

# The Social forum-process; tendencies and features

Niklas Hansson

[niklas.hansson@ethnology.gu.se](mailto:niklas.hansson@ethnology.gu.se), [n.hansson2@spray.se](mailto:n.hansson2@spray.se)

Department of Ethnology Gothenburg University

Etnologiska Institutionen Göteborgs Universitet

*Paper från ACSIS nationella forskarkonferens för kulturstudier, Norrköping 13–15 juni 2005.  
Konferensrapport publicerad elektroniskt på [www.ep.liu.se/ecp/015/](http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp/015/). © Författaren.*

## **Introduction**

This piece of writing is concerned with contemporary politics, primarily focused on the World Social Forum, and *the ongoing political process* that I would like to refer to as the Social Forum-process. My point of entry as it comes down to this particular political process and my research, is the local “offspring” called the Gothenburg Social Forum. A Social Forum cannot be conceived of as the representation of *a* movement (a particular social movement and its’ repertoires and proposals), rather, the Charter of Principles<sup>1</sup> (the document that “guides” this process) and some of the initiators of this political invention, proclaims it to be more like an open meeting place,

for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any other form of imperialism and are committed to building a planetary society directed toward fruitful relationships [...]<sup>2</sup>

– or that of a communicational and informational space.

The Social Forum-process, the process that was set off into the world (if you look by datum) through the stimulation of what is called the World Social Forum’s *Charter of Principles* and which was launched during the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in the year of 2001 as an effect stemming from these efforts. Number two in the chronological order of this document is interesting for the remainder of this paper, hence proclaiming the unleashing of a process, or a flow of orientations: “2. The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localized in time and space. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that ‘another world is possible’, it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it” (Leite, J-C, 2003: 10) This imperative has been taken seriously if one directs the attention towards what has happened world wide since then. If only taking into consideration how this particular idea of a meeting place subsequent to these initial steps and principles has been spread like a contagious viral implementation of an open space for communication between various actors engaged with how global and local economical development and political power are executed today. Local efforts sprung from this document have emerged on all continents<sup>3</sup>, thus making

---

1 [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) (2005 06 01).

2 Ibid.

3 Unsgaard, O, 2005 Det globala civilsamhällets 1990-tal. De Sociala Forumens föregångare; FN-konferenser och den transnationella Zapatismen, (Forthcoming article on the genealogy of the social forum-process).

this single space of communication a global one. But, these encounters should not be addressed only as a revelation of common projects and desires, but also as a reminder of “the differences of those involved – that is differences of material conditions and political orientation” (Hardt, M, 2002: 114). Some of the historical events that lead ahead towards the Social Forums, as we know them today (in a reductive and linear fashion) were witnessed during the end of the last decade. There might seem to be a sudden emergent political activity during the demonstrations and events that made the WTO summit in Seattle 1999 very much a global event. And, as sociologist Håkan Thörn (2005) recently proclaims, the global media (communication) coverage, transnational networks of organizations, individuals, new media and increased opportunities for travelling and emigration, and the increased collection of agreements on a trans-/international or global scale, prominently via the UN concerning human rights (followed by the constant counter-conferences organized “outside” the official UN-conferences<sup>4</sup>), thus help to include world wide or global attention toward issues that affects globally<sup>5</sup>. The cycle of protests on a large scale that followed, continual reports on protests and demonstrations at various summits involving UN, G-8, the World Bank, etcetera<sup>6</sup> (Leite, J-C, 2003) was part of an already ongoing rally of various social struggles against the effects of a neo-liberal agenda, most obviously seen in the global south and actualised in the protests against the implementation of programs and projects of the IMF, the World Bank and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)<sup>7</sup>.

### ***A concretisation of globalization theory...***

Now, if not to waste all the time and space on extracting the lineage of these events I will carry on with a brief draft concerning certain cultural and technological developments that are interesting and possible tendencies to be considered, in the context of a supposedly global informational culture<sup>8</sup>, or what has also been described as a time-space compression that has also made it feasible to talk about the social forum-process as part of a global social movement<sup>9</sup> and globalization. In the wake after the crash of the dialectic between the two great opponents, the US liberal line and the communist bureaucratic line; followed by the repression of socialist alternatives against neo liberalism in a rapid speed, the world ends up with the “only one choice” agenda. With the destruction of the Berlin wall as a symbolic marker in 1989, there seemed to have been some trouble in the political camp as to propose

---

4 Unsgaard, O, 2005 Det globala civilsamhällets 1990-tal. De Sociala Forumens föregångare; FN-konferenser och den transnationella Zapatismen, (Forthcoming article on the genealogy of the social forum-process).

