not far from a photo exhibition displaying action images from Buenos Aires, London, Milan, and Barcelona. This was in explicit contrast to the massive lecture halls housing the official plenaries. The speaker gave an inspirational talk about decentralization, diversity, and interdependence, arguing at one point, “Our movements are like an ecosystem: very fluid, always changing, working toward their own survival”. Reflecting the networking logic that had been muted, if not absent, within the larger Forum, he went on to enthusiastically exclaim, “I hate the slogan Another World is Possible – Many Other Worlds are Possible!”

*Intergalactika* also provided a space for planning and coordinating several creative direct actions targeting the official WSF. The idea was not to question the legitimacy of

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17 For an insightful description and analysis of the 2003 edition of the *Intergalactika* space at the Youth Camp in Porto Alegre, see Osterweil (2004a).

the Forum, but rather to criticize the perceived top-down manner in which it was organized. Indeed, the WSF represented an opportunity to reach masses of potential supporters, but its more institutional and reformist elements were viewed as undermining the self-organizing network logic within the broader movement. Immediately following the tactics and strategy discussion, dozens of us took the bus from the youth camp to the university for a 'guided tour' of the VIP room.<sup>18</sup> Soon after arriving, we joined the anarchist Samba band from Sao Paolo (dressed in black, rather than the usual pink we were accustomed to) and danced our way up to the second floor. We continued to march through crowds of surprised, yet delighted onlookers. When we burst into the VIP room, a heavy-set Brazilian with long Rastas jumped onto the counter, tossed plastic bottles of water to the crowd, and led us in an enthusiastic chant, "We are all VIPs! We are all VIPs!" We then gave ourselves, and a group of nervously amused NGO delegates, an impromptu bath. The Forum organizers were livid, and only the intervention of our well-connected allies spared us from a direct confrontation with the police. However, as a Brazilian OC member confided to us at the IC meeting in Barcelona later that spring, there would be no VIP room the following year.

## One Foot In, One Foot Out

These experiences at the WSF in Porto Alegre in January-February 2002, and at the IC meeting that spring in Barcelona had been particularly instructive. On the one hand, we learned the Forum could bring together tens of thousands of people from diverse movement networks, thereby creating a unique space for encounter and exchange while generating powerful global identities and affective attachments. On the other hand, although the Charter of Principles expressed an open networking logic, there were serious contradictions in practice with respect to grassroots participation, open access, and horizontal organization. However, it was also clear that critically engaging the Forum from the margins not only proved useful in terms of bringing our own projects forward, it allowed for the promotion of constructive change from within. Indeed, confounding clear boundaries between inside and outside, we recognized we had important allies within the very heart of the organizing process. As preparations began for the first European Social Forum the following November in Florence, we began debating among our colleagues in Barcelona and elsewhere how best to engage the process. This led to the first proposals about creating an autonomous space in Florence.

The notion of building an autonomous space 'separate, yet connected' actually came quite naturally to many in Barcelona. The concept itself expressed a horizontal networking logic, and the previous fall we had negotiated similar dynamics surrounding the mobilization against the Spanish Presidency of the European Union in Barcelona. Tensions at the local level actually began in Spring 2001 during the Campaign against the World Bank, a broad convergence space involving grassroots networks like MRG or the Citizens Network to Abolish the Foreign Debt (XCADE), critical elements of

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18 A group of radical French activists also organized a pie-throwing action to denounce the presence of French parliamentarians during an official press conference organized by the Socialist Party of France.

ATTAC, leftist parties, and unions, as well as more institutional sectors. Although some anti-capitalists participated in the Campaign, many militants, including radical squatters, had formed their own autonomous platform.

