

**Territory and Deterritory:  
Inside and outside the ESF 2004,  
new movement subjectivities**

**Rodrigo Nunes**

**1 – From Paris to London**

The path that led from the ESF in 2003 to the following edition in London was a lot less straightforward than a mere crossing of the channel; it went through a lot more detours and accidents, and raises important questions as to the present situation of European movements in their processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

The London bid for the ESF was presented in Paris during the second edition as the result of an agreement between the Socialist Worker's Party (SWP) and the Greater London Authority (GLA). It was discussed and approved at a closed meeting, one of those that still abound in Social Fora everywhere – like those that prepare the agenda of the Social Movements' Assemblies. The decision to present London as an alternative was never debated among British movements; in fact, the GLA (and the group behind, a small Labour tendency called Socialist Action, basically composed of advisers to the mayor, Ken Livingstone) had never shown any interest in the process at all, whilst the SWP, by means of its myriad front groups (Globalise Resistance, Stop the War Coalition, Project K etc.), although active in the WSF and the ESF, had made systematic efforts to stop the spontaneous process of organization of Local Social Fora, in places such as London, Manchester, Leeds and Cardiff. The GLA's involvement was a demand made by certain key actors in the European process, such as Attac France, to make sure the event was financially viable. The beginning of the organizing process in December in London came as a surprise to many.

From then on, things couldn't have gone worse. In a first period, because the SWP and the GLA posed as fundamentally antithetic the participation of 'serious organizations' – basically the British trade unions, still siding with the Blair government despite the odd criticism – and networks and groups based on ad hoc and horizontal ways of organizing, without administrative hierarchies and decision-making centres. This is where it began: a process of denial of all the potency shown by movements since the mid-90s, in favour of a provincial political pragmatism strictly concerned with the immediate agenda of the main groups involved. This problem was made brought to the attention of the 'continental' actors involved (COBAS, Transnational Institute, different national Attac groups, Greek Social Forum, ...), and the Preparatory Assembly that took place in London in February produced a document demanding that the British groups worked towards some sort of composition between the 'verticals' – SWP, Socialist Action and trade unions – and the 'horizontal' – all the others.

One thing, however, would structurally prevent this from happening: the 'open secret' that haunts the organization of Fora, that is, the disguised participation of political parties. The hegemonic groups in the UK refused to recognize the problem as a tension between parties and movements, because they refused to recognize themselves as parties. In the sad excuse for a 'mobilization' process that ensued, this became scandalously clear: non-publicized meetings were organized with different sectors (black, Muslim, women's movements, ...), all of them held inside the GLA, and including almost only groups whose leaders were in some way connected to the SWP or SA. Thus, the 'horizontalists' went on denouncing the lack of transparency, the 'verticalists' went on pretending it was not their problem, and most of the 'Europeans', although in active support of the 'horizontalists', had two clear limits in their intervention: not wanting to run the risk of there not being a Forum (a constant threat used by the GLA and the trade unions, claiming to withdraw their financial support if they didn't have it their way), and not being able to go deeper into the discussion of the participation of political parties, since that would be a source of general discomfort. It was thus that the idea of the 'English exception' came to be – that this process was abnormal, but had to be taken all the way.

It was, in fact, abnormal: the level of political and financial lack of transparency, administrative incompetence (to solve basic problems, such as visas and accommodation or the official website, that besides being little interactive and not working for a long time was hosted at the GLA server), and the sheer bullishness (in the intimidation and 'expulsion' of groups and individuals and the rapport with the 'Europeans') led things to a point, right before the Preparatory Assembly in Berlin in June, in which the Italian and French groups publicly ventilated the idea of withdrawing from the process altogether. The resulting climate, obviously extremely hostile to the 'verticalists', helped the 'horizontalists' score an important victory: all the self-organized spaces could require their inclusion in the official programme.