5 Thörn, H, Solidarity across borders: The Anti-apartheid movement, the Media and the emergence of a global civil society (forthcoming).

6 Leite, J-C, 2003 The World Social Forum – Strategies of Resistance.

7 Hardt & Negri, 2004: 214ff, Leite, J-C, 2003, *Challenging Empires*; Editors: Jai Sen, Anita Anand, Arturo Escobar, Peter Waterman; Pdf available at [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html), *Another world is possible* – Popular alternatives to globalization at the World Social Forum; Fischer & Ponniah 2003

8 More than anything I believe that the concept of *information* would gain a high-ranking spot as common denominator of the globalization process in its most common feature. Computer mediated information, TV, Information Technology (IT), Informational economy (stock markets etc.), digital technologies working by the processing of information, information as part of the paradigm of immaterial labour so powerfully developed in recent theories of the transformation of production, information flows and overload in relation to the Internet and how to cope with the ever changing flow of information... It is probably a faulty to track down a certain trait as the dominating figure of contemporary culture, but information is a mighty great part of present-day global culture. Of course, this perspective might dispose certain traits of euro centrism in its narrow scope on the transformational power of information and computer mediation or communication.

9 Here I do not refer social movement to some sort of social movement theory, which would, for example, imply either the European identity paradigm (*Nomads of the present*, Mellucci, A, 1989) or the Anglo-American paradigm or resource mobilization theory and rational choice (See Sidney Tarrow, 1998, etc.). The battle of the definition of what a social movement is and what it is not is not the ground of my attention.

alternatives to a rapidly changing capitalist order. Some choose to call this global capital order an empire, some call it imperial (to recall the hegemonic position of USA in the new world order)<sup>10</sup>, but the prominent factor seems to me being that it is a global phenomenon carrying with it some essential characteristics when it comes down to politics, and the possibility of global information and communication.

Globalization brings together societies that earlier appeared far from each other, a compression of space-time that speeds up the pace of change in economic and social relations, while a global media network saturates all populations with information and images. (Leite, J-C, 2003: 36)

It appears, as there is a double movement implicit here. Firstly, that of a flattening or standardization of disseminated content regarding the diffusion of information and images from out of a culture industry. “After incorporation, local cultures are picked up distributed globally, thus contributing to cultural hybridization or cultural imperialism (depending on whom you listen to)” (Terranova, T, 2004: 80). Secondly, the global media seems to unravel all kinds of traditional culture borders, and in some cases this explodes in violent and repressive resistances deeply involved with reaffirmation of cultural identity<sup>11</sup>. Also this parallels the idea of “you are either with us or against us”, the political discourse of post-11<sup>th</sup> September and the war against terror. The route chosen by promoters of the social forum-process is not to choose the agenda of either/or as with or against us, but rather that of alternatives and a positive addition of differences and antagonisms.

### **... And cultural politics in Information age<sup>12</sup>**

From an informational perspective, a meaningful perception, one that can be made sense of and articulated, is a statistical compound of the familiar and the unfamiliar [...] Indeed, Crasson (like Baudrillard 20 years later) will conclude that information and meaning might be inversely proportional: the more information the less meaning. (Terranova, T, 2004: 14)

When images provided for describing reality do not seem to project the “true” pictures or positions of the individual’s place in society, the result will be the segmentation that we know as a the implosion of the social or the Baudrillardian signs with no referents or without meaning<sup>13</sup>, working by the logic of increased number and frequency of images → decrease of

---

10 On the world order as Empire, see Hardt & Negri, 2000, wherein they unclasp the present global power situation by engaging a network theory of power stemming from influences of French philosophy and the works of Foucault and Deleuze & Guattari. As to the imperial theory of power (or should I say hegemony-theory), Swedish writer Andreas Malm (2004) has made an effort in proclaiming the “wrongs” of seeing present world power as that of a network power without any centre and disclaims any effort that fails to see the role of the US as a prime motor or leader of a “pack”, as in the Gramscian tradition of the hegemony-figure.