The World Bank Campaign involved a great deal of conflict between radical grassroots networks and their institutional counterparts. Even when the latter decided to found their own organization following the June mobilization,<sup>19</sup> debates continued to rage between the traditional Marxists, who wanted the Campaign to continue, and many from XCADE and MRG who preferred to dissolve the Campaign, at least until the next mobilization against the EU. Given this ongoing struggle between networking and command logics, some within MRG proposed to forge a large autonomous space the next time together with radical militants and squatters, which could then coordinate with the broader Campaign against the EU.<sup>20</sup> An MRG-based colleague sent an e-mail to the Campaign listserv explaining the reasons for the proposal to create an autonomous space, which included the following:

We can't force each other to integrate within organizational forms we don't share. The best thing would be to organize within different spaces according to our own traditions, but coordinate in order to complement one another in daily practice. Separating does not necessarily mean dividing. On the contrary, it means moving forward in order to take advantage of both the newer and older experiences and organizational ideas, learning from the errors of the past, toward a new form of understanding collective action. It's about separating in order to work more effectively together.<sup>21</sup>

When discussions began about whether to participate in the Florence ESF it was thus a relatively simple step to apply this networking logic to a proposal for building an autonomous space there. I am not suggesting MRG was the first or only group to formulate these ideas. In fact, they seemed to emerge simultaneously from many different directions. Rather, I want to illustrate how at least one version of the idea emerged, and further, how networking logics and politics at local, regional, and global scales are often mutually reinforcing.

The Strasbourg No Border Camp in July 2002 provided an initial opportunity to debate the various proposals for building an autonomous space at the ESF in Florence, leading to the now famous formulation: 'one foot in, one foot out'. The debate around the ESF on July 26, 2002 drew significant interest, as dozens of grassroots activists from the Italian *Disobedientes*, Cobas, and PGA-inspired activists around Europe came together to share ideas and experiences. An activist from Berlin began with a brief outline of the situation, "People say everything is open, but a small group makes all the decisions. There are mostly Trotskyists, trade unionists, political parties, and ATTAC, but very

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19 The institutional sectors created a more traditional membership organization, which they confusingly, and perhaps manipulatively, called the 'Barcelona Social Forum'.

20 Because the institutional sectors ultimately pulled out themselves, militant anti-capitalists and squatters decided to participate within the Campaign against the EU. Rather than create a separate space, different networks thus divided themselves up internally around distinct commissions and logistical tasks.

21 Cited from a document called, 'Opening the Debate after the Statewide Meeting in Zaragoza: Separating in order to Work Together More Effectively', posted on the bcn2001@yahoo.com listserv on December 4, 2001.

few from networks like PGA or the broader movement. How do we bring radical ideas and proposals without becoming part of the power structure?"

Several argued that we should participate, but organize things differently, highlighting a vision of self-managed social change from below. Many felt it would be better to stay outside, as one activist pointed out, "Participating is a way of legitimating their attempt to make the ESF *the* space of the anti-globalization movement!" Others thought it was more important to intervene, as the Berliner suggested, "In Porto Alegre many people never saw the youth camp; there was not enough interaction. We should have one foot outside, but also another inside". Her position was widely shared, as an Andalusia-based squatter added, "We should organize a different space, beyond, but not against the ESF, although we should also participate within". After a long discussion, the group ultimately decided to release the following statement:

We agreed to launch the idea of constituting a concrete space for those of us who traditionally work with structures that are decentralized, horizontal, assembly-based, and anti-authoritarian; a space that would maintain its autonomy with respect to the "official" space of the ESF, but at the same time remain connected... This would mean... having one foot outside and another inside the ESF... This autonomous space should visibilize the diversity of the movement of movements, but also our irreconcilable differences with respect to models attempting to reform capitalism. The space should not only incorporate differences with the program of the ESF in terms of "contents," but also in terms of the organizational model and forms of political action.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, ideological differences were largely coded as disagreement over organizational process and form.

The European PGA conference in Leiden provided an opportunity for further defining the autonomous space in Florence during a session on September 1, 2002. Some were still reticent about participating, but as one activist argued, "The ESF is a perfect moment of visibility. We are a ghetto here in Leiden; there is very little media coverage". At the same time, there was growing support for a space completely outside the forum. Specific groups could make their own decision about whether to take part within. Others were concerned about being integrated into a social democratic project, leading to consensus about the importance of clearly 'legible' actions to communicate the underlying political distinctions. Indeed, such complex networking politics would involve a delicate balance: "The challenge... consists of making sure, on the one hand, the initiatives are not co-opted; and, on the other hand, avoiding... isolation".<sup>23</sup> We ultimately decided to recast the autonomous space outside the forum, which would allow individual activists and groups to make their own decision about where to position their own feet with respect to the boundaries dividing official and autonomous spheres.

