

On open space

Explorations towards a vocabulary of a more open politics

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Only man, indeed only the gaze of authentic thought, can see the open which names the
unconcealedness of beings. The animal, on the contrary, never sees this open. ...
Not even the lark sees the open.

Giorgio Agamben 2004, p 58 + p 57, citing Martin Heidegger

I

Openings

A preamble to this exploration of a vocabulary of a more open politics

What is open space ?

An open, uncluttered expanse of space, in theory available to all ? Or is it a culture, a way of doing things, a cultural practice ? (But in this case, is it a noun – a thing -, a concept, or a practice, an action ? Or are noun, idea, and verb interrelated ?) Social practice. Political practice. Networking. Horizontality. Structurelessness. Democracy. Anarchy. A way of relating. Uncertainty. Transparency. Openness. Closedness; closure. Enclosure. Public space. The commons. Property. Intellectual property. Copyright. Copyleft. Common property. FOSS – Free & Open Source Software. Safe space. Autonomy. Equality. Freedom. Fair trade. Free trade ? Freedom. Liberty. Tolerance. Discrimination. Inclusion and Exclusion. Boundaries ? Policies ? Rules ? Democracy ? Hierarchy ? Open access. Open Source. Open plan. Open door policy. Open systems. Open society. Chaos. Clocks and clouds. Determinacy and indeterminacy. Randomness. Open-endedness. Movement. Not object but subject : Opening space ?

The concept of open space arises in many fields. For those in these professions (such as myself, by background), it belongs to urban planning, architecture, and landscape architecture, but it is equally used in the disciplines of office and workspace planning, education and knowledge systems, social management, conflict resolution and transformation initiatives, and now also of social and political practice. But beyond this, and as the cluster of terms above makes clear, it is also closely related to a host of other social, political, economic, scientific, technical, and philosophical concepts and practices.

In particular however, it has come into increasingly intensive use in social and political practice in recent years, along with related concepts such as horizontality and networking, and has gained special currency by virtue of its use since 2001 in connection with the phenomenon called the World Social Forum.² In some cases, there are also cross-over applications, such as in the case of the WSF, which declares itself as an open space and where to help people understand this concept, one of its founders refers to it as a 'square' in a city, or *praça*, in the original Portuguese (Whitaker, 2004).³ The WSF has also adopted the slogan 'Another World Is Possible !', which itself signals, and symbolises, an openness to the future. As de Sousa Santos has argued in terms of the WSF's slogan and approach, by its flagging of the 'Not yet' it is pointing to the immanent potential of the future (de Sousa Santos, 2004b).⁴

Perhaps especially on account of and through the extraordinary proliferation of the WSF that has taken place over these years, this idea – and its related concepts – seems to have widely caught the imagination of people and organisations across the world (Alvarez, September 2007; Conway, November 2006; de Sousa Santos 2006, 2007).⁵ On the surface, this has happened as a result of both the polemical challenge that this sustained and successful proliferation itself has represented to neoliberalism and its mantra of TINA – There

Is No Alternative. Initially, this was symbolised by the World Social Forum always being held to coincide with the World *Economic* Forum in Davos, Switzerland (and where at a media byte level, the WSF was even given this name to highlight the fact that the *social* was more important than the economic). But in time, and is evident from so many testimonies that are now on record, the WSF has caught the imagination of people across the world as a function of the very special quality of celebration and freedom that it embodies – and in particular because of its embodiment of the idea of open space.

Put simply, the idea of 'open space' has seemed to very widely appeal both to participants in the WSF – and to organisers of social fora in different parts of the world - as well as to observers and commentators perhaps especially because of the evident failure of conventional practices of politics and of community organisation to cope with the rising complexity of society and politics today, but also because open space has seemed to be a part of new cultures of doing things that are emerging in our times. I will elaborate on this below. But as a consequence, the WSF is today widely read and portrayed as an *alternative* to traditional movement, including of the left (de Sousa Santos, 2006) – and is also read, perhaps a little too easily, as offering, or seeming to offer, a possible way out of the limitations of traditional movement, rather than as the complement that it is.

But this is on the surface. Beneath this, and looking back over the past eight years of the Forum since its inception in 2001, I suggest that there are three central characteristics of this phenomenon that inform the WSF and that have in particular contributed to this 'success', this proliferation, and simultaneously to the widescale dissemination of these ideas, concepts, and practices : *Self-organisation*, *autonomy*, and *emergence*; and that it is the resonance of these concepts with the world emerging around us today that is responsible for this 'success'. And beyond this, I suggest that it is these three characteristics that are the central concepts of the social and political practice of open space.

As I will discuss below, the WSF itself (and most of its participants) however uses only one of these rather specialised political terms, self-organisation, and in a way, perhaps as a reflection of the sophistication – and elegant simplicity - of its Charter, the only term that it itself uses is *open space* - through which it signals all of these crucial political principles and is their incarnation. One possibility is that the initial organisers of the WSF were sensitive to the possibility that a hard sell of such apparently overt 'political' principles would have been contradictory to the very spirit of open space and would have led to their being not accepted by many who have come to take part in the WSF. This approach seems to be working; as already mentioned, the practice – and perhaps also the term – seems to have ignited the thinking and actions of individuals and organisations all over the world that are concerned with the state of the world.

On the other hand, and quite aside from the critique and opposition that the WSF has faced, its use and practice of this concept of open space has also been under intense debate right from its outset, much of it from within the Forum (Sen 2004b; Teivainen, forthcoming); and the debate has recently only been intensifying (ATTAC Germany, nd, c.2008). The real or apparent openness of the Forum is seen by critics of open space both as being responsible for it being not sufficiently effective in the struggle against neoliberalism and also for its being used to advantage by those who do not believe in this struggle (or do not believe in it so centrally).

In recent years, these arguments have converged to form an increasingly powerful demand that the Forum requires both a clearer political programme and also a more defined, linear structure (Sen and Kumar, compilers, January 2007) – characteristics that I, along with some others, believe will unalterably change the Forum, causing it to lose its soul. Among the various initiatives, that around the Bamako Appeal in particular has taken the shape of a determined, well-prepared, and sustained mobilisation process among social and political organisations in several parts of the world (Forum for Another Mali, World Forum for Alternatives (France), Third World Forum (Senegal), ENDA (Senegal), and ors, January 2006;

Amin, 2006b; Waterman, October 2006; Waterman, February 2008). That this initiative should have this character should not be surprising however, given how much is at stake.

Some critics of the concept and of the specific practice of the WSF also argue that the idea of open space has emerged and been popularised only in the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and see its emergence and success as part of the ascendance of neoliberalism along with concepts such as 'civil society'. This, along with the generous funding the WSF has got from Northern funding agencies, is seen as part of the politics of open space : A disguised attempt to put a human face to neoliberal globalisation.⁶

At one level however, and as this essay will try and show, this debate is similar to the intense self-critique that has taken place in similar experiments over the past half century, and this introspection is in the very nature both of the new movements that have been emerging in this time and in the idea of openness. But at another level, the very future of the experiment called the WSF is today also at stake. Personally, I respect many of the criticisms put forward of the WSF and of the idea and practice of open space. I nevertheless feel however, and after taking them into account, that the idea remains a vital contribution to political practice today. Rather than just taking sides, I believe that it is therefore crucial, at this juncture, to critically engage with and comprehend more precisely, and more sensitively, the ideas that are at stake; and only then to take positions. In part therefore, and in specific relation to the current debate on the future of the WSF, this essay is also openly written with the aim of trying to ensure that the baby is not thrown out with the bathwater.⁷

It is perhaps useful for me to lay out here my own experience of and with open space, and the reasons for my normative commitment to the concept. Much of this has happened because of my training as an architect in the 1960s, of my exposure to anarchist ideas in the 1970s, and of my long involvement with social and political issues as an organiser and strategist and then as a student of movement – and, I suspect, also simply because I am a child of the 1960s, the meaning of which I will explore a little in this essay. All of this background, and especially my work through the 1990s on the dynamics of the internationalisation of movement, led to my responding both viscerally and intellectually to the WSF's usage of the concept when I came across it during 2001-2, especially as enunciated by one of its founders, Chico Whitaker (Whitaker nd [January 2001], February 2002, 2004).