11 A contemporary example of this discourse could be what anthropologist Hylland Eriksen names a battle between the problematic conceptual pair of “West” and “islam” (2004). Identity politics, politics of cultural differences and post-colonial perspectives on differences, are widely acknowledged throughout contemporary intellectual debates.

12 I am personally against the conceptualisation of our present age as a sign of some kind of revolutionary step forward, catalysed by a new category of reality labelled *information age*. Rather, we could pay attention to how new technology processes loads of information at higher speeds than before and at greater spatial width.

13 This is what is called simulation or the reference between signs without any real objects – only difference that refers to another difference... from cultural use value, to exchange value, to sign value...

meaning<sup>14</sup>, the uttermost flux and the dissipative character of information society is a tendency that probably infects the way that (political) subjectivity is constructed today. The proliferation of struggles involved with gender issues, cultural identity, racial conflicts, national concerns and sexual preferences, highlights the attack on macroscopic moulds of identity. With the rise of informational global space (TV, Internet etc) there might seem to be a greater potential for modulation and dissection of the body as it is “split and decomposed into segments of variable and adjustable sizes (race, gender, sexual preference; but also income, demographics, cultural preferences and interests). It is at this point that we can notice the convergence of the cultural politics of information with digital techniques of decomposition and recombination.” (Terranova, 2004: 34). The convergence of contemporary politics in the shape of the social forum-process and the *social forum as an open space* for horizontal communication<sup>15</sup> (composition of technology, devices, objects, people make up the informational milieu of the local-global political network), and digital techniques for communication and information is prominent.

In a fashion of unparalleled speed in the history of politics (regarding the mobilizing of and communication between various forces of antagonism against capital, war and imperial power), the self-organizational mode of social movements that have risen in opposition to neo liberalism, organizes and communicates by a mixture of traditional and highly complex forms of communication to connect their diverse moments. The demonstrations against the war on Iraq in February 2003 is possibly the top number ever to come together and mobilize political protest by means of *no central leadership* and many are the reactions on how previous believed to be totally oppositional forces, the likes of churches and anarchists etcetera, coming together on occasions like the well announced demonstrations in Seattle 1999<sup>16</sup>. Rob Shields (2000), as cited by Terranova (2002) suggests us to speak of “drawing together” – a *mode of composition* rather than governance<sup>17</sup>.

The most frequently referred to writer regarding characteristics for a globalized network culture could possibly be sociologist/geographer Manuel Castells and his three part opus on the rise of a network society loosely “entitled” *the Information Age*. His proposition for understanding how computer-mediated communication relates to that of cultural globalization works on two levels: Firstly, at one level it is the production of a common time-space continuum, characterized by an extreme time-space compression (mentioned above). He also argues that in network society, the previous constraints of time disappear, thus the emergence of a timeless time, while at the same time the firmness of space and its boundaries are destabilized by flows; flows of capital, flows of signs, and flows of people. The other level of this movement relates to that of the disconnected local time (or the majority of excluded poor parts of the worlds’ population), the disconnected majority for whom the timeless time of the global space becomes a wired minority – or repetitive system, almost as it was an autonomous system of self-reference<sup>18</sup>. So, how to use this notion of understanding a global networked society in the area of contemporary social struggles and most prominently that of the Social

---

14 The multiplication of images for gender, class, ethnicity, cultural identity etc. The idea proposed by Baudrillard is meaning as simulation (Baudrillard, 1994).

15 Whitaker, C, *The WSF as an open space* ([http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html)).

16 See amongst others, Hardt, M, *Today's Bandung* (New Left Review 14, Mars/April 2002 “One of the basic characteristics of the network form is that no two nodes face each other in contradiction; rather, they are always triangulated by a third, and then a fourth, and then by an indefinite number of others in the web. This is one of the characteristics of the Seattle events that we have had the most trouble understanding: groups which we thought in objective contradiction to one another – environmentalists and trade unions, church groups and anarchists – were suddenly able to work together, in the context of the network of the multitude.” (Hardt, M, 2002: 117).

