

FOUR DAYS THAT SHOOK OUR WORLDS

Turning up to volunteer at the European Social Forum office, three floors up in an inconspicuous building next to the Stock exchange in central Paris on opening day - 2 and you're never sure what might happen. Just have to muck in and do the next job that needs doing. Started off making my personal contribution to cutting 70km of string into 1 metre lengths for the accreditation badges. By the afternoon I'd moved onto stationary logistics and by the eve, a rapid promotion for three of us all volunteers, all new that week, who found ourselves answering the phones and fielding all the questions as the rest of the staff went out to the sites to organise "sur place."

On the opening day of the most important political event in Europe for decades any organisation which takes a decision to stop answering the deluge of phone calls at midi because it's time for lunch must be either French, arrogant, confident, well organised or all four. To be honest I was disappointed. I'd really enjoyed trying to explain to the President of Ile de France that there wasn't a VIP service and to get into the Forum he was going to have to queue up just like everybody else - and to the Portuguese delegation leader that there were 50,000 others looking for accommodation so he'd have to wait his turn as well.

But back to the organisation. 7 permanent staff to put together the 4 days. 55 plenary, 250 seminars, nearly 200 workshops, 50,000 participants, etc, etc. Just getting the 30,000

interpretation headsets there from around the world was a feat in itself, never mind the 40,000 meals served under the Confederation Paysanne marquees. But the figures don't do the Forum justice. This is more about quality than quantity and a new form of organisation. Sure there were tensions between some of the organising committee and the staff, but that's to be expected. For some the social forums are a door opening from the outside into a new form of politics; for the older political stalwarts they are a door opening from the inside. You don't become an ardent adept of autonomous non-hierarchical organisation when you've been a member of the French CGT communist union for the last thirty years. So that's bound to create some interesting synergies and creative tensions, a bit like a cumulous storm developing. Laurent, the brains and organisation behind the internet, community media

and communications made the perhaps obvious but interesting analogy between the permanent staff's 9 month work contracts and the forum. Working with them and talking to them it just didn't feel at all like a difficult pregnancy or birth. And now everybody's busy imagining how the "enfant terrible" will develop. It doesn't stop here. So maybe the most important thing about the fora is just that that they happen. Just trying to imagine the voluntary effort involved is staggering. Try the obvious comparison with a "traditional" political party conference and the financial and political resources they can call on.

If you're not used to French and Italian politics, the dominant flavour of the week, then you might not have realised how important the food tents were, for the quality of both the food (my

marks went to the Alsatian wine and sauerkraut) and the networking. Sitting there one night with the only journalist from the British press as he tried to satiate his recent organic pastis addiction whilst trying to get to grips with the detail of Negri's analysis of Empire I spotted Nelson, Djamel and Mamadou sitting there resplendent in their ghetto gear smiling at the joyous mayhem going on around them. To the backdrop of Bella Ciao played by a Brass fanfare and with 2,000 people itching to find a space to dance on the tables we struck up a short conversation. "Where you from? and what you doing here?" "La Courneuve," said Nelson "we heard there's some mouvement going on down here. You some kind of a prof?" Never been sussed out so fast in my life. Off they went later still smiling as they took their message back to France's most notorious housing estate. More efficient than Fedex. The forum made me think a lot about Marconi's idea that we are only Six Degrees of separation from everybody. As we all open up our networks to each other in a spirit of cooperative enterprise moving towards a better world our politics become exponential, powerful and difficult to control.

Next to Nelson and the others in the tent were some

Sheffielders, my UK home town: brilliant I thought, get some news from home. But no, got sidetracked. They were from the International 5th League of revolutionary socialists, or something like that (can never seem to get my head round the word order). Lots of stars and fists anyway, and real dinosaurs. Debating whether the working class is still so important or whether in the information age knowledge is power is never easy but when the crux of the argument seems to be that I got up to Paris in a lorry and that must have been made by someone QED. It seemed better to leave it there. Or maybe the pastis was getting to me.