In December 2001 I decided to write a note on the implications of bringing the WSF to India, on the basis of my research during the 1990s (Sen January 2002a). This note seemed to strike a resonant chord in some, including being widely circulated by the organiser of a preparatory meeting for establishing the WSF in India. As a result, I ended up getting heavily involved with the WSF, first in India and then internationally, initially as an organiser (as Co-Convenor of the WSF India Preparatory Committee) as then also as a commentator on the WSF; and it was through this that I came to engage with the idea of concept of open space both in theory and in practice. Reflecting on my own experience as an organiser in social movement and then my research into the dynamics of movement, I was both persuaded by some of the formal arguments that had been put forward in its favour and also excited by what I felt was the immense potential of the initiative called the World Social Forum; and I started writing on it (Sen, 2002).

My subsequent experience both of the WSF and of the WSF as open space was however, both challenging and bruising, and I soon ended up feeling that if I wanted to remain engaged with the WSF, I could do so better and more creatively from the outside rather than on the inside; and I then both dropped out of the formal organisational process and wrote some critical reflections on my first year of involvement with the process (Sen, 2004b and 2004c). Over time, I elected to remain closely involved with the WSF, working from 'outside', and – now that I look back – embarked on a long process of engagement with the theory and practice both of open space (Keraghel and Sen, December 2004) and of the WSF (Sen, Anand, Escobar, and Waterman, eds, 2004; Sen and Waterman, eds, 2008; Sen

and Waterman, eds, forthcoming (2009 a and b). I also ended up organising, usually together with others, a series of workshops and seminars focussing on the praxis of the WSF and of open space rather than on issues, both before the WSF in Mumbai in January 2004 and at successive editions of the WSF (Sen and Keraghel, August 2004; Juris and Nunes, June 2005; Sen, January 2007b) and also initiating and engaging in related public debate (eg Sen, January 2006b, Sen, Teivo Teivainen, and Immanuel Wallerstein in debate, March 2006; and Sen and Kumar, compilers, with Patrick Bond and Peter Waterman, January 2007).

This focus on and experiments in open space in turn led me to being invited to organise workshops on the theory and practice of open space, such as at the anti g8 demonstrations at Rostock, in Germany,⁸ and to explore the idea in terms of its pedagogical potential through formal courses (<http://critical-courses.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CEOSDMHome>, and also Meltzer and Sen, November 2007, and Hayes, Nelson, and Sen, December 2007).

As a contribution to this collection of essays on autonomy in movement, I try through this essay to open up and examine the concept of open space, towards a more critical discussion of it and towards an understanding of its contribution to this field. I do this, first, by – in Section II - using the WSF as an example and by summarising the expression in the WSF of the principles of autonomy and emergence. I then move to the bulk of the essay, where I discuss at some length the concept of open space as their incarnation and its contribution to a more open and more autonomist politics. I do this by presenting in Section III a synopsis of the history, nature, and politics of open space, and an exploration of new horizons and conceptualisations of open space that have emerged recently and that are continuing to emerge in the course of our own lives. I then move, in Section IV, to a discussion of its characteristics and contradictions; and conclude, in Section V, with an exploration of a grammar and vocabulary of a practice of open space and a delineation of a framework of some organising principles for open – and for opening – space.

II

Seeding the clouds : The WSF and autonomist politics

In this section, and to put the rest of this essay in context, I summarise and discuss what I believe to be the three seminal influences that the WSF has had and is having on social movement and politics, globally and locally, and that I suggest are encapsulated and made manifest in its practice of the concept of open space : *Self-organisation*, *autonomous action*, and *emergence*.

Even if there has been and continues to be intense debate on its actual record, there is no doubt that the WSF has been (and continues to be) an extraordinary and sustained experiment in *self-organisation* and *autonomous action* - at an enormous, historically unprecedented scale and with a wide range of local interpretations and manifestations. As has been widely documented, the WSF is based on the idea of self-organisation, where those who elect / volunteer to 'organise' social fora – whether at the world level or the continental, national, or local – are, in principle, meant to simply organise a space within which all those concerned by the impacts of neoliberalism, war, and exclusions, are invited to organise their own events or activities. In order to avoid taking over this space and representing those taking part in the social fora, the WSF has – so far - taken the conscious policy decision that it will itself, as a body, take no political positions and make no statements. This is a key aspect of a wider Charter of Principles that it has adopted (World Social Forum Organising Committee and World Social Forum International Council, June 2001), thus encouraging and enabling a political culture of self-organised and autonomist action by those who enter the space.

This practice has been significantly developed over the years since the formation of the WSF in 2001. From a beginning where the original organisers of the WSF created space for others but also organised and staged major events – big lectures by famous figures in literature and politics, and big panel discussions, both of which were events that drew participants away from the less glamorous events organised by smaller participant organisations present at the meetings –, the big centrally-organised events have been progressively cleared out, first to the physical periphery of the Forum and then by 2005, entirely. And the WSF took a huge conceptual step forward when in 2008, when it organised a 'Global Day of Action' on and around January 26 2008 when some 1,500 autonomous, locally self-organised actions took place across much of the world in place of the traditional single (even if huge) world meeting of the WSF,⁹ But at one level the entire experiment called the WSF has been suffused with these ideas and this experiment and, as I have argued elsewhere and come to below, is a key example of *emergent politics*, learning as it goes along (Sen, January 2007; Chesters 2008).

On the other hand this culture, and tendency, is different from – even if related to – the practices of *autonomist politics* and of *autonomous space*, which have also been manifested at the WSF (Adamovsky, nd, c.2006, Juris 2005b, Nunes, November 2004), and to which I return below.

Initially drawing inspiration and ideas from a wide range of historical traditions of movement and thought (ranging from the work of the liberationist Church in Brazil (Levy, forthcoming (2009)) to the Zapatista uprising in Mexico – though this is a more complex lineage¹⁰), and more generally reading the new cultures of more autonomous movement politics that took shape in many parts of the world in the last quarter of the 20th century, the Brazilian designers of the World Social Forum and their friends and associates in France and elsewhere came up with an idea that, I suggest, *could only take form* in a non-centralised way and through relatively autonomous actions at relatively local levels. This vision, or concept, was first articulated in what has turned out to be a far-sighted document, the WSF's Charter of Principles – a document that is worthy of study precisely because of its attempt to embody and give expression to these ideas (World Social Forum Organising Committee and World Social Forum International Council, June 2001; Sen 2004d).

This document, and the concept and subsequent practices of the WSF, drew heavily on pedagogical ideas that were contained in the formulations of the progressive Church in Brazil and Latin America, and in particular liberation theology, and also the work of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire and his theory of conscientisation and a pedagogy of the oppressed (Levy, forthcoming, 2009; and Freire 2007 [1970], Education Encyclopaedia - StateUniversity.com, nd). But I believe that there were also other influences, and other compulsions. Though none of them has as yet gone on record saying this (as far as I know), I suspect that the Brazilians, at least, also drew lessons from the manner in which more conventional, centralised social and political movements in Latin America had been ruthlessly repressed during the previous 2-3 decades, including through the extermination of their leaders. If the experiment they were proposing was to succeed, and the idea to take hold, then it would no longer be possible for conventional forms of repression and/or disruption to work. The fact that the vision of the experiment – now made possible by new technological possibilities and as a part of new, emerging political vision and practice - was transnational and transborder, or in other words not located within the confines of any given nation-state and the reach of its security apparatus, made this escape from history only that much more emphatic. And it also invited and made possible (and even inevitable) an unprecedented richness of cultural and political expression that was consistent with the holistic, planetary vision that the WSF enunciated in its Charter.

