

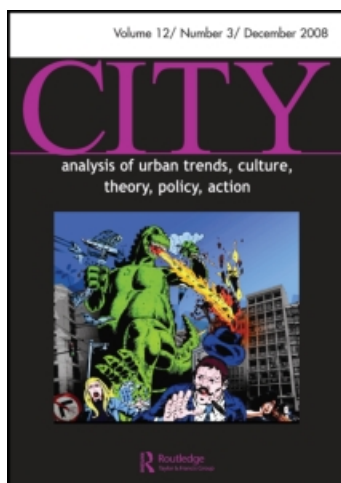
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Two world urban forums. What happened in Rio? Where does it lead? A discussion

Adrian Atkinson; Barbara Lipietz; Marcelo Lopes de Souza; Shipra Narang Suri

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Two world urban forums. What happened in Rio? Where does it lead? A discussion

Adrian Atkinson, Barbara Lipietz, Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Shipra Narang Suri

Introduction

'In the history of radical movements, of social movements, the process of cooptation is well known, and this ... is perhaps what is happening to forums to the ideals of forums, when they become forums for all stakeholders alike – as if all stakeholders were equal. But they are not all equal. The task is to make them equal.'

Thus, Peter Marcuse in his address for the opening session of the more populist Social Urban Forum (SUF), one of the two forums that were meeting in Rio in March, 2010. The other was the original, more institutionalised World Urban Forum (WUF). Between and within the two forums, was the procession of cooptation at work? Was there also some move towards equality? What happened? Where does it lead?

Three members of the *City* network, Adrian Atkinson, Marcelo Lopes de Souza and Shipra Narang Suri, and a new associate, Barbara Lipietz, were there. And we are in touch with a fifth participant, Peter Marcuse, to whom we return later in this introduction. What did they see? How do/did they interpret it? This is the approach we adopted when we began our virtual dialogue between Souza in Brazil, Narang Suri in India, Atkinson in Switzerland and Lipietz in the UK. This is an approach that emphasises *the process of knowing* or perhaps not knowing, of coming

to know or not know, of individual, cultural, national, institutional and existential understandings and misunderstandings, of divergent, conflicting and/or shared meanings.¹

What follows is then not an agreed statement, not a static presentation of petrified 'knowledge' but a dynamic exploration in temporal form. A narrative, in fact, conducted in/on **three stages**. Four individuals arrive in Rio. What did they see, hear? Or rather, three people arrive in Rio – Souza was, as he rightly asserts, already there. We begin, then, with a presentation of four **preliminary thoughts**. At this point Souza, the one insider to that/those situation/s, saw the need to set out an analysis of what had been happening, which he does in an essay, **A (very short) tale of two urban forums**. This was, to say the least, something of an eye-opener to his three visiting colleagues. Atkinson's immediate response was that it 'put our chatter to shame'. The third stage, then, is a series of interim conclusions, **Second thoughts**, by the three outsiders, a relatively short one by Atkinson and two successive essay-type responses/accounts, from Narang Suri, 'A response to Marcelo ... Reflections on WUF', and from Lipietz, 'On WUF, SUF and mobilisation for progressive change – a response to Marcelo, Shipra and Adrian.'

What did happen?

This, then, is the story presented here, or perhaps a drama in three acts, taking place on several stages. It is, of course, not as simple as that. In one sense the presentation relativises the developing understandings. We need to look more deeply into some of our basic categories. In what sense(s) are three of the participants outsiders, and indeed our fourth visitor, Marcuse? Three of them were not involved in SUF. The fourth, Marcuse, was involved in SUF but arrived a day late (because of passport/visa problems) and so – to introduce more dynamics into this account – his opening address had to be read for him and he missed the protest march, and confrontation with the police, etc. to which Souza refers.

In another sense we—now to include the writer of this introduction who was not there at all but has been listening, watching, communicating, and has contributed to the shape and nature of this dialogue—are, to varying degrees, insiders as comrades in the social (and intellectual) movement to which Marcuse refers and of which he and David Harvey (mentioned below in this context) are prominent members. And yet that movement, or rather the potential movement, is itself divided, to a significant extent, into insiders and outsiders. The SUF was, in Souza's words, 'organised by people (some academics) who invited Peter to join it, and these Brazilian academics were at the same time involved with the WUF and with the SUF (and with the Lula government, and with UN-Habitat and so on...'.² Beyond these, in one sense, insiders was, as Souza puts it, 'the other side': 'a kind of social basis which became largely frustrated in the course of events. *This* social basis – not the top organizers – confronted the police on the first day of SUF. *This* social basis became increasingly critical towards SUF's organization and structure' (Souza's emphases).

Souza himself is an insider/outsider. As an academic he is to some extent an insider but one who works closely with outsiders, some

of the largely excluded Brazilian social movements and members of a South African one, the Abahlali baseMjondolo (the photographs of one member, David Ntseng, illustrate, and the analysis of another, Richard Pithouse, also contributes, to Souza's essay). He is, to use Gramsci's formulation, to a significant extent, an organic intellectual; as indeed, in different ways, are Marcuse and Harvey.

And where does this lead?

Where does this insider/outsider distinction place our dialogue? Cooptation was involved but could to some extent be avoided. Insofar as they were aware, or became aware, of their shifting, potentially conflictual situation, the participants are involved in a necessary dialectic of knowing/knowledge.

