

What's the World Coming to? The World Social Forum beyond critique and deconstruction

--- An interview with Emma Dowling ---

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Introduction

In its physical form, the World Social Forum (WSF) is an annual global meeting of civil society groups and movements opposed to neo-liberalism. The first WSF took place as a protest directed against the World Economic Forum of world leaders in 2001. The protest against the prevailing economic world order has continued with forums convened in different locations around the world every year since, culminating most recently in the WSF in Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2007. But the WSF represents more than just a physical event: it is a movement indicative of new forms of global autonomous political and social mobilisation. Whilst the WSF's motto is 'another world is possible' the forum differs from traditional political movements in that it does not attempt to represent or promote one vision of or methodology for challenging the status quo and conceiving of alternatives to neo-liberalism. Instead it characterises itself as plural and diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan. It is a forum for critique and a movement concerned with deconstruction. It is a strategy of analysis, a space, a process directed at elucidating the nature of the world order as it is and, echoing the aim of this issue, concerned with moving beyond that to consider how the world could be.

In this interview, *In-Spire's* ethics editor, Rebecca Shah, talks to Emma Dowling. Emma has been a participant in two recent WSFs including this year's forum in Nairobi. She was involved in organising the WSF's regional cousin, the European Social Forum, in London in 2004 and is currently completing her PhD analysing globalisation-critical social movements at Birkbeck College, University of London. *In-Spire* asks her to subject this year's forum and wider alter-globalisation movements to critique and to explore how it might be possible to move beyond critique and deconstruction into envisaging and creating an alternative possible world.

Interview

Can you start by telling us how the WSF movement came about and how did you become involved with it?

The WSF started with ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens), NGOs in Brazil and left wing political movements who were organising around the issue of globalisation and against global financial institutions. Perhaps similarly to the Zapatista *Encounters* that had already taken place in Chiapas in Mexico, the idea was to have an event where members of different movements and organisations could come together and network in order to strengthen their projects. Important in this is not just the moment that is the WSF with workshops and seminars,

plenary sessions and other meetings, but also that people have a continued engagement with each other year after year and can build a more coherent movement through the process of exchange of information, strategy or ideas. People become friends and comrades in that process.

I first became involved with the WSF because I was active with ATTAC, an alter-globalisation organisation, around the time the first European Social Forum (ESF) happened in Florence. I knew about the first WSF taking place in Porto Alegre before that and wasn't able to go, but attended the ESF 2003 in Paris. So I've been around the social forum process since the beginning and became involved directly in the organisation process when the ESF came to London. And after that I went to the WSF in Brazil in 2005 as part of a project called Explorations in Open Space, which explored what the forum as an open space means in terms of political practice, whether the forum should remain an open space or have a more clearly articulated political programme. I personally think the forum was never an open space; I think it's a logical contradiction!

How far do you think the movement can be seen as action or an attitude of critique and deconstruction on the history of the dominant world order?

Very much so; the movement comprises a vast array of different actors that come together under the theme 'Another World is Possible', or, as some people prefer 'Other Worlds Are Possible', which doesn't reinforce a universalising discourse around *one* world being possible. The movement comes out of wanting to critique the Thatcherite slogan that 'there is no alternative' to the globalisation of capitalist social relations. It's very difficult to put labels on the forum but if anything it is anti-neo-liberal, not anti-capitalist. It calls into question neo-liberalism, the Washington Consensus, the fact that people are less important than profit - the whole new wave of global politics around neo-liberal restructuring. There are different narratives about when this movement started to coalesce - many people argue that it was 1994 with the Zapatista uprising, others talk about Seattle, and others see it as a new cycle of struggles that has its antecedents in the 1968 movements, but this particular phase is about critiquing capitalist, neo-liberal globalisation. The first WSF tried to put this critique onto the agenda, which is why it coincided with the World Economic Forum.

Let's talk about the physical WSF space. This year, you went to the WSF in Nairobi. What were your impressions? How did it compare to previous forums?