Over the subsequent years there has been – expectably – a wide range of experimentation with this idea, with 'the Forum' constantly learning from its experimentation and struggling to reinvent itself (Sen, January 2007, Whitaker, January 2008; Chesters, November 2008); and also of contention and struggle. On the one hand, the approach

appears to have been open-ended, indeterminate, and inclusive, where all manner of local interpretations has been encouraged; on the other, the experiment has also often been informed by a spirit of what Jeff Juris has termed 'intentionality' (Juris 2007). The expression of this intentionality has ranged from the determined manner in which the initial authors of the WSF 'globalised' and 'spread' the Forum to India (Sen 2002, and Teivainen, forthcoming (b)) to the idea of deliberately holding one of the Polycentric World Social Forums in 2006 in a closed society like Pakistan as an internationalist action of solidarity to help local movements open up their political space (Rousset, April 2006); to the manner in which the organisers of the US Social Forum in 2007 deliberately designed the organising process itself – and through that, the event – so that grassroots groups dominated and were able to take greatest advantage – and/but where this also meant the sidelining of almost all the big earlier movements in the country, from civil liberties to women to labour to the environmental (Guerrero, Luu, and Wiesner, 2008, Juris 2007).

Even as they have encouraged what was in effect autonomous expression of the experiment elsewhere however, the organisers of the Forum have also had to struggle over the years with the phenomenon of militant, independent, autonomist politics and actions in and around the Forum, and as Jeff Juris and Rodrigo Nunes have argued, they have been pushed hard to allow ever-greater autonomy within the Forum because of these actions (Juris, 2005b; Nunes, November 2004 and April 2005).

These have included actions from within the body of the Forum (such as the Assembly of Social Movements) as well as of the growing incidence of autonomous, parallel activities that have taken shape and place just outside the WSF but precisely during the Forum. Examples of the latter include the efflorescence of parallel activities in the Youth Camp when it is held in its home ground of Porto Alegre in Brazil, and the irruption of autonomous zones especially when the European Social Fora are held (Nunes, November 2004 and April 2005; Juris, 2005b). Initially perceived (somewhat conventionally !) by the organisers as a challenge to the Forum, they and Forum participants have gradually – even if still somewhat challenged by the parallelism and independence – come to see the symbiosis and synergy of this phenomenon; and some have come to not just live with it but to love it, and to value it as a part of a much larger 'Forum'.

This however is not just a question of the multiplicity of actions, and the autonomy and independence of the actors, leading to a much richer Forum – which is how the issue is normally portrayed – but that this permeability and feedback also contribute to making the WSF a far stronger and more robust political phenomenon. As Graeme Chesters explains (Chesters 2008, p 6),

... In complexity terms, the system of relations constituting the WSF has tended towards a point of self-organised criticality, an 'edge of chaos' represented in the balance of attractors constituted by the official forum and the self-organised alternatives. Thus *the willingness of antagonistic actors to critically engage and the permeability of the WSF has been a strength of the forum*, leading to a high degree of sensitivity to external inputs enabling the WSF to assimilate ideas and initiatives whilst internally adapting its structures to move between steady states without violent perturbation. Indeed, I would argue that the constant iteration through reflexive practices that characterises the emergence of feedback loops within the alter-globalization movements has been particularly apparent within the WSF, where the use of computer mediated communications, including wikis/blogs and other online publishing by autonomous actors, has crowded out 'official spaces' of articulation in cyberspace. (Emphasis supplied.)

As I come to later in this essay, I suggest that this phenomenon of symbiosis is in the very nature of open space (and therefore of the open space the organisers of the SF say they want it to be); and that in almost all senses, the organisation of such activities is a direct result of the organising of the Social Fora as open spaces.

Another manifestation, which both saw itself and was also seen by the organisers of the WSF not only as a challenge but as opposition to the Forum, took place in Mumbai, India,

in January 2004, in the form of another forum named Mumbai Resistance (Anon, January 2004b), and indeed, of what ultimately turned out to be, because of divisions and fractures within the opposition, several other fora (Chetia, August 2008). Here again, and despite the intentions of the organisers of MR (as it came to be called), the fact that MR took place literally across the road from the WSF in Mumbai in one sense only expanded and enriched the Forum, with many participants in each constantly crossing the road and visiting the other, and, I would argue, strengthened it – and even if this was an ironic outcome for the organisers of the actions in opposition.

There is also another dimension to this. Though not the same, the open-ended nature of the WSF, and its emphasis on self-organisation, has also meant that in several contexts, the Forum has been left open to being taken over and controlled, to greater and lesser extent, by particular ideological formations that then practised either direct sectarianism or what Massimo De Angelis has called “discursive sectarianism” (De Angelis 2005). Examples include the WSF in India for, during, and after the world meeting in January 2004 (Sen 2004c) or the European Social Forum in London later that year (Dowling 2005, Sullivan 2005), and to some extent also the less-known Norwegian Social Forum in Oslo, also in 2004.

Given the liberal and even libertarian philosophy that generally characterises and informs the WSF as an idea, these experiences of centralised control have widely been seen and portrayed in negative terms. But in trying to understand the practice and politics of the WSF as open space, we then also have to take into account the practice, as mentioned above, of affirmative inclusiveness or “intentionality”, that was practised in the organisation of the widely celebrated US Social Forum in June 2007, as already mentioned above, as a form of controlled closedness (Rebick, 2008; Guerrero, Luu, and Wiesner, 2008; and Juris, 2008).

In short, the WSF, and open space, is prone to this, and it is perhaps in its very nature – and in our own very nature, as human beings and social beings.

Different to this but parallel, the Nairobi Forum in 2007 saw the event being conducted in a manner that showed that it had been allowed by its organisers to be taken over by rank commercial considerations and greed, as well as by conservative religious interests, all of which was in severe contradiction with the WSF’s principles (Mbatia and Indusa, February 2007; Oloo, March 2007; Vargas, April 2007).

As a partisan participant in these debates and struggles, I would suggest that we need to see these varying dynamics as a part of a much larger ongoing struggle between different cultures of politics, and that despite these inversions, we need to nevertheless try and perceive the extraordinary larger attempt towards self-organisation and organisational autonomy that the World Social Forum process as a whole represents. We need to continue to struggle to achieve this quality, always pushing the boundaries.

At the same time, we need to recognise these as inversions and contradictions, and to work to address them. One way of doing this would be to take forward the somewhat hesitant steps that have already been taken within the WSF following the Nairobi experience, to define a set of organisational principles that can guide the organisation of social fora but also provide a framework of relational practices between different WSF bodies in the world and therefore the WSF as a world experiment.¹¹

The third, key, related organisational characteristic of the WSF, I suggest, and precisely because of its scale, its main contribution to world politics, is a culture of *emergence*.

For many organisers and participants in the WSF process, the open space that it is trying to be is, or represents, a new form of politics. More accurately, it is a form – or mode

- of organisation and structure, and a way of doing things, that *allows* a new form of politics, based on principles of self-organisation, open-endedness, indeterminacy, and organic learning and reproduction : In short, the articulation and practice of what can be termed an *emergent politics*. I suggest that this is a key factor in the effectiveness of the WSF as a social and political initiative.