As to what happened, though they were largely unaware of what was going on at the time, they have come to accept Souza's account. But where does this lead us? To take one point from each, for Lipietz, so far as WUF is concerned, it leads to the possibility that it 'could be re-energised by a more disciplined, careful, reflexive engagement with some of its very own processes...'. For Narang Suri, it leads from the thematic focus of WUF on the Right to the City to a question: 'when, where and how do the worlds of ideas and projects meet?' For Atkinson, the discipline and reflexive engagement with organisational processes, and the focus on a meeting-point between ideas and projects and on the Right to the City, have to be directed to dealing with urban/social collapse as oil runs out and climatic factors increasingly impact on all settlements.³ These will require—he sees this as implied by Souza and Pithouse—a more local and specific programmatic approach than that advocated by those who base their hopes on the supersession of capitalism or even on greater equality between SUF and WUF.⁴

Bob Catterall

Notes

- 1 We follow here an approach adopted in some earlier discussions in this journal – see the Editor's introduction to "'Cities for People, Not for Profit': background and comments', *City* 13(4), pp. 466–470, 2009, particularly pp. 467–469 and also, for a similar approach, Catterall, B. and others 'Is it all coming together? Thoughts on urban studies and the present crisis: (18) 'Detained at her majesty's pleasure...' (A dialogue on the implications of a volcanic interruption to the plans of those attending

a geography conference in Washington), *City* 14(3), pp. 339–352, 2010.

- 2 Email to the author, 29 July 2010.
- 3 This interpretation draws to some extent on ongoing discussion led by Atkinson in *City*.
- 4 Marcuse's overall account, inevitably missing from his brief address at the SUF, involves necessarily a distinction between short, mid- and long-term objectives (see Marcuse, P. 'In defense of theory in practise' *City*, 14.(1–2), pp. 4–12, 2010, particularly the cases discussed pp. 8–11.

1. Preliminary thoughts

From: Barbara Lipietz

Date: 15 June 2010 23:44

I was thinking of writing a piece to reflect a very specific angle on the World Urban Forum (WUF); that is, the experience of moderating an internet debate on governance and participation for UN-HABITAT, ahead of WUF. The main contribution would be to get across the output that came out of the debate since (a) it was an interesting process and there were some valuable inputs on the ways in which participatory governance has to be rethought if it is to be more than window-dressing and actually help to actualise 'the right to the city' in the years ahead; (b) UN-HABITAT hasn't been particularly active in disseminating the output and it seems a shame to let the contribution die out. But I guess I would also incorporate some (!) thoughts about the disconnect I then felt between that intense process of deliberation and the debate that emerged in the official 'Dialogue' on the topic—which was (unsurprisingly perhaps) rather bland. It would be interesting to have Adrian's perspective on that too since he so actively and critically inputted into that debate.

Beyond that I think there is a basis of a looser dialogue (which could take the format of the 'Detained at her Majesty's Pleasure'

(i.e. a more conversational approach) around some issues stirred up by WUF and that are relevant to other discussions within *City*:

- WUF's contribution to the Right to the City agenda? Don't know about you but the few sessions I attended left me pretty dissatisfied: is it just a new fad? How do the very real democratic innovation experiences that we have seen in Brazil, in parts of the USA, etc. relate to an emerging international discourse on the city that looks set to lose its radical content?
- Linked to that, an interrogation about the linkages (or lack of) between WUF and the Social Urban Forum (SUF). Quite a few questions can be raised about the two parallel (and disconnected) events of course—and I think those who have been involved with *City* for longer will better be able to make the connections with past debates at *City* ... (but am happy to develop some leads on this too).
- WUF/SUF and their contribution to a cosmopolitan urbanism—or an urban outlook that straddles the 'South' and 'North'. Whatever the misgivings of WUF (and SUF?), the relevance of such

gatherings is the dialogue that it is able to generate across that divide. That dialogue is, of course, far from being devoid of power relations etc.—but there is nonetheless a form of engagement which is still largely inexistent (or is even more heavily biased) in urban studies. Is there anything that we can learn/take from this? Any interesting forms of knowledge creation/knowledge sharing etc.? And of course what are the pitfalls involved?

- To relate to the latest *City* output and its focus on climate change: did WUF/WSF address the issue? How far were environmental challenges integrated into thinking through the Right to the City or indeed, bridging the urban divide?

From: Adrian Atkinson

Date: 16 June 2010 07:14

Concerning your point Barbara about blandness: my impression in all that I dropped in on was the same. No rabble-rousing here! I think there was even an attempt in at least one of the Dialogues I attended to organise contentious inputs direct from practitioners in the South from the audience but somehow these disappeared into the immenseness of the silent crowd (silent because there was only time for a few brief questions and comments—0.1% of the crowd and, indeed, a preponderance of people I know, typical of the way the same people always dominate the scene). Indeed, the medium becomes the message in the sense of this being more of an outing for most of the participants than ‘critical edge stuff’. Do the silent ones learn something? Are they inspired to do better when they arrive home?

I suppose different people get different things out of it and there is no way to summarise this beyond saying what we as individuals—or as a small group—got out of it. Again, given the size of the event, one could do no more than scratch the surface of what went on. One had one’s own sessions—

and in my case these went very smoothly, giving the impression almost of religious rituals: everyone knows now how to listen to a few lectures and then form working groups and come up with reflections or suggestions of the groups ... but what then? Good feeling, but actually learning (and now I am talking specifically about so-called ‘training events’)?

Apropos your point, Barbara about ‘straddling North and South’, this hardly holds in that my looking through the list, now on the WUF website, of those attending (about 550 pages!!!) it became very evident that the North sees this very much as an event about the South and I expect the South also sees it as a South–South affair: the northern government representatives (with the marginal exception of the USA) were overwhelmingly local embassy people and those representing development agencies. There were very, very few European local authorities present over against vast numbers from the South—and, I noted, particularly Africa (albeit in all sections, Brazil obviously dominated in terms of numbers).