The last months, however, saw a substantial worsening: two attempts at stitching up the selection of official plenary speakers (the first of which eliciting a letter from various British NGOs threatening to withdraw from the process) and the fact that the two bodies of the organization process in England – the Organizing and Coordinating Committee – had clearly been sidelined by the GLA, and that all relevant administrative decisions were being made at closed meetings among GLA advisers. The definition of the main plenaries, the result of complex negotiations between 'verticalists' and 'Europeans', made the intentions of the two hegemonic groups towards the Forum very clear: the SWP wanting to make exhaustive use of the theme of the war and the Middle East so as to breathe life into its Stop the War Coalition and fuel its new 'front party', the Respect Coalition, itself a previous attempt to capitalize on the anti-war movement; Ken Livingstone looking for a platform to apply some new 'red' varnish to an otherwise entirely liberal government, insisting in his image of the man behind a multicultural London (both him and his racial adviser Lee Jasper were appointed to speak at the anti-racism plenary). As a whole, the agenda corresponded to the provincialism of the process, and themes like the

opposition to the European Constitution – which, incidentally, is supported by the British trade unions – were left in the background.

## **2 – Official territory: Alexandra Palace**

In the far end of North London lay Alexandra Palace, a place normally used for big musical events, where most of the official programme took place. A huge space with a few thin partitions defining the area of the halls, the acoustic effect it provided was in perfect correspondence with the process: a reverberating confusion of voices through loudspeakers. Besides offering much less interesting plenaries, seminars and speakers than previous years, the space as a whole showed all the mistakes made throughout the organization. The seminars vaguely related to the ‘third world’ took place on an unprivileged corner; the food was all provided by catering services employing low-wage work, plastic packages and corporate brands everywhere; the media centre was small and ill-equipped, while NGO, party and trade union stalls distributed enough leaflets, papers and stickers to drown a small town in.

Had there been any effort to include the most creative and productive parts of the European movements, that could have obviously been different: couldn't Indymedia volunteers have set up more efficient media centres running on free software? Couldn't solidarity economy enterprises and the various ‘activist kitchens’ have provided more adequate catering? Examples abound. The only ‘movement’ service taken on board by the ESF, in the end, was Babels’ volunteer interpretation; even that, however, proved to be a shaky relationship, to the point that the latter were threatening to pull out a week before the event due to the lack of solution to problems such as accommodation, transport and access to the website.

No, it wasn't here – where the programme was politically almost homogeneous and empty or timid when it came to proposals – where it was at; the process had been successful in eliminating all conflict under a patina of forced consensus; the result wasn't convergence, but a feeling of back-slapping hollowness, enhanced by the uselessness of the big plenary format, with its ‘experts’ and ‘leaders’ preaching platitudes from a platform. Alexandra Palace was a dead geological stratus.

## **3 – Deterritories: the autonomous spaces**

The exclusion of conflict from the inside caused its proliferation and concentration on the surroundings: London had not one, but various alternative spaces, almost a Forum in their own right. The proliferation was the consequence, to a certain extent, of the lack of public spaces; not surprisingly, three of these events took place in squatted social centres; that was also the ‘autonomous’ solution for the accommodation crisis the official event still hadn't solved a week before the event (when the mayor rented the huge and useless Millennium Dome and made it available to all of those who paid £10 on top of the £30 registration fee).

It is interesting to highlight that this year's ESF probably had its least 'ideological' 'opposition' ever: even at the conference of People's Global Action – anticapitalist network whose existence predates the Social Forum process and is very critical of it – in July there was a great number of groups interested in taking the 'one foot in, one foot out' approach. It was above all a matter of occupying space and making oneself heard; that this should end the way it did was much less the result of a 'principled opposition' than a consequence of the specific circumstances of the British process, and the fact that the London lives under a police State in disguise: Beyond the ESF (the largest) and a few other autonomous spaces were under permanent surveillance, with helicopters flying overhead and policemen at the door to take pictures and monitor the flow of people.

The accumulated tensions would surface on the Saturday, when a group of around 300 people occupied the plenary session where Ken Livingstone and Lee Jasper were supposed to speak (the former, possibly warned by the police, had cancelled shortly before); carried out by groups such as the Wombles, the North-European Anticapitalist Network, Xarxa de Mobilitzacio Global, Reseau Intergalactique, Indymedia UK and Babels, the action stormed the platform, hung banners saying 'Another World is for Sale', criticized the GLA's control over the event, and read statements from Babels and Indymedia UK, the latter on the seizing of its servers by the FBI.

