

# Activism, Affect and Abuse: Emotional Contexts and Consequences of the ESF 2004 Organising Process

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## abstract

Written without prejudice, this essay addresses the emotional dimension of activism through an informal account of my experiences in the UK-ESF organising process. I provide a record of the conflictual process as considered through the lens of my professional training and background in Re-evaluation Counselling (RC). I also suggest strategies for dealing with emotional dynamics in future activist efforts.

## Introduction

I have never procrastinated so much in my life about the writing of a text as I have with this essay. Upon reflection, as I finally face what has been underneath this delay all along, I realise that it would be more accurate to say that I have never dreaded to such an extent what I would have to recall and feel in order to write and think about the topic I proposed as a contribution to this special issue of *ephemera*, namely the emotional dimension of the organising process of the UK-ESF. And now I recognise this dread, for it is familiar from many experiences in my past, some quite a while ago, and some more recent: it is the dread of returning to the scene of abuse.

And this language is accurate, for this is precisely what the UK process of organising the European Social Forum was from the start. I am reminded of a definition given by a leader of a seminar on sexual abuse and incest that I attended years ago; she advocated that we define incest in the broadest sense, as ‘a betrayal by a person or people in power’. This conceptualisation of ‘incest’, then, would include abuses of power by institutions and their representatives. From this perspective, the frequent expressions by those of us who were disempowered in this process, that ‘we were screwed’, takes on a deeper resonance.

So I invoke this scenography of abuse not to overly personalise the experience, but as a way to connect the individual and collective levels of the role of emotions in the UK-ESF organising process. In this essay I will highlight key points and instances of conflict and focus upon the emotional aspects involved, contextualising these with descriptions and analyses of the specific power dynamics involved, the political groups

wielding and not wielding power, and the situatedness of power abusers within political parties and government structures.

I will offer two concepts to help untangle these emotional dynamics: ‘internalised oppression’ and ‘restimulation’, both borrowed from the theory and practice of Re-evaluation Counselling.<sup>1</sup> ‘Internalised oppression’ refers to the way members of oppressed groups internalise the messages directed at their group, begin to believe they are true, and act out these messages, hurting themselves and other members of their group. Internalised sexism is one example. A less familiar but nonetheless salient instance relevant to this situation is the internalisation of oppression of activists. ‘Restimulation’ occurs when a situation in the present reminds a person of some hurtful experience in the past from which s/he has not healed and brings up the feeling(s) associated with these old hurts. In this reading, recipients of the controlling hostile behaviour of UK-ESF central organisers were often restimulated to past hurts, such as those which occurred in school, in our families, and in other social groups (e.g., ‘cliques’).

While a consideration of the history of the Social Forum movement is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to keep in mind that some of the specific power struggles experienced in the UK-ESF organising process have been encountered before in efforts to put on Social Forums at the world and regional levels. In particular, there has been a growing tension between the emphasis on openness and democratic process in the WSF’s Charter of Principles and the actualities of various organisations and groups working together on the ground in organising Social Forums. Another central area of tension has been the Charter’s forbidding of the participation of governments and political parties and the role that these have nevertheless played, to varying degrees, in all the world and regional Social Forums.

Nonetheless, the primarily (and problematically) London-based UK-ESF 2004 organising process took these pre-existing tensions to an extreme not previously confronted. From the start, this process was consistently characterised by fear-driven abuses of power and attempts to control, manipulate, and exclude others whose political affiliations and organisational methods differed from those of the central organisers. These attempts, which usher out of particular political viewpoints and particular plans and visions for large scale emancipatory social change, simultaneously have an emotional basis. Recipients of the hostile, manipulative, patronising, and controlling behaviour of these central organisers found ourselves negotiating much on the emotional front as well. Participating in this process engendered many feelings in us, including fear, humiliation, shame, shock, sadness, frustration, fury, outrage, betrayal, powerlessness, and feeling overwhelmed.

## Context and Backstory

The factions that went forward to seek approval to get the ball rolling for an ESF in the UK were visible from the start. Broadly, on one side were the London Social Forum and

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1 For more information about Re-evaluation Counselling, see <http://www.rc.org>.

other grassroots organisations, who approached the organisers of the Paris ESF in the fall of 2003 with the proposition that the ESF be held in the UK in 2005, allowing enough time for thorough and effective organising. On the other side were some large UK trade unions, the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), and people associated with the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, and the Greater London Assembly (GLA) (later revealed to be members of the 'secret' party called Socialist Action (SA)); members of this contingent were keen to have the bid to host the ESF in London approved for 2004. With the latter group's assurance that the process would be transparent and inclusive of grassroots and other less institutionally powerful organisations and groups, the Paris ESF organisers gave the go-ahead for the planning of the UK-ESF in late 2003 and the event's occurrence in 2004.

From the start, UK-ESF organising meetings were a shambles. Agendas were not pre-circulated; chairpersons were drawn exclusively from SWP-big union-GLA/SA camps; and speakers from other circles were either cut off or disallowed from speaking entirely. Shouting matches and complete chaos ensued. I joined the organising process in January of 2004, just after the first of such meetings. While some participants, for example members of the antiauthoritarian/libertarian 'group' the Wombles (<http://www.wombles.org.uk>), were quickly disillusioned, others – newcomers like me, some members of the LSF, and folks from other grassroots groups – decided to stay on board and see if there was any room for negotiation with those who at that time seemed fully in control.

At this point, let me stop and stress that already the different choices, in this case about the question of whether or not to participate in the organising process at all, were informed not only by different levels of knowledge and previous experience with the power dynamics in interactions amongst the already-emerging 'sides' in this arena, but were also influenced greatly by different emotional states and responses. The disillusionment and frustration, even infuriation, that many long-time activists from social centres and other alter-globalisation efforts experienced at this point led them to pull out and already to turn their attention to organising 'alternative' spaces (which have become increasingly visible and important to Social Forums in general, and were, at this very time, central to the WSF held in Mumbai in January 2004). Those of us who chose to stay and try to engage were feeling some initial shock, disbelief, and frustration at the tactics of the people controlling the organising committee. But we also were invested in retaining hope, which led us to try to bring negotiation and democracy back into the organising process.

I should also say that some of us just found it very difficult to believe that people who were (supposedly) on the same overall 'side' – something broadly conceived of as 'the left' – could be so seemingly irrational, so unreachable. To have come to that conclusion that early would have felt defeatist, and we were committed to persistence. Another feeling that came into play was the belief that the UK-ESF itself had the potential to be such an important event for so many thousands of people, that to cede the official process to the people who were so rigidly controlling it seemed a shame. We literally believed that by staying involved, we could influence not only the organising process, but the flavour, inclusiveness, and – equally important – the *political* scope and focus of the event. We hoped to counter the increasingly apparent desire by the

organisers for a conservatively liberal event that would marginalise and exclude refugees, homeless people, sex-workers, etc., as well as people and groups whose efforts are aimed specifically against the current neo-liberal regime of capitalism.

Thus, right from the earliest meetings, there was an interrelationship between people/groups in power, process, specific decisions taken, and participants' emotional experiences. One issue that characterises all activism was urgently on the table: the question of when to engage, and when to leave a process or group, and do something else or work with other people/groups. This is also frequently framed as the question of whether or not to 'give up', a phrase that is particularly telling, with its tone of resignation. This negotiation, this 'giving up', echoes with what many if not most of us experienced in our childhoods. While a generalisation, it is still true that most of us as young people experienced surprise, shock even, to find that the people around us, our parents and caregivers first, and later teachers and other authority figures, treated us in hurtful ways, frequently as a displacement of their own distress. As young people, we often felt compelled to reach out and try to engage with these very shut-down adults who were in charge of our care, and in our first years, of our very survival. This impulse was both one of working to ensure our survival and also one of still believing in the best of human beings, wanting to help these people be more present and open to life and to connection.<sup>2</sup> But for many of us, at some point while we were growing up, and frequently as a product of being hurt/damaged/traumatized with little emotional support to assist with healing, we 'gave up'. We gave up fighting for the attention and love of the people around us. Some of us became 'tough' and tucked away our sense of abandonment, or isolation, or hopelessness. Others of us became stuck in the sadness, hopelessness, or disappointment. Perhaps rage and the desire for revenge was a response of others of us to these kinds of dynamics.

So those of us who in January and February of 2004 decided to 'stay in' and who attended weekly meetings that took on an increasingly farcical if simultaneously Stalinesque character, were, in part, motivated by hope, by a desire to 'not give up', as well as by the real belief that we would make a significant difference to the many people who would be enabled to attend the more politically radical and inclusive ESF which we intended to make happen.