As Arturo Escobar has explained in his brilliant essay 'Other Worlds Are (Already) Possible : Self-Organisation, Complexity, and Post-Capitalist Cultures' :

Self-organisation is .. at the heart of complexity in biological and social life. Ants, swarming moulds, cities, and certain markets are among the entities that show what scientists call 'complex adaptive behaviour'. These examples evince the existence of bottom-up processes in which simple beginnings lead to complex entities, without there being any master plan or central intelligence planning it. In these cases, agents working at one (local) scale produce behaviour and forms at higher scales (eg, the great anti-globalisation demonstrations of the last few years); simple rules at one level give rise to sophistication and complexity at another level. Scientists have a new word for this discovery, *emergence*, when the actions of multiple agents interacting dynamically and following local rules rather than top-down commands result in some kind of visible macro-behaviour or structure. There is more : these systems are (sometimes, not always) 'adaptive' — they learn over time, responding more effectively to the changing environment.

(Escobar 2004, p 351.)

Building on Escobar's work, I have suggested, in relation to the WSF,

... that there is something that lies behind, or under, this apparently rather innocuous, or even vague, romantic, assertion, that the Forum "provides a space". ... I want to build here on the thesis that we, as human beings, and like other living beings, communicate and exchange information at levels other than the obvious, but which is no less 'rational' than the obvious. Flowing from this, and building specifically on the work of Steven Johnson and Arturo Escobar, I suggest that the Forum is today playing roles that Jane Jacobs and others have argued that public spaces such as footpaths play in the emergence and lives of great cities: of being spaces where ordinary, 'local' / locally-rooted individuals, going about our own everyday work and lives, and who may not necessarily have complete knowledge about what is happening in the wider more 'global' world, communicate with each other and exchange information both at conscious and other levels, and through this develop a wider picture and thereby become 'global' actors (using the term 'global' in its generic sense, as distinct from and counterposed to 'local') [Escobar 2004; Jacobs 1961; Johnson 2002].
(Sen, January 2007, p 510)¹²

Graeme Chesters (2008, p 2) argues that this architecture leads to :

.... macro-level outcomes that are not always apparent to their participants. These emergent properties are the outcome of complex adaptive behaviour occurring through participative self-organization from the bottom up. This organizational form and the behaviour that structures it leads to the emergence of a collective intelligence that in turn drives forward the same processes in feedback loops, leading not to entropy as one might expect in a system of this type, but rather to substantial increases in agency and potential.

And he goes on to say (p 2) :

The concept of *emergence* describes the unexpected macro outcomes produced by reflexive actors engaged in complex patterns of interaction and exchange, outcomes that are historically determinate and unknowable in advance. ... What appears to have occurred within the alter-globalization movements is that their affinity with participatory and democratic means and their adoption of a decentralized praxis has encouraged organizational forms with emergent properties that are politically and culturally efficacious within a network society. Thus, we have seen the emergence of durable networks that are highly effective at information management, communications, material and symbolic contestation and mobilisation at the local and global levels. This has been coupled with recognition amongst certain actors, of the primacy of process in catalysing these effects and a prioritisation of process as a means to maximise these emergent outcomes.

One of the key and persistent controversies about the WSF, indeed, is whether it is 'effective' - and whether such a loose, open network and process such as open space can in fact ever be effective, by definition. In these terms, I would emphasise that to attempt to assess a phenomenon such as the WSF with conventional tools and parameters of effectiveness is completely misplaced; we need new and very different parameters to comprehend and measure what Chesters is describing - to trace how learnings flow across networks and to 'see' what effects they have.

I quote from Chesters at length to argue that *it is precisely in its openness - to the extent to which it is open -, and in its diaphanous, web-like structure, that the strength and effectiveness of the WSF reside* (Chesters 2008, pp 1-2) :

I want to argue that an over concentration on 'networks' can sometimes mask or reduce our understanding of the complex form and potential of new spaces of dialogue and encounter that are shaping global civil society (GCS) - e.g. the World Social Forum. I also want to argue that a failure to understand these complex dynamics might result in such experiments being tipped towards a point at which their capacity for innovation and their role in catalysing and fostering collective action is diminished. ... Metaphorically, much of this work treats networks as so-much 'plumbing', a series of conduits connecting nodes within which exchanges occur. Resultant network maps tend to emphasise the most prominent flows and marginalize minor ones. This can lead to an emphasis upon strong, established links characterised by entrenched 'habits of mind' - dominant discourses if you will.

Instead, I want to suggest that *in terms of social change at critical junctures it is the 'weak ties'* (Granovetter, 1973) *that are actually crucial to maintaining and innovating network relations, and that it is in the operation of these weak ties that the resilience and potential of the WSF resides.* This moves our focus from networks to processes of territorialisation and de-territorialisation - the manifestation of networks within physically and temporally bounded spaces and the lines of flight between these territories - the reconfiguration of networks through processes of encounter, the proliferation of weak links, the exchange of knowledge and the construction of affective relationships through facework and co-presence. These processes of physical interaction that characterise global social movements - the protest actions, encuentros and social fora are further understood to be dynamically interconnected and co-extensive with a digital commons that underpins computer mediated interaction and communications and which gives the 'movement of movements' its rhizomatic character. (Emphases supplied.)

Finally, and in relation to what I suggest has been the WSF's organisational strategy for expansion and for not merely resisting but nullifying the possibilities of disorganisation and repression, Chesters goes on to argue that it is exactly this quality, and this strength, that allows it to do so (p 2) :

When analysing the relationship between the dialogical spaces of global civil society and collective action, we must look to processes and to form, for it is within this hidden architecture that something of the dynamic strength of the alter-globalization movements can be grasped. These movements display 'small-world' characteristics (Watts & Strogatz 1998), they consist of hubs and nodes that are typified by a penumbra of 'weak ties'. In network analysis, this structure demonstrably allows for rapid communication and is resilient to all but the most focused of attacks.

I develop these ideas a little more, later in the essay; but this understanding and vision led some of us to an early attempt to formulate a definition of open space back in 2005 (but which today requires further development, in the light of the issues I raise later in this essay)¹³ :

The central idea here is that an open space, rather than a party or movement, allows for more and different forms of relations among [social and] political actors, while remaining open-ended with respect to outcomes. It is *open* in that encounters among multiple subjects with diverse objectives can have transformative political effects that traditional forms of movements, coalitions, and campaigns, with uniform themes and goals, exclude.

This concept and this definition thus offers scope for a much wider range of actors to take part in and contribute, including those not necessarily involved with politics or

movement. In other words, it is far more inclusive in terms of a process and network; and it is something that keeps spreading and keeps opening up.

The organisers of the WSF seem to have always understood this processual character of the Forum right from the beginning. In its Charter of Principles, drafted in June 2001 within six months of the very first manifestation of the new process, they emphasised precisely this quality and characteristic :

2. The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre [in January 2001] was an event localised in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that "another world is possible", it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.

As Chesters points out (p 5),

Waterman (2003) describes this as akin to discovering the 'secret of fire', a secret which he describes as the capacity to 'keep moving', to constantly challenge any process of capture or stratification. The construction of the WSF as process rather than event advances these goals of continuous, reflexive critique, which when iterated via computer mediated communications result in a situation Waterman describes as 'around the world in 80 seconds'. ...

Or less ! As I have already said however, notwithstanding the above the organisers of the WSF itself and its participants use only one of the three rather specialised terms. Aside from self-organisation, the only term that it itself uses is *open space*, through which it signals all of the above. And again as already mentioned, its approach seems to be working; this practice has led to what even its detractors allow has come to be nothing less than one of the widest social and political experiments ever to take place and that seems to be contributing to changes at multiple scales and levels.