17 Terranova, T, 2002: 8.

18 Castells, M, 1996: 414-421.

Forum-process and, when it comes down to it, the local Gothenburg Social Forum which is the prime basis regarding the field that I am approaching as far as my research goes (– or the framed site of my ethnographic work and online material).

The most concrete understanding of how the supposedly timeless space is re-connected at the level of locality would be how debates and practices of the disqualified world is constantly inserted into the timeless detached global. By virtue of computer mediated communication the local passions is re-connected by such actions as multiple petitions and alerts/alarms, not to mention an uninterrupted circulation of information about local political/social struggles (from every corner of the world). Thus “virtual social movements continuously re-connect that which is separated (by space, time, limited access to through mainstream media etc.)” (Terranova, 2002: 7)

The notion of a “space of flows” offered by Castells is probably best understood as the basic characteristic of a space that premieres flows over the solidity of the “space of places”. And, as I tried to describe above, the argument put forward by Castells regarding this space of flows (time-space compression) should most likely to be regarded as a “competition” between the included and the excluded, connection and disconnection within a sphere of global informational networks – “[...] not so much the play of meaning but the overall dynamics of an open informational milieu.” (Terranova, T, 2004b: 52) This idea is something that I have tried to think about a little bit harder. It could imply that if I am researching a political struggle/phenomena/methodology/place within a global *informational* space, then maybe, what I am really closing in on is the concept of information. That is information, not solely being an aspect of what is commonly referred to as an act of communication and information being the content of communication – but, rather, the combination of the double articulation of information as on the one hand a *physical* force (mass) with dynamic qualities characterized by nonlinearity and probabilistic features, and on the other, a signifying and meaning-producing activity (Ibid.). I want to look deeper into the potential of this material not through representational analysis of the Social Forum-process, but as part of a cultural and political production<sup>19</sup>, the engagement with the medium (in-between), the types of communication and organization that it enables and its relationship with the context of late capitalist society. \_

### ***The riches of process***

Here is the argument. If we want to understand the mechanics of power and organization it is important not to start out assuming whatever we wish to explain. For instance, it is a good idea not to take for granted that there is a macrosocial system on the one hand, and bits and pieces of derivate microsocial detail on the other. If we do this we close off most of the interesting questions about the origins of power and organization. Instead we should start with a clean state. For instance, we might start with interaction and assume that interaction is all that there is. Then we might ask how some kinds of interactions more or less succeed in stabilising and reproducing themselves [...] (Law, J, 1992: 2)

When faced with contemplating the social forum-process as part of a global space, as far as communication goes (TV, Internet, Tele-com, global media reach), one reaches for that relationship between the global and the local, which simultaneously expresses a global communicational *space* and the local singular *place*. Maybe we should cast this distinction aside, and treat the “globality” of this space as both global and local at the same time. Thus, bringing forth a moment where we can choose a perspective where the global-local distinction

---

<sup>19</sup> The type of communication (collective composing, re-composing, formulated, re-formulated) that the medium of a Social Forum enables.

gives way for another mode of characterising this process. Maybe a time-space concept where we look at this process as composed of various political bodies that interact and relate to each other with different space- or time cycles (a set or nested set of cycles) would better describe it. This move could enable us to think of the process not as cooperation between different levels, but a process individuating different spatiotemporal individuals. They are not either global or local, they are both at the same time but with different speeds – for example, at a particular state the process works by local (Gothenburg) time speed, at another it works with global (Internet) time (frictionless, or nothing is never completely frictionless but rather faster and therefore appears as frictionless, think of the incredible speed complementing ever more plentiful bandwidth and optical fibre technology).