Working Class or Multitude? This was the subject of the only seminar I managed to get to, but was it worth it! A 10 round contest between a slick, polyglot, 70 yr old muscular heavyweight from Italy: in the purple corner Antonio Negri, thunderous applause; in the red corner the middleweight Brave Alex Calicos, whistles. Thought I'd time warped back to '68. The meeting had spilled out to the car park, earnest young radical chic Europeans were hanging off trees, on walls, on shoulders anywhere just trying to catch every word from the master as he graciously wiped the floor with the middleweight. All it was missing was the smell of Gitanes but just experiencing

the broad smile under the beret of French radical sociologist Philippe Corcuf made my day, and Toni Negri was still smiling when I spotted him at the final meeting on Sunday. He's ill now though I hear, was due to do a programme on France Culture after the forum but had to pull. Imagine that on Radio 4! But maybe there is preliminary work to be done before that.

A stark reminder as we left the Sunday meeting. Assembled in the cold drizzle under the motorway bridge, ranks of the SWP were forcing us to move through them as they chanted their versions of "revolutionary" slogans. Difficult to describe my emotional reactions. First of all I looked round to see where the cameras were. Must be a documentary, a period fiction or maybe even a post modern pop video I thought. No cameras to be seen anywhere, excitement turned to fear, then to anger and finally to a sort of sympathy, maybe even compassion. Later in the St Denis food tent (you probably think I spent all my time there!) a paper seller was moving between the tables, "Socialist Worker, Socialist Worker c'est gratuit" Congratulated him on his multi-linguism but couldn't help thinking "c'est normal", it's just your polemic set within a dépassé aesthetic. In any case aren't

we arguing that information and knowledge should be circulated freely like software? How can these basically good-thinking people and organisations be brought into the folds of the movement of movements more effectively, or should we nurture them because they provide valuable links and reminders to our political failures (and some victories of course) in the past? Answers on a post card...

Maybe the revolution won't be televised (unless they're our own tellies) but it will be cultural. Patrick Viveret the French Philosopher is saying that this movement has gone from being a western movement based on an analysis of the economics driving the madness in the world to a movement which is very nearly global and now dominated by political and cultural analysis. OK he didn't say it quite like that but it sounds a lot better in French. Culture is a word that often strikes fear and can seem to mean so many things. I wasn't sure about the cultural offerings at the forum: felt like a germ of something was beginning to happen but hadn't really got off the ground yet. There were nearly a hundred events over the four days though. Documentary cinema and music seemed to have the upper hand but there were also some interesting offerings from Theatre

groups, and of course music. A lot of it also took place in the city away from the main venues for the forum. I passed an agreeable moment listening to a beautiful Tablar/Sitar concert given by Neela Bhagwat.

But culture is also popular culture and that seems to be developing well. Fatma's a friend from Marseille, now making her way in Paris. She's young, beautiful, rebeu*, rebellious, confident and sometimes quite angry. She is neither "Pute ni Soumise" - neither a prostitute nor submissive, as one of the vibrant new networks coming out of the popular banlieues have decided to call themselves. Set up in reaction to the forced gang rape and immolation of a young woman and the general climate of oppression and fear, this movement is calling into question the positions of some of their older brothers and sisters. Fatma attended a seminar 'led' by some of these from the 'Mouvement d'Immigration des Banlieues' and from her description, threw a full-scale Mediterranean Wobbly: mainly, and I'm paraphrasing here, at their macho posturing and covert opportunism. "All they're looking for is a job as a Ministerial advisor and a Renault Megane with a f*!\$ing chauffeur". These are not new criticisms of

course but serve to keep us all on our toes. Some were saying that this was the year the movement went out into the Banlieue (St Denis, etc), but the Banlieue didn't necessarily come down to meet us. I think it's probably a lot more complicated than that. Fatma's are not new criticisms of course, but they do serve to keep us vigilant against arrivism which leeches away the potential energy of our actions. And why didn't much of the Banlieue show? Try Ramadan: not the guy all the French press were trying to expose but the religious celebration. Imagine suggesting the next forum should be held between the 23rd and 27th December!