At the same time, and before closing this section on the WSF, it is important to repeat and to underline that that these practices are by no means true of the WSF alone or are its trade mark (and even though I have earlier argued that there was, in 2003-4, a tendency to fetishise and commodify the name and the concept (Sen 2004b)). These practices are common to and characteristic of many parts of what, for want of a better name, is referred to by some as the 'global justice movement', such as the PGA (People's Global Action) whose 'hallmarks' also provide a similar, open-ended framework. And where indeed, some argue that the PGA, through its formulation and by its very existence and the actions it has inspired, in turn seeded the WSF (Abramsky, August 2008). These practices therefore need to be seen as common characteristics of emerging experiments in the practice of autonomist action, and as Ezequiel Adamovsky has argued, in its transition from the social to the political (Adamovsky, nd, c.2006).

III

Towards opening up open space

Following the above discussion of the WSF as an experiment in open space, in this section I attempt to contextualise, unpack, and open up the *concept and practice* of open space. I start by suggesting that we, following Giorgio Agamben, focus and reflect on openness itself, in relation to humanness. I then present a brief history of open space, go on to discuss some new horizons of open space, and follow this by a discussion of its nature and politics; and conclude this section with an exploration of its contradictions and paradoxes.

On openness

In order to enter this space, it is vital to reflect on the possibility that as Agamben has argued, of all living beings – indeed, of everything that we today know in the universe, animate and inanimate - only 'man' is capable of seeing the open; and that the open is a key part of humankind's relationship to its environment. Citing Heidegger's discussion of the

relation of animal and man to their environment, Agamben explains that this is a uniquely human capacity (Agamben 2004, p 58) :

Only man, indeed only the gaze of authentic thought, can see the open which names the unconcealedness of beings. The animal, on the contrary, never sees this open.¹⁴

He explains (p 51) :

The guiding thread of Heidegger's exposition is constituted by the triple thesis : "the stone is worldless [*weltlos*]; the animal is poor in world [*weltarm*]; man is world-forming [*weltbildend*]." Since the stone (the nonliving being) – insofar as it lacks any possible access to what surrounds it – gets quickly set aside, Heidegger can begin his inquiry with the middle thesis, immediately taking on the problem of what it means to say "poor in world."

In these terms, a crucial further difference Agamben draws between the animal and the human is that whereas for animals, their environment is open but not openable, humankind has the capacity to open up the world; *we can disconceal it* (p 55) :

The ontological status of the animal environment can at this point be defined : it is *offen* (open) but not *offenbar* (disconcealed, lit., openable). For the animal, being are open but not accessible; that is to say, they are open in an inaccessibility and an opacity – that is, in some way, a nonrelation. This *openness without disconcealment* distinguishes the animal's poverty in world from the world-forming which characterizes man.

Although Agamben goes into far more detail in his extraordinary treatise, for this discussion it is perhaps enough to simply draw out the conclusion that open space, and the ideas of openness and openability, are thus profoundly, and uniquely, *human* qualities – qualities that are innate to our nature and immanent in everything that we do.

A short history of open space

The concept and the practice of 'open space' in social and political movement – and especially in autonomist movement - are not new. There have been similar practices in movements since the 1960s, though not called this then. For instance, in many ways the feminist movement in North America, and elsewhere, practiced something very close to this idea back in the late 60s onwards : A free, unstructured, and non-hierarchical movement (Hayes, December 2006). This attempt to create and practice such a movement then however became the subject of intense critical reflection within the movement in terms of what one participant, Jo Freeman, famously called "the tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman (aka Joreen), nd [May 1970/1971]). As pointed out above, reflection is an integral characteristic of the practice of open space, and Freeman similarly wrote this essay in response to frustrations of trying to organise non-hierarchically and as a critique of masculinist forms of organisation.

This social experiment was not restricted to the feminist movement alone, though arguably was most rigorously developed there; it was part of general articulation of a counter-culture in North America from the 1960s (Roszak 1969), and also, for instance, in India in the 1970s, though coming from very different roots (Sheth, nd; Weber, 1998).

There have been equivalents and expressions of this idea in many parts of the world and in many fields. Another vital expression was its exploration in education, best known through the work of Paulo Freire and his theory of conscientisation and a pedagogy of the oppressed, starting in Brazil but having impacts in much of the world (Freire 2007 [1970]; Murphy 1999; Andreotti, forthcoming (2009)).¹⁵ And of central relevance to the WSF was the parallel articulation of liberation theology in the 1960s and 70s, which had profound influence on the evolution of social and political movements in Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, and through this history, also on the ideology of the WSF (Levy, forthcoming (2009)).

This experimentation continued right through the 1980s and 90s, and where there were waves of struggle within these and other movements. In each of these instances the

concept of openness was rigorously practiced, debated, and critiqued. And as I see it, the emergence during the 1990s of PGA and of Direct Action in the US, and of the organisational culture underlying the direct actions at Seattle 1999 and then in the series of 'global actions' that took place during the early 2000s, and the WSF – all of which were manifestations of a new politics founded on ideas of horizontality and open-endedness – were a natural outcome of these stirrings, experiments, and movements.

(On the other hand, a rather different and very specific application of the concept also took place in the development and practice, perhaps particularly in the US, of a method called 'Open Space Technology'. This however, is an application and use of the concept that appears curiously inexplicit and uncritical. For instance, according to its founders, 'Open Space Technology' is merely "the name given to a meeting without a predetermined agenda" (Open Space World, nd; Owen, nd).¹⁶)

In other words, I suggest that the idea and practice of open space in social and political activity is a generalised, widespread, and non-centralised political-cultural phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century, one that is only continuing to widen and deepen in our own times, the early 21st century.

To understand what is happening, we therefore perhaps need to think about open space in ways other than those in which its critics are pointing. This may also help in understanding why the term open space has come into use, and seems so relevant. One key issue is how other developments in the second half of the 20th century have changed the way we relate to each other and to the world around us.

As Nunes argues (Nunes, November 2006 [2005]), and as others have argued before him in terms of related phenomena such as transnational advocacy networking,¹⁷ the recent intensification in social networking and in networked politics as a common social practice is (and must be understood as) a function of the major changes that have taken place in recent decades – in the same period as the explorations outlined above - in the material means of information exchange and communication and also of international travel. Nunes' argument is that the "... *large scale massification* of these media, and [the emergence of] a multipolar medium like the internet in particular, is ... the chief material cause behind the 'renaissance' of openness and horizontality".¹⁸

Equally, and as Ezequiel Adamovsky has argued, open space is a bio-political organisational form, and as such only mimics the social and political relations that people today, in the world as it is emerging, are anyway building among themselves (Adamovsky, nd, c.2006).

As we have seen in relation to the WSF, it is not as if the concept and practice of open space is not being intensely contested and challenged in specific contexts, but taking a step back it is perhaps fair to say that networking, the horizontality of social relations that goes with this, and the openness that is required as a characteristic of networking, have now become, in many parts of the world, the 'natural' and normal way for ordinary people – including but not only activists - to behave and to organise things, and to build social relations. It has come to be widely accepted, even if the term itself is not used to describe the practice. And in organisational terms, these new practices have opened new doors, new ways of thinking and acting.

Social movement activists have perhaps made among the most active and imaginative use of these new possibilities (Juris, Spring 2004; Juris 2004), but this is a generalised situation and not restricted to social movement and politics. Many fields, including the military, industry, entertainment, and other big business, have also found strategic value in using this approach, and where it today also fundamentally informs contemporary debate on science, knowledge systems, and intellectual property; and, of course, this is the basis of the phenomenal expansion of everyday social networking in our

times (Lessig 1999). And in turn, the WSF's slogan and philosophy, 'Another World Is Possible !', with its emphasis on what is *capable* of happening rather than that which works on the basis of on an inexorable and linear logic, is fundamentally consistent with this emerging social practice and with the philosophy and concepts that underlie it.