During the initial state of the social forum-process, as we can see above in the excerpt from the *Charter of Principles*, this was always-already conceived of as an open system, an open architecture<sup>20</sup> promoted to engage change in the world and a potential to include different expressions concerning critique of neo liberal world order (outside of the right-wing conservative discourse) and, also, the possibility to inform each other on contributions of another possible global development, against corporate globalization. Thus, the forum-process is not directed but *directional*, no one body or will, can pilot it<sup>21</sup>. The loosely put together formula, from out of which this process was initiated, brings on certain characteristics concerning the development of the forums that would follow from that first one in Porto Alegre. This space, one of the great political inventions in this new movement, the world social forum-process, is the place where since January 2001, a large part of what often is referred to as the global justice movement has met to debate and discuss its struggle. The social forums sustains a new form of politics, a space that uses as its model the idea of horizontally structured networks, rather than a hierarchical pyramid. This model condenses *and* extends points of dispute and facilitates the dynamic of dialogue and collaboration. It is not an organization or institution, and no final resolution or assembly (political body) assumes to speak for all of the participants. No transcendental image is used for representation<sup>22</sup> - no hegemonic signifier. The idea is a composition combining heterogeneous entities without assuming any homogenisation and that could be thought of as a heterogeneous assemblage. The view of several (re-) productive communities (local) inhabiting different contexts (political ecosystems) is what characterizes this notion of synthesis (De Landa, M, 2002: 107).

As developed and evolved as a network of networks, or an *internetwork* (Terranova, 2004:41), it (the Social Forum-process) provides an analyst with interesting features of a topological formation that presents a dynamic system. The “hard-ware” of the system (relatively stable sites or nodes in a network<sup>23</sup>), consists in large of the documents that make up the *Charter of Principles*, interrelated protocols from preparatory work, certain “rules” that

---

20 I got comments on the social forum-process which come close to this, as describing it as an “ongoing building” (“bygge” in Swedish).

21 Massumi, B, 1992: 103 on the not directed escape from molar or stable forms, moulds readymade (for example the utopia-to-come in traditional Marxism), which he names becoming-other. A qualitative movement by which a system entails the opening up towards an “outside”, the other, as to become different – I think of the Social Forum as such a system, constantly up for change though opening up toward new additions and different political orientations. This is an inclusive strategy that I reckon is close to that of the Social Forum strategy.

22 See Massumi (1992) on the transcendental image as reducing a diverse world into the two-or three dimensional representation of image. “Every molar organization produces an image of transcendent agency of this kind. For the State, it is often the blood of the race or the flag, for Christianity, the blood of Christ; for the Family, the Phallus and semen. The categorical grids policed by these images are analogs. Because every term on one identity grid correspond to a functional equivalent on each of the others, it is possible to circulate among them[...]” (Massumi, B, 1992: 112).

23 Might be called *clusters* as to recall the heterogeneous character that informs them.

combined are the backbone of some of the methods related to decision-making (the implementation of consensus at meetings is highly valued), web sites (even though they are constantly in change and got interactive functions) for the various forums and the technology (computer-mediated communication and information). Because of the precarious character of a distributed network, the participants (individuals or activists) cannot really be featured as stable nodes in the social forum-process. A likeness with that of individuals and machines connected to the global Internet technology is probably not that far away. I do *not argue that the social forum-process is like the Internet*, but the way that individuals connect to and disconnect from the overall process, at certain points in time and leave at another (we do not have membership registration here) reminds me of the collective communities that flourish as Internet activity. The Internet is a highly used technology as well for the dissemination of information as for the global reach of the forum-process. Many are the alternative newssites, newlists, newsblogs that constantly post and report during these events, and in-between them.

Also, the speed and potentially democratic<sup>24</sup> and collective character of a medium as the Internet, is important for the making consistent of a political network of networks. One example of how the Internet is used is how parts of preparatory work were being performed during preparation for last years' European Social Forum<sup>25</sup>. A methodology called *consultas*<sup>26</sup> was used for the many organizations and networks to post propositions for themes to be part of the forums' program. These kinds of proposition-walls are used later for debating which themes to choose for the workshops, discussion-boards, debates that collectively make up the forum – together with, of course, the participators/"forumists" during that certain event. In other words, the social forum-process could be thought of as beyond a concrete assemblage of protocols, documents, places and individuals (organizations and networks), the process is also an abstract political diagram entailing a certain production of political space. Another aspect of this, not to be forgotten considering contemporary political space and culture in an informational milieu (for example the social forums), is how representation in the face-to-face fashion (recognizing the Other as different) seems to diminish in favour of "opinion poll"-like features. For example, the gathering of information in relation to certain themes presented at meetings of preparatory assemblies that are open for everyone's participation and the dissection of the political socius into sub-individualized units of information<sup>27</sup> by attending the use of storing large amounts of information about the population (that is the active individuals, networks and organizations that partakes in that kind of "screening" for the work on setting the agendas of forthcoming events/forums) in the form of the arch-model of the new medias, databases<sup>28</sup> or memories. Consequently breaking down supposedly whole subjects into segments of interests, preferences, and etcetera. These segments can thereafter be recomposed and decomposed as to face the challenges of the diversity of the actors contributing to such an event as a social forum. It certainly projects problems for a *stable* political struggle and resistance against corporate neo liberal globalization to be recognized.