Specific actions and contents were also discussed, and this is where major disagreements emerged. For example, as someone from the *Disobedientes* suggested, "We should organize a series of actions around three issues: global war, labour, and new

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22 Cited from [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/space/index.html](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/space/index.html), accessed 13 April 2005.

23 Cited from [http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/pgaeurope/leiden/autonomous\\_space.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/pgaeurope/leiden/autonomous_space.htm), accessed 13 April 2005.

social subjects”. Reflecting an open networking logic, and subtle critique of the *Disobedientes*, an activist from Indymedia-Italy countered that process was equally important, arguing that, “An autonomous space should be defined by open access. We have to create spaces and tools that allow people to come together”. Disagreements over whether spaces should be more or less open or directed are not only found within the official forum process; they are also present along its margins. What began as a single project thus ultimately broke down into parallel autonomous initiatives in Florence, including Cobas Thematic Squares, the *Disobedientes* ‘No Work, No Shop’ space, and Eur@ction Hub.

## Proliferation of Autonomous Spaces

The official ESF in Florence surpassed all expectations, involving 60,000 activists from around Europe in debates and discussions, and drawing nearly 1 million to the demonstration against the war in Iraq on November 9, 2002. In addition, many more activists passed through the autonomous initiatives mentioned above, as well as a feminist space called Next Generation (cf. Waterman, 2002). Although criticized for being relatively marginal, the Eur@action Hub, in particular, provided an open space for sharing skills, ideas, and resources; building new subjects; exploring issues related to information, migration, and self-management; and experimenting with new peer-to-peer communication technologies. The project thus manifested a particularly clear horizontal networking logic within its organizational architecture, emphasizing process and form over content. Above all, it was designed to facilitate interconnections, inside the Hub and between the Hub and other spaces around the Forum, as the flyer explained:

Hub is... a connector. It is not a space already marked by pre-established content. Anyone can contribute proposals designed specifically for the Hub, but ‘also connect’ to this space others that might take place in other places or moments in Florence. Hub is also an interconnection tool: for bringing together proposals or ideas that have been dispersed or undeveloped until now, which might acquire greater complexity.<sup>24</sup>

After Florence, the autonomous space model caught on, becoming standard practice at subsequent events. For example, at the 2003 WSF in Porto Alegre, grassroots activists organized several overlapping parallel spaces, including a follow-up Hub project, the second edition of the *Intergalactika* project, and a forum organized by Z Magazine called ‘Life After Capitalism’. In addition, Brazilian activists hosted a PGA-inspired gathering involving activists from Europe, South, and North America. Although emerging from distinct political contexts and histories, autonomous spaces at the 2004 WSF in Mumbai were even larger, particularly since grassroots movements in India were extremely critical of the institutional NGOs leading the process. These included: Mumbai Resistance (an initiative of Maoist and Gandhian peasant movements), the Peoples Movements Encounter II (led by the Federation of Agricultural Workers and

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24 See [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/space/hubproject.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/space/hubproject.htm), accessed 13 April 2005.

Marginal Farmers Unions), and the International Youth Camp.<sup>25</sup> PGA also held another parallel session, involving mostly Asian and European movements.<sup>26</sup> Finally, activists organized various parallel initiatives at the second ESF in Paris in November 2003, including an autonomous media center, Metallo medialab, and a highly successful direct action space called GLAD (Space Towards the Globalization of Disobedient Struggles and Actions).

At the same time, many anti-authoritarians have refused to take part in the forum process entirely. With respect to the ESF, Paul Treanor, a Dutch anti-authoritarian, has thus argued that, “The organizers want to establish themselves as ‘the leaders of the European social movements’. They want to become a negotiating partner of the EU (2002)”. As pointed out above, however, the forum process is much more complex, contradictory, and contested, involving anti-capitalists as well as reformers, libertarians as well as vanguardists. On the other hand, many grassroots anti-capitalists recognize the strategic importance of the social forums, as Pablo Ortellado, a Brazilian activist has argued, “The social forums are attracting a wide range of people, many of whom we really want to bring to our part of the movement. It’s not enough to sit and criticize the Forum... We should somehow set our own events and attract those people (2003)”. In a widely circulated essay, Linden Farrer thus comes out in support of a ‘contamination’ strategy:

The best way of working with the ESF [is] being constructive in criticism, attempting to change the organization from inside and outside, preventing liberals from tending towards their self-destructive habits of strengthening existing structures of government. Rather than abolishing the ESF because it had a shaky- but ultimately successful- start, we should work to make the ESF a truly revolutionary force (2002).<sup>27</sup>

Many grassroots radicals would agree, and if the most recent ESF provides an indication, in ever increasing numbers. Indeed, the cultural politics of autonomous space

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25 The largest and most well known alternative space at the WSF in 2004 was Mumbai Resistance (MR), which involved a coalition of 300 political movements and organizations, including Lohiaites, Marxists, Leninists, Maoists, and Sarvodaya workers. MR, which criticized the main forum for its funding practices and its unwillingness to reject capitalism, was initiated at the International Thessaloniki Resistance Camp in June 2003. It took concrete form when the Coordinating Group of the International League of Peoples’ Struggles decided in July 2003 to organize a parallel event during the 2004 WSF. The social composition and political visions characterizing such spaces in Mumbai differed from the largely young, middle class, and urban-based activists (with the exception of Cobas) behind previous alternative spaces at the forums. Previous spaces also were more inspired by a left libertarian vision and a commitment to the politics of autonomy in the strict ideological sense (I want to thank Michal Osterweil for reminding me of this point, personal correspondence). In other words, autonomy can refer to both a specific politics and a structural relationship. In this sense, while recognizing these important differences, I continue to use the term ‘autonomous space’ to characterize MR and other alternative initiatives in Mumbai to signal their structural relationship vis-à-vis the main forum, which captures a key aspect of the emerging networking logic explored here: decentralized coordination among diverse, (structurally) autonomous elements.

26 See Olivier de Marcellus, ‘Divisions and Missed Opportunities in Bombay’, posted to the pga@lists.riseup.net list on 12 February 2004.

27 For a subtle critique of the contamination strategy, and an argument in favor of anti-authoritarians developing their own grassroots networks, if not abandoning the Forums entirely, see Grubacic (2003).

perhaps reached their fullest expression at the European Social Forum in London in October 2004.

## European Social Forum- London 2004

As conflict between horizontals and verticals around the London ESF process continued to escalate, numerous activists and groups, some against the forum process and others holding out hope for reform, decided to organize and coordinate a series of grassroots autonomous spaces. Despite important differences with respect to ideology and position vis-à-vis the official Forum, the various alternative projects were united in their commitment to horizontal, directly democratic processes and forms. As a Beyond ESF spokesperson explained during the opening plenary presenting the autonomous spaces at Middlesex University on October 13, 2004, “We have spent six months defining ourselves in opposition to the ESF, but our way of showing opposition is by organizing ourselves in a different way”. Delegates from other spaces were not so much against the Forum itself, but the perceived heavy-handed tactics of the SWP and Socialist Action. As a main organizer of Life Despite Capitalism explained, “To fight the top-down, vertical culture we created the horizontals based on our own culture of openness”. In many ways, the autonomous spaces represented an affirmation of the open space ideal expressed within the Forum charter, as their collective declaration clearly articulates:

We want to create open spaces for networking, exchanges, celebration, thinking, and action. We believe our ways of organizing and acting should reflect our political visions, and are united in standing for grassroots self-organization, horizontality, for diversity and inclusion, for direct democracy, collective decision making based upon consensus.<sup>28</sup>

The autonomous spaces in London were ultimately more numerous, well attended, and perhaps more fruitful, in terms of generating synergies, cross-fertilization, and debate, than at any previous Forum. Thousands of grassroots activists engaged in a dizzying array of alternative projects, direct actions, and initiatives. Although it was impossible to be everywhere at once, particularly given the long distances between venues, I attended many of the alternative events and workshops, which included:

### 1. *Beyond ESF* – October 13 to 17, Middlesex University

Beyond ESF was an alternative gathering of anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist struggles, involving hundreds of workshops, discussions, and events organized around five themes: Autonomy and Struggle, No Borders, Repression and Social Control, Zapatismo, and Precarity/Casualization. In addition, activists also used the space to plan and coordinate ongoing activities within grassroots formations like PGA, No Border, or the Dissent Network, which organized a daylong workshop to prepare for the July actions against the G8 in Scotland. Perhaps even more important were the informal networking opportunities around the bar, canteen, vegan kitchen, and hallways.