That meant an intensification in surveillance the following day: around twenty people were followed between Beyond the ESF and the centre of London, where they were going to join the Anticapitalist Bloc for the closing march. Surrounded by more than twice the number of policemen at King's Cross Station, four of them (from the UK, Italy and Greece) were put under arrest. At the closing event in Trafalgar Square, a group – annoyed by the fact that what had been defined as a strictly cultural event at the Brussels Preparatory Assembly had become a pageant of SWP, Respect and Stop the War Coalition leaders – tried to make their way onto the stage to denounce the 'pre-emptive arrests'. The stewards from the Stop the War Coalition (to whom the march had been 'subcontracted out'), even faced by the mediation of 'Europeans' such as Piero Bernocchi, from COBAS, called the police and stood by watching as they arrested two more activists.

It's unnecessary to remark how bad a precedent the use of the police by the organization of the ESF against participants is; but an evaluation that concentrated on that too much would end up forgetting the most important thing about these two days: that the autonomous spaces were above all extremely productive. Be it the discussions around how to develop an 'activist research' and a 'research activism', at the Radical Theory Forum and elsewhere; the excellent debates on precariousness and migration at Beyond the ESF; the exploration of the idea of 'the commons' at Life Despite Capitalism; the creative and joyous search for new ways of protesting at the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination; the debates on media and knowledge and the No Vox night at Camden Centre – there was a tangible feeling of convergence and creation of subjectivities; it was a 'less ideological' opposition not because it had no ideas or alternatives to propose, but

because it shunned facile binaries – the simplistic ‘us and them’, ‘inside and outside’ – and favoured the least reactive, most productive aspects of the new European movements.

#### **4 – The new European movements between deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation**

Many of the political forces active in the ESF process are the stratification of moments of deterritorialisation in the 60s and 70s: for example, May 68 and the peace movement. It is symptomatic that the two hegemonic British groups have never had anything like this in their trajectories. The third edition of the ESF has found the movements that came to light in the second half of the 90s at a crossroads that opens up new possibilities and calls for the overcoming of that moment.

On the one hand, there are the groups that remain attached to the identity formed in that period: the heroic times of the Global Days of Action, the massive street protests against international institutions, brought to an impasse with the threat of violence that has hung in the air since Genoa. These groups live the tension between the closing down of the public sphere and a progressive criminalization that pushes them into a dead end, between the difficulty to open up some kind of dialogue with society and the dangers of an escalation of violence. If that period was of enormous importance for the creation of a new political subjectivity, a new political generation, the transformations in the political context and the move towards a period of permanent global war poses questions that have to be answered – the risk of not doing it being isolation, fragmentation, becoming a subculture. The condition of survival of the subjectivity of those days is finding ways to overcome it.

The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination in particular explored interesting tactics and approaches to direct actions. For example, the attempt (frustrated by the police) to organize a free public transport party in the underground – where Yomango were ‘responsible’ for the foods and drinks, while Planka brought their experience in coordinating the struggle of migrants and unemployed workers in resisting the privatisation of public transport in Sweden. The emphasis here was not on the spectacular media impact, but on the direct contact with the users of one of the world’s most expensive public transport systems. Another interesting idea is the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army, whose workshop at Beyond the ESF was packed: tactically versatile, it can be an alternative for large demos (where it has the merit of escaping the dichotomies that lead to escalation), small direct actions and popular theatre and education. Popular education is, in fact, one of the staples of the preparation for the G8 2005 meeting in Scotland carried out by the Dissent network by means of their roadshow.

This new-fangled interest in popular education not only shows a realization of the need to go beyond the achievements of the period of the global days of action – raising awareness, expressing the dissent that was ignored by the

hegemonic discourse, all of which, as 'representations' of 'the struggle', fall easily into the category of 'propaganda by the deed' –, but especially a perhaps yet tentative move beyond the comfortable identity of 'activist culture', with all its risks of self-referentiality. (It must be said that, as far the usual criticisms go, the autonomous spaces were mostly a young, white, university-educated affair.)