Regarding, Barbara, your raising the issue of climate change and how this was dealt with: it certainly was there—with a whole day’s Dialogue on it and many other kinds of events with climate change as the specific focus. But once again the Dialogue session I attended barely penetrated to the drastic steps that will be needed to stay below the 450 ppm (plus 2 degree) limit set at Copenhagen and what this will mean for the global and local economy if genuine steps are to be taken. I very much doubt whether the vast majority of the audience understands the meaning of this message and it certainly did not feature in any way in the final wrapping up or any other major statements about what the event was supposed to be about. Once again blandness brought on by sheer numbers and the general atmosphere.

My thing, of course, was looking out for any meaningful mention of energy issues and, as with the global warming mitigation, the impacts that the decline in energy availability (people prefer to talk of rising prices) will

have. There was no mention of this anywhere in the programme (there may have been a networking event but the complete list was nowhere available). Furthermore, I came across no mention at all in my wanderings of coming energy price rises and declining availability and so obviously if these are not mentioned then nor are the problems that these will raise in terms of the way cities function and the impact on citizens and especially the poor ... The only mention of 'peak oil' and its consequences I encountered came up in one of the events I was involved in (the launching of a book on the future of urbanisation in the South with authors of the papers presenting their bit). The issue slid in at the side, as it were, during the final general discussion and there was a little concern and knowledge amongst one or two of the audience which I helped to feed. I suppose such knowledge is actually quite widespread but given that it wasn't anywhere raised, so it was nowhere debated. I can imagine it is simply that those people who do have some inkling look around and see nobody discussing it so think it is probably not important, again cowed by the general ambience and the fact that none of the stars are mentioning it ...!

So where do we go from here?

From: Marcelo Lopes de Souza

Date: 16 June 2010 13:11

In fact, I did not come to Rio—I *was* in Rio (since I live and work here), and it was my intention to take part in both forums (the WUF and the SUF), but things developed in such a way that I concentrated my attention on the 'alternative' forum. I can report a little about this experience, and I think that the protest march against the WUF (the people who participated in the 'alternative' forum

were the protagonists of this march) could serve as a 'link' between both experiences/descriptions.

From: Shipra Narang Suri

Date: 16 June 2010 14:03

My own impressions are not very different from those mentioned by Barbara and Adrian, but I would also like to add that this WUF—the fifth one—seemed somehow to be just more of the same. I saw or heard very little that was different from Barcelona, Vancouver or Nanjing. The networking events were too many, with too many speakers and too little discussion, and the Dialogues hardly any better. In fact, on the whole it seemed like a huge missed opportunity—with a theme as vast, thought-provoking and universally relevant as 'Right to the City', and a rich online discussion preceding the event, there could and should have been much more engagement with ideas, rather than projects. That to me is the main problem with these for a—one that I wanted to explore in our networking event, if we had been allocated a slot—how do the worlds of ideas and projects meet. Do they meet at all? Or is the WUF basically a best-practice exchange/lessons-learned type of event which doesn't really engage with the thinking and writing world (I'm trying to avoid the practitioners vs. academics terminology), whether in the North or the South? Is this what it was/is meant to be? Or can it be more?

Also, on the link between WUF and SUF—David Harvey spoke at the Dialogue on RTTC, I understand from Marcelo that he also spoke at the SUF. That and the protest march aside, the link between the two events was non-existent. Another missed opportunity, perhaps?

2. A (very short) tale of two urban forums

Marcelo Lopes de Souza

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.' (Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 2007 [1859])

Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of his two 'historic novels', in 1859. It is set in London and Paris before and during the time of the French Revolution, and it shows the background which contributed to this revolution: poverty on the one side, elitism on the other, and oppression and brutality as the main 'links' between the two. In this novel, letters play an important role. And so it was as I exchanged some emails with my South African friend Richard Pithouse (urban activist and philosopher, lecturer at the Department of Politics, Rhodes University, Grahamstown), in order to discuss what was going on during those days in March 2010 when two urban forums—the World Urban Forum (WUF) and the *Fórum Social Urbano* (Social Urban Forum, SUF)—took place in Rio de Janeiro.

Those days in March were above all a time of ambiguity and ambivalence. A time of contradictions, we could say. Not necessarily 'the worst of times' (well, let us keep in mind the figures regarding urban problems in cities like Rio, from the housing deficit to the crime rates ...), but surely not 'the best of times' either; anyway: interestingly, it was 'the age of wisdom', but at the same time 'the

age of foolishness'. Was it 'the spring of hope'—or, considering the naked reality and the increasing (and literally armed) impatience of the many (the poor, the dispossessed), 'the winter of despair' ...?

The following account contains just a few personal remarks (on the basis of my 'field notes') and a quote from one of Richard's emails to me. It is not a paper in a proper sense, it is just an invitation to reflection.

First impressions

The third day of the WUF, 22 March 2010, was at the same time the first day of the SUF ('the other one'), conceived to be an alternative to the former (considered by the participants of the Social Urban Forum as 'the conservative one'). It began interestingly, in spite of the repression: dozens of social movements (which were either directly or indirectly involved with the SUF) organised a march; hundreds of people went to the WUF's venue to protest—peacefully and creatively, more or less in the style of a 'Global Action Day' (see Figures 1–3). It was possible to hear English sometimes, even German and French, and especially Spanish, but I think at least 90% of the protesters came from different parts of Brazil and especially from Rio de Janeiro itself, so that people were singing and provoking in Portuguese.

In the meantime, Lula da Silva, the governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro (Sérgio Cabral) and the mayor of the city of Rio de Janeiro (Eduardo Paes) were inside the building where the WUF was going on. Then came the police—with gas and big sticks; business as usual ... People resisted as much and for as long as possible, but the WUF's participants just looked at them, usually



Figure 1 22 March 2010: the participants of the *Fórum Social Urbano* (Social Urban Forum, SUF) take part in a march to protest against what was perceived as a somewhat exclusionary space, the World Urban Forum (WUF). Photograph: David Ntseng.

without showing solidarity (probably on the contrary). Finally the protesters decided to go to the SUF's venue, provocatively located only c.300 metres away from the WUF's venue, in Rio de Janeiro's harbour area.