There have been social forums on the African continent before, last year there was a polycentric forum in Bamako, Mali, but it's the first time the WSF as one unified event has taken place in Africa. It was very different to my experiences of being in Porto Alegre. The forum is so diverse it is a difficult thing to label. There are multiple subjectivities from left-wing anti-capitalists to liberal lobby groups, NGOs, anarchists and independent activists, citizen activists, environmental campaigners and feminists, so once you start trying to label the WSF you run into problems. Bearing that in mind, I felt that there was one particular discourse which seemed to permeate this year's forum: the big influence of large NGOs that have money.

There are a number of reasons for this. The first is that the forum was taking place without political or financial support from the local council or the Kenyan government. They weren't opposed to the forum taking place - it was viewed as a lucrative opportunity for local businesses - but it was not actively endorsed or funded as far as I can tell. That

meant funding had to come from elsewhere. WSF funding always come from multiple sources, but in the past local councils have provided funding or infrastructure or something. When the forum took place in London the mayor's office, Ken Livingstone, gave a lot of money to the forum. I don't know enough about the events in the run up to the forum, nor am I familiar with Kenyan politics in any detail, but a Kenyan friend of mine has mused that even if there might at some point have been money allocated to the WSF, it probably would have never reached its destination because of the high levels of corruption within governmental structures.

The second reason why there was a presence of large NGOs is that Nairobi is the United Nations and aid-agency capital of east and central Africa, thus these organisations are there and obviously they're going to get involved in something that's happening on their doorstep. Given the evident shift in discourse that has taken place in recent years, from one in which neo-liberal restructuring was imposed as an inevitable global development, to one which promotes 'globalisation with a human face', maybe even as a result of the alter-globalisation movements, organisations that wouldn't have seen themselves as part of this space ten years ago do see themselves as part of it now.

The third reason is that in Africa, from what I can tell, the legacy of the Christian mission and the neo-colonial politics of charity helping developing countries to 'develop' still loom large, which is a really problematic issue. This is different to Latin America where there have been these organisations but in a very different historical context.

So the big NGOs represent not only the dominant, wealthy, capital-based societies, but also the ideas of neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism which the WSF was set up in opposition to?

Many of them do. Although you could argue that a good deal of the people that are part of this movement don't necessarily see charitable causes or the format they take as problems, so they have a different politics from my politics. There are also religious organisations that see themselves as part of the alter-globalisation movement, so it is a space that does encompass these forces. Church organisations and poverty and development NGOs exist in this space because they're also about making the world a better place and helping people. They are also there because of the self-organised nature of the forum. It is precisely because the space is articulated as some sort of non-partisan space (whether it can or should be non-partisan is another question) that it is an opportunity for people with power and money to monopolise that process. In that moment self-organisation backfires because those with more money are able to put on bigger events. For example, the Human Rights and Human Dignity caucus which was a UN-related group that had about 80 sessions in the WSF with a massive tent in a very prominent place can do that because it's a self-organised space. In the London ESF larger organisations like trade unions and particularly the mayor's office made concerted, very well-organised attempts to completely monopolise the forum and succeeded in doing so because they had money and power. The challenge is how we can come together and have these networking moments without reproducing these relations.

What happened recently in Nairobi after the forum took place I think is indicative of the contradictions that are embodied in the participation of some of the larger NGOs and UN agencies in the WSF events. In March this year 56 activists who had been using Nairobi's Jeevanjee Gardens as a meeting space for their open forum for many years, were beaten and arrested for 'unlawful assembly' in a dispute over the planned

‘regeneration’ of the gardens which the activists were opposed to because they claimed it was being turned into a public bus park without any consultation with the people who use the space, as well as being an attempt to take it away from the people that currently access this public space. According to reports I’ve read, Nairobi city council is working in partnership with UN Habitat, which was also a major player within the Human Rights and Human Dignity Caucus at this year’s WSF.

How do the big NGOs influence what happens within the forum space?

There used to be a lot of large-scale plenary sessions within the WSF, but the emphasis now is more on workshops and seminars where different groups come together to organise sessions on different political themes. These range from neo-liberalism or capitalism to human rights, environmental concerns, land and housing, financial markets... There’s very focused networking that goes on, or showcasing of campaigns but also information and ideas sharing, as well as political exchanges. All of these things take place. What I think is a problem is that this year one of these became more dominant – there was a lot of showcasing. It’s a form of politics which feels a bit like a trade fair or business meeting.