## **Underneath My Personal Involvement**

Several particular moments from the UK-ESF organising process were also key emotional moments for me, and I will use them as narrative contexts for making larger points about the affective dimension of this process. One of these pivotal moments was

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2 I realise that such sentiments are immediately open to the theoretical criticism of 'essentialism'. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that we must explore, and in some cases adopt, such thoughts regarding what it means to be/become human, in the spirit of what Gayatri Spivak, in a feminist context, refers to as 'strategic essentialism', in the endeavour to move forward in envisioning and building a non-exploitative world that values all forms of life. So I will continue with these broadly conceived ideas about the psychological dynamics from early life that appear to me to be typically involved in our emotional struggles in activist processes.

certainly the highly charged meeting of the European Assembly that took place in London over the first weekend of March 2004. In order to describe the events of that weekend and my experience of it, I will first provide the ‘backstory’ to my personal involvement in the UK-ESF organising process.

Prior to 2004, my life in London primarily revolved around doing research and writing my Ph.D dissertation. I had decided to defer and delay getting involved with many specific activist groups and efforts until that document was done. I had, however, been part of one London-based group, a loose network of folks interested in the intersection of politics and spirituality. Calling ourselves ‘Spirit Matters’ (after the title of one of U.S. activist/rabbi Michael Lerner’s books, 2000), we had put on one-day events that combined talks, debates, group discussions, and experiential elements such as dancing, music, and yoga. At the time that we decided to branch out, at the start of 2004, someone forwarded an e-mail to the Spirit Matters organising committee about the UK-ESF organising process. Not only a lovely and inspiring invitation, this letter also articulated the politics in quite an anti-capitalist fashion and emphasised inclusiveness to a great degree (see Appendix 1). Some of us went along to investigate, and we were shocked by the chaos and oppressive treatment that we saw at the meetings (which contrasted greatly with the loving, inviting, and hopeful tone of the initial letter we received). Knowing nothing of the political and power context and history involved, two of us, who have experience in counselling and mediation and who saw that the heavy-handed chairing of meetings was pivotally influential in the resulting chaos and resentment, sent a letter to the UK-ESF organising committee and volunteered to offer our skills. We offered to chair meetings and to facilitate workshops training others in democratic and consensus-based chairing/facilitation. We received no response.

At the next meeting of the Organising Committee (OC), we decided to reach out again, in person. There were again shouting matches and emotional conflicts, mostly concerning the declaration issued by GLA staffmember (and prominent member of Socialist Action), Redmond O’Neill, who proclaimed that the previous working groups – who had been in place for a few months and many of whom had undertaken significant amounts of work already – were thereby abolished. The meeting was chaired by the then president of the RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport Union), who was abrupt, authoritarian, and expressed favouritism in allowing some people to speak, and for long periods, while denying these privileges to others. We spoke with him afterwards, acknowledging first the difficulty of chairing a meeting where there was so much tension. For a moment – about five seconds – he was ‘real’, that is, we could see the fear in his eyes, and he spoke about his anxiety and how hard chairing the meeting had been. Then the guardedness and rigidity went back up, and that was it. This rigid, hard, severe stance was displayed by many of those ‘in control’ throughout the process and we were met repeatedly with a similar rigidity, coupled with overt hostility for the people who had tried to have their voices heard at the meeting. Clearly, our skills as mediators and negotiators of emotional conflict were not at all desired; those ‘in power’ merely wanted the dissenters either to acquiesce to their plans or to leave the process. My colleague in Spirit Matters decided she would no longer participate in the official organising process, while I continued to go to the weekly OC meetings as well as those of the Programme working group. Knowing no one, and at this point having little knowledge of the history of context for the tensions, I attended meetings and soaked up

what I could glean about the various ‘players’ and their political allegiances, which I quickly realised were also parallel with the differences in style and treatment of others at meetings. Each week many people tried respectfully to raise questions or to propose policies, and each week they were shot down, either dismissed outright, or told there was not enough time to address their concerns.

I began to realise that an abuse of power on a deep level was occurring yet was being denied. That is, there was a pretence by those in power that there was no abuse happening. Yet everyone knew that it was, and those without power were not only subjected to this denial and pretence; we also were forced to *witness the abuse*. Frequently actors from the ‘side’ in charge would scream at or shame very directly and personally actors who had tried to shift the power dynamics, to interject new ideas, or to suggest that the process itself be made more ‘democratic’ (comments which were received with particular vitriol). What I want to flag up is that within the context of these official meetings, a space supposedly characterised by inclusiveness and consensus, those of us not in control – that is, we were not from the organization hosting the meeting, we did not chair the meetings, and we had no say in the agenda nor how it was discussed or implemented – not only saw the most egregious abuses of power, we also *had many feelings* about these abuses, including the sadness, fear, shame and sense of powerlessness one experiences while watching someone else be abused.<sup>3</sup> In January and February 2004, the fact that I did not know the other attendees of the OC meetings meant that I was alone with my feelings. I was informing Spirit Matters, as well as other members of an editorial collective I am part of, (for a London-based magazine called *Mute* that deals with art, culture, new media, and politics), about what was happening at the UK-ESF OC meetings, and I felt some sense of duty as a kind of reporter. But as the weeks went on, I increasingly dreaded each Thursday night meeting. Now I can see that I dreaded re-experiencing the sense of powerlessness, the frustration, and the grief and shame of watching abusive treatment go on unabated (and actually worsen each meeting). There was also a sense that surely, this abusive atmosphere would change, and every week I entertained some hope that perhaps it would, this time, be different. It never was. Nonetheless, I carried on going, and took copious and detailed notes, not really sure why I was doing so and what purpose they might serve.

## The Horizontals Come to Town. . .

After several weekly OC meetings, the European Assembly (EA) took place over the weekend of 6-7 March 2004. Just before this, I was surfing the Web and came across the documents of the ‘horizontals’, who were calling a gathering on the Friday night preceding the Assembly for everyone interested in trying to make the organising process more democratic<sup>4</sup> (see papers by de Angelis, Dowling, Juris and Tormey in this issue

3 One particular example comes to mind: when a man from Brazil, representing the World Social Forum, was completely unacknowledged, disrespected, and treated in an entirely patronising manner at a UK-ESF OC meeting in February 2004.

4 The Horizontals’ ‘Call for Democracy’ document can be found at <http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=CallForDemocracy>, and the longer document, the ‘Horizontals’ Statement’, with background and explanations is at

for more information regarding the debates and disagreements that emerged between the ‘verticals’ and the ‘horizontals’ in the process of organizing the London ESF04). I went along, and the attendance of over fifty people, many from continental Europe, as well as their passion, gave me hope for the first time since I had joined the organising process. This meeting itself did not run entirely smoothly, as there was so much to be decided about how to intervene during the Assembly that people became anxious. The man who had volunteered to chair the meeting became overwhelmed with the massive requests for speaking, and began to be short with some people and to cut them off abruptly (including me at one point). As I was one of the few people in the room who had actually attended most of the OC meetings, I was knowledgeable about the actual behaviour, tactics, and plans of the ‘verticals’. Many people directed their questions at me, and I sought to give them enough information with which to make their suggestions and decisions. The chairperson started rolling his hands, indicating ‘wrap up’ to me, when I was speaking. I felt hurt and shamed (being restimulated to school and other past incidents). But what was wonderful was that, unlike in the official ESF organising process, I was able to speak with him after the meeting, and not only did we connect, he apologised for his behaviour and I was able to detach from my earlier feeling of taking it personally, and even to laugh about it. To describe the role of humour in making it through this experience of being part of the official UK-ESF organising process would require a whole essay in itself; suffice it to say that it was essential for our emotional survival. In sum, after this meeting of the horizontals, the first face-to-face meeting after only virtual communication, I think most people felt what I did: excitement, a sense of connection and collectivity, and a sense of purpose. Despite the slight tension and the tight time frame with so much on the agenda, we had managed to come out of the meeting with a consensus to distribute two documents at the Assembly: (1) the original Horizontals’ Call for Democracy, and (2) another short document that highlighted the abuses of power going on within the organising process and that listed simple and reasonable requests for changes within it.<sup>5</sup>

On Saturday morning, this excitement of the horizontals was in the air. We greeted each other warmly; I felt I had ‘found my people’.<sup>6</sup> However, as the SWP/GLA-SA folks placed their numerous stacks of handouts on the tables, a few of us horizontals became concerned: where were our documents? In the midst of focusing on the content of them,

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<http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=HorizontalsStatement>. And thanks to Teresa Hoskyns of the LSF for organising the meeting of the Horizontals that preceded the 6-7 March 2004 European Assembly.

