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raising the political temperature

Naomi Klein and Haifa Zangana
Resisting the occupation of Iraq

Mark Serwotka
Let's make the civil service ours

Adrian Mitchell
Prize-winning poetry of war

Latin America special

WHEN THE LEFT WINS OFFICE



HOW DO THE PEOPLE WIN POWER?

Social forums after

The London ESF: was it worth it?

by Katherine Haywood

You might think that the European Social Forum (ESF), held in London in October, generated nothing but conflict. That is certainly the impression made by the letters page of *The Guardian*. Some participants, on the other hand, found the seminars repetitive and rhetorical. Susan George, for example, wrote: 'What we no longer need are ritual denunciations and constant reminders from the platform that we are in favour of some things (social justice, human rights, democracy, ecological responsibility...) and against others (war, poverty, racism, global warming...). Reiteration of these themes has become the primary function of over-abundant ESF plenary sessions.'

In addition, there was widespread anger that the infrastructure and services in London were out of sync with the values of an open, cooperative, non-exploitative movement. Commercial catering companies provided over-

priced, unethical food, with Coca-Cola widely available despite several appearances at seminars of Edgar Paez, whose colleagues in the Colombian trade union movement are being routinely harassed and assassinated while demanding better working conditions from the multinational corporation. And responsibility for the ESF website was handed over to a private company at a price of £40,000 when highly skilled volunteers were available. At the same time, many would-be participants found the £30 entrance fee and accommodation costs beyond their budgets.

We might ask whether the huge amount of time, effort and resources required to mobilise such large events places too great a strain on the social forum movement, and undermines its capacity for maintaining revolutionary fervour. Or has the movement succumbed to the familiar destructive forces of power politics? Ultimately, was it worth it?

Negative answers to these questions would ignore the very real progress made towards a truly international, alternative political movement.

Approximately 25,000 free thinkers from more than 70 countries came together for four days and nights to discuss, plan and network. Something that inspires so much activity and energy has a momentum that cannot easily be halted. The event attracted thoughtful discussions on a multitude of diverse issues, from climate change to the security state, and war to cultural identity; it stimulated new international networks and strengthened ones already underway.

London may have been a turning point for the ESF, with component organisations re-emphasising their autonomy in relation to the wider process. In future the ESF may become a collection of activities in one geographical space: activities that are still interdependent, but which cross-fertilise less systematically.

This may increase conflict but, as academic and activist Jeff Juris says, 'such conflict should not be feared, but rather recognised as an integral part of the forum itself'. However, the social forum model must embrace debate with a flexibility that maintains connection with all its divergent tendencies.

The politics of language

by Stuart Hodgkinson and Julie Boéri

If you participated in any of the 'official' spaces of the third ESF in London, you will at some point have doubtless traded in a piece of ID for a flashy, black headset providing live, simultaneous interpretation of speakers into languages as diverse as French, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Greek, Turkish and even Galician.

Impressed by this apparent realisation of genuine internationalism, the role of language in global social transformation might even have briefly flickered across your mind before the long pauses, broken sentences and occasional loss of sound drove you mad.

But for how long did you think about the person behind the voice in your ears, hidden away in a claustrophobic booth at the back of the room? How much did you reflect on the skills, technology, resources and, above all, politics involved in enabling you to understand the myriad different

languages that define and bring social forums to life?

Our guess is not a lot. Most people tend to take the indispensable role of language, and those interpreting it, for granted; many even assume interpreters to be paid professionals. The truth could not be more different. Simultaneous and consecutive interpretation and document translation are provided free in political solidarity by Babels, the growing international network of volunteer interpreters and translators at the heart of the social forum process.

Babels was born in the run-up to the Florence ESF in 2002. The dubious politics and huge cost of hiring professional interpreters for the World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001 and 2002 led a group of communication activists linked to the French branch of the alternative globalisation network Attac to propose that only volunteers be used for interpreting.