I think it’s also useful to remember the context in which the larger NGOs play a role in African countries. These organisations have been working in an African context for many years, and they have African partners, so it’s not that the WSF puts poverty alleviation on the map when it comes to town. There are connections that already exist. But the way that they in some instances played themselves out within forum meetings was quite problematic. For example I was in a session about the G8, and the organisations from the global north have their partners either on stage with them or sat in the audience who are from African countries and together they both proliferate the same discourse so that if you want to challenge that but you are yourself from the global north you can’t because it looks as though you’re imposing your white, western, middle class way of looking at the world, when the *African* people actually want the same things as these organisations. Do you see what I mean?

Yes, the WSF is supposed to be a place without power structures within it, but clearly there are power differences, not only in terms of money - between those that can afford to self-organise and those that can’t - but also in terms of the interpersonal interactions.

Any social forum exists within existing neo-liberal social relations and not outside of the system and it would be foolish to think otherwise. I say ‘open space’ is a logical misnomer because to declare a space in which power doesn’t exist or shouldn’t play a role is impossible. If we understand power as being a relation and as something that permeates our relations then power never goes away. Power is not a commodity that you can leave at the door; it comes with you in your spaces through your interactions with other people. You can’t just declare power to not matter anymore. Political practice has to be informed by that notion so that we can understand the power relations that exist in those spaces and deal with them, not so that then we can live in a world without power, but so that we can find better ways of dealing with it and also generate contestation and conflict in a productive way so that we can move forward.

Do you think that the WSF is a space that is able to engage with ideas about power?

I think it can if we have a different political practice. There are many problems that feed into why I felt frustrated at the forum at both the declarative politics and the opposite when people start invoking the other the whole time, like “where are the African people?! Where are the African social movements?! We need an African to talk about this!”. This becomes a reification of ‘the African’ without understanding that Africa is a complex place. You can’t really have ‘the African’ who comes and gives the ‘subaltern’ perspective on whatever problem you’re discussing at that moment. I think the problem is two-fold: On the one hand, this invocation of the African voice stems from a desire not to reproduce white privilege, which is a good thing, but on the other, it appeals to an identity that does not exist in such a simplistic way, nor does it address the complexities of social and capitalist hierarchies that exist within Africa. Furthermore, I feel there is a tendency to universalise the subjectivity of the people involved with the WSF movement. We see ourselves as all being part of the same movement or having the same enemy, whether that’s imperialism, capitalism, environmental degradation, human rights abuses or whatever, and within that there seems to be very little space to understand how we as individuals with our different locations, struggles and subjectivities come together or conflict; and how to work through that if we’re going to get anywhere beyond fictional solidarities, statements of intent or lowest common denominator politics, which is what it often ends up being. So on the one hand we celebrate our diversity and multiplicity and we see that as our strength (and sometimes also our problem) and on the other hand what permeates that is actually a denial of difference, because we do not understand our different localities in relation to one another within the struggle and within global capitalism.

Does the WSF, as it stands, have the space or the ability to consider these ideas of identity politics, or will focusing on these things subvert the purpose of a non-directive space?

I think we shouldn’t talk about identity politics in the sense of something static. One of the problems of some ‘new’ social movements is too static an understanding of different identities - the homosexual, the woman, the environmental activist - different identities as opposed to subjectivities. Then organising happens around those different identities and it becomes much more about lobby-politics to have your identity represented in a space than trying to understand the different power relations, interconnections and sites of contestation between these different moments. That’s also a problem when class is ignored. Class isn’t talked about much any more because it’s supposedly an antiquated way of understanding the world now we have these multiple social identities more important than class or capitalist social relations. It should be the interconnections between capitalism and social identities, as well as reconfiguration of class composition that we address within our movements, not one or the other. What I find lacking is bringing it back to ourselves and who we are in that space. It becomes about something that exists outside of that space not something we bring with us into the space. The WSF is then seen as standing outside of the relations that we’re trying to deal with as if neo-liberalism, capitalism and human rights violations only exist ‘out there’. The WSF is, of course, a space where we bring all of that with us so we have to be able to deal with it within the structures as well as in the outside world.