- 5 In this short document, which we called ‘Principles for Democracy’, we proposed 10 concrete changes to the organising process: 1. Affiliation of individuals (max. £5); 2. Working groups freely organized; 3. Individuals working in the process must participate in the decision-making process; 4. Meetings around the UK and around the EU – the timetable has to be accessible to the majority; 5. Transparency: sending meetings to all lists and web; 6. Rotation of facilitators; 7. UK assembly/organising committee as the place where decisions are taken and individuals as organisations have equal voice in the process; 8. No more meeting in GLA; 9. Prioritizing spaces for workshops and seminars at the heart of the ESF; 10. Fees are too high!
- 6 I admit that this might sound overly sentimental. Nevertheless, I maintain that it is important to risk this rather than hiding or feeling embarrassment over these feelings. Our ability to connect with each other in these situations is precious and integral to our intent to build community and solidarity in our desire for a world beyond capitalism, exclusion and violence.

had we made sure that specific people would ensure their printing and distribution? No, we hadn't, we realised. And then all of a sudden, other horizontals arrived, documents in hand, and began to distribute them to the ultimately two hundred-plus people who attended the Assembly (again, held at the GLA). This kind of spontaneous taking charge of things as exemplified by the way these documents materialised that morning seems a strong feature of horizontal organizing processes, indicative perhaps of a sense of being empowered to *do*, rather than wait for someone else to do for you or to tell you to do. It certainly brought smiles to our faces, as we prepared for the meeting proper.

The chairing of the Saturday morning EA meeting again was autocratic, aggressive, and about as far from 'consensus' as you could get. Our plan had been to propose that 'democracy and process' should be added to the agenda – as the first item to be discussed. The chairs took the first five speakers to speak to the agenda; two were from continental Europe (Hungary and Greece, I believe) and made our suggestion, i.e. that issues concerning 'process' be discussed first. The chairs agreed to other recommendations for additions or changes to the agenda, but as for ours, they said that it would 'come up in the discussion of the specific proposal' (to host the ESF in the UK, in other words the "bid" that the "Europeans" were being asked to support, which was their first item on the agenda). Several people voiced support (yelling it out) and some (fewer in numbers) voiced disagreement. The chairs then declared that this is how it would go down – 'process' discussed with the proposal/bid – and acted as if the issue was closed.

It was at this point that I decided that I had to say something. I just could not let it go, incensed not only that someone who had chaired a zillion meetings – always dictatorially – was one of the chairs, but also that they were running things in this fashion. I gathered my courage and went to the microphone to speak, thinking I was first in the queue and would be part of the next group to speak (they were taking speakers in groups of five). While I was standing at the mike, the chair seemed to pretend that I wasn't there, and announced that someone would give the welcome (a guy from a union). I waited behind him, assuming I would be able to speak next. But again the chair announced that someone else would speak to formally present the proposal for hosting the ESF in the UK. I was hesitant, and the man (from the Tobin Tax Network, ATTAC) said to me personally, 'Look, you can be the next one to speak'. I was about to say O.K., but I thought, *No, this is ridiculous – I want to object to the silencing of our proposal that the process/issues of democracy be discussed first*. So, I said no and insisted I be allowed to speak before him. The chair looked at me, furious, and angrily snarled, 'You are occupying the microphone, for ten minutes now – you are blocking the process'. It had only been a minute, maybe two, but of course his tactic did not involve accuracy; it was an attempt to shame and silence me (and by extension, us, the horizontals).

I was quite taken aback, to say the least. As the next two speakers who presented the details of the proposal spoke, I stood behind them, at the front of the large room with a few hundred people seated before me, and felt on the verge of tears. I had to use all my experience of counselling and healing and tell myself that I could not cry at this moment, that I would have to get support for that later. As they went on for quite a while, I had plenty of time to regain my composure. I was allowed to be the first person

to speak after these two had presented the proposal. I started by saying that as I was representing a group interested in the intersection of spirituality and politics (namely, Spirit Matters), I found it ironic to be from a group so much concerned with ‘peace’ and to be accused of ‘occupying the microphone’. I made it clear that it was not my intention to disrupt or block the meeting. I spoke to the issue of the facilitation of meetings, which had plagued the organising process from the start, and I mentioned that several weeks earlier some of us from my group had offered our skills as facilitators and mediators and had been told there was no structure to accept our offer and that chairs would rotate. I emphasised that this did not happen over the course of the next several weeks. I then spoke to what had just occurred – three of five speakers’ proposals of changes to the agenda were agreed by chairs; the other two speakers’ proposal to speak first about ‘process’ had not been agreed to by the chairs, and was just unilaterally denied its own place. The chairs objected loudly – ‘There was consensus!’, they shouted; ‘Everyone agreed!’ But plenty of people shouted back, ‘No, we didn’t!’ and ‘No, there wasn’t!’ So, I just said that I found it completely unacceptable that chairs could railroad through their desire and that what I saw was not consensus in any fashion, and I requested that they define ‘consensus’ as it would be applied at this gathering.

The rest of the morning people continued to speak not only to the actual proposal to host the ESF in the UK (issues of venue, budget, accommodation, and the like), but also to the issue of process. What was so wonderful was how many people from other European countries said that our list of suggestions was reasonable and voiced support, and also how many of them spoke against the proposed registrations fees (which were quite high – £20 unwaged, for example) and which had been one of our main points of complaint.

Later that day, the SWP/‘big union’/GLA-SA leaders huddled together in the front of the room and finally agreed that this issue of ‘process’ deserved its own working group that afternoon. Over 50 people crowded into a room for this working group, and after some chaos and shouting and general lack of progress, someone from France suggested that each ‘side’, ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’, choose three people and these six would have a discussion and see what negotiation could occur. A few of the Europeans would facilitate and mediate, and we would stay until a resolution was reached (by this time the other working group sessions had ended, and the rest of the assembly had gathered again for the closing discussion).<sup>7</sup>

We retired to our respective corners – this was becoming quite dramatic! – and hurriedly chose our three people: Massimo De Angelis, for his knowledge of the political theorisation/contextualisation and his skill at articulating the ‘big picture’ (see de Angelis in this issue for more comments regarding the ESF04 organisational

7 I should note at this point that I am adopting the language that was used, by everyone involved, throughout the UK-ESF organising process, that is, calling people from outside the UK ‘the Europeans’. Being from the states, I found this language extremely strange, as in the U.S., the UK is considered ‘European’. However, for convenience sake and to reflect convention, in this essay I do adopt this language. At some point this very distinction could be a very useful point of investigation itself, as it reveals much about the pre-existing divisions and tensions that characterised this UK-ESF organising process and event as well.

process); Javier Ruiz, because of his association with Indymedia ([www.indymedia.org.uk](http://www.indymedia.org.uk)), and autonomous and other networks; and me, because I had been at almost all the meetings and had the knowledge of the nitty-gritty details (and the notes!). The ‘verticals’ chose Hilary Wainwright (from *Red Pepper* magazine – and it should be noted that she was one of several folks in the process who at this point wasn’t really allied with either ‘side’); Chris Nineham (who used the front group Globalise Resistance in this process but who is a very involved member of the SWP); and Peter X (about whom we knew little at the time, but later learned is a member of SA). Europeans from France and Italy in particular were facilitating. We used the ‘fishbowl’ technique, where only the nine of us (three verticals, three horizontals and three facilitators) who were in the inner circle could speak, with any observers welcome and around us in another circle. We agreed to start with ‘their’ document and to go through each point.<sup>8</sup>

We had only got through a few points, agreeing on changes and additions, when a GLA rep. came in and said they would be locking the building in ten minutes – we had to leave the room. We were determined to carry on and decided to find a nearby pub or restaurant to do so. The search for this venue itself was hilarious, and I thought would have been good for inclusion in a video of this whole crazy process. After much wandering, we found an Italian restaurant down the way from Tower Bridge, and dug in again, the nine of us at a table, with observers all around us.