The social and political use of the concept of open space, and the contemporary rise of this concept and practice, must therefore be located in this much wider context. We need to see it as the crystallisation of a new cultural-political practice that has accompanied, synergised with, and contributed to other developments. On the other hand, if the concept and practice of open space and its characteristics are being equally used by those seeking to exercise centralised power, then we need to critically reflect on what, more specifically, its liberatory potentials are and where this lies.

New horizons of the open

In this discussion, it is also important for us today, in the early stages of the 21st century, to recognise three realities : That the conventional visualisation and conceptualisation of 'space' fundamentally changed during this past (20th) century in several major ways; that this has especially happened only in the very recent past, in terms of human history and evolution; and that this – this visualisation and conceptualisation - is continuing to rapidly evolve and change in our times, and at an accelerating pace.

At one level, this has been simply a function of 'space', and of new dimensions of space, and of 'openness', becoming a more everyday experience, and in a way, it has come about because of the popularisation of space and of understandings of space in many spheres of life – art, music, science, and even everyday consumption. Keeping in mind Agamben's explanation of the role of the open for humankind, as a species human beings – albeit with variations across contexts - today visualise and therefore conceptualise space very differently from just half a century ago. This is now such an everyday thing that we are barely aware of it. But this is nothing less than an epochal change, and as such, this necessarily also has significant implications for our use and practice of the idea of open space.

The first major steps were taken in the first half of the 20th century. In the visual arts and then the plastic arts, the emergence, articulation, and then exploration of cubism fundamentally challenged all previous and more fixed conceptions of both *space* and *time* in western art (Berger 1977 [1972]; Berger 1992 [1965]).¹⁹ Completely new representations and explorations of space, and time, took shape. Similarly, in music, the emergence and articulation of jazz from the early 20th century onwards, with its traditions of improvisation and, in John Brown Childs' words, of "...organized ambiguity and ambiguous organization" – opened up new dimensions of time and space (Childs, April 2007, also citing Schwartzman 1990) :

In the words of the great African American artist Romare Bearden, and focusing on his comments about the role of the horizontal in his work, and where he was influenced in part by jazz and also by Chinese Art, Indian art, Renaissance European art, ancient Greek art, Mexican muralists, African art, and African American culture :

When an artist decides on a *space*, we get a certain kind of space. When I say space, I am not talking about, let's say, distance; I'm talking about relationships... When you get that, it doesn't matter what you're working on.... (p 190)

... It seems to be that verticality detests surprises, but, assuming a communally shared framework, horizontality surprises and enlivens.

It is a question of collage... The thing is that the artist confronts chaos. The whole thing of art is - how do you organize chaos ? (p 197).

These ideas then continued to be developed and explored in literature and art from about the 1940s onwards, and perhaps particularly in the course of the school of magic realism during the 1960s onwards – the exploration of a sort of heightened reality where

magical elements, elements of the miraculous, or seemingly illogical scenarios appear in an otherwise realistic or even 'normal' setting, and where through the playing with (or 'distortion' of) both time and space, new understandings emerge (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_realism).

These developments in art and literature paralleled – and sometimes preceded – developments in science, especially through Einstein's discovery of relativity in the early 20th century where time and space were revealed as one, and the subsequent explorations and development of these ideas right through the 20th century; including in terms of theories of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and chaos (Prigogine and Stengers 1984).

But arguably, and where the relevance of all this lies for this essay, it has perhaps been only the second half of the 20th century that we have seen the decisively more generalised *socialisation* of these perceptions, to a significant degree led by developments in science and technology; and that it is during this same period that the practice of open space in social and political movement emerged.

The first development has been through the exploration of extra-terrestrial space. The idea of humankind actually reaching out into and travelling, and existing, in what has come in English to be called 'space' – the apparently infinite openness that exists beyond the confines of our planet – has been around since at least the 19th century, but in material terms, this vision came to be realised by humankind as a whole only from 1957 onwards, with the launching of the first space satellites. This had two impacts : One, while specialists and professionals have imagined and conceptually understood – and mapped – the globe for several centuries (Cosgrove 2001), it was only in 1961, with the first manned satellites, and in 1970 with the moon landing, and given the by-then fairly widespread availability of simultaneous transmission through television, that it became possible for ordinary human beings, with our own eyes, to - for the very first time in our history as a species – directly view and comprehend planet earth not only as a whole but – crucially – also as an object within a much larger universe; aside from also seeing and having a direct virtual experience of other worlds such as the moon; and since then, also of other planets in our solar system.

And two, from this point on the meaning for ordinary people of 'space' – the vast and apparently infinitely and utterly open, so-called 'outer space' – also changed fundamentally. From the remote and mysterious it suddenly became familiar, a part of everyday life; entering and visiting it became part of direct human experience; and as space science and astronomy have come to be popularised, people all over the planet have progressively become aware on an everyday basis of the vastness of space and of our place in the universe, not only in a physical sense but also cosmologically and existentially (Sagan 1985); and indeed, even as consumers. As Neil Armstrong - the astronaut who was the first human being to land on the moon - said, even if he flubbed his line a bit, "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind".²⁰ This however, I suggest, was not so only in terms of human beings breaking out of terrestrial existence and landing on the moon, significant as that was; it was also in terms of our comprehension of our universe and of our exploration and comprehension of the open.

Again, while some of this perception was available before this to specialists – adventurers and explorers, astronomers and other scientists, religious thinkers, philosophers, artists, writers, and poets – it now became a phenomenon, perception, and virtual experience available to the species, and as a result of rapidly changing information and communication technologies, to human beings and cultures all over the world, to be variously comprehended, internalised, imagined, reinvented, and domesticated in terms of humankind's widely varying cultural contexts.

The second development has been in terms of the realisation and articulation of the interconnectedness of everything. As a function of the progressively widening recognition during this period of the earth as one whole and as a 'spaceship', we have also begun to

become aware of the Gaian nature of the planet as one - as a system and as a living organism (Lovelock 2000); where everything on this planet (every thing, every action, every process) is connected to everything else. In popular consciousness, this is a consequence of the growing awareness not only of the multiple environmental crises that the planet is facing but of the systemic *ecological* crisis we are today facing, as a species, where life systems themselves are breaking down.

One crucial aspect of the articulation of this radically new Gaian perception has been the recognition of the function in earth's ecosystem of open spaces on the planet - such as the oceans, the Siberian tundra, and the Amazonian basin - as organs that are essential for the life of the planet. (This organic, systemic conceptualisation is radically distinct from the colonialist tendency to define the Amazon especially as part of 'humankind's patrimony', thus also laying claim to it.) Open space, locally and globally, has thus become more than something one can create / enter / use / inhabit; it has now come to be popularly understood as having an organic, ecological, and *systemic* function, fundamentally interconnected with its surroundings.

Once again, while this deeper ecological understanding was available to some before this - in particular to indigenous peoples in perhaps all parts of the world but also to some specialists in non-indigenous cultures such as environmentalists, landscape architects, and planners - it has now become a common perception, even through the consumer goods that some of us buy, and therefore in our everyday values and norms.

Third, our visualisation and conceptualisation of open space has of course also been dramatically expanded by the invention of the worldwide web, with all its apparent open-endedness. Again very suddenly - in historical terms - yet another (and fundamentally new) dimension of 'open', seemingly unbounded space has been added to our cognitive vocabulary. And beyond the openness, it is now common to see references to the Internet as the model on which social movement organisation is increasingly based (Klein, July 2000a, and Klein, July 2000b), and "... common to point to the practice of Free and Open Source Software communities as the 'vanguard' of this democracy-to-come" (Nunes, November 2006 [2005], p 2). (This however, despite the equally known reality of the new disparities that the invention and use of the computers and the web have produced, the so-called digital divide.)