Returning to your experiences at this year's forum - I have read reports that this forum attracted only a fraction of the numbers that attended last year's forum. Can you reflect on why this may be, for example, whether it is a practical matter to do with where and how it was organised or more to do with diminishing global interest in the WSF?

I thought a lot about this because at the forum I had a sense of emptiness. There was a lot of hustle and bustle and there were obviously lots of people around, but I still had a sense of emptiness. Rooms were empty. There was also a sense of an absence. For me that absence was ordinary people and local movements. There seemed to be representatives of local organisations and there were lots of people from the slums but they had been brought there through organisations.

So you think attendance had a lot to do with the context of where it was held?

I think so. If it had been in South Africa for example, it might have been very different because South Africa has quite strong movements and the anti-apartheid struggle still figures quite largely in people's politicisation. By comparison, in Kenya the Mau Mau movement was defeated, and although it did pave the way for Kenyan independence, two quite autocratic regimes followed under presidents Kenyatta and Moi. There is also the idea that the WSF is a place where representatives of organisations come together not members of organisations. Not everybody agrees with this but the discourse does exist. We also have to remember that the ability to travel depends on one's financial and visa situation. But maybe it's also that people are now wondering whether the WSF is a politically useful process for them.

I haven't spoken to anybody about this in any detail, but I think some people who view themselves as anti-capitalist, who maybe trace their history back more directly to the Zapatista movement feel that going to the forum doesn't make sense because it's dislocated from local contexts and local struggles because it is dominated by the old left, NGOs or other forces they feel uncomfortable with. Maybe they felt that there wouldn't be anybody that they want to connect with because those people can't afford to go. But there is a sense that a lot of people are beginning to ask, well, what purpose does the forum serve in any sort of effective way?

The forum is different to more traditional political movements because it doesn't aim at a particular solution, it is purely a space. But are participants able to value it as a space and a process or do they need a purpose - goals and outcomes - in order to value it?

I think problems start when we try to impose an overarching purpose on our everyday struggles. The WSF tries to avoid that by saying that it's not trying to be a political programme. At the same time, if you've got an open space, all that can be is a space! You have to understand what the limitations of the WSF are. You can use it to meet people and strengthen your networks, but if the right people aren't there then you can't connect with them! It becomes a vicious circle. I don't think the movement needs an overarching programme, which is what some people within the forum have tried to do. Or, rather, they have said not that the WSF needs to develop a programme itself but that the WSF space should be used to develop a programme for the movement. For example, the Porto Alegre Manifesto of the G19 in Brazil resulted from 19 (predominantly male) intellectuals and activists who got together to develop a programme for what they thought should happen in the world. They later retracted it saying it was only a proposal amongst many others because people were very critical of trying to impose a programme on the movement.

After that in Bamako some people developed the Bamako Appeal which was pages and pages of what should happen to make the world a better place, tackling everything from gender politics to labour struggles, environmental struggles, new forms of democracy, global capitalism etc. And that has started a debate about open space verses political programme. It's unresolved.

Immanuel Wallerstein, who has been quite supportive of the Bamako appeal, said in the Herald Tribune that this year's forum moved beyond the debate about whether the forum is a space or a political programme, or whether it needs a political programme, because in Nairobi everybody got together and just got on with it. A similar argument was put forward in a German newspaper article I read¹ that because the forum was taking place on the African continent where poverty and reality were staring us in the face we couldn't have airy-fairy debates about left-wing politics any more. We actually had to get down to reality and start organising practically because hunger and starvation were screaming at us.

Do you think they were? According to the reports I've read hunger and poverty were kept at some distance away by the high entrance fees!