Scepticism about volunteer 'quality' gave way to pragmatism at the 11th hour when the high cost of the traditional market route began to bite the Italian organisers.

An emergency call for volunteers was made. Three hundred and fifty volunteer interpreters and translators were eventually used. Cathy Arnaud, an interpreter at Florence and now a coordinator with Babels Spain, paints the scene: 'It was complete chaos, but miraculously it worked. We had to fight the organisers just for a space to work in; eventually we took our own initiative and squatted a medieval tower. It was beautiful but freezing and we had no money, computers, phones: nothing. Coordinators hung planning sheets on washing lines; some people stayed up all night to finalise everything. As for the quality of the interpretation: well, that was definitely a mixed bag.'

The success of Florence led to the spontaneous emergence of new Babels coordinations in Germany, the UK and Spain alongside the original French and Italian pioneers. It also prompted more consideration of language issues by the Paris ESF organisers, who gave Babels decent office facilities, computers, a longer preparatory process and a relatively large pot of money (£200,000). The 2003 Paris ESF drew on more than 1,000 Babelitos.

London

In the light of the European Social Forum in London, *Red Pepper* assesses the strengths and weakness of the concept and looks forward to Pôrto Alegre 2005

Balthazar Serreau



Babels interpreters working in London

Following the 2004 WSF in Mumbai and the first Social Forum of the Americas in Ecuador, the Babels database had almost doubled to more than 7,000 people by the time of the London ESF. In October 500 volunteers from 22 countries were gathered, enabling some 20,000 participants from more than 60 countries to express themselves in 25 different languages.

Impressive number-crunching aside, however, the real story of Babels lies in its embodiment of the innovative but difficult process of 'pre-figurative politics'. By attempting to put into practice the principles of solidarity, pluralism, equality and horizontality, Babels is creating not only alternative systems and practices to

free-market capitalist society, but also the social counter-power needed to defend and embed them permanently.

Underpinning the Babels philosophy is the organisation's willingness to reflect upon its role in each forum and then learn and develop from practice. For example, following the unhappy experience of a two-tier workforce of voluntary and paid interpreters in Florence, Babels now makes the principle of 100 per cent volunteer interpretation and translation a precondition of its involvement.

Most important of all is Babels' affirmation of 'the right of everybody to express themselves in the language of their choice'. To this end, Babels is orchestrating a conscious process of

'contamination' in which the excellent language skills of the politically sympathetic trained interpreter interact with the deeper political knowledge of the language-fluent activist to develop a reflexive communications medium organic to the social forum movement. A good example is the Lexicon Project: an ongoing effort by volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds and countries to create a comprehensive glossary of words and phrases for interpreters and translators to best reflect different meanings according to national, cultural and historical contexts.

Unfortunately, the nice sounding rhetoric of diversity and inclusion within the WSF Charter of Principles still remains largely unrealised in many social forums, especially the ESF. Just as at Florence and Paris, the large majority of the 20,000 participants (and interpreters) in London were mainly white, able-bodied western Europeans. This failure over three years to significantly include those either living in or originating from central and eastern Europe and the global south, not to mention from the disabled and deaf communities, cannot simply be explained away by the systematic refusal of visas (witness London), problems of disability access or the gargantuan cost of international travel from outside the EU.

For both Florence and Paris, the inherent bias of the forum's organisers led to English, French, German, Italian and Spanish being designated as the 'official' ESF languages. And although Babels successfully insisted on this formal language hierarchy being dropped for London, informally the same old colonial languages dominated the website, outreach materials, press releases, platforms and programme.

Curiously, ESF organisers tend to justify this status quo through the market discourse of 'supply and demand'. While it is true that language hierarchies are an inevitable reflection of the continued dominance of western European political movements in the ESF process, their existence also act as a major outreach barrier to the social movements of 'majority Europe' and beyond: if people do not believe their languages will be spoken, then they will be less likely to attend.

Babels cannot shy away from its own responsibility in this regard. Because its development has been inseparable from that of the ESF, the majority of