We managed to go through the whole document and agree to additions, deletions, and rewordings. There were compromises on both sides, as well as discoveries of many places of mutual agreement. We were honest about our concerns and insisted that they be kept on the table. There was, for the first time, genuine dialogue between folks from the ‘sides’ who had been in conflict with each other for so long. From the people ‘representing’ the Organising Committee at this meeting, there was acknowledgment of all the problems, such as negative facilitation of meetings, lack of communication, etc. With the exception of the recalcitrant Peter X, we both heard each other about many important issues. We spoke honestly and openly about our fears and concerns. Given the dynamics that occurred before, it was pretty amazing.

After a few hours, we had finished going through the UK-ESF organising document. There was not enough time then to address our document of short points (see footnote 5), but we agreed mutually that someone from our ‘team’ would stand up the next day at the European Assembly with ‘their’ document, present the changes to the audience, and voice support for these changes. Then someone from their ‘team’ would stand up and say that they supported the spirit, of our (other, longer) document, ‘A Call for Democracy in the ESF process’. The two people chosen to do this were Chris Nineham (‘vertical’ SWP-er) and Javier Ruiz (‘horizontal’ involved with Indymedia).

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8 This document, sometimes known as the ‘Alex Gordon proposal’ after the president of the RMT who chaired several of the early meetings, was drafted on 24 January 2004 and amended a few weeks later by the OC. Its full title is ‘For a UK Organising Committee to host the European Social Forum in London’

We felt such a sense of relief and excitement. Only then and in later discussions that night was it revealed to us that they actually had thought that our whole intention was to make sure that the ESF did not happen in the UK, and that we came to block the whole process. This was their fear, and it indicates how much fear distorts: they were not hearing us accurately for a long while, and they chaired meetings etc. from the place of this fear. So they actually seemed shocked when they realised we did *not* want to sabotage the process, only to increase the democratic and inclusive character of its organisation.

The energy after this smaller process group meeting was incredible: people who had been yelling at, or furious with, each other only hours before were walking along the riverfront hugging each other. ‘Mixed’ groups of both horizontals and verticals (as well as those located more in-between these two positions) retired to another pub and another restaurant, sharing with others the ‘good news’ of this breakthrough. Then, across ‘sides’ and various affiliations or political investments, we were able to have some real exchanges about details of how we would proceed. I left feeling astonished at the turn of events, quite positive, but, I felt, not in a naive sense. Hopeful, for the first time since I became involved. I also felt proud to have been a part of this collective effort by the horizontals – we pooled our knowledges, resources, thinking, suggestions, and energies, and it worked. I appreciated all of the work done behind the scenes to get us to that point: the creation of web sites; the attendance of meetings; the thinking about language, proposals, and strategies; the booking of rooms; and the arrangement of accommodation. It seemed a truly collective and collaborative effort.

I was not able to attend the EA on Sunday, as I was leading a long-planned workshop ('Emotional Support for Activists' for some of the leaders of a London group that works to support the non-violent resistance in Palestine). Actually, this workshop provided the only space for me to release my emotions around the ESF organising process.<sup>9</sup> The tradition in which I am trained, Re-evaluation Counselling, promotes the idea that everyone has distress and that leaders are facilitators who also need support for emotional healing. Thus, at groups and workshops, the leader also takes a turn for a ‘session’, as I did that Sunday. In my twenty-minute session, I went back to the previous day’s experience, remembering that moment when the chair yelled at me and the rest, and I was able to release much grief, fear, and anger (through crying, shaking, and sweating, respectively). I remembered in my session the moment when people in the audience were all yelling, when horizontals shouted ‘Let her speak!’ and others said the opposite. After releasing some feelings, I then recalled that one woman in the front (someone I didn’t know) had shouted ‘We don’t want to hear you!’. This memory, especially, brought up much shame and many tears. At the end of my session, I’d cleared enough of what had been restimulated that I was able to remember all the people, some of whom I’d met for the first time that day, who had come up to me and thanked me for my intervention. Other activists at this workshop indicated their appreciation for my willingness to ‘show myself’ and my struggles with feelings around

9 The theory and practise of Re-evaluation Counselling refers to the process of ‘discharging’, the physical release of emotions, which comes in the following forms: tears for grief; hot perspiration for anger; cold perspiration and shaking for fear; laughter for light embarrassments, light fears, and light anger; yawning for boredom and physical tension.

tensions in activist circles. Indeed, I believe we need many more spaces like this in which to acknowledge, release, and process the hurts that get restimulated during social change efforts, and one reason for writing this piece is to open a space that places value on the affective experiences including trauma that might be encountered in activist practice.

I was told that at Sunday's meeting of the EA, Javier and Chris expressed their support for each group's document (as described above), and the amendments to the proposal for the UK Organising Committee to host the ESF in London which were read out to the assembly (i.e. the changes we had so laboured over the previous evening) were accepted. Javier and Chris hugged. Amazingly, Javier was asked to be one of the facilitators of the meeting that afternoon. While we were clear that it was just a start, a first step in what would have to be an ongoing process, we felt this negotiation was significant. Most of what we achieved addressed the meta-level of process, for example, language about a 'spirit of trust' and 'an atmosphere of mutual respect', or the meta-level of inclusion, for example, language of 'networks' and 'local Social Forums' being added to organisations as participants in this ESF organising process and the event itself. There were many specific items and issues that remained to be addressed, and the 'spirit of trust' and real consensus had yet to be created and implemented. But I and many other horizontals felt that enough progress and real dialogue had occurred that we could recommend wholeheartedly that folks from all backgrounds, including those who were previously excluded from the non-democratic nature of this process, could jump on board and become involved with the UK-ESF organisation. Indeed, in an e-mail to the democratise the ESF e-list, I urged others to 'Join working groups, attend the meetings of the Co-ordinating Committee and Organising Committee when you can, post ideas on the Web, reach out to other groups and bring them into what will hopefully now be an ever-widening circle of groups, networks, forums, and individuals coming together to plan, create and experience the ESF in London in October 2004' (8 March 2004).

When I read these words that I so passionately expressed (and believed) at the time, I feel sad and somewhat angry. Disappointment, and some sense of regret, not to mention the resurrection of that internalized critical voice saying: *you should've known better than to trust them*. This is what abuse and a betrayal of trust does; it makes one doubt oneself, and feel 'stupid' for being conciliatory and trusting. However, from the space outside these feelings, I can also observe that: (1) we (meaning the horizontals who were involved in this negotiation at the time) did not have enough information to realise what was likely to happen; (2) given this, it made sense to try to reach out and work through things with the 'vertical' folks; and (3) there was another dynamic to the power structure that came through much more forcefully after this experience and which was largely responsible for the continuation of abuse and lack of democratic process: namely, the entrenched position and power of the rigid, secretive, and hostile members of the 'party' Socialist Action, linked to the Mayor and the GLA.

## Dashed Hopes and More Abuses of Power

In the meantime, given the information we had and what we had experienced, we found ourselves feeling hopeful, positive, and eager to move forward the work of the organising process. We issued a letter calling for more horizontally minded folks to join the organising process. We envisioned being able to work within the structures of the process more successfully after the Assembly experience, and we also sought to bring in more people with horizontal leanings to support one another at these meetings.

The reality starkly contrasted with our expectations (also see Dowling, this issue). From the time of the ‘breakthrough’, the SWP-SA alliance was already swinging into action, and working hard to prevent any real changes being introduced into their plans, or into their way of organising (which for them, went hand in hand). Over the next few weeks, several of us attended not only the OC, but the weekly Co-ordinating Committee (CC) meetings, and meetings of all the working groups. What we discovered was that the CC – unlike what had been articulated when it was proposed (namely that it would be a committee to co-ordinate tasks, such as phone calls, between the then weekly meetings of the OC) – functioned effectively as a kind of Central Committee. It actually took away the power from the OC. Most decisions about the organising process and the ESF were made in these meetings; we saw this straightaway, which is one of the reasons we fought so hard to have the meeting time changed from 10 a.m. on a weekday morning, which was hardly enabling of ‘inclusion’ for those of us who were also holding down day-jobs. In this and in every other contribution, we were prevented from allowing changes to be implemented. Attending these CC meetings was like showing up for dinner, invited, but only under external pressure. And the metaphor is apt in another way, for we were, the entire time, treated as unwelcome guests. (I should add that, as became clearer over time, many SWP members were more flexible and willing to engage with us, in contrast to the incessant rigidity and hostility of the SA contingent).