The 'apex' of that Monday at the 'alternative forum' was a roundtable with David Harvey and two Brazilian urban planners (Erminia Maricato and Raquel Rolnik) in the evening. Peter Marcuse was scheduled to participate in this opening roundtable as well, but he arrived in Rio only on Tuesday due to problems with his visa. By the way: Harvey, Marcuse, Maricato and Rolnik took part in the WUF as well.¹

At the end of that day, I wrote a more or less optimistic email to Richard Pithouse in relation to the SUF. Richard was very interested in following all facts regarding both

forums due to several reasons, especially because a delegation of four activists of Abahlali baseMjondolo (the shack dweller's movement of which he is one of the organisers) was taking part in the WUF as well as (invited by me and my research team) in the SUF. (As a matter of fact, taking part in the SUF and meeting us was the main interest of the Abahlali's activists; attending the WUF was a means to the end, since they got their travel expenses financed this way.)

On closer inspection ...

However, as time went by, I began to have mixed feelings—at least or particularly in relation to the SUF. As far as the WUF is concerned, it was, for many people, frustrat-



Figure 2 The protest march goes on through Rio de Janeiro's Central Business District. Photograph: David Ntseng.

ing—(almost) from the beginning. ‘Too much government (and consultants and academics) + NGOs (and almost no social movements in a proper sense)’ was a usual criticism on the part of activists. Actually I was not ‘frustrated’ myself, simply because I did not have any great expectations at all. But I must confess I was quite frustrated *by the Social Urban Forum*. When it came to an end on Friday, 26 March, my (relative) enthusiasm had been replaced with disappointment.

Its structure was too much influenced behind the scenes by a specific group of people (a few Brazilian academics and a few activists connected with some big NGOs and some political parties). There were many students (mostly middle class) as well as NGO staff and fully fledged academics of all sorts, but activists from *favelas*, *sem-teto* settlements (e.g. squatted buildings) or the periphery represented only a tiny percentage of the people who attended the so-called ‘alternative forum’. Rio de Janeiro’s poor population simply did not take notice of

what was going on in the framework of the SUF.

These problems were perceived by me and by some others from the very beginning, but they became increasingly evident and annoying in the course of the days. As a result of this, an increasing number of participants of the ‘alternative forum’ were taking the microphone to criticise some problems on Thursday and Friday. It seems that the ‘alternative forum’ was *not* a true alternative at all, so that I began to think: *we need an alternative to the ‘alternative’*...

As I wrote to Richard to tell him about my disappointments, it is necessary to understand the background of this situation. Let me summarise the problems (from my point of view), from the specific to the general ones:

- (1) The Social Urban Forum could have been a promising initiative, but it was ‘colonised’ by a few influential academics and activists, most of them strongly connected



Figure 3 The march reaches Rio's harbour area, where the World Urban Forum's venue was located. Photograph: David Ntseng.

with some political parties and/or with some big NGOs as well. They form a kind of network which only at first glance appears to be a true alternative to institutions such as HABITAT and governments (but in fact, many or most of them are or were also more or less connected with institutions like these, despite some appearances to the contrary).

- (2) This network decided about who should be invited and who should be kept at a distance. Did the priorities and dynamics determined by this group meet the needs of the social movements and grassroots activists? My answer is a clear *no*. Actually they did not facilitate anything for many social movements, so that this contributed to the fact that an important meeting on Wednesday (organised by '[Re]Unindo Retalhos', which is a kind of

'front of organisations') was attended only by some 20 people in an improvised space ...

- (3) Anyway: as I told Richard in December and David Ntseng (one of the Abahlali's activists who visited Rio) a couple of days before the forums, our urban movements in Brazil are experiencing a deep—and highly complex—crisis these days. There are *many organisations* (some of them are important, most of them are very small); but it is difficult—for lots of reasons—to mobilise and organise the people. Among the factors, let me mention the following:
 - (A) The role of political parties (co-optation, manipulation, instrumentalisation of the poor).
 - (B) The role of NGOs (not necessarily, but more often than not: manipulation, patronage).

- (C) The role of many 'progressive academics' (often ranging from those who behave themselves as 'vampires' of movements—that is studying them but not contributing to praxis in any sense—to those who try to guide and control social movement's organisations—sometimes more or less on behalf of the interests of a political party).
- (D) The intimidating and demoralising role of criminal groups and organisations inside the segregated spaces themselves.
- (E) The role of mass media (very important in Brazil in order to keep the poor busy with football, TV series and all sorts of intellectual garbage).
- (F) The effects of widespread corruption in our political system (cynical behaviour, increasing lack of interest regarding everything which is related to public life ...).

(Interestingly, we see a very different reality when we consider what is going on in terms of social movements on the countryside—MST [*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*] and others ...)

Anyway, there were some opportunities to meet interesting people during the SUF—and for me and my research team and some Brazilian activists that meant above all to meet the militants from Abahlali baseMjondolo: David Ntseng, Louisa Motha, Mnikelo Ndabankulu and Mazwi Nzimande. I later wrote to the South African comrades that I could imagine how frustrating the 'alternative' forum was for them too, in many respects. In an email to me, David Ntseng spoke from his heart:

'Ambiguity and ambivalence are the characteristics of SUF, and you are right: the WUF was clearly government and UN Habitat space. But for the SUF it is most unfortunate that it did not provide the alternative most of us were yearning for.'

I said that anyway, it was at least an opportunity to see our reality how it really *is*, and not just how it 'could be' ... 'If you understand our weaknesses and contradictions—along with our potentialities', I said, 'then you can help us much more.'

Richard's feedback

At this juncture, it is interesting to reproduce the core of Richard's comments regarding my emails during these days.

