



A REVIEW OF:

GIUSEPPE CARUSO (2012) COSMOPOLITAN FUTURES. GLOBAL ACTIVISM FOR A JUST WORLD. HELSINKI: INTO PUBLISHING. FREE E-BOOK. PP.228, ISBN 978-952-264-216-5

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The World Social Forum (WSF) - the gathering of global justice activists, an inspiration for innumerable people worldwide, even hailed as “the world parliament in exile” in its early days - is in its second decade of existence. 14 years after its initial launch in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the Forum has materialized in numerous locations worldwide, getting ever closer to its global ideal. On the other hand, some surely wished to see it become a vehicle for institutional change by its teenage, a scenario which has not unfolded.

The moment calls for thorough and critical reflection to facilitate deeper understanding on the significance of the Forum. Here comes in Giuseppe Caruso's book, *Cosmopolitan futures*. Caruso is a Helsinki-based scholar-activist, one of those best positioned to write about the WSF. Social scientist on the one hand, engaged activist on the other, Caruso manages to be deeply (even painfully) critical on some points of the Forum, though being very committed to the spirit of the movement.

The focus of *Cosmopolitan futures* is in the unique practices of the WSF, especially the “open space”, and how well the ideals and reality match. Thus it is an insider analysis of the WSF: a study on the Forum's capacity to create new political culture rather than its capacity to impact mainstream politics.

The beginning of the book introduces these practices of the WSF in length. Subsequently, Caruso goes on to study the conflicts related to how the open space can be used. A particular case thoroughly studied is the Mumbai WSF of 2004. Mumbai is presented as both a case study and a generalizable example of persistent dilemmas of the Forum. In the end, Caruso aims at looking beyond the emerged problems.

The WSF takes the stance against corporate globalisation, but clearly denounces any attempts to form a political agenda other than its “charter of principles”. Thus the political idea of the WSF is expressed in its very structure: a collection of horizontal networks; open communication; celebration of the multitude as the opposite to the “one-size-fits-all” logic of hegemonic globalisation.

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The main critical questions regard the practice of the "open space". Theoretically, the concept is unambiguous. Yet in reality, who can do what in the open space is always open to negotiation. Some participants have always been willing to stretch the implicit values of the space to promote their political agendas. On the other hand, there are concerns that the insistence on full openness of the WSF erodes the very political opposition the Forum was created to express: opposition to neoliberal globalisation. Clearly, the WSF cannot be inclusive without limits. Further, several activists have expressed concerns that by merely celebrating "openness", the WSF ends up renewing existing relations of oppressions and exclusion (women, indigenous people etc). To some extent this might be inevitable, as the WSF cannot revolutionise the whole social existence at once, yet active promotion of excluded minorities could be more efficient.

The ideal of the "open space" was very much embedded in Brazilian activist tradition. Thus the big question in the early days of the Forum was, to what extent the "open space" is particular to the Brazilian scene, and to what extent it can be replicated anywhere? In Caruso's analysis, it was the Mumbai WSF where the tensions arising from the open space had to be dealt with, as this first materialization of the Forum outside Brazil was a major test to its global nature.

Caruso documents in detail complaints which arose before and during the Mumbai WSF. The documentation is a disconcerting piece to read for any idealistic champion of the process. It includes complaints about gender discrimination in the preparation process, exclusion of dalits and other India's marginalised minorities, and the Forum organisers' uneasy relation to religious minorities, which resulted in the exclusion of muslim groups.

Apart from the open space, the WSF has always withheld a tension related to the question, how thoroughly committed to horizontality the Forum ought to be. Does horizontalism function in organisation? Are there not at least some technical issues which need to be handled managerially? And on the other hand, is the sharp distinction between "political" and "technical" ("just managing things"), not indeed one of the cornerstones of neoliberalism's self-legitimation?

Caruso analyses in detail a debate he sees as instructive, namely the dispute over using open software on Forum organisers' computers. In India back in 2004, open software was still very experimental. Seen as a foolhardy attempt by some, there was a lot of insistence on returning to Windows for getting things done. For others, open software as opposed to Microsoft was at the heart of what the Forum stands for. At the end, open software was used, but only after intense debates.

Disagreements also arise from acceptable sources of funds. Organising a global event is not costless. The Forum has received money from American foundations, development agencies of OECD governments, and other sources which, inevitably, are suspicious players to many minds. Further, the role of large NGOs has sparked intense debates. They work for poverty reduction and such issues, but are very North-dominated, sometimes patronising, and apolitical. They put in lots of money and expect visibility in return. For many, they are something of a Trojan horse of Northern domination and hegemonic development discourse. Others would invite the participation of any interested organization – and see the incoming funds as necessary.

Caruso does not stop at analyzing these tensions, but goes on to discuss conflict mediation. He could have devoted even more space to this topic, since here the book gets truly interesting and engaged. Indeed, getting beyond a conflict is one of the true arts of horizontal movements. Mediation at its best means looking creatively beyond a dispute rather than seeking an arithmetic

middle-ground between conflicting opinions. This art of living in a movement is a topic the author knows a lot about.

The book explicitly aims at being in line with the spirit of the forum: the form and the method are inalienable parts of the content. Published by a Finnish radical publishing house with international readership, and distributed free of charge as an e-book, the book is in itself an expression of grassroots socialism. The author also wants to play with the ambiguous boundary between serious transformative policies and ridiculous jokes, by for example omitting the use of capital letters as “all letters are equal”. The point is, that we have to do experiments with equality, not to predetermine what equality consists of and how it is to be promoted.

Cosmopolitan futures is accessible and interesting, and surely is read amongst both WSF activists and social scientists. Caruso’s insider perspective is both its strength and weakness. While being able to discuss the issue thoroughly and provide a unique insider perspective, the book will hardly be of interest to people not familiar with the process. To the insiders, it is surely worth reading.