There is no way to really capture the flavour, or the abusive nature of these meetings. At times, there was pretence, as we all feigned being civil and ‘on the same page’, while underneath the surface anger and mistrust seethed and fermented. The verticals resented our presence. We resented their control and the betrayals of promises. Members of SWP and SA came to meetings with already agreed upon agendas, and they blocked any other ideas. They used several tactics to maintain this control and rule out other options: dominating the chairing of meetings; refusing to add items to an agenda; putting items at the end of the agenda and never getting to them; saying a particular subcommittee was already working on something; twisting our proposals so as to frame them as asking for the opposite of what we intended; and, when all else failed, eschewing the usual condescension and patronising, and instead being directly hostile and shaming.

There also were institutional elements that held up these strategies in ensuring control. Certainly the foremost of these was the role and involvement of the GLA. Almost every OC meeting, and all CC meetings, as well as several (usually unannounced) outreach meetings to particular constituencies, were held at the GLA. The minute-takers were GLA staff. E-mail was received and answered by GLA staff. A GLA staffperson, whose specialisation was not IT, was put in charge of the tender for the web site (the battle for the web site not to be given to a corporation had long been lost). Not only the central

involvement of the GLA, but also the physical presence of the City Hall building that houses the GLA, were eerie to experience. For one thing, there was this sense of an odd split between the awareness that it is against the Charter of Principles of the WSF for political bodies to be directly involved in a Social Forum, and the feeling of being part of something exclusive and important (the work of the ‘London Mayor’s office and the GLA’), a feeling reinforced by the gorgeous, contemporary and comfortable City Hall building itself. In this way, the weekly experience of undergoing the security search at the GLA mirrored this double aspect, this schizophrenia. On the one hand, one felt the *wrongness* of it all: not only the continual reminder of the fascistic ‘war on terror’ that characterizes the contemporary moment and the accompanying proliferation of security searches all over the west, but also in the way that security searching before an ESF organising meeting acted as a reminder that the GLA should not have been involved at all – and it certainly should not have become the de facto Central HQ for organising the ESF, which it was for months. On the other hand, undergoing the security search was part of the ritual, part of feeling included and even perhaps ‘important’, and as everyone went through it, occasionally a moment that levelled the ‘horizontal-vertical’ separation. For me personally, being searched was a moment to gather myself, to try to retain some sense of hope and empowerment regarding the meeting ahead, and to try to remember everything we wanted to address that day.

What happened between the first weekend of March 2004, and the end of May 2004, which was the end of my involvement with the UK-ESF organising process? Accounts more detailed than mine can be found on the web, for example at [esf2004.net](http://esf2004.net).<sup>10</sup> Suffice it to say that the transgression of ‘process’ – the abuse, underhandedness, secretiveness, manipulation, and even downright lying – increased dramatically.

Two other dynamics occurring during the horizontals’ concentrated involvement in the spring of 2004 are important to consider. First, verticals often arranged ‘closed door’ secret meetings with individual horizontals, which echoed the oppressive ‘Central Committee’ mentality that pervaded the whole process and which were blatant attempts to create divisions *within* the horizontals. Needless to say, none of these divisive tactics worked, because we shared everything with each other and increasingly experienced a vital sense of solidarity. However, as the verticals chose their ‘favourites’ to consult with, and worked blatantly to ostracise others (including me), we were often left with feelings reminiscent of the school playground, with its hierarchy of insiders and outsiders. In any group setting, including those within activist efforts, we must acknowledge and negotiate these feelings of ‘not being liked’ and of being excluded. Second, all of the feelings that we experienced as a result of the abusive and irrational way that these meetings were conducted made it very difficult for us to continue to think clearly. This is another dynamic that warrants consideration in activist efforts, as we need to address the emotions we experience in such situations and figure out ways to help each other retain and reclaim clear thinking.

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10 Hodgkinson, S. and L. L. Sullivan (2004) ‘Transgressions of Process from 6/7 March Assembly Until Now’, 16 April, the (now obsolete) URL is <http://www.esf2004.net/wakka/EvidenceLogTwo>.

## Emotional Overload and Disaffection

Looking back, I would characterise the period between the March European Assembly and the May-June disaffection of almost all the horizontals as one of trying to keep our heads above water. We rapidly clocked how naive our position had been following what we perceived as the ‘breakthrough’ of the Assembly. We regrouped and came together to try to strategise how to work at all within the process. On the one hand, we did have many meetings in-between the official ones, starting with a meeting held during the first European Creative Forum (ECF, <http://ecf2004.org/Mambo/index.php>) on 10 April, where about a dozen of us retired to a pub and made much headway in outlining plans and drafting proposals, etc. These continued, with meetings in the foyer of the Royal Festival Hall and other locations. All of these gatherings were characterised by much laughter and comraderie, as well as concrete achievement. However, not only were the documents and plans that came out of these meetings blocked on every front at the ‘official’ organising meetings (we produced outlines for the web site structure, a list of keywords that would facilitate workshop/seminar proposal merging, proposals for norms concerning minutes, and many more documents that were all ignored or rejected), but we also found ourselves with no real outlets for the emotions that we were experiencing in this process.

In general, I noticed two responses to these abusive meeting experiences by those of us who were not in control: (1) bitching sessions detailing all the (admittedly pretty unbelievable) transgressions of ‘democratic process’ and even of dignity and respect and (2) drinking copious amounts of beer at pubs (and often these were combined). As I don’t drink, I often joined in (or even initiated) the bitching – a typical way that one reaches for feeling some kind of power in a situation in which you have little. However, I was also often feeling much more than anger, and I felt there was nowhere to go with these feelings, no way to express, in a London pub, the sadness of watching people behave so cruelly, or the shame of having been forced to witness the abuse of others.

The London Social Forum did sponsor two workshops on ‘Emotional Intelligence for Activists’ during the spring of 2004, led by a colleague and myself. These were useful spaces for a handful of horizontal folks to receive support for our feelings around the organising process: spaces where these feelings could be articulated, and where those who wanted could have sessions to release directly the feelings and hurts that had been restimulated by being part of organising the ESF. Yet these spaces were far and few between. People needed sustained support along these lines, and we found ourselves not only emotionally overwhelmed, but also completely overstretched in terms of time, energy, and resources just dealing with all of the CC, OC, and working group meetings and what occurred at these. This feeling of being overwhelmed and overextended, which often translates into being ‘burnt out’, is very common for activists. It often is accompanied by difficulties in setting boundaries and maintaining balance (time for self-nurturing and the rest of ‘life’ as well as explicit activism), by feelings of guilt (that sense that one is never doing enough), and by feelings of urgency (‘We must work hard and implement radical social change NOW!'), (see also, S. Sullivan, 2004; 2005). I believe that we need to work together to create space and time for support in working through and releasing these feelings, as part of all our activist efforts, not just the organising of Social Forums. The saturation point is different for all of us, but without

the actual release of the emotions that are triggered in these situations – whether from the abusive treatment of those in control such as the SWP-SA folks in this case, or from the abusive and oppressive treatment of the police and other state forces in other instances – we become overwhelmed, feel hopeless, find it hard to think, and eventually feel that we have no other choice but to withdraw from the particular effort or process entirely.<sup>11</sup>

This is precisely what happened when very late one night, Emma Dowling (this issue) and I found ourselves entertaining an idea that up until then we had not allowed ourselves to explore: that of pulling out of the official ESF organising process entirely. On 27 April 2004, at 2 in the morning, we composed an e-mail message over the phone and sent it out to several horizontals with whom we'd been working closely.<sup>12</sup> We asked, 'Why don't we walk away?' We also noted that meetings were 'hostile and ridiculously time-wasting' and acknowledged that we were 'burnt out, overworked, frustrated, attacked, broke, and overwhelmed'. That about sums it up. And 'broke' points to another key dimension of this organising process, one not at all divorced from emotional concerns, namely money. The verticals were almost unanimously being *paid* for their participation in this organising process. Most horizontals, in contrast, were not

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11 Or, we might become confused and overwhelmed and perhaps not realise that it makes sense to withdraw until quite late in the game.