'Here it is my impression that, for years, there was always the official space (state centred) and the alternative space (NGO/academic centred). But the alternative space, led and dominated by NGOs and a few academics, would also present itself as the voice of the grassroots struggles when of course it was not. Abahlali baseMjondolo (AbM), together with the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign (AEC), walked out of one of the main "alternative" spaces in 2006 to create a genuinely autonomous movement space—a space organised by and for movements. For this they were, of course, viciously attacked by the NGO and academic left—a process that still continues. And of course just as the state cannot conceptualise the agency of the poor and must always blame a middle class conspiracy so too the middle class left could only understand the walkout through the language of conspiracy by a rival middle class faction.

I think that the walkout was a very brave move by the AEC and AbM and that it has laid the ground for the possibility of an independent or autonomous politics of the poor. Of course as a middle class intellectual there were two challenges:

1. First whether or not to go with the movements or to stay with the money and power and career opportunities of the middle class left. Some people made the right decision and others made very disappointing decisions.

2. How does one take the reality of the situation where the “alternative” space is actually the project of a rival elite, and, also, the refusal of this by the movements, and do justice to it in one’s written work?

I think that Peter Hallward really gets this right in his book on Haiti.² I have tried to reflect this often ignored distinction between movement and NGO/academic spaces accurately in my written work—e.g. by making a distinction between the “grassroots left” and the “civil society left”.³ The question of getting the right terminology is very important. But this question is not merely a question of developing the right terms. It is also often a political question. It is often hard to tell the truth about these things in the academic/NGO spaces. The authoritarian left (who are sometimes major power brokers in “civil society”) use all kinds of personal attacks and slander as well as institutional forms of authoritarianism (e.g. disciplinary processes, even attempts to censor academic work by threatening legal action or threatening to hand people over to university bosses) to intimidate people to not discuss this issue and to continue with the fiction that the NGO/academic spaces are the same thing as movement spaces when they are clearly not.⁴

In the manner of a balance sheet

I think that Richard’s words brilliantly summarise some of the most crucial challenges progressive academics (with or without quotation marks) face. To a large extent, it is hardly necessary to comment on his email. However, it is convenient to underline a particular question.

As far as the WUF is concerned, at least we know better what can be expected and what cannot; there is, I think, no place for illusions—all specific and possible gains in terms of knowledge and ‘synergies’ notwithstanding. (I would not like to express myself in such dogmatic or sectarian terms to the point of refusing this possibility absolutely; after

all, some interesting speeches and talks can be delivered at meetings like the WUF. The possibility of the existence of ‘some interesting speeches and talks’ in such a context is not the point, however.) But what could be said about an ‘alternative’ which is not an alternative at all? *Which kind of role do different academics want to play?* (What are they trying to do...?) Both in terms of academic and political debate about alternatives and possibilities, disagreements are unavoidable, since asymmetries are enormous and interests are objectively (and often subjectively) tremendously divergent. Maybe these disagreements do not prevent us from learning from each other sometimes, in the context of a commitment to dialogue more than to confrontation. (Of course, confrontation is sometimes unavoidable, perhaps even necessary, especially in those cases when the state apparatus responds to words and arguments with gas or bullets.) It is necessary to be *sincere*. I would not like to ‘moralise’ an eminently political debate, but sincerity and equality are fundamental premises and this means that the organised poor must be taken seriously as partners in all conversation about problems, scenarios and alternatives. This is why Abahlali baseMjondolo has demanded that the middle-class left in the universities and the NGOs ‘Talk to us, not about us.’⁴ In the eyes of many grassroots activists and poor people in general, both NGO staff and academics (with their typical middle-class background) have increasingly become objects of deep political suspicion precisely because of the kind of hypocrisy that could be perceived by many people at the SUF; a kind of ambiguity, ‘doublespeak’ sometimes. Maybe the WUF was in comparison at least more ‘transparent’ ...

Acknowledgements

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and, as far as David is concerned, the nice photos too).

Notes

- 1 Both Erminia Maricato and Raquel Rolnik are senior urban planners, historically linked to Lula's *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party). Both worked at the Ministry of Cities under Lula (Maricato as former Vice Minister [2003–2006], Rolnik as National Secretary for Urban Programs [2003–2007]). Raquel Rolnik is nowadays United Nations Special Rapporteur on adequate housing.
- 2 See Hallward (2008).
- 3 See, for instance, Pithouse (2007a, 2007b). See also Souza (2006, 2010) and Esteves *et al.* (2009).
- 4 See Pithouse (2007b) and Ndabankulu *et al.* (2009). A more complete variant is: 'Talk to us, not about us, not for us.'

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3. Second thoughts

From: Adrian Atkinson

Date: 23 June 2010 19:47

Marcelo's piece is brilliant—putting our chatter to shame.

I think the point is twofold: firstly, Marcelo was able to see the whole Rio scene far better than any of us foreigners, because he is local and could listen in and react flexibly to all that was going on, rather than groping one's way through a highly stylised venue and organisation. Secondly, and linked to the first point, none of us saw the absence of the real oppressed. Well, I did attend the follow-on from a colleague's

networking event of last year which I was involved in, and which was half 'us' and half 'them' on the podium: this year they decided that only the representatives of the grass-roots should present and I was happy with this—albeit in Marcelo's terms, the context made nonsense of the speakers who were polite, rather than trying to put over any point such as Marcelo is doing!

Perhaps, in the light of Marcelo's piece—and particularly Richard Pithouse's analysis presented by Marcelo—the annui felt by

Barbara, Shipra and myself at WUF, qua event, should have been anticipated. After all, surely nobody believes that we are less than light years away from anything approaching a World Revolution of a socialist or any other kind. Grubbing around in the ashes of the 'concerned' end of Modernity in some kind of Hope of finding a spark to ignite radical change is, well, close to pathetic, and maybe we should be ashamed to have gone there with any such ambitions.

