

Radical Theory Workshop @ the 2nd European Social Forum: *some notes*

Sian Sullivan, 1st December 2003

After a navigationally-challenging half-hour suburban walk from the main Social Forum spaces of Bobigny, north-east Paris, we eventually found our allocated space for the somewhat grandly titled 'Radical Theory Workshop'. We – Steffen Böhm (co-editor *ephemera: critical dialogues on organisation*, University of Essex), Jeremy Gilbert (Signs of the Times, University of East London), Jo Littler (Signs of the Times, Middlesex University), Oscar Reyes (Independent Student Media Project, University of Essex), myself (University of Warwick), Tiziana Terranova (University of East London) – registered the workshop as a response to our shared sense that the ESF in Florence last year, while electric, eclectic and inspiring, was rather low on theoretical content and reflection with regard to contemporary supranational socio-political 'movement(s)'. Our blurb for the workshop registration process went something like this:

As part of the European Social Forum, we hope to establish an international network of intellectuals/activists who are interested in the relationship between new theories and new forms of politics. How can we move beyond a simplistic opposition to representative politics? How can the network form contaminate the institutional spaces in which a vast number of people live and work? How can we relate the analysis of new forms of power with experimentation in political practice?

Given the workshop's location in the backend of suburban nowhere, and the one week Forum registration notification which meant we had next to no time to publicise the workshop, we entered the space with somewhat low expectations regarding what might transpire over the next three hours. Having rearranged the lines of chairs into a more conversation-friendly circle for around 15 people, we opened up proceedings with personal introductions. At this point we consisted of the five of us who had made it from the registration 'team' (Tiziana had unavoidable teaching commitments and couldn't make the Forum until the following day), and about five other punters: more encounter-group than theory/practice workshop.

But people kept on coming. By an hour later all the chairs were taken, and our intimate circle had expanded to fill the periphery of the room. The last time I took a note of numbers there were more than 50 people (37 men, 24 women), from a range of European countries (Finland, Denmark, Italy, France, Germany, Holland, the UK, Yugoslavia – apologies if I've missed any), as well as a few folk from North America. That such a diverse collection of individuals - streetwise activists, university lecturers, performance artists, students – should be drawn to a meeting entitled 'Radical Theory' in itself reflects a contemporary blurring of boundaries between the conventional (and impossible) theory/practice divide. Add to that the range of academic disciplinary backgrounds represented – cultural studies, organisation studies, anthropology, ecology, geography, media studies, political science, art, performance, critical theory (anything else?) - and we were at the brink of finding ourselves either a melting pot of radical intellectual activist potential, or an incoherent mess.

Given the burgeoning size of the group, and with our intentions for the workshop to provide a meeting and improvisational space rather than be directed by a clear and predetermined agenda, a decision was reached to divide into three smaller discussion groups and then report back in the larger group in the last half-hour of the workshop. Questions and issues raised related to things like: what do we mean by 'Radical Theory' anyway? What areas of thinking, what theoretical frames, might be included in this term? How to enhance our shared political and moral concerns through finding some sort of common discursive space when we come from such diverse intellectual and other backgrounds? How to provide a 'learning space' for those unconfident and perhaps distanced by the language and conceptual terms employed by theoreticians, but nevertheless drawn towards the radical potential of radical theory? And conversely, how to engender a similar space for those leaning more towards the ivory tower dimensions of academic life to encounter a perhaps more corporeal experience of activist practice?

At this point, I can only speak for my experience in the group I elected for. We began by each identifying one or two key words/ideas/concepts that we as individuals understood as being a part of this notion of 'Radical Theory'; and/or what we might

like to see as being part of this discourse/practice. Interestingly, a number of reference concepts came up more than once, which in itself is an indication of perhaps more coherence and shared concepts in people's thinking than we might have anticipated. What emerged from this initial whip round was something like the following verbal and conceptual snapshots, each of which lend themselves to both thinking and doing practices at the core of our endeavours as theorists and activists:

How can radical democracy be brought down to earth and its pragmatic possibilities thereby magnified?

How to popularise/make accessible radical theories: the significance of art and poetry in contributing to a *popular* radical theory?