Yes, but hunger and poverty also came to the forum and challenged it, which is really important because what I think the forum needs to be is not an open space but a space of contestation where we can actually engage with one another. Contestations were happening at the forum which was very positive but also very tragic because local Kenyan people had to storm the gates and demand free entry. Slum kids were swarming through the forum and demanding free food from the Windsor Hotel and the Norfolk Hotel, which respectively belong to the Kenyan Interior Minister and was the first colonial hotel in Nairobi. These two that would be considered the enemy in anybody's book were providing five star food for forum participants at extortionate prices. It was a massive problem. The kids were demanding free food and there were actual food riots. I was there to show my support and solidarity with these young people because it was absolutely outrageous. Why were the small local traders providing food relegated to some place further away and in our faces were five star hotels that were selling us food?

Things that I had read were very critical of those aspects of this year's forum – the commercialism and lack of access for local poor people - but you make it sound like an example of what the forum is all about: a space where genuine challenges and contestations can happen. Would you say it wasn't altogether a negative experience, perhaps even a strength that problems can be challenged and dealt with in the space?

Yes, in this sense we can understand conflict as productive of change. Although, it remains to be seen how the forum process responds to these issues. It was addressed formally by the Assembly of Social Movements, an assembly which exists within the forum because the forum is not supposed to make any decisions. The idea is that the different movements which participate in the forum can come together and make some decisions on what may be the focus of campaigns. The February 15th anti-war march of 2003 was something that came out of the forum process for example, or the pledge to participate in the G8 summit protests. This year the Assembly of Social Movements' declaration condemned the commercialisation, the NGOisation, and the militarisation of the WSF. I haven't mentioned that we not only had five star hotels providing food we also

¹ Ulrich Brand, Frankfurter Rundschau 27/01/07: "Die Netzwerke für eine andere Welt werden dichter"

had to buy air time from a mobile phone company in order to register for the forum. The forum was sponsored by Celtel which is a Kuwaiti-owned corporation providing cell-phone infrastructure in 15 different African countries and in countries in the Middle East.²

Funding would appear to be an ongoing problem, especially if the forum is to behave in a way that embodies the ideals it intends to promote and discuss.

I think one problem is that of scale. It's very easy to have a gathering of 100 people and live up to your anti-profit ideals. If you're trying to cater for hundreds of thousands of people it shifts. I fully understand that. I think, however, that we have already come a very long way in trying to generate alternatives and that wasn't apparent at this year's forum. For example, in Porto Alegre there was a massive solidarity economy space. Granted, there's a bigger solidarity economy movement, but even in Africa there are many cooperatives that function very well, but they were not involved. In the same token you can use open source software, why use Microsoft? They might not solve all of the problems but alternatives do exist so at least we need to be engaging with them. It seemed to me that too many compromises were made this year.

I understand that some local organisers took alternative action outside the forum to voice their discontent with some of these compromises.

That's right; there was an alternative forum that was organised in the Jeevanjee Gardens in the centre of town by the Citizen's Assembly, which is a coalition of local groups including the emerging Social Activism Network and People's Parliament. These organisations felt the need to have an event that was visible and accessible to the local Kenyan population and that was free. It was also a political statement that the forum was deeply problematic in how it involved or did not involve local people. The people that I spoke to weren't against the forum, but they were against some of the things we've talked about here that happened around the forum.

If this was planned in advance, it must have been known before the WSF took place that it would encounter problems and fail to allow suitable access for local people?

Yes, I think the forum at the Jeevanjee Gardens was planned in December. It wasn't advertised on the WSF website but I found out about it because of a protest at the WSF opening ceremony where people came with banners that said: 'Five hundred KSH to go to the forum or feed my children for a week? Come to the alternative forum in the Jeevanjee Gardens'. I went to an event there that had over 100 local Kenyan people and a few white people dotted around including myself. Immediately I felt quite uncomfortable. I wasn't used to being in a space where I was in the minority, so that was already an experience for me. People were talking about the WTO and youth and their experiences as farmers or living in the slums, about rape, about not being able to feed themselves, send their children to school or to get an adequate price for their produce etc. It was interesting to see how people there were saying 'well, we've had NGOs for 40 years and our problems remain' indicating that there are problems with the way certain NGOs are doing politics. We can't throw every NGO into the same pot, but I mean the big poverty and development NGOs, church organisations etc. There was critique. One guy gave a message to 'civil society' critiquing the whole problem of colonial liberalism, which I thought was very interesting.