What Richard's piece indicates—and in general Marcelo is implying—is that radicalism in our world isn't a matter of global discontent or oppression but rather a very local matter, the lack of resolutions, however, being overwhelmingly held in place by larger forces—cultural, political and dare I say it energetic—that shape current social relation.

My ultimate point is that as these large forces begin to fall apart and away, all hell will break loose and a very wide spectrum of possibilities will emerge in process of resolving local and, what were global and national problems, locally.

These possibilities range from escalation of conflict into violent and destructive 'settling of scores' through (as in the fall of Rome) the simple evaporation of elites and middle classes for lack of resources to maintain their status and power (which doesn't automatically resolve the existential problems of today's poor and oppressed!) to a reassertion and hardening of class lines into some kind of caste or feudal arrangements. I believe 'radical thinkers and activists' should start to anticipate this and be in a position to influence or, dare I say it, steer the outcome.

A response to Marcelo ... Reflections on WUF

Shipra Narang Suri

As I read through Marcelo's piece, it is impossible to disagree with anything he writes. I did not attend the SUF, only the WUF, but I can relate to his feelings of dissatisfaction. But it is interesting to note that while Marcelo expresses disappointment, frustration and annoyance at the way SUF turned out, captured by the NGO-academic left rather than being a truly open platform for grassroots movements, WUF only receives a passing reference in his reflections ... a footnote, almost. Clearly, he had no expectations from it, and therefore did not feel let down by what went on there.

But some of us did have expectations, and we did feel let down. As someone who has been involved with WUF since the second forum was held in Barcelona in 2004

(followed by Vancouver in 2006, Nanjing in 2008 and now Rio in 2010), I had many of the same feelings for WUF as Marcelo had for SUF. Disappointment that despite such a vast, rich and challenging theme as 'Right to the City', WUF events largely ended up talking about more of the same—water projects, sanitation projects, housing and urban development plans. Frustration that very few new voices or new ideas were heard, that the focus was on showcasing best practices, and there was very little debate and even less introspection. Annoyance that there were so many parallel 'events' that the really interesting ones managed to get only 25–30 participants, while the usual suspects collected 100-plus people in self-congratulatory mode. Irritation that there was no time or space for meaningful discussion.

The World Urban Forum was launched, in fact, as a type of 'alternative' space. Before 2002, when the first WUF was held in Nairobi, UN-HABITAT's Governing Council was the only space for discussing the agency's mandate, agenda and activities, mainly with governments, but with some participation of 'accredited' NGOs. WUF was launched with the aim of opening up the discussion, of making it a truly participatory platform where NGOs, academia, local governments, women and youth groups, among others, could express themselves and exchange ideas on urban issues. The UN General Assembly noted that is was a '*non-legislative technical forum in which experts can exchange views in the years when the Governing Council of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme does not meet*'.¹ Further, the General Assembly encouraged local authorities and other Habitat Agenda partners to participate, in the World Urban Forum in its role as an advisory body to the Executive Director of UN-HABITAT.² In other words, the World Urban Forum was an opportunity for UN-HABITAT to hear voices from the trenches, so to speak, and to reflect on its own work in the light of what it heard.

The popularity of the Forum has indeed soared over the past decade. From 1195 participants at the first WUF in Nairobi in 2002 (as per UN-HABITAT's records), we have come a long way—nearly 12,000 people attended the Rio Forum. For networking event slots, we're told that only 1 in 30 applications makes it (so please apply early, and make sure you have some big names on your panel!). There are training events and side events and special sessions, youth and gender assemblies, caucuses and concerts, in addition to Dialogues and Networking Events (that there is very little time for discussion in all these, is another matter). Anyone who is interested in the urban sector is, or certainly wants to be, at the Forum, if not presenting

then critiquing; if not raising resources, then simply networking. Governments are fighting over the privilege of holding future sessions of WUF, in spite of the number of zeroes on the bill (the next one will be in Bahrain in 2012). Presidents and Prime Ministers line up to speak at opening and closing ceremonies. Even the Americans are on board now, as was evident from the sizeable US government contingent at the Rio Forum. Surely these are measures of success of the World Urban Forum phenomenon.

Or, are they? Would it not be better to ask one simple question instead—has the Forum remained true to its original aim, that of providing an opportunity to urban dwellers, urban researchers, urban thinkers and urban practitioners, to reflect upon and share their experiences, to exchange views and to provide UN-HABITAT with some critical feedback on its work, as well as some direction for implementation of the Habitat Agenda?

On the whole, the fifth WUF in Rio seemed like a huge missed opportunity—with a theme as thought-provoking and universally relevant as 'Right to the City', and a rich online discussion preceding the event (about which I'm sure Barbara will tell us more), there could and should have been much more engagement with ideas, rather than projects. But then, where and how do the worlds of ideas and projects meet? Do they meet at all? Or is the WUF basically a best-practice exchange/lessons-learned type of event which doesn't really engage with the thinking and writing world, whether in the North or the South? Is this what it was/is meant to be? Or can it be more?

Notes

- 1 UNGA Resolution 56/206.
- 2 UN-HABITAT (2002) Report of the first session of the World Urban Forum, Nairobi, 29 April–3 May 2002. UN-HABITAT, Nairobi. Emphasis added.

On WUF, SUF and mobilisation for progressive change—a response to Marcelo, Shipra and Adrian

Barbara Lipietz

Shipra's and Marcelo's texts on the WUF and SUF demand reflexive responses. Poignant in their candid take on events, they also raise difficult questions—on the role and nature of political mobilisation, ways in which various actors can best work towards progressive change (or, more generally, fail to do so), the function of grand gatherings and the relationship between ideas and practice/praxis. Huge questions, hugely challenging—and I sense from both, not entirely resolved. So, let me try and jump into the cauldron here and rummage through a few thoughts, unsettled and un-'worked through' as they are.