12 I should note that by this time, which was mid-April 2004, we had discovered that all of the lists, including the 'democratise the ESF' list, as well as the unofficial websites, were being monitored by the verticals. Although these lists were 'open', we had mistakenly assumed that only horizontals were signed up. The verticals never posted any messages, but we became aware of their presence when they brought up things which were discussed only on these lists in meetings. Such surveillance was not pleasant to experience and only added to the Stalinesque quality of the organising process. At any rate, because we wanted to ensure privacy, we found ourselves, reluctantly, going against the very notion of transparency that we had been calling for so fervently in the organising process, and producing internal lists with names of particular horizontal folks who were centrally involved in the process. Horizontals who were not involved on the ground, some of whom, for instance, lived outside of London or the UK, eventually sensed this and called for more communication of what was actually going on, on the public lists. I can only speak for myself in this regard, but I know that I was completely swamped, with barely time to stay in contact with those of us who were attending meetings and strategising, and while I desired to continue to write 'reports' to the public lists, I was never able to get back into that habit (and I did feel guilty about that). I regret, as do others I'm sure, not being able to stay plugged in to that larger horizontal community at that time. However, I also see how structurally dictated this lack of communication was. One other factor was also influential in how things were handled on this level. After the March European Assembly, although more horizontally inclined folks did step forward and begin attending CC and other meetings, at any given time there were only a small group of us doing this. At best, we might have ten or twelve, but with impossible CC meeting times of 10a.m. – noon on a weekday, and the frequency of meetings overall which was quite demanding, and with horizontals being generally quite busy with activist efforts of the groups and networks of which they are a part, it was very difficult to get more folks to become part of the official process. And I'm sure that knowledge of the abusive dynamics that I have been outlining here was not a big draw either! At any rate, low numbers were definitely a factor. We were all stretched quite thin, and at this point the UK-ESF organising process had pretty much taken over our lives. At the same time, of course, many 'antiauthoritarians' involved for longer in radical left politics in the UK could see quite early that the ESF organizing process was going to reproduce familiar exclusionary dynamics. This contributed to peoples' decision not to stay with the formal organising process and instead to focus on self-organising autonomous spaces. In other words, people who nonetheless put a lot of time and energy into the London ESF had already made conscious choices not to become involved in the formal process.

only *not* being paid, but were spending money that we did not really have to spare (at least this was definitely my case), as the expense of travelling to meetings (in London, to the only non-London OC meeting in Birmingham, and to EAs held outside the UK); having coffee, drinks, and meals before and after meetings; and printing and photocopying documents often added up to quite a lot over time. This is not to mention the ‘cost’ of our time and labour, which was considerable. A kind of ‘class divide’ was thus replicated in the very structure of the organising process itself, with the folks from big unions, the SWP, and SA (whatever the front groups of members of the latter two organisations) being externally supported, flown to meetings of the European Assembly outside the UK, and being paid for their days of attendance of the CC. Horizontals instead found ourselves at a disadvantage when it came to time and resources, a dynamic exacerbated by the key role of the GLA, whose staff, photocopying capacity, public relations machine, etc. were at the disposal of the verticals 24/7. Again, aspects of the organising process such as this reinforced the sense that we were the unwelcome guests, poor relations who were reluctantly tolerated but were blatantly disrespected, as poor and working class people often are. (As with so many other things, this was ironic, given that many of the groups the verticals ‘represented’ purport to support the liberation of the ‘working class’ and the eradication of exploitation and poverty).

By this time many of us noticed that the organising process had become the main topic of our dreams at night. Or, more accurately, I should say nightmares. It was an almost universal experience for the horizontals who were regularly attending meetings to have frequent nightmares about the ESF organising process. Certainly mainstream frameworks for activism don’t address phenomena such as these! My interpretation would be that: (1) these nightmares reflected the state of post-traumatic stress that we were in; and (2) because we were not getting a chance to release any of our constantly triggered emotions – because we were not dealing with these emotions effectively in our waking lives – they came out while we slept, as they were going to manifest somewhere. They were sparks of messages trying to get our attention and let us know how deeply we were being affected, and what emotions needed to be acknowledged and released. Fear, shame, sadness, anger, and the feeling of being attacked and powerless were some that were revealed in the themes of our nightmares.<sup>13</sup>

### My ‘Final Straw’ Moment. . .

As it turned out, the ‘walking away’ of the horizontals didn’t happen straightaway at the end of April after our e-mail. We decided to give it another go, and geared up for the next Organising Committee meeting, set for the 16th of May. We had a plan we felt was foolproof. An agenda for the meeting was in circulation, and we met beforehand to discuss the proposals we wanted to make with regard to each issue on it.<sup>14</sup> In particular,

13 These nightmares have returned to me as I’ve been writing this piece, revealing that I have much more to process in the wake of having participated in the official UK-ESF organizing process. I imagine that other horizontal folks also are in the same boat.

14 Proposed Agenda circulated at the meeting of the UK ESF Organising Committee, May 16, 2004, LSE. Agenda: 1. Apologies; 2. Changes to the Agenda; 3. Minutes of last meeting; 4. Report back from Istanbul; 5. General state of play: Finance, Affiliations, Company, Office, Website; 6.

we intended to insist that the issue of the staffing of the office be discussed, and we were going to protest the way that issue had been handled thus far: i.e. there had been no open call for secondees to the office staff, and two people from SA and SWP had simply been ‘appointed’ by the verticals. A Unison/SWP member was one of the meeting’s co-chairs, and he opened the meeting with a proposal that the agenda be changed, with programme concerns being addressed first, and allotted two hours. We saw this as (1) a blatant attempt to delay addressing process and practicalities (finances, office staffing, accommodation, the nature of the legal company, the web site) and (2) an abuse of power by the chair. He attempted to railroad this proposal through time and time again, and instead of acknowledging there was no consensus to accept a proposed change to the agenda, a debate about it was allowed to go on for 40 minutes. In the end, the programme was discussed anyway within the report back from the Istanbul European Assembly, and when I and others tried to raise a point of order to object to this, we were ignored and then shot down straightaway. Even three hours into the four-hour meeting, the chair continued to insist that the programme themes be discussed, despite many people’s objections and requests that these be more appropriately dealt with in the Programme Working Group and elsewhere. The programme content was still being discussed with less than an hour of the meeting to go. A prime point of contention was around a proposal of a member of SA (present here in the context of the front group ‘Abortion Rights’) and other verticals, who insisted that because an outreach meeting of women’s groups had reached consensus that the phrase ‘women’s liberation’ should be added to one of the six programme themes/axes then this previous decision meant that we automatically had to agree to that. Of course many of us did not, arguing instead that the principle of transversality compelled us to insure that women’s liberation issues were addressed *across* all axes.

Any objections raised or alternative viewpoints to these two proposals met not only with hostile responses, but also with a strategy that the verticals’ repeated numerous times throughout the organising process: namely, a passive aggressive restating, inaccurately, of the horizontals’ proposal or objection, accompanied by a false characterisation of a person’s/group’s position. For example, when over a third of those attending the meeting objected to the chair’s proposed agenda change (which effectively meant that practicalities and process would not be addressed), Alex Callinicos (SWP/ front group Project K) took the microphone and in faux lamentation mode, said, ‘We do indeed have a responsibility to the European process. I find it amazing that people do not want to talk about the programme, which is what will mobilise and excite people the most.’ Later in the meeting, he declared that ‘These people who constantly go on about process are in fact really wanting to get power. It is a power struggle.’ This latter accusation was of course laughable – the horizontals did not want power, but a proliferation of democratic possibilities in the organising process (see article by Jeremy Gilbert, this issue). It also was a prime indication of the pot-kettle mentality that pervaded the verticals’ discourse throughout. I also want to highlight the first accusation here: i.e. the twisting of the objections over giving the programme two hours of time that afternoon, into the formulation that we ‘didn’t want to talk about the programme’, and the implication that we *didn’t care* about the programme, which was simply untrue. Later in

the meeting this abusive dynamic was repeated by women involved with Socialist Action, who accused everyone opposing the adding of the wording ‘women’s liberation’ to one of the programme axes of being ‘opposed to women’s liberation’.

Two other things occurred at this meeting that added to its elevation to surreal heights of abuses of process and that contributed to our already great feelings of frustration. First, in cases in which there was not consensus for verticals’ proposals, the chair or another vertical would immediately call for a vote ‘only by members of affiliated organisations’. This request (1) violates the Charter of Principles; (2) goes against the agreed upon ‘For a UK-ESF Organising Committee’ statement hammered out at the March EA negotiation (as described above); and (3) added insult to injury, in that many organisations had not been able to affiliate at that point, due to the verticals’ refusal to give out information about the nature of the company that had been created to assist with the organizing process and the precise legal parameters accompanying the affiliation process (others had not affiliated because of financial difficulties, even though that, too, was against the organising statement’s parameters). This was not the first time that the verticals played what we had come to call ‘the affiliation card’, and we were sick and tired of this blatant discriminatory practice. The other thing that occurred was that the chair led a SWP-SA walk-out at the end of the meeting. When no agreement could be reached about a slate of people who would represent the UK at the upcoming European Programme Working Group that was to meet in Paris later that month, the chair announced that the meeting was over and physically disconnected the power from the microphone, even though someone from Babels (the organization of volunteer translators/interpreters, <http://www.babels.org>), was trying to give the report they had been promised time for.