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28 Cited from the free paper ‘Autonomous Spaces’ circulated around the London ESF. For additional information, see [www.altspaces.net](http://www.altspaces.net).

2. *Radical Theory Forum* – October 14, 491 Gallery

Radical Theory involved a series of workshops and discussions among activists and committed intellectuals exploring how theory can inform action. Specific themes included: feminism, post-Marxism, popular education, complexity theory, as well as the politics and organization of the European Social Forum, among many others. The conference was followed by a party with film, art, music, and spoken word.

3. *Indymedia Centre* – October 14 to 17, Camden Centre

The Indymedia Centre provided a space for independent reporting and multi-media production around the ESF and autonomous spaces, including numerous protests and creative interventions. It also housed a bar and public access computing facility, as well as evening cultural events. In addition, the Camden Centre also housed a four-day conference around communication rights and tactical media production.

4. *The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination* – October 14 to 17, Rampart Creative Centre

The Laboratory provided a self-organized space for creative intervention and exchange, where participants shared ideas and tactics through a series of workshops, discussions, and direct action events throughout the city. Some of the specific actions included: Corporate Olympics, the 5<sup>th</sup> biannual March for Capitalism, Yomango collective shoplifts and Tube parties, and Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army recruitments and trainings.

5. *Mobile Carnival Forum* – October 14 to 17, Rampart and throughout the city

The Carnival Forum was housed in the London to Baghdad bio-diesel double-decker bus, which circulated from site to site around the Forum and other parts of the city. The project specifically used political theatre and music to generate discussions and workshops around various issues, including peace, democracy, and neo-liberalism.

6. *Solidarity Village* – October 13 to 17, Conway Hall and London School of Economics

The Solidarity Village involved a series of projects and initiatives that specifically focused on alternative economies. Concrete spaces included the Land Café, Well Being Space, Art Space for Kids, Local Social Forums Area, the Commons Internet Café, and SUSTAIN! which included presentations, leaflets and information stalls.

7. *Women's Open Day* – October 14, King's Cross Methodist Church

This one-day gathering involved speak-outs, food, video screenings, childcare, and information stalls focusing on the non-remunerated survival work carried



out by women around the world, including breastfeeding, subsistence farming, caring, volunteering, and fighting for justice.

#### 8. *Life Despite Capitalism* – October 16 and 17, London School of Economics

Life Despite Capitalism was a two-day forum for collective debate and reflection around diverse issues and struggles involving the idea of the ‘Commons’. The goal was to begin to generate a new discourse and analysis, including a critique of capitalism and the articulation of alternative values and practices that represent what we are fighting for. These alternatives do not lie in the distant future when capitalism has been abolished, but rather exist here and now. Two series of workshops explored the idea of the Commons in diverse spheres: cyberspace, the workplace, public services, free movement, and autonomous spaces, as well as several cross-cutting themes, including power, networks, democracies, creative excesses, and the commons more generally.

Throughout the London Forum I was thus able to move fluidly across the city’s urban terrain from one space to another, and between the autonomous spaces and the official forum at Alexander Palace and Bloomsbury. Boundaries were diffuse, shifting, and permeable, as spaces literally flowed through and across one another. Indeed, the movement’s broader networking logic was physically expressed through the division of urban space, allowing diverse forms of organization to converge in time, without imposing one form over another. This does not mean there was an absence of interaction and struggle, as illustrated, for example, by the highly public direct action against London Mayor Ken Livingstone. However, conflicts were largely localized in space and time, and were, in fact, productive: making underlying tensions visible, generating collective debate, and pressuring the Forum to abide by its expressed guidelines and ideals. The autonomous spaces thus allowed grassroots radicals to engage in their own alternative forms of political, social, and cultural production, while moving out from their radical ghettos to tactically intervene within the broader forum, and throughout the entire city as well.