---

24 See Hand & Sandywell's *E-topia as Cosmopolis or Citadel* (2002) on the "fetischism" related to the supposedly democratic (inherent) character of the Internet. (Theory, Culture & Society, 2002).

25 The Forum was held in London/England 2004.

26 Consultas was used by the Zapatista/EZLN for the use of implementing features of direct democracy when standing in front of important decisions including future aspects for the villages in Mexico's jungle (Gustafsson, E, 2004: 60). Maybe one can draw some line of inspiration from these methods for greater participatory practices regarding transparency and democracy.

27 The notion of sub individualized units of information is collected from how the conception of market polls works accordingly as collecting information about consumers preferences, tastes, flavours etcetera and combines and re-combines these accordingly. No whole, stable or autonomous subjects coming to meet face-to-face here.

28 Terranova,, T, 2004: 35.

The insertion of Internet in organizing social forums cannot be enough pointed to as a technology/informational space that certainly affects the complexity of researching the organizing of contemporary social movements. Mailing lists, discussion forums, and Internet communities are prominent spaces used for interactivity between the organizing actors of social forums. And, maybe we must plunge into how to label the precarious and temporally limited activity of participating in one of these collective spaces when attending organizing features of an open space for communication. The activity of the “preparatory-group” preparing Gothenburg Social Forum, which I have as one of my research material categories, is by large organized through the medium of Internet communication. Those of the participants who are more actively involved might complement their online conversations by meeting face-to-face in regular or sporadic meetings. Also, we have the meetings that are referred to as “preparatory-meet”, without any constant members, thus promoting an atmosphere of an interchanging of information and anyone interested in partaking should be able to just step inside and connect to the ongoing process. And, additionally, there is the use of mobile or fixed/stationary telephony to set up meetings<sup>29</sup>, organise demonstrations, debates etcetera. “Participants to these exchanges might be individuals who are relatively disconnected from the majority of the other subscribers or might move within physical networks where regular face-to-face contact cements a group belonging” (Terranova, 2002:2). This brings us the interesting figure of an organizing that spells out the activity of individuals that might or might not belong (to local, regional, national, European, global groups), they might feed a space with information or simply incarcerate it; they might be organizers of certain events (maybe of their specific interest) or only occasional participants. Anyhow, the online activity cannot be analysed isolated from other sites of communication, which includes leaflets, posters, organizing debates, and so on.

Mailing lists (i.e. “Gsf-internt”, mailing list including posts, messages and so on concerning preparatory work of Gothenburg Social Forum), websites, online discussions etcetera, present virtual social movements<sup>30</sup> with possibilities that are closely connected to the interfacing of man and the machine, technology and Internet<sup>31</sup>. It is the ability to continuously *formulate and reformulate* types of themes, questions, urgent organizational features, propositions for discussion or problems they wish to address on the basis on this *collectively produced information* that this kind of interactivity explores. They connect individuals and groups to each other, and, also, disconnect them from some kind of totality of Internet activity

---

29 The Gothenburg Social Forum has its’ own mobile phone – only used for the purpose of communication related to the forum.

30 Virtual should not be read here as something only referring to the virtual activism of computer-mediated and linked political networks, but also what entails the idea of the open space of the social forum as an experimentation with not being defined by what it is, its actuality (a solution or effect with inert qualities and extensions), but rather (potential) as a consistency within a field, thus the virtualization of the given entity persists in deciding what questions to which it is a response – the initial actuality of these movements, spaces and the social forums, thus mutates in the direction of responses to what is defined as uneven unfurling of cultural, social, economic and political globalization. The virtual and the actual are concepts elaborated by writers such as Gilles Deleuze, Manuel De Landa and Brian Massumi. The virtual is not the virtual world of computer simulation, and it is not opposed to the real, but to the actual (see Deleuze, G, 1994: 208-209).