A criticism that has been made (for a while in the so-called 'global South', more recently in the 'North') is that despite its principles of horizontality and refusal of representation, the period of the great demos belied a return of representational politics: they took place in the 'North', amidst a young, white majority that claimed that 'resistance is everywhere', but in the end of the day dealt with problems that were not close to their protagonists. This is, on the one hand, an oversight of the specificities of the European context – things like squats and social centres are not simply demands of 'spoiled white brats', but a struggle of a youth that has been made precarious by the structural transformation of capitalism and the welfare reforms, and a struggle that (at least potentially) opens up to those of migrants, *sans papiers* and the unemployed. On the other hand, it does have an element of truth: the emphasis of these demos seemed always to be on struggles elsewhere, where the dark side of capital was more immediately visible, and they lacked a clearer definition of what the lines of conflict 'at home' were. The resistance to capital is indeed everywhere, even in its core areas (and it's never enough to repeat that the core-periphery dynamic is repeated like a fractal all across the globe, also in those areas generically thought of as peripheral); one of the subjectivities formed in that period, however, is especially concerned with grassroots organizing processes in places like Asia and Latin America, in which structures such as the PGA European support group, for obvious material reasons, have been playing a relevant role in helping establish links, opening up discussions and helping with fundraising.

A third subjectivity, however, turns itself precisely towards the question of the 'struggle at home', and starts to concentrate on the immediate issues of the European context. This can be seen, for instance, among the groups who are mobilizing against the European Constitution. Other transversal, but immediately local, struggles that were highly visible were the ones around copyleft and intellectual property, something that (contrary to what some might think) is relevant not only for geeks developing softwares but for everyone insofar as it faces the immanent tendency of knowledge to become a common under its new forms of production, which bears obvious importance for any discussion on the future of knowledge – from the university to the pharmaceutical industry – and labour itself.

It was, however, another, deeper process of (re) invention that points to a tendency towards both spatial and political reterritorialisation that drew the most attention during this ESF.

The most remarkable thing about it is how it clearly is about capturing subjectivities made diffuse and disjointed by the transformations of the last years and provide them with a new class subjectivity. While the concept of the

'multitude' was too abstract for any immediate political use, what we saw this year was a rise of the 'precariat': precisely the new 'class' created by the regime of flexible accumulation, the 'flexible', 'flexploited' workers of the world. With no fixed job, no access to welfare, the precariat is the anomalous contradiction within the historical trend of capitalism towards the decrease of the labour journey: they work more for less. More than that, the concept makes possible a transversal analysis of contemporary society, in the sense that the precarious condition is extended to issues like housing and legal status, thus incorporating struggles such as those of the *sans papiers* and migrants, which were also very visible in the autonomous spaces.

It's no exaggeration to say that this debate was one of the most successful at the ESF, resulting in a call out for the European-wide organization of a Mayday parade of the precariat in 2005 like the ones in Milan and Barcelona this year. It's also clear, however, that some problems remain: for example, the lack of a theoretical solution for the evident differences between immaterial and material precarious labour; or the question of how this new European movement identity relates to other struggles elsewhere (which is a central problem for a truly 'global' resistance that goes beyond mere 'international solidarity'). It also remains to be seen what the paths this transformation might take are – many possibilities, including neo-trade unionism, are open. One thing is certain, though: the intensity of the debate and attention doesn't mean *per se* the guarantee of the existence, or creation, of this new subjectivity; it should be observed that a few of the groups that signed the 'Middlesex Declaration' have had little contact with the idea, let alone done any work on the area; therefore, for those who left London celebrating the victory of their position, the lesson of Bologna '77 should be applied to movement building as well: *lavorare con lentezza*.

## **5 – Between London and Athens**

The path leading from London 2004 to Athens 2006 begins in Paris, in November, with the Preparatory Assembly of evaluation of the process just finished and the beginning of the one to come. It shouldn't be much to expect it to be a burial of the British stage: it is highly unlikely that Socialist Action will remain involved after this, and the SWP will be left alone in the role of justifying the unjustifiable. However, to turn it into a simple condemnation of 'the British exception' will mean that a significant opportunity to discuss the future of the ESF and the Social Forum process as a whole will be lost.

We can imagine that the evaluation will be harsh, but we can also predict that some things won't change. It's hard to believe that, despite having had its most productive involvement ever, the new European movements will be less suspicious of the Forum after everything that went on. And it's true that the official event in London tried harder than ever to be a capture machine in its attempt to homogenise discourses with immediate political goals in sight.

But it's precisely to the fact that the attempt at controlling it has failed – that is, having succeeded at Alexandra Palace only to strengthen the position of the

autonomous spaces – that we should look in search of a few initial conclusions.