So, there was manipulation of the order of the agenda, consensus processes were ignored, objectors and their objections were falsely characterised and then attacked, the ‘affiliation card’ was played, and in the end the verticals refused to stay and negotiate when some of their pet proposals were not adopted. The spirit of these actions was one of contempt, condescension and disregard for non-vertical ideas or reasoning. There were interesting emotional responses to these dynamics, some of them overtly expressed at the meeting itself. One horizontal ended up shouting ‘Fuck you!’ to the chair, who at times had been directly verbally attacking this person. There were many other instances of both verticals and horizontals swearing, but mostly at a lower volume. Nonetheless, the verticals began a smear campaign against this one loud swear-er over the mainstream ESF e-mail lists, once again labelling horizontals as ‘troublemakers’ and righteously insisting that they could ‘not condone abusive behaviour’ (!) such as this at meetings. In fact, this was the first time that anger had been expressed by the horizontals in such a strong way. It can be interpreted as a standing up to the abuser(s), and many of us in the audience felt both embarrassment and relief when this indignation was (finally) expressed. ‘Fuck you!’ might not be the most elegant or effective language, but its rawness reflects the way it feels to be in that place of having been abused, of being falsely accused of being the abuser (classic ‘blame the victim’ stuff), and of simply not be able to take it any more. There is probably much more to be thought through and theorised about the nature and role of anger in these situations; I offer this anecdote as a contribution to starting that conversation.

I came away from this 16 May 2004 OC meeting with a complete sense of disgust. And I think this meeting was, for me, the final straw. Somewhere a line had been crossed; the abusive behaviour was simply too blatant, and, well, too abusive.

It was necessary for me to be out of the country in June of 2004. Once away from the ESF organising process, I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted. I felt a sense of relief, like I could breathe again. And now, looking back, I can see that this relief was precisely that of being *removed from the scene of abuse*. I also felt quite keenly that sense of ‘having my life back’. And so I was relieved that upon my return to London, I had an excuse for not getting back into the organising process: I had to finish my Ph.D. dissertation. By this time, July of 2004, the horizontals had, by and large, pulled out of the ‘official’ organising process entirely. A meeting of many groups, horizontals and Wombles and many others, had been called at the end of May, and folks had started working very hard on organising alternative events for the ESF. I was completely supportive of these efforts, but by July had simply run out of time and energy to contribute to these efforts, as my dissertation needed attending to. I still felt relieved, and as the ESF itself approached, I had mixed feelings. I was amazed, heartened, and quite grateful at the array of wonderful, well-planned, and politically substantive alternative events that were being announced on various e-mail lists in the late summer and early autumn (see <http://www.altspaces.net/>; <http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=AutonomousSpaceForESF2004>). I felt a slight twinge of guilt, and an even greater sense of sadness that I’d been missing out on the camaraderie and energy of the collective efforts that had been undertaken along these lines, but I was excited about attending as much of the ‘alternative ESF’ as I could. As the October date came closer, I discovered that, actually, I felt complete disgust and loathing for the entire official event, and I had no desire to attend it at all. It seems clear to me now that going to the official ESF felt like going to visit someone who had abused me as a child – something I wanted to avoid at all costs. I was stuck in a place of wanting to avoid, to shut down, to ignore the feelings – and the abusers – and almost pretend that the abuse did not happen. There was, to be fair, a more rational dynamic that was occurring as well: I decided that I wanted to take in the positive energy, brilliant thinking, and collective spirit of the alternative spaces. As I hadn’t been able to contribute much to the organising of these spaces, I very much wanted to support those who did. So I attended many of these fantastic events, such as the Radical Theory Forum and the Life Despite Capitalism workshop, to name just two out of a plethora of alternative offerings. How much came out of the hastily organised alternative ESF events was impressive, in both the quantity of alternative events, as well as the quality (depth, interweaving of cultural and experiential elements with the analytical and political, proposals for the future, and a hell of a lot of fun and solidarity). I was inspired by what everyone who helped organise these alternative events was able to achieve; thank you to all of you.

## Denying and Disavowing the Abusive Reality

I want to mention one more emotional dynamic that was part of this whole process, one that was quite insidious: denial. When the abused or powerless person/group requests acknowledgment of the reality, the abuser refuses, continues to talk from the place of

the lie, of the fantasy, pretending that everyone is really ‘on the same side’, disavowing by this very pretence not only the real differences in power (and in this case of politics) but also the reality of the abuse. The abused are left feeling frustration and disbelief. Head shaking – ‘can this person or these people really be in this much denial?’ ‘Can there really be this refusal to acknowledge what is really going on?’

One of the ways this denial and pretence happened time and time again was in the SWP-SA invocation of the ‘we’ of the ‘Left’. This is akin to the address used by the dominant media all the time, what Stam (1983: 39) calls “the regime of the fictive “We”“ used, for example, by announcers in U.S. television news. Allen explains that “the signified” of such a fictive we “is usually left vague enough to cover both the addresser and the implied addressee” (1992: 122). The result, according to Stam, is ‘misrecognition of mirror-like images’. Like that of television newscasters, the discourse of members of élite left organisations such as the SWP and the GLA “claims to speak for us, and often does, but just as often it deprives us of the right to speak by deluding us into thinking that its own discourse is our own” (Stam, 1983: 39). Speaking of television news, Stam says, “Often it gives us the illusion of social harmony, the ersatz communication of a global village which is overwhelmingly white, male and corporate”. (Ironically, this characterisation reflects the SWP-SA-big union discourse that pervaded the entire UK-ESF organising process.) Those of us who were not at all convinced of such unity in fact or in purpose were left to say constantly, “Wait a minute. ‘We’ are part of a different ‘We’ – not your ‘We’. And our ‘We’ comes out of a completely different political context, different political goals for social change, and different ideas of how we effect social change as well.”

Confronted with this denial and pretence, as well as with frequent outright lies, the abused find ourselves feeling like *we* are ‘crazy’. The irrationality of the abuser(s) is thus transferred onto the victims of the abuse and irrational behaviours. This is just one of the emotional bases for the horizontals’ frequent experience of feeling distraught when people not privy to participation in the organising process itself expressed disbelief at our characterisations. ‘Surely you must be exaggerating – it can’t be that bad!’ many externally located folks would say. The only response to this is first to insist: ‘No, this *is* happening’, and then to feel a very deep need to describe the events themselves, to document the abuse (of power, of process) in great detail, and then the concomitant also very strong *need to be believed*. This need obviously has a personal resonance, as it is difficult to deal with feelings of not being believed and heard when one has seen and experienced abuse first-hand. But at the same time this need also is politically vital: for if the real dynamics are not acknowledged, analyses of the situations and decisions about how to respond to them and move forward cannot happen, or at the very least, they will be distorted and ineffective. Nonetheless, it does put the people who make the effort to speak out about and document the abuses in the position of being defensive and almost child-like, ‘Hey, really, we’re not making this up!’ Add to this the incessant false characterisation of all of us horizontals as ‘the “real” troublemakers’, which made any expressions from horizontally minded folks outside the UK suggesting we were either exaggerating, or distracting from the very real work to be done by our complaining, all the more painful and exasperating. The ‘blame the victim’ phenomena are even more difficult to experience when it comes from potential allies.

## The ESF, the Emotional Aftermath, and a Few Ideas on How To Proceed

I must admit that once the ESF was over, I did retreat again. I needed to focus on my dissertation writing, it is true. But I also, mostly unconsciously, took steps to distance myself from anything related to the ESF, past or future. In fact, it was only in realising that I did still actually want to write this article I'd so delayed, that I acknowledged what was holding me back, i.e. all this repressed emotion. Others I've spoken to in recent weeks as I've been composing this, and re-experiencing many of the emotions I've just described here (along with the return of the nightmares, though thankfully less frequently than last year), have agreed that the ESF organising process was a scene of abuse, and that they, too, are still in the throes of post-traumatic stress. (And whole organisations and networks, such as the London Social Forum, have had to collectively recover from the emotional devastation the ESF organising process caused). I hope that the narratives and thoughts I've shared here are an initial step towards helping us address this post-traumatic stress and towards formulating strategies and plans to acknowledge and deal with our emotions in Social Forum processes, and in all activist efforts more generally (see [www.activist-trauma.net](http://www.activist-trauma.net)).