31 Scott Lash has elaborated the specific encounter between contemporary “man” and technologies not by highlighting some kind of cyborg or hybrid metaphor, but by using the term *interface*. “What happens when forms of life go technological? In technological forms of life, we make sense of the world through technological systems. As sense-makers, we operate, less like cyborgs than interfaces. These interfaces of humans and machines are conjunctions of organic and technological systems. Organic systems works on a physiological model. Technological systems work on a cybernetic model. Cybernetic, self-regulating, systems work through functions of intelligence, command, control and communication. We do not merge with these systems. But we face our environment in our interface with technological systems.” (Lash, S, 2001: 207) And, we might add, we organize our encounters in our interface with technological systems. *Thus, bodies are not defined by what they are, but, rather, by what they can do.*



and users, in directing focus on specific matters. They establish, or try to establish connections with users between a variety of opinions and information while at the same time filtering and organizing or re-arranging for them the excessive, chaotic loads (quantity) of easy accessed information on the Internet. This mode of collectively produced information provides the network activity with changing consistency, and it also *opens up the political model of the group* toward that that Paolo Virno (2004), following some parts of Marx's writing, has labelled as "general intellect" – a collective intelligence, a collective assemblage of bodies and machines where connectivity implies the release of a surplus value<sup>32</sup>.

### **Iconoclash**

Another aspect of this "perspective" is related to the question of what kind of movement this is. We may stop and ask our selves what kind of movement (if we talk the talk of media blabbering about the "anti-globalization movement) is a movement with no particular signs or general political consensus (regarding strategy, goals, etcetera)? And, how are we to conceive of a political and cultural movement that is hostile against "representative" politics (See the dislodge of anything coming out from the social forums as representing the whole of the forum-process in the Charter of Principles<sup>33</sup>) My personal reading of this social forum-process is that there is a critique against the notion of politics as that of a clash between clearly articulated perspectives debated between a limited numbers of contributors. The notion of the Social Forum as the construction of a "counter-hegemonic" politics<sup>34</sup>, that is the notion of a coalition that ought be able to find its identity under the sign of a single or hegemonic signifier, has had trouble to find its way throughout the multitude of connected movements, organizations and networks.

The political theory of modernity, whether in its liberal or Marxist version, constructed the unity of action from the agent's unity. According to it, the coherence and meaning of social change was always based on the capacity of the privileged agent of change, be it the bourgeoisie or the working classes, to represent the totality from which the coherence and meaning derived. From such capacity or representation derived both the need and operationality of a general theory of change. (de Sousa Santos, B, *Toward a counter-hegemonic globalization*, 2005: 341)

This could be a principal antipode towards a general theory, refusal of some kind of general theory for change that compels the Social Forum-process to engage in non-representational politics. The political content of these networked politics and social movements may then not be found in clearly stated coherent positions, but, rather, in *both* the specific proposals that are put to the fore *and* the organizing riches of examples of "theory-in-practice"; "[...] the autonomous, anti-hierarchical, and networked protest affinity groups – from their decision

---

32 In Virno's (2004) writing this "surplus value" is captured/appropriated by contemporary capitalism, and is related to the notion of immaterial labour as a new hegemonic figure of production, where the human intelligence and the collective character of knowledge is highly valued for innovation etc. Virno's detour to the *multitude* resembles that of Tiziana Terranova's in that neither writer consider the multitude to be the new revolutionary subject, but rather a concept that could announce a tangible effect that stems from, amongst other things, earlier means of capitalist production – a response and a potential figure. Real but not "hacked", a non-romantic view.

33 See also Whitaker, Chico, *The WSF as Open Space*; "The Forum's Charter of Principles strongly opposes the assignment of any kind of direction or leadership inside it: nobody can speak on *behalf* of the Forum – there is no sense speaking on behalf of a space or its participants. Everyone, individuals and organisations, retains their right to express themselves and to act during and after the Forum according to their convictions, embracing or not, positions or proposals that are introduced by other participants but never on behalf of the Forum or all of its participants. ([http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html)).