First of all, the inside/outside discussion, more than ever, has proved to be empty. What was the ESF? Alexandra Palace or Beyond the ESF, Life Despite Capitalism, the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination? In what seems to me to be the most correct sense, all of them. If Fora will be capable of expressing the diversity of the movement(s) they say to bring together and serve as a public arena, it'll be because of their capacity to incorporate conflict, not to subsume it under a semblance of false consensus. To that extent, the British process, with all its many flaws, points to a promising possibility in its recognition (tacit or explicit, in the form of inclusion in the official programme) of other spaces; the Forum as a constellation of related self-organized convergence spaces without a centre seems a lot more interesting than the present format.

Format-wise, this edition shows the possibility of transcending the obvious limits that Fora – so far built around plenaries with the 'big names', normally resulting in generic analyses and platitudes with no visible impact, or the two-hour seminars and workshops in which any true convergence or common action are unlikely results – so far have shown. Let's take, for instance, the experience of Life Despite Capitalism, in its many interlocked sessions that lasted for a day and a half, or the whole programme (not explicitly organized as such, but effective none the same) around the issue of the precariat, in which there was a sense of build up leading to the Assembly of the Europrecariat. To this day the organizers have asked themselves the questions of how to make Fora less diagnostic and more constructive, without challenging the basic assumptions of the format. The plenaries, for instance, are living dead left-overs from the first WSF in Brazil, which was clearly planned as a one-off talkshop rather than a political 'process'. The London experience points to yet new ways, although these have always been explored in the 'periphery' of the Social Forum process (in the Youth Camp in Porto Alegre, in the Argentinean Social Forum etc.), without receiving the proper attention of its key players.

Another lesson the sad spectacle of Alexandra Palace presents us with is the necessity to incorporate the creative potency of the movement(s), which can provide viable, effective – and politically challenging, and much more cooperative and participatory – solutions to areas such as communications, translation and catering.

A serious issue that remains is that of finances: everyone saw the negative effect of this year's 'selling' of the ESF to the GLA, the only entity able of sustaining the event in the terms in which it had been thought. If this is the price to pay, the question is not one of condemning the GLA, but of seriously rethinking the whole structure and format of the Forum – which leads us back to the two previous points.

As strange as it may seem, the great lesson this year offers us is still the one everyone has heard a thousand times, without really seeing it in practice: the

Forum seen as an event is useless, an empty spectacle with no practical results; as a process, it opens up to new deterritorialisations and reterritorialisations, combinations and recombinations, which should be the whole reason why they are organized in the first place.

A problem that remains is that of the closing of the process on itself; there seems to be, since the beginning, no remarkable renovation as regards the participants truly involved (a criticism that could be levelled at Social Fora pretty much everywhere), which results in an autistic and self-referential process. The consequence this year was obvious: the UK edition was taken over by the group that had been the most active until then and its partners of choice. The fact remains, however, that as long as there is any identifiable centre, like the plenaries and the thematic axes, it won't be enough to recite the 'no locus of power' mantra to wish away the concentration of decision-making in a few, well-known hands. An interesting change has been tried out by the WSF this year, organizing an on-line consultation; why not a deeper, grassroots, de-centred process, like the one proposed by the European Social Consulta?

The so-called 'Social Forum process' doesn't exist in the ether; it can only be as productive as the existing social processes, but it can also be a lot less powerful, and even destructive to previously existing relations and connections. It can only become what it's supposed to be if it functions as a feedback loop between political processes in progress and the organization itself; in other words, it can only be the open space it set out to be if its organization is diffuse in ongoing political struggles, not an invariant that comes to movements 'from the outside', pre-structured by the efforts (however well-intentioned they may be) of a few actors. As long as it tries to produce a movement that is bigger and more united than it actually is, it's more likely to breed disaffection.

It could be the case that the transformations in the European context, plus the general feeling of dissatisfaction spawned by this year's edition, might create the conditions for transformations in this direction. On the one hand, we see the trade unions and political parties that have been involved so far with their social bases stabilized, with few possibilities of growing; on the other, the turn of the new movements towards struggles 'at home' and specifically European questions opens up the possibility – necessity indeed – of dialogue, which can create not consensus nor mediations, but protocols that make for less tense and more productive contacts in the future.