² See <http://www.celtel.com/en/our-company/our-investors/index.html>

Was that debate happening inside the WSF as well?

In some spaces it was, but I felt it wasn't problematised sufficiently because there were too many organisations there that were heralding their successes as opposed to critiquing and deconstructing problems. There was a lot of 'look at the fantastic sanitation project that we're doing in this slum' or 'this brilliant education project that we're doing here, isn't it great that we have brought all these slum dwellers to the forum?' or 'come to the slum and see our project'. It was interesting that a message across the board was: 'the subject of social transformation is in the slum. Let's go and see it', whatever your politics, it seemed to be the same. Everyone was looking for this subject of social transformation or the victim that needed to be helped. All of us were looking for 'them'.

Over 50% of the population of Nairobi live in slums. I went to Korogocho slum because I had met a person from Kibera (another slum) at the opening ceremony. He took me to Korogocho with another friend. First we went to this Catholic mission where there were lots of white people with cameras taking pictures of the slum and all the slum children were performing for the visitors. I found it problematic. Then we went looking for a radio and newspaper project which is being run by local youth from the slum, which I was interested in because it was more self-organised. It was interesting for me to deal with who I was, why I was there and whether I was also on my own little mission to find the people that I'm supposed to be in solidarity with or wanting to help. It was interesting to try to understand how that plays itself out for me personally and my politics but also how this problem was situated within and around the forum. I found it problematic that slum dwellers became the 'what's hot' of the forum. But I also felt I had found the self-organised project - fantastic! That is the kind of politics that I support here - a politics of the first person where you engage with your own struggles, rather than the struggles of the other that you're in solidarity with or you're trying to help.

But I found some of the material produced in their newspaper really problematic. There were pro-life, anti-abortion articles and an article that read almost as if women were blaming themselves for rape, saying 'if we weren't so corrupted by capitalism and the images of women half-naked on television then we wouldn't go around wearing mini-skirts and then we wouldn't be raped'. On the one hand, I think it is important that the needs and demands of people who have been marginalised, excluded or exploited, are put at the centre of our movements' politics, at the same time, I don't think this should lead to a reification or a deification of a supposedly unified 'subaltern'. So how do we engage with one another? I want to be able to critique others, if I think that there is a problem with their politics, but at the same time, we need to be able to do that in a space where it's an engagement, where we don't simply judge/accuse each other or walk away. How does that play itself out? Am I acting out a moment of privilege if I criticise an African person? How do we forge real solidarities and common projects?

There was a demonstration of people from the Kibera slum at the WSF opening ceremony and it was unclear what the demonstration was about. There were organised slum-dweller groups, many of them connected to local churches. They had people dancing with headscarves and t-shirts about their organisation and all these people waving Palestinian flags. There were Christians and pro-Palestinians marching together: was this a celebration of diversity? Or did people get confused about what it was about? We asked some young people who were waving Palestinian flags what flag they were waving. They were very indignant. One said, 'don't you know? This is the Kenyan flag' and then

another said 'it's the Spanish flag'. That was a real moment where I thought 'wow, who's been going round here distributing these flags not actually telling people what the hell they're waving?'

Did you ask them what they were there for?

I spoke to two boys from the Kibera slum who were with an organisation affiliated to the church and asked them why they were there. They immediately told me 'we're here because we're proud to be from the slum and we're trying to better our lives'. I asked them what they thought the problems were for Kenya at this moment in time and immediately like out of a gun came: 'African corruption and the oppression of women', as if they had been told by someone that these were the two central issues.. Coming across these two issues many times, it felt to me like these two social practices had been taken out of their particular context, branded as 'evil' and as the cause of all problems, rather than seen as issues within a more complex system of cultural practices, colonial dependencies and global capitalist exploitations. I asked them if they thought African corruption had anything to do with the relationship between Kenya and other countries, like the UK, 'no, why?' was the answer. In just the same way that Palestinian flags were being handed out to people, mantras are being handed out to people. It seems as if these forms of education are, based on a practice of symptom alleviation, often informed by a neo-colonial framework, in which people are being educated along these lines and then they regurgitate and act on that opinion. It's an uncritical and non-deconstructing form of education which I think is really problematic. For this reason I was really impressed with an educational youth group from Mombasa who were working to empower themselves and other young people through unlearning the colonial narratives they had been taught previously and were turning to indigenous knowledge to (re-)learn where they come from. I think there's some real value in their approach.