34 See Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The World Social Forum: Toward a counter-hegemonic globalization* (I &II), in *Challenging Empires*, [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html).

making structures to the carnival they introduce into the protests and revolutionary actions.” (Terranova, T, 2002: 5) The alternatives of social forum politics, the “another world is possible”<sup>35</sup>, are then identified not only with concrete proposals, but also, with the mode of composition, communication and organizing itself.

---

35 See [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) for the articulation of the “warcry” of the forum’s “Another world is possible”.

## References

- Baudrillard, J, (1994): *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, cop.
- Castells, M, (1999): *Informationsåldern - Nätverkssamhällets framväxt: ekonomi, samhälle och kultur*, (band 1) Göteborg: Daidalos.
- De Landa, M, (20050821): *Dialogues*, available at [www.watsoninstitute.org](http://www.watsoninstitute.org).
- De Landa, M, (2002): *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London: Continuum.
- Deleuze, G, (1994): *Difference and repetition*, New York: Colombia University Press.
- Fischer & Ponniah (2003): *Another world is possible – Popular alternatives to globalization at the World Social Forum*, London: Zed Books.
- Hand & Sandywell (2002): “E-topia as Cosmopolis or Citadel”, in *Theory, Culture & Society* (Vol. 19, No. 1-2, 197 - 225), London: Sage.
- Hardt, M & A, Negri, (2000): *Empire*, Harvard University Press.
- Hardt, M, (2002): “Today’s Bandung”, in *New Left Review*, 14, Mars/April, <http://www.newleftreview.net/PDFarticles/NLR24806.pdf>.
- Hardt, M & A, Negri, (2004): *Multitude: war and democracy in the age of Empire* New York: The Penguin Press.
- Hylland Eriksen, T, (2004): *Can there be identity without politics?* [http://www.sum.uio.no/research/changing\\_attitudes/humanism/hylland\\_eriksen14.06.04.pdf](http://www.sum.uio.no/research/changing_attitudes/humanism/hylland_eriksen14.06.04.pdf).
- Lash, S, (2001): “Technological forms of life”, in *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 105-120, London: Sage.
- Law, J, (2003): *Notes on the Theory of the Actor Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity*, <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/papers/law-notes-on-ant.pdf>, first published 1992.
- Leite, J-C, (2003): *The World Social Forum – Strategies of Resistance*, Chicago: Haymarket books.
- Malm, A, (2004): *När kapitalet tar till vapen: Om imperialism i vår tid*, Stockholm: Agora.
- Massumi, B, (1992): *A user’s guide to capitalism and schizophrania: deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, cop.
- Massumi, B, (2002): *Parables for the virtual*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mellucci, A, (1989): *Nomader i nuet: sociala rörelser och individuella behov i dagens samhälle*, Göteborg : Daidalos.
- Sen, J, Anand, A, Escobar, A, Waterman, P, (Ed.) (2005): *Challenging Empires*, available at [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html).
- Sousa Santos (de), B, (2005): *Toward a counter-hegemonic globalization* (Pt. II), in *Challenging Empires*, available at [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html).
- Subcomandante Marcos/Gustafsson, E, (2004): *Från sydöstra Mexicos underjordiska berg* Stockholm: Ordfront.
- Tarrow, S, (1998): *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Terranova, T, (2002): *The degree zero of politics: virtual social movements and virtual cultures*, [http://www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas\\_articles/pdf/terranova\\_degree\\_zero.pdf](http://www.noemalab.org/sections/ideas/ideas_articles/pdf/terranova_degree_zero.pdf).
- Terranova, T, (2004): *Network Culture: politics in the Information age*, London; Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.
- Terranova, T, (2004b): *Communication beyond meaning*, in *Social Text*, Volume 22, Number 3, September 2004, pp. 51-73(23), Duke University Press.
- Thörn, H, *Solidarity across borders: The Anti-apartheid movement, the Media and the emergence of a global civil society* (forthcoming).
- Unsgaard, O, *Det globala civilsamhällets 1990-tal. De Sociala Forumens föregångare; FN-konferenser och den transnationella Zapatismen*, (forthcoming).
- Virno, P, (2004): *A grammar of the multitude: for an analyses of contemporary forms of life*, New York: Semiotext(e), cop.
- Whitaker, C, (2005): *The WSF as Open Space*, in *Challenging Empires* available at [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/informes/1557.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/informes/1557.html).

## Websites

[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) (World Social Forum).