Another related new and crucial understanding of openness has also come about in recent decades, in terms of the fundamental role that systems, networks, and emergence play in all physical, natural, and social processes, and where openness and open-endedness are essential and intrinsic qualities and characteristics of these concepts (Capra 1997, 2004; Johnson 2002). This new comprehension is today beginning to inform and influence all sciences, and through this is likely over time to influence and shape our thinking in all areas of life. Given its newness, it is perhaps premature to include this as having already contributed to our new consciousness of open space - but its influence is growing even as you read this essay.

Equally, a specialised but nevertheless crucial recent development in our understanding in this area has also been the articulation, in the field of radical social geography, of the ideas that time and space are inseparable and that both are social constructs (Harvey, 1996). This in turn has been a part of a wider critique by David Harvey and others of Marx's focus on time alone, and more generally, towards an understanding of "capitalism as the structure and process within which the salience of time is framed, and whose closing / opening of space we are pitted against" (Waterman, March 2007).²¹

Finally in this sketch, we need also to locate the concept of open space, and the new visualisations, in a longer political history of cyberspace - of so-called 'virtual space'. As Shuddhabrata Sengupta has argued, the invention of the printing press, and with this the invention of the idea of artificial *media* by which human beings could exchange ideas with each other at a mass level (and also create more permanent archival records, ie memory)

marked the first radical opening of virtual space in human history (Sengupta, forthcoming [2009]). At one level, each successive step in this process – the appearance and distribution of leaflets, books, journals, and newspapers, and then radio and television, and most recently the web – can be considered to have been steps towards opening space and opening new spaces. And significantly, and just as with physical open space as earlier discussed, each of these steps was taken first by individuals, working 'locally', autonomously, and 'randomly', and in each case the steps have been subject to challenge and (en)closure by either state or market corporatism and/or by fundamentalist forces within societies, such as religious, caste, ethnic, and/or nationalist power.

All these developments have also intertwined, and they have, individually and collectively, and in many ways perhaps especially as a consequence of processes of popularisation that are now so commonplace, profoundly shaped – and continue to shape – our thinking and perceptions. Equally however, attempts at planning, control, and enclosure are today as true of these new dimensions of space and openness as in the old and more familiar; think of the 'conquest' of space, the growing attempts by corporations and the military to control the web, and the juggernaut of genetic modification and the control of natural life processes (Pasternak, August 2007). Unlike in the case of the more familiar physical and local open space however, as I come to below, we as yet still have little vocabulary available for 'reading' macro-ecological open space and virtual space such as the web in terms of their political geography.²² We therefore can and must equally ask the same questions as we do below of these other historically newer manifestations of open space, and develop vocabulary necessary to understand and act on what is happening.

The nature of open space

There is an open space in language and literature that exists despite the most adverse circumstances. As I say this, I am reminded of Boris Pasternak's famous poem, "The night is dark and it is bitterly cold, but we must at least keep a candle lit."

Ashok Vajpeyi²³

As a consequence of the history sketched out above, and as is evident from the cluster of terms given at the beginning of this essay, open space is today a term that belongs to an extensive community and vocabulary of related contemporary concepts, ideas, and practices, and where some of the terms are also used interchangeably.

But beyond this, there is also the question of context. At a quite fundamental level, what does open space, and the open, mean to fisherfolk and to sailors; to the Inuit or to people living in deserts? Or to nomadic peoples, for whom motion - through space - is constant? What does open space mean to people living in deep valleys? To a sculptor in front of a rock? To someone composing a piece of music? To a dancer on a stage? To the physically or visually challenged? And to people dying of a terminal disease, or to someone on death row? To a choreographer? To a physicist?

Are each of these different meanings? Or is there, and can there be, a common meaning across different subjectivities?

Third, and beyond the question of content is that unlike openness, which we can perceive, open space exists only when we construct it – and whatever we construct will necessarily be a function of the conditions that prevail where we construct it. As Wangui Mbatia expressively put it, our construction of – and struggle for – open space may, at one level, be compared with a spider's spinning of her web. Necessarily, the web she will create is a function of the space and opportunity she is working within.²⁴ At the same time, we need to keep in mind Agamben's invocation of the difference between man and animal.

Partly therefore, as a consequence of being a member of a community of like terms and practices with much overlap, partly because of quite different interpretations and uses of these terms in different fields and contexts, and partly because of very different social and

material conditions that prevail in different contexts, there is perhaps no one definition of open space. As Nunes points out in terms of horizontalities, there are many open spaces – and many meanings of open space (Nunes 2006 [2005]).

(This however then suggests that the branding and trade-marking of open space – as has been done in the case of so-called 'Open Space Technology' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology; Open Space World, nd) - therefore contradicts the very essence of the concept, and that this (en)closure and appropriation should be read as the capitalist action it is; or at a more liberal level, that this – even if it has been branded – is just one more meaning among many of open space, and as such the trade mark becomes irrelevant.)²⁵

This plurality, and the ambiguity that goes with it, is in the very nature of open space, which is essentially a social and cultural construct – in all the fields it is used, and in all its meanings. It is therefore important to root and/or understand the use of the term in particular contexts and conditions.

The fundamental nature of the concept of open space, in all the fields that it is used, is not only that of something that exists, or can exist, but also that of a symbol of possibilities; a metaphor. Its existence, and the possibilities of its existence, is as important as actually practising or experiencing it. As de Sousa Santos has argued in terms of the WSF and its slogan, 'Another World Is Possible !', which – by its flagging of the possible and therefore of the 'Not yet' – points not to an existing reality or definite singular future but to its immanent potential (de Sousa Santos, 2004b).

It is also crucial to recognise and read the contemporary political-ideological meaning and potential of open space. Especially in the conditions of closure that have so deeply afflicted the world over the past two decades, as a function of the synergistic interaction of religious fundamentalisms, economic fundamentalisms, and an imperialist power with its so-called 'war on terror' post 9/11 and all its outfalls, every practice of open space and horizontality must also be recognised as being a significant polemical challenge to empire and to hegemonic politics, whether in social movement, art, or everyday social relations. In many ways and at many levels, the idea and concept of open space is deeply interrelated with human rights, democratic freedoms, civil liberties, and cultural expression. It is as relevant to science, education, literature, and art, and to faith, and to the conditions of everyday life, as it is to politics and social movement.

The politics and meta-politics of open space

I suggest that the central meeting place of the Huadenosaunee (Iroquois) at Onondaga, about which I write in *Transcommunalism*, was/is very much like the open space that you describe. It was not a capital city, not the vertical place of the most powerful. Rather it was the horizontal place of agreement/disagreement worked out with the protocols of respect that I find so inspiring. Those protocols are another form of the organizing of chaos, I think.

John Brown Childs, 2007 ²⁶

The emphasis of this essay is on the social and political uses of the term *open space*, but I hope that the relevance of this discussion to the other uses will also be evident, throughout. In order to try to establish and retain this connection, but also to allude to and perhaps reveal the politics and meta-politics of open space in the field of movement, I will here open up the discussion by looking at two particular uses of the term and a very similar term – 'open space' in urban planning and 'open plan' in both urban and office planning.

In doing so however, I also question the usually implied normative equation of the term *open space* with the apparently similar and related term *the commons* – and where the commons (and the defence and promotion of the commons) is a key contemporary symbol in

the opposition to capitalism. I argue that the two are similar but not the same. Most crucially, the commons is an *alternative*; open space is only an instrument, a vehicle, a transitory stage. And in doing so, I also reflect on and critique my own earlier work.