I also note that throughout the writing of this article, I discovered big gaps in my memory. As many of these events happened quite a while ago, perhaps that does not sound surprising. However, usually I can quote exact dates and times of particular conversations and events, even years after they have occurred. I attribute this fuzziness in my memory directly to the distresses that are, for me, still attached to this whole experience. Distress makes us forget. So, the shame, dread, fear, grief and sadness, frustration, and shock that coalesced around this organising process have been dormant, repressed for months, and as a result, they have affected my memory. I believe that many of the horizontals, myself included, are still walking around in a state of post-traumatic stress. Writing this piece, documenting the abusive dynamics and the emotions that I and others typically experienced during this process, and trying to articulate these in some coherent fashion, has led me to face much that I had been avoiding. Now, I realise that the UK-ESF organising process was precisely a scene of oppression and abuse. Equally, those of us who went through it need to acknowledge what feelings and issues we are still carrying around as a result of having experienced the irrational, abusive, and hostile behaviour that pervaded the process as a means of avoiding our perpetuation of such dynamics in other contexts.

My initial suggestions for what we can learn and carry forward from these experiences are:

- (1) To incorporate an understanding of the role of emotions, and in particular the common experience of restimulation, in any activist efforts.
- (2) To set aside space and time for attention to these emotional dynamics as well as for the more practical issues and tasks.
- (3) To work to build an activist community (or, more accurately, communities) in which we give each other support for our feelings, such as those outlined here.

(4) To create spaces for us to release our anger – at the exploitative society, at oppressive dynamics, at ‘the state’, as well as at abusive factions ‘on the Left’ that we run up against.

(4) To learn about the oppression of activists and the common internalisations that result (such as feeling overwhelmed, guilty, and hopeless, and such as being out of balance in terms of how much time we devote to ‘organising’ in that larger sense and how much we devote to ourselves).

(5) Along these lines, to create a climate of encouraging us to be, individually and collectively, as nurturing to ourselves as possible. This will mean remembering to treat our bodies well (I have never smoked so many cigarettes in my life as before, after, and in between UK-ESF organising meetings!). Giving ourselves validation, nurturing ourselves and each other, and creating spaces to release our triggered emotions will lead to less of the self-destructive behaviours, such as excessive smoking and drinking (and lack of rest, to name another frequent struggle for many of us who engage in social change efforts). It will also help us to think more clearly, and to choose more effective actions (or non-actions, as the case may be).

I also have a sense that it would be useful to learn how to reach for the humanness underneath all the patterns that people in power display. As yet, I have not cleared enough of my despair and hopeless around this issue, so I do not have much clear thinking to offer here. But in the longer term, I do think we will have to learn how to reach for and connect with people in positions of power more successfully. It may be that in cases that are abusive in the way that the UK-ESF organising process was, the rational thing to do is to avoid or leave that process. After all, expectations of humanness are a basis for any possibilities of negotiation, and therefore are essential for any politics to take place. But there may be other instances in which it will be possible for us to reach around the distresses of those with whom we are working to connect with the human being, and thereby move forward together more effectively.

## APPENDIX

Letter received by Spirit Matters, via e-mail, January 2004:

16 Jan 2004  
European Social Forum Programme Group  
c/o World Development Movement  
25 Beehive Place, London, SW9 72R

Dear Friend,

We want to inform you of the chance for your organisation to be involved in an extraordinary and far-reaching event later this year. The European Social Forum (ESF) is an opportunity for trade unions, community groups, anti-racist organisations, women’s groups, lesbian and gaygroups, the anti-war movement, campaigns around the environment, privatisation, health,

disability, asylum, housing – everyone trying to create another world – to make vital connections with people organising on the same issues across Europe and internationally.

This, the third ESF, will be held in London in November 2004. The previous events in Florence in 2002 and Paris in 2003 brought together 60,000 social movement, community and trade union activists from across Europe and the world. These inspiring three day events included workshops, debates, seminars, cultural events and rallies united by the theme: Another World is Possible!

What makes the ESF special is that the themes for debate and the seminar and workshop topics are decided by campaigning, cultural and political organisations across Europe. We are writing to you on behalf of the UK group co-ordinating the programme of the ESF and to encourage you to get involved in this process. The Programme Group is one of several groups set up to plan the ESF in London. See details overleaf of how you can find out more.

The European Social Forum is part of a global movement for change and social justice. It was inspired by the World Social Forum (WSF) which came out of the belief that protest by itself is not enough. Movements for social change need the space and the international exchange of ideas and experiences to develop alternatives to the free market madness which dominates mainstream politics and our daily lives. Social Forums, global, regional and local, are attempts to create opportunities to exchange information, learn, be inspired, think aloud about future visions and strategies and plan joint international action, all in an atmosphere respectful of diverse opinions and experiences. A sign that this idea is one whose time has come is that as we write, tens of thousands of people are gathering for the 4th WSF in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), India.

In the WSF spirit, the organisation of the ESF in 2004 is intended to be participative and egalitarian. The Programme Working Group is made up of reps from around 30 trade union, campaigning, political and cultural organisations. We come from many different parts of the left and labour and social movements. But we are all united in wanting to organise an international event which will be of real practical use to men and women on the frontline of resistance and alternatives to environmental devastation, privatisation and war. Public sector workers demanding better wages and conditions for the vital work they do, asylum seekers fighting for the right to work and against destitution, detention and deportation; black and immigrant people fighting racist attacks; single mothers or part-time and low paid workers refusing to be sidelined; women organising against subordination, rape and other kinds of violence; people with disabilities and older people defending day care, transport and pensions; lesbians and gay people active in all these movements; sex workers fighting eviction and harassment; workers in manufacturing resisting redundancy and insecurity; people taking action on international issues of war and peace; unfair trade and third world debt – the list is endless but all these groups and many more have a common interest in working together across Europe and internationally. We want the programme to be strongly influenced by the needs and ideas of all these movements and struggles.

As outlined above, the programme will include large debates (kept to a minimum), seminars to debate strategies and propose action for resistance, and smaller workshops dealing with practical cooperation and movement building. Our job is to encourage the widest possible participation of organisations in workshops and seminars – and to help them in whatever way they need.

We are not asking you to commit to anything at this point. This is just to sound out your views and ideas. Later this year there will be a chance formally to register interest in organising

specific workshops or seminars. We will let you know the timetable table. There will also be a financial appeal for the ESF and organisations will be urged to affiliate.

Don't hesitate to contact us if you have any queries. See e-mails and addresses below. If you would like a speaker about the ESF then please let us know.

We look forward to hearing from you and possibly meeting you at the first UK Assembly for the ESF in 2004 on the 24th January, from 1.30-5.00 pm, at the GLA, City Hall, the Queens Walk, London SE1 or Assemblies in the future. The purpose of the UK Assembly on the 24th is to discuss the structure for the organisation of the UK ESF. Future assemblies will also discuss the programme.

All the best,

Alex Gordon (RMT), Hannah Griffith (Friends of the Earth), Jonathan Neale (Globalise Resistance), Anna T (Crossroads Womens Centre), Dave Timms (World Development Movement), Hilary Wainwright (Red Pepper)

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How you can become involved in the ESF in 2004?

We hope you or a colleague will fill in the form enclosed, adding any further comments. Join the email list for information and discussion on the ESF. E-mail [esf-uk-info@lists.mobilise.uk](mailto:esf-uk-info@lists.mobilise.uk)

[<mailto:esf-uk-info@lists.mobilise.uk>](mailto:esf-uk-info@lists.mobilise.uk)

We hope you will send a delegate to attend the next UK Assembly for the European Social Forum on 24th January, from 1.30-5.00 pm, at the GLA, City Hall, the Queens Walk, London SE1 to discuss the structure for organising the UK ESF.

Send delegates to the next European Assembly, which will be held in London on March 6th and 7th.

Yes, my organisation would like to make an input into the ESF programme

Form: Name of organisation:.....

Name and position of contact filling the form:

Main activity of organisation:

What issues would your organisation like to see on the ESF agenda?

Please give your three priorities.

Have you any suggestions about how we present these issues? What kind of debates for example?

Would you be willing jointly to organise a workshop or seminar on any of these issues?

Are you already part of a European or international network or does your organisation have international connections?

What resources can you bring to the ESF ? Time? publicity? Help with fund-raising? Access to rooms or accommodation – if you are based in London?

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PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM BY POST TO: ESF Programme Group, C/O WDM, 25 Beehive Place, London SW9 72R

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**the author**

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