### **Conclusion: From Open to Networked Space**

At this point, I hope to have accomplished my first two objectives. On the one hand, I have traced the emergence, diffusion, and implementation of the autonomous space concept with respect to the social forums from my situated experience. I have thus considered complex local networking politics in Barcelona as well as my participation in *Intergalactika*, the IC, and the debates over the “one foot in, one foot out” principle. Finally, I discussed the proliferation of autonomous spaces at recent World and European Social Forums. On the other hand, this paper has also explored the cultural politics of autonomous space from a more theoretical perspective. In this sense, I have argued that building autonomous spaces reflects the underlying networking logic within anti-corporate globalization movements, involving the creation of horizontal ties and connections among distinct elements or nodes across diversity and difference. At the same time, as we have seen, networking logics are never completely dominant, and are

always challenged by competing logics, generating complex networking politics within specific spheres. Given that such political logics are increasingly inscribed directly into organizational architectures, it should come as no surprise that ideological debates have often been coded as struggles over process and form, particularly within and around the social forums. But what does this mean politically? How does the preceding analysis generate a new vision for the social forum process?

If activists have learned anything over the past few years it is that our movements, networks, and groups are exceedingly diverse. Conflicts over political vision, ideology, and organizational form are simply unavoidable – within and between sectors. Indeed, they are constitutive of the broader convergence processes that characterize mass-based movements. At the same time, given such high levels of diversity, it may be impossible to work effectively together within a single space. This does not mean abandoning the Forum, as many radicals and anti-authoritarians would suggest. But neither does it imply a mere strategy of contamination. Rather, it suggests radicalizing our horizontal networking logic by not only continuing to build autonomous spaces within and around the forums, but also by working to inscribe the politics of autonomous space within the very organizational architecture of the Forum itself.

In this sense, the proliferation of autonomous spaces at the London ESF ought not to be viewed as an aberration due to the extremely bitter conflict between horizontals and verticals. Instead, the successful organization of so many interesting, diverse, and often disjunctive spaces represents a model for re-conceptualizing the Forums entirely. Interestingly, the most recent WSF in Porto Alegre in January/February 2005 moved in this direction by shifting from a central site at the Catholic University toward a networked terrain involving diverse thematic areas. Moreover, the youth camp and the various projects housed there, including a new instantiation of *Intergalactika* called the *Caracol*, were geographically situated at the centre of the Forum rather than along its margins. At the same time, however, there is also a danger this kind of shift may represent the cooptation of difference, as opposed to its full expression.

In this sense, rather than view of the Forum as a singular open space, even if networked internally, it should be conceived in the plural as a complex pattern of politically differentiated, yet interlocking networked spaces, open not only within, but also with respect to one another. Boundaries are always diffuse, mobile, and permeable. Despite the contradictions noted above, openness and horizontality are important ideals, but they should be extended outward, reflecting the often conflictual interactions among different spaces and the relationships between them. Indeed, radical networking logics explode any rigid divisions between inside and outside. Such a view recognizes that the Forum is always a work in progress, evolving as diverse networks and groups interact, alternatively connecting, disconnecting, and recombining.

By re-conceiving the Forum as a horizontal network of autonomous spaces that converge across an urban terrain at a given point in time, we would thus be reproducing the organizational logic that allowed activists to successfully organize mass direct actions against multilateral institutions in places like Prague, Quebec, and Genoa. In each of these cities, activists divided up the urban terrain to facilitate and coordinate among diverse forms of political expression. Indeed, diversity of tactics represents the

manifestation of a horizontal networking logic on the tactical plane.<sup>29</sup> What I am suggesting is that the forums provide a unique opportunity to implement a similar networking logic through the articulation of alternatives rather than simply protesting what we are against. Of course, much of this work will continue to happen within our own networks, but building mass movements requires periodic moments of broader convergence, interaction, and exchange, however complex and contradictory they may be. In this light, reconstituting the Forum as a multiplicity of horizontally networked spaces does not mean dividing, but rather working more effectively together, and thereby breathing new life into a process that desperately needs continual revitalization.

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29 I refer to diversity of tactics here with respect to the underlying organizational logic, not the merit of any particular tactic. This is not the place to recapitulate debates surrounding violence and non-violence.

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