WUF

What, then, did we, could we expect from WUF?

Like Shipra, I didn't attend SUF (to my shame, only found out about its existence a couple of days into the WUF and then, was swallowed up by my commitments at WUF). I had come to WUF to present at the official 'Dialogue' event on Governance and Participation, a brief summary of the preparatory e-debate sessions on the same theme I had moderated for UN-HABITAT, on behalf of the African Centre for Cities. But like Shipra and Adrian (and Marcelo re: SUF), I did come back disappointed.

We talked, early on, of blandness. Perhaps the soaring heat, the humidity, the dizzying number of people contributed to a general sense of lethargy. But there was more to it. Adrian mentioned the 'good conduct' of participants in the ongoing litany of official and side events—all playing out a well-

rehearsed part in a grandly orchestrated 'best-practice' celebratory fest. Hardly any voice of despair or discontent, all agreement on the way forward: the need to involve and recognise and uphold the 'genie créatif' (or creative genius) of cities' poorer or excluded inhabitants (yes but how? and through what processes? And how should this articulate with the strategies of other urban actors etc.); and perhaps, more problematically, as Shipra summarises so well, little sense of introspection, of humility in front of our general and combined failure, as urban community, to transform substantially the lives of those millions still living in abject conditions.

Part of me, following Marcelo or Adrian, thinks I was simply naive to expect anything else from big jamborees such as WUF. In spite of their original crucial role in offering an alternative to the suffocating dominance of the Washington consensus, they can no longer be the place where real, alternative thought/processes will emerge—too big, too clunky, too institutionalised, too ritualised. Another part of me, more pragmatic, more generous perhaps, recognises the ongoing role of such gatherings as international iterations of the importance of the urban and urban development concerns—a 'fact' that is still not universally recognised (cf. in the majority of African countries), with harrowing consequences for the lives of the majority of urbanites carving out extremely precarious existences in cities. For the African Centre for Cities, the WUF represented a key policy arena in which to put forward a case for African urbanisation to be taken seriously by political, business and social

leaders and, accordingly, for them to mobilise convincingly in the domain of sustainable urban development.¹ When seen in that light, then, the sheer number of people and official/side activities at WUF *was* a good thing—lobbying for the assertion of the ‘Right to the City’ as a fundamental political priority.

But the problem, as Shipra also rightly brings up, was that there was a high risk that this hugely ‘thought-provoking and universally relevant’ theme would be tamed, stripped of its radical content through being so whimsically appropriated. Certainly the term was repeatedly brandied in Rio, but I am not sure that I understood what exactly it came to entail in the various permutations of WUF5. And I am quite sure that the expectations that somehow it would reinvigorate and re-politicise the debate and the ways forward towards just, progressive and sustainable urbanisation did not materialise. This has to be seen as some kind of failure—both by Shipra’s useful reminder of WUFs’ original objectives; and by the expectations vested into the Forum by those who participated in the e-debate exchange I had the good fortune of co-moderating.

In those three weeks of intense Internet exchange (in our case, amongst participants from 28 countries, more than 200 postings and many more viewers), there was the hope (tinted by a fair degree of realism) that the Right to the City could, just could, become reality through a reinvigorated/radicalised notion of participatory governance. This would involve on the one hand, reinjecting participatory governance with a politicised conception of participation as empowerment, whereby participants develop the tools and the vision to challenge unequal distribution of resources in a progressive and sustainable fashion. And on the other, it would require stretching the concept of participation to include the economic or livelihoods terrain; that is, in order to remain relevant to the vast majority of marginalised in our cities, participatory processes would

have to engage seriously with (aim to understand and support) the livelihood strategies already employed by marginalised groups in their daily struggles to live in the city. In turn these would require context-specific, mature reworkings of some principles of participatory governance along the following axes: a renewed emphasis on *vision* (of the ‘just’ of ‘good’ city) as the core driver to participatory *processes*; a greater effort (and democratic innovation) in carefully translating such visions of the just city—garnered through participatory processes and therefore built in part on the often fluid livelihood strategies of the excluded—into workable programmes that tally with governmental procedures and budgetary processes; and a context-specific exploration of the most productive interaction between social movements of the marginalised and the formal political process.²

This was the outcome of sincere soul-searching, of painful/sobering accounts of failure as well. The debate *was* reflexive and came, at times, close to Shipra’s expectations of what WUF should be about. A shame then that this (and other e-debates, and other critical engagements on UN-HABITAT’s work and approach) were not the *starting-point* for discussions at WUF5. Could WUF, then, be re-energised by a more disciplined, careful, reflexive engagement with some of its very own processes? It is noteworthy that the rationale for the e-debate was precisely that of *guiding* and enriching the Dialogues.

Social movements and political parties/ progressive academics

Part of the soul-searching exercise in the e-debate related directly to the points raised by Marcelo. Actually, let me rephrase this: the e-dialogue was steered to engage specifically on the relationship between social movements and political parties, and, to a lesser extent, on the link between participatory and procedural democracy. We did not engage the

fascinating terrain broached by Marcelo and Richard Pithouse on the relationship between 'grassroots' social movements and NGOs/the academic left/'progressive intellectuals'—although there were earnest (and at times pleading) questions regarding ways to foster independent organisations of the poor in hostile environments, a space where that particular dynamic could have been explored. Could it be because most respondents (and moderators) were either NGO practitioners and/or academics (some of which, involved with social movements such as WIEGO, SPARC and waste pickers in Brazil and India)? Perhaps we did not have the courage to be as blunt and self-critical as Marcelo and Richard in their email exchange and in these pages (and as a moderator I could have steered the debate that way)? More generously, perhaps, this illuminating insight got diluted in the limited space and time awarded for each topic.