Global, Lutte, Action, and Disobedience: GLAD to be here, to be here glad, that's the sort of acronymic creativity I like. Is this the fringe (or as the French call it the 'off') or is it central? Geographically at least, off centre, just the other side of the peripherique from La Villette, the autonomous, cooperatively organised arm had set up camp under two enormous marquees. Cheap vegetarian food, wash your own dishes, organic bar, bands in the evening, actions during the day. The new No Vox collective made up of Action against Chomage, Droit au Logement and the Sans Papiers were organising from here. These are no strangers to NV Direct

Action and taking the struggle to the authorities and this is France so GLAD was a cool place to hang out if you're into all of that. Paris Indymedia was based here, having exhausted all possibilities of collaborating elsewhere.

Disobedience, don't you just love that word, conjures up all sorts of memory frissons from schooldays. I just wonder if this is the crux of what we're calling here the enchantment of politics that you felt so strongly during the forum. Renaissance, enlightenment, action and movement. In France and elsewhere we owe an awful lot to Attac and the lot from Le Monde Diplomatique, real intellectual catalysts, and where would we be without their analysis and determination to get the world agenda changed. But speaking to attacians I've known for some time it seems that Attac's pivotal role is changing. Many keep their allegiance but have moved on to other forms of action or concerns across the spectrum, from media to direct activism and further a field and that, is just great news. Attac is not a disobedient or especially rebellious organisation, nor is it especially packed out with young people, so it's good it's being forced to leave go of this perceived centrality. Stick to the knitting though, a valiant

project is already on the go. All the seminars, workshops, plenary were staffed with Attac rapporteurs. These reports are currently being collated. Knowing Attac and their teacher and retired civil servants members these won't be 1 side A4 action point type things. God knows how many tomes it will run to when finished, but perhaps now when they say, "this is just a movement of antis, no propositions, etc" we'll be able to point to this work - or am I just being naïve?

Went off to the Media Lab, in the 11ème arrondissement with Fabrice, another mate from Marseille who's ex Attac, and now busy setting up Indymedia in Marseille, which is great because that's where it started in France back in 2000. The MediaLab was where many of the alternative media groups were based for the week. For the initiated and the un, a full programme of training on streaming, free software, new publishing tools, strategy and more could keep you active for years to come. Don't know why but sitting in a café opposite Fabrice and I had set off into a fantasy world where we were imagining the Alter-mondialist "people" magazine we were going to start. You know the sort of thing, José Bové on the cover, blurred photos of some of his sheep, sneak preview of his new yacht

being built at St Nazaire, or paparazzi photos of Bernard Cassen and his disciples round the pool at his house in the Luberon, Naomi Klein's new lingerie collection, or the uncensored Red Pepper Christmas party photos. There's a lot of potential here and Fabrice had just launched in one of his pet hate "stars" Christopher Aguiton when I looked round and Aguiton was there, sitting three tables down chatting away in English to some of his acolytes. Tried to get Fabrice to record an interview with him, we knew he couldn't and wouldn't refuse, but Fabrice is more intelligent than that. Got to be vigilant though, maybe as a first step we should suggest banning the use of the first person when communicating; move over to the Rastafarian "I and I?" Shit!

The British press: scandalous or scary? It was the second day and most of the UK press and the BBC hadn't showed. Rang them up to see what was happening: World Service was doing an interview later (which never went out) and Radio 4's Today told me I was being aggressive when I asked them why they weren't here. If the Forum could make the front pages of most of the quality European press, and Les Echos, France's FT, can run a 24 page supplement on the alter-globalisation

movement, then something is going wrong over there. Either this movement isn't on the governments and their media friends' radar screens yet, or it is but they don't want to talk about it. Either way it's good for us - lots of room to talk - but if I was the News or Political Editor of any of the British quality media I'd either be asking some pretty searching questions of my journalists or be extremely ashamed of myself. You take your pick.

Communicating isn't easy when there's so many countries involved so Babels is a welcome and intelligent project and another spin off from Attac except that their members are younger, polyglot, intelligent and much prettier. But first one last great divide journalist story from the call centre. A journalist from Le Point (France's Forbes magazine) rings.