This reminds me of people waving banners distributed by the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP) at the anti-war march in London in 2003 without understanding what the SWP stood for and how it related to the shared anti-war issue. My question is whether your experiences were really special because of the context or just indicative of a global problem?

I think it's a problem of political practice. It's a problem when we don't give enough space to forms of education or understanding that try to unpack things, critique, deconstruct, and move beyond the immediate context and simplicity. It's very easy to say Africans are corrupt, women are oppressed, if only people had the right moral values then the world would be a better place or whatever it is that you choose to brand as the key to unlocking all the problems of the world. I think we need to start from people's experiences to try to make sense of it rather than starting from explanation and trying to match the experience to the explanation. But also where does our own humility come in? I have a problem with the Catholic Church and all organised religion because that is the conclusion I have come to through my own experience of life and politics. How do I then acknowledge and have the humility to understand that religion is, for many of the Kenyan people I met, central to their lives and their politics? Also, how can I critique the problems I see with the way that the Catholic Church operates?

I was talking to a friend I made who was involved in organising the events in the Jeevangee gardens and he was saying one of the biggest problems in trying to organise at a grass-roots level was that African people are still in this mind-set that 'white people

know better'. In a binary construct, white people are seen either the problem or the solution. Whether it's a positive or negative image of the white person the construction is always in relation to the white person. He told me that when the white person left his group, it seemed as if other people didn't have faith in themselves to know what to do.

The WSF is supposed to be a place where we can critique some of these things and then move beyond them. But if our practices within and around the forum space don't engage with these problems then we're not going to be able to move on. Reading the résumé of the international council meeting after the WSF, there was some self-criticism about mistakes such as the huge military presence at the forum - massive machine guns turning away four year old children from the slums - and commercialisation. But there was no question of political practice. On so many levels we have to ask how we can get back to or get forward to a sort of politics which engages us with one another?

Is this failure to engage related to the fact that the forum promotes a particular form of social and political organisation (e.g. NGOs) under what is ostensibly a non-directive approach to social organisation?

Absolutely. I think that happens when we lose our sense of critique and our understanding of the constellation of forces within which we are situated. In the same way that if you look at the G8 summit protests in the UK in 2005, the massive campaign of Make Poverty History and the Live 8 concerts to all intents and purposes hijacked the movement, even though NGOs that were involved in the Make Poverty History campaign have always been part of the movement protesting against the G8 in a lobbying capacity. What seemed to happen in Gleneagles was that the movement became a force to *legitimise* rather than *delegitimise* the G8. The G8 became elevated to a position where it could be a force for good in the world instead of understanding that structurally speaking this institution can never change the rules of the game because it is an epiphenomenon of the system where the rules are being set. How can giving it more power and more legitimacy solve the problem? The alter-globalisation movement has been successful in shifting discourse by challenging neo-liberalism and the idea that there is no alternative to it, but shifts in discourse do not necessarily mean shifts in material realities. The G8 is talking about climate change and Africa using discourses that are coming out of the movement and translating them into policies which on the surface *look* like they're moving towards something different. It is not necessarily lying, even though a lot of it is rhetoric, but actually if we unpack the policies they are just doing the same old thing. It is a problem when discourses shift but practice doesn't. That is the problem with lobby politics. If you're asking the problem to sort out the problem, then the problem is unlikely to be solved!

Do you think that the WSF, as a place where process matters above outcomes, unlike the G8 protests, might present a better opportunity for longer-term genuinely transformative change - if it isn't subverted along the way in power struggles?