For, as far as the perennial intellectual and organisational knot that is the relationship between social movements and political parties (let alone governments) is concerned, there *were* some very hard and difficult questions posed within the e-dialogue. For instance, participants debated whether civil society pressure was most effective when working within legal frameworks or outside of them—a key tactical question for social movements keen to retain their political leverage from formal political formations and the state. The jury was out (of course!) but some put forward a number of mechanisms to increase social movements' bargaining power, including capacity building, political education, literacy campaigns (including literacy in planning and budgeting). Access to information—especially when it is collected and owned by grassroots organisations—was also singled out. And the e-debate engaged with the difficulty faced by many maturing organisations of the excluded, wanting to scale up to mobilise around city-wide issues: that is, how to develop sophisticated, broad-based transformative visions, while retaining their mobilising capacity as organisations

able to deliver on idiosyncratic demands for change.³ These are crucial questions and go to the heart of the dilemmas of radical intervention and the limits to change.

Marcelo's input reads like a particularly lucid (and dispirited) contribution to that debate. Dispirited in that it offers in effect a rather sombre account of Brazil's urban social movements—and the latter, in all their complexity and inevitable organisational dilemmas, were seen as beacons of light for many participants to the e-debate, dogged by other, extremely difficult national or local organisational and political contexts. From Marcelo, I would like to hear more about Brazilian urban movements (I did not realise the situation was quite as critical) and why he thinks the situation differs in rural areas—but I guess this will have to be for another occasion.

Marcelo's and Richard's call for autonomous organisation of the poor reflects their analysis of political contexts whereby the margins for progressive interaction with political parties are diminished (or outright limited). The extension of this call to interactions with progressive intellectuals or academics, in the South African context at least, denotes a situation whereby it is difficult for 'organic' intellectuals (intellectuals emerging from the grassroots or from social movements) to remain aloof from the main political party (unfortunately, not really political parties) or trade movements because of what Steven Friedman calls an 'unfinished political transition', the ongoing legacy of the party-as-liberation-movement phenomenon, and the ANC's Leninist or top-down, centralist organisational tendencies.⁴ The Brazilian context is of course different but nonetheless, and like elsewhere, prone to elite capture of this particular kind.

And yet, of course, there are more positive accounts of the interaction between social movements of the marginalised and intellectuals/academics. While we might still turn to some Brazilian examples for inspiration, the city of Cordoba, Argentina (and other Argentinian cities) during the country's recent

and deep economic crisis provides just one such example. There, a specific structure of the National University of Cordoba was set up and geared to work with—at the service of—civil society, providing technical input and supporting various social cooperatives in the face of the State and economy's quasi collapse. In such cities, the crisis acted as the catalyst for an ebullition of social economy experiments, marked by the effective and generous solidarity of intellectuals/academics with social movements. Of course, in this particular instance, one does not need to dig far to excavate a rich history of social and political activism; inevitably, local opportunity structures matter—and are so un-tradable!

The complex and complicated role of academics/progressive intellectuals is a fascinating debate—with a long history!—but one where, in truth, I feel ill-equipped to engage in appropriately or fully here. But what great food for thought Marcelo and Richard have given us—and what soul-searching this can only initiate or indeed, accentuate!

On ideas/practice/praxis

In trying to tie together these disparate reflexions, Marcelo's and Richard's critical take on the contribution of 'the academic left/progressive intellectuals', and Shipra's thoughts on the world of practice vs. the world of ideas, I am left with internal ruminations on the meaning of praxis.

The strategies and tactics of urban social movements are always—or rather, are at best—bound to be shifting, adapting to changing local and global contexts. Alliances with some at certain times, will prove debilitating on other occasions—be it with parties, intellectuals/academics or other social and political partners; countering that putative mobility is arguably one of the main headaches of political parties and governments. The key driver inevitably remains what, in the end, is more likely to help bring about alternative, more just, sustainable, indeed

joyful urban futures? There are bound to be vastly different responses here. But I am quite sure that the most attractive or powerful will be those that result from the transformatory, creative confrontation of practice and ideas. We need to take more seriously the meaning of praxis, we need engaged theory and we need theoretically grounded, reflexive and transformatory policy, which in turn can only hope to be relevant (and effective) when drenched and informed by real-life practices, conflicts and dreams in the city—including and especially, those of the majority of the urban excluded.

Despite the lethargy and the missed opportunity(ies) in Rio, the urgency remains—and as Adrian would put it, the looming energy and climate crisis have rendered the urgency all the more palpable. But we do need alternative modalities of facilitating this encounter—and this may still, perhaps, be the role of a modified WUF and a modified SUF. We have two years to think about and bring about these changes: the next WUF, WUF6, will be held in Bahrain in 2012—and another SUF is to take place in parallel. Certainly, Marcelo's point about sincerity and equality being prerequisites in all such engagements is fundamental. Perhaps we need to add perseverance, patience and openness.

Notes

- 1 For that purpose, the ACC organised a side event at WUF on the theme of 'African Urban Futures: Promoting Urbanization Strategies'.
- 2 See the e-debate presentation at WUF on the following weblink: <http://africancentreforcities.net/programmes/public-discourse/world-urban-forum-dialogues/>
- 3 See Section 4 of the e-debate full report, following the above URL.
- 4 See on that: Friedman, S. (2004) 'The Unfinished Agenda: Incomplete Democratic Transitions with Special Reference to South Africa'. Research paper, Centre for Policy Studies, Johannesburg. See also: Gumedé, W.M. (2005) *Thabo Mbeki and the Battle for the Soul of the ANC*. Cape Town: Zebra Press; and Lipietz, B. (2008) 'Building a Vision for the Post-apartheid City: What Role for Participation in Johannesburg's City Development Strategy?', *IJURR* 32(1), pp. 135–163.

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