How can theory also *be* radical political practice?

Radical theory can itself engender possibilities

The ability of a theoretical frame to have robust explanatory power at a variety of different levels or scales of analysis (e.g. from the universal to the subjective) makes for empowered and empowering radical theory possibilities

People are talking about 'Social Forum Theory' – what is this?

Theorising/engendering radical structures/organisations: complexity, nested systems, scale, weak ties, networks, flattened hierarchies, decentralised structures, fluidity and crystallisation, unfolding, moving beyond

How does socio-political change emerge from these phenomena?

Network of networks

Complexity *is* anarchy

Anarchism; relationships between anarchism and the libertarian New Left positions

Going beyond ideological purism and sectarianism; political identity promotes sectarianism; a move from stating identity to affirming a practice, e.g. from 'I am a feminist', to 'I *advocate* feminism'

Relationships between state institutions and anarchist theory/practice, e.g. re: public services

Taoism

Subjectivity/subjective experience

Post-logos: a rethink/deconstruction of the categories of modernity, including the category of 'political'

Relevance of cross-cultural exchange/communication: one person in the meeting (not me!) made reference to anthropology being 'the discipline of the movement'!

The practical need for radical spaces that are more permanent but not deadened by top-down forms of organisation; we need to work in real space, not just theoretical space

The challenge of constructing a counterhegemonic position that remains fluid
How to hegemonise 'the' grassroots

A substantial part of the meeting revolved around a discussion regarding the implications of *naming*, given that in many ways we are talking about, reflecting on, and participating in socio-political movements without names and/or with many names. This is both problematic and necessary: it is difficult to *represent* something that cannot be categorised, named and pinned down; by the same token, the contesting and opening up of the bounded categories fetishised by modernity is at the heart of contemporary radical resistance politics. A name implies another category with another boundary, another inside/outside border. Radical resistance politics resists fixity: embraces becoming rather than being.

Altermondialisation (alternative globalisation) was noted as an affirmative label. It moves away from being framed as anti- this or that, and also leaves open the space of possibilities for becoming something(s) beyond and alternative to what is being contested in the here and now. Someone also observed that it is astonishing how terms and concepts associated with radical socio-political movements have become normalised in popular discourse over such a short period of time: e.g. diversity, multiplicity, pluralism, reflexivity.

And now what to *do*?

A number of proposals and initiatives were made at the workshop. It remains to be seen how these will unfold over time. These included:

- The setting up of an e-list called Radical Theory Forum (thanks to Tom Cahill for doing this). A main focus of the list would be a space for communicating about the possibility of establishing a non-specialist journal. The description of the list is as follows:

‘This list was born during the European Social Forum in Paris. The group intends to publish a "Radical Theory Journal" which will be neither academic, nor activist. It will try to create a tension laden and dynamic new form of theory informed by action that arises from, helps to understand and bring benefit to the altermondialiste movements. This list is the working forum for the journal.’

Appropriately, the list has been established with Riseup.net, an activist web host which operates to support ‘altermondialist’ political work and is resourced on principles of mutual aid.

- As noted above, a number of the workshop participants felt that an opportunity existed for the establishment of a journal that linked radical theoretical work with political practice. A second evening meeting was held during the Social Forum to take this discussion further.
- An explicit intention is to establish a space for a longer and more structured ‘Radical Theory Forum’ to coincide with, or be part of, the next European Social Forum, which is to be held in London in 2004. Possibilities for participation in the organising process of the next ESF were also raised, and details for the next preparatory meeting were flagged up at the workshop (13th-14th December).

The workshop also provided a space for networking and connecting with other theory/practice, scholar/activist, ideas/action initiatives in which people are already participating:

- Planetary Anarchist Network
- Peoples Global Action
- Shifting Ground Collective
- Academia, Activism and Postanarchism CSGR project 2004
- Social Movements and Activist Research conference in Barcelona, January 2004

In sum, and as someone pointed out in the final feedback, it is clear from the number and diversity of participants that the notion of ‘Radical Theory’ compels us, even if we are not sure exactly what we mean by the term. It is also apparent that there is a demand for critical and reflective thinking spaces to be at the heart of the social forum process.

27th November 2003