Yes. And if our struggles also aren't about trying to find different ways of doing things simply in abstract terms, but also on a practical level, then we actually need to think not only how to confront global capitalism, but also how to organise our every-day lives differently. And that doesn't mean having some sort of utopia at the end of it. It means engaging in our everyday struggles that then transform on multiple levels. Maybe having these massive events is counter-productive. Maybe we need to think of different ways of doing things like going back to more decentralised ways of organising. I don't

know what the answer is. I've gained a lot from going to forums. I think they have been useful but you can't have only one moment of attack to the system and it's interesting in that respect that there is going to be no WSF in the coming year. I think forum organisers were feeling over-stretched trying to organise annual forums. It seems that people want to go back to what I call 'visibility exercises' so later this year there will be a big focus on the G8 and next year instead of a forum there will be decentralised global days of action. These decentralised actions will be in direct confrontation with the system but will also say 'We're still here! We're still doing what we do and it's still important', rather than having a one-off meeting that the media and others aren't really interested in. It's trying to change the form in order to gain some ground again, but in some ways it's also a return to an emphasis on direct confrontation with the system, like the much-heralded anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999.

It may seem retrogressive, but it's also engaging with the ideas that you mentioned of the forum recognising itself, its internal power structures and its situation within the world. Maybe decentralised and contextualised action will strengthen the global meetings of the future?

Yes, I hope so. I still have faith! Then we have to ask how do we use the connections that we've made? We've been meeting with each other for a long time now, so has that strengthened what we've been trying to do or not? I think it has. I think it's been an amazing resurgence of political activity, not just in the social forums but everyday communication over the internet coupled with people travelling, exchanging analyses, strategies and visions, visiting different struggles all over the world - these exchanges have strengthened our networks and we've learned a lot in the process. I've learned a lot in the process. It's been incredibly useful and my critiques of the forum and the different movements are in that spirit. I don't think it's all wrong, but we do need to think about how this is working, what direction it's going in and about how different events and process are necessary at different moments in time.

Do you think it's meaningful to start thinking about beyond critique and deconstruction? Is it possible to imagine another possible world before we deconstruct what we have now, who we are and how we relate to each other?

I think we can't see it in those terms. I think it's a false dichotomy to talk about critique and deconstruction as things that are different from reconstruction. Part of changing the world or reconfiguring social and power relations is about critique and deconstruction. It has to be an ongoing process. I don't believe in utopias. We should see critique and deconstruction as something ongoing in our political practice that never goes away. We're always reinstituting something that isn't perfect so we always have to be critiquing and deconstructing that and prefiguring these social relations as we go along. I think we're prefiguring in the here and now something that we want to exist and whereas that opens up a whole new space to talk about politics, it doesn't mean that then all that matters is the every-day practices of human interaction and alternative modes of production and consumption. Of course there is still a political sphere and there are still nation states and many different sites of politics and of struggle. Thus, pre-figuring the desired world is not sufficient for social and political change to occur, but it's an important element. So I think 'deconstruction' and 'reconfiguration' are two sides of the same coin. They go together and we can't see it in this linear way, which is why the forum can't move through stages of first critique, then deconstruction, then reconstructing this other world it's just an impossible framework to begin from in my opinion.

So we should more see it as an ongoing and hopefully eternally incomplete project?

Yes, I would say so. And that relates to what we think the purpose of the forum is. We need to be looking at the struggles that go on every day. That's where we can change things, have successes and gain ground. The forum should be this space where we can engage with one another. Whether the forum as an event is a good idea or not might change in the next five years but that doesn't mean that it is wrong now, or that it was wrong five years ago. It means that there comes a point when we have to reconfigure and rethink and maybe have a different strategy for some time which might then change again depending on the needs of that moment.

I was really reassured to have a conversation with someone from the Nairobi citizen's assembly about these issues. He had a real bone to pick with civil society if the WSF is civil society because it's not involving ordinary people. My question was: what is it that we have to do to win? Is it involving local people, or something else? What is the key to changing things? And he said 'I think we're actually already winning because we're sitting here having this conversation'. That sounds trite but at the same time if we don't start from who we are and build from there then I don't think we're going to get very far.

That sounds like a positive place to end our conversation too. Thank you for your insights into the complex praxis and politics that underlie the WSF. Given our conversation it will clearly not be an easy journey, but I want to ask you in closing; do you think another world is possible?

I think other worlds already exist!