"Hello I'm looking for a story from the ESF: we're a business magazine so would like to cover a business that maybe was set up after Florence or Porto Alegre last year"

"What about Babels, they're the organisation providing all the interpreting and translating services in Paris and Mumbai. They've brought their polyglot member translators over from all over the world,

arranged all the headphones, etc; that'd be a good story"

"Yes, but aren't they a voluntary association, I'm looking for a social enterprise business"

"But they employ loads of people, big budget..."

"No, an association's no good"

"Sorry then that's the best I can do" I said incomprehensibly as I wept with frustration into the handset.

Conveniently the Babels party on Saturday night closed at midnight so I was up bright and early to get to St Denis in time for the final meeting of the movements. A bit of a let down as it turned out: maybe the incessant drizzle didn't help. Even so, huddled at the marquee entrance I made one final rencontre, Gia, Greek but living in London who'd come to the Forum to link up with her compatriots. She'd had an incredible time at the Forum as well and just needed to share this with somebody. I don't know what there is about smoking outside no smoking buildings but you always meet the most incredible people and Gia was no exception. We spent the afternoon together swapping notes, mails, feelings and thoughts until the sound of the Eurostar whistle could be

heard in the distance and Gia had to prepare to re-enter CCTV land and the obligatory passport swipe, photo opportunity and interview with the Special Branch.

"Madame, can you explain where you've been in France"

"I've been in Paris at the European Social Forum"

"We've heard about that Madame, could you just explain what you've been doing there"

"I've been talking, and listening and meeting interesting people officer"

"Hmm, we thought so. Would you mind just stepping over here into this more... er, more comfortable room"

And I set off back into my own real world. Coming down after an experience like the Forum is not easy, the real world just appears too weird for words. Luckily the Paris metro had been the scene of some active advertising political graffiti campaign and the next day I started up a conversation with Jean Baptiste as he was replacing damaged ads for "cheap" expensive loans and other useless goods and services.

“Must be a pain to have to replace all these posters”

He returned an ironic smile.

“No I think it’s good, and funny, only takes a marker pen and a bit of wit and you’ve turned the adverts message round. Dead simple. That’s got to be too good for words. Er, sorry”

“You could buy yourself a marker pen, do a bit yourself, you’re well placed”

Laughing, “Think that would be going a bit too far, I do my bit though, elsewhere”

The Metro arrived so we said Goodbye and I got on. Monday morning is never gay is it? Especially in capital cities for some reason. Opposite me I could see the saddest, most tired face I’ve ever seen. In his late forties the man’s jowls seemed to be touching his collar bone, and his mouth bent downwards level with the bottom of his chin. Mentioned this to the young woman sitting next to me.

Surprised (you don’t talk to strangers on the metro) she replied: “It’s always like this in the morning, it’s because they’re all going to work”

She thought for a moment and then turned back to me and continued: “But you know, it’s the same in the evening when they’re going home, tired and sad.” Got off at the next station, turned the corner off the platform and into the corridor where a Venezuelan Indian guitarist Tomas Da Aquino was busking. I’m not sure what exactly it was, the conversations, the sadness, tiredness, the rencontre, over-emotionability, or just the timbre of his tenor voice resounding against the guitar and echoing around the tiled corridor as he sang his own composition "Esperando Por Ti", but it made me think of Wales and home, and nostalgia. I just burst into tears, once I’d let go, flooding down my cheeks. So if that’s the down side, it gives you an idea of what the up side of the forum was like.

How is it possible to sum up such a set of events? Firstly, this is just my story.

There are more than 50 000 other stories to tell,

And I just hope they’re being told. Secondly it’s natural to make comparisons, and the European Social Forum in Florence last year is the obvious one. Florence was happy, but besieged in the Fortress conference centre and under attack from all sides but especially the Berlusconi media. Florence came out, joyous during the enormous demonstration, but even that was still anti. Paris was different. Positive, intelligent, looking out, building and going way beyond happiness to a state which can only be described as bordering on euphoria. It was a changed way of looking at the world, confident in our criticisms, more definite in our propositions. A paradigm shift, a jump in consciousness, call it what you like. If politics can really be as fun as being a 12 year old at Butlins in the seventies when you’ve just discovered girls (or boys) than I’m all for this re-enchantment process. Let’s keep it going to London next year.

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