In the field of urban planning the term 'open space' carries a physical and apparently apolitical connotation, of being a relatively large, relatively open, unbuilt / 'undeveloped' space, usually but not always made available either for recreational or (in some particular contexts) agricultural purposes. See, for instance, the following definition, to which I contributed :

Open space : In urban planning, 'open space' refers to publicly owned land that is preserved and protected from being built upon, as a commons. Open space is usually accessible to the public, but may also be leased out for agriculture. This concept is also used in political parlance, however, to indicate a culture of openness, of free and non-hierarchical dialogue, and of horizontal organisation. The concept has also played important roles in conflict resolution processes, management practices, and problem-solving exercises in multi-ethnic, racial, and ideological situations.
(From : Sen and Kumar, eds, March 2006)²⁷

Like many definitions, this usage sounds universal but is in fact is culturally quite specific – and it is significant as much for what it does not say as for what it says. First, and by definition since this use is in terms of urban planning, it refers only to *urbanised* conditions (which, spelt out, means conditions where most land is built upon and 'open space' is the exception).

This however, is radically different from the tradition of a commons, or common property, that still prevails in many rural and agrarian communities in the world. The commons is not residual space but an integral part of the local and wider social ecology and economy, where such property and the rights of access to it is a function of traditional communitarian decision (though also subject to local social segmentation).²⁸ As Massimo De Angelis argues, for every commons, there is a community (De Angelis, November 2006).

This is very different from planned open space. On the one hand, planned space does not have a single, defined community, but rather is – in theory - a public space, open to everyone; and on the other, the commons was not and is still not today referred to as being 'open', by locals. Indeed, the commons was and is not in fact open but rather available primarily to locals and then too, only within locally determined rules of custom and of customary law. The kind of open space that is created through planned intervention is therefore not a commons, and should not be confused with this.

Beyond this, in the contemporary world planned open space not only does not have a defined community that owns and manages it but to the contrary, is by definition centrally planned, managed, and owned.

Even though, therefore, the creation of planned open space in urban areas is often seen (and populistically portrayed) as a normative commitment to 'the social', and even to anti-privatisation, a more critical look reveals such space being only a part of larger regimes of centralised control, property, and the State. But if true, then in terms of the particular concerns of this essay, this in turn demands that we revisit and critically reflect on the metaphor used by one of the founders of the WSF, Chico Whitaker, as mentioned earlier, to explain the open space that he argued the WSF is : The idea of a 'square' in a city, or of a *praça*, in the original Portuguese. The usage of this metaphor has arguably fired the political imaginations of many participants in the WSF, as an alternative starting point for politics and political organising. But if such spaces in the city are in fact neither a commons nor open, then we need to re-visit this usage, question it, and perceive and comprehend the profound contradictions that are contained in such an allusion – and recognise that it is a slippery and dangerous illusion.²⁹

Second, looking at these conditions historically, the 'open spaces' that our planners construct in fact refer to contexts where under conditions of both capitalism and state socialism, agrarian or forest land - both private and common - has been 'enclosed' and taken over for urban or industrial uses and its previous occupants or users displaced and scattered;³⁰ and where the 'open spaces' that we now know have been specially kept aside as part of social planning for the new occupants of the general space within which the open spaces are located – and not for their original inhabitants, who are in effect usually excluded. Some of the best-known examples are the great parks in cities of the North (London, New York, Paris, Washington DC). Planned urban 'open space' therefore, though appearing to provide amenity to city inhabitants, in reality involves appropriation, expulsion, enclosure, exclusion, and control, usually centralised. The tendency in planning to portray them as a commons – which would by definition require local community control – is misplaced and a distortion of reality (and, I argue below, deliberate); but for those who look here for the liberatory and emancipatory potential of openness, it becomes a grave mistake to see them in this way.

Similarly, it is important to recognise that famous urban parks that actually bear the name - such as the Boston Commons in the US and Clapham Commons in London - were originally commons but have long been taken over by the state in the form of municipal authority. The idea is empty; only the name remains. To understand and to refer to these as a 'commons' is again a distortion, in multiple ways.

Third, we will perhaps agree on the fact that the existence of planned open spaces in urban areas in theory provides inhabitants with the possibility both of some relief from the dense conditions in which they otherwise live, and also, importantly, the chance of chance, random encounters with others and the profound potential that comes with this as discussed above, of learning-about-the-world-around-us. (Though not forgetting the price that some have to pay for this.)

On the other hand, it is crucial to also be alive to the reality that in many cases, urban parks were originally specifically created not so much to provide relief and/or recreation to the general citizenry but to engineer, plan, control, and give order to societies. Many cities that are famed in planning circles for their seemingly open spaces (Paris, Brasilia) were created in times of – and as instruments of - autocratic and harshly exclusionary politics, and many urban open spaces today celebrated for their civic, and civil, qualities were expressly created for military purposes (for instance, the great Maidan in Kolkata, and once again Hausman's Paris). This dark side of planning continues to be an intrinsic part of contemporary life and politics in the world today, as has always been the case. In our times, Israel's urban planning actions in relation to Palestine and Palestinians are only the best-known example (Yiftachel, 1998).³¹

In short, in many or even most cases, planned 'open spaces' in urban areas are far from being open, and have to be politically read for the conditions of closure, enclosure, and control that are involved. They only become open when they are opened up by those who use them.

(And given this, and where I have developed this analysis only in the course of writing this essay, it of course becomes necessary for me to now therefore get back to the drawing board and revise the definition I gave above, to which I contributed and for which I am therefore partly responsible.)

One more related point. Whereas openness and open space - in cities and in urban planning - are widely associated with grace and beauty, we need to read that these too are socially constructed ideas. Our conditioned notions of what is beautiful are intrinsically linked to the imposition, establishment, and maintenance of centralised order; and conversely, we are conditioned to associate the lack of imposed order – implicitly, disorder – with ugliness (Sen, September 1996; Sen, August 1999). It is therefore not a coincidence that popular

spaces – generally more open, random, and apparently unordered - are rarely portrayed as 'beautiful', especially by planners, and are usually deplored by them. Beauty, grace, and order are therefore not only related but intensely ideological constructs.

Much of the above applies equally to office planning, where the term 'open plan' has come to have great currency in modern architectural thinking and practise – but which is equally deceptive and in fact is a part of the project of modernity, of giving order to society. Given my elaborate discussion above in terms of urban planning, it is perhaps not necessary for me to similarly open up this concept, but I urge readers to reflect not on the theory but on the practice and reality of so-called 'open plan' offices.³² Again drawing from the Wikipedia :

Open plan is a generic term used in architectural and interior design for any floor plan which makes use of large, open spaces and minimizes the use of small, enclosed rooms such as private offices. The term can also refer to landscaping of housing estates, business parks, etc, in which there are no defined property boundaries such as hedges, fences or walls. ... Many different companies are experimenting with designs which provide a mix of cubicles, open workstations, private offices, and group workstations. In some cases, these are not assigned to one particular individual, but are available to any employee of the company on either a reservable or "drop-in" (first come, first served) basis. Terms for this strategy include *office hotelling* and *alternative officing*. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_plan, accessed js 10.11.08)

Let me try to now pull these arguments together. Four common threads run through the two definitions I have cited and my discussion of them :

- That urban open space – whether at the city scale or in offices, etc – is planned, designed, and provided by some, for use by others;
- That even if such spaces do provide the opportunity for some degree of open, random encounter, the quality of 'openness' of these spaces is ascribed not by the users but by the designers and planners;
- That the rules of using the spaces are also set by the designers and planners, joined now by the administrators and/or owners; and –
- That every attempt is made by the state and civil society to socialise users into understanding, perceiving, and believing that such spaces are indeed 'open' – and even 'beautiful' - including by the use of names that use highly normative and evocative terms such as these; and with the same designers and planners assume the roles of establishing the norms of beauty and order in society, by writing books on it and so on.

All this holds lessons for us as we attempt to explore and understand the politics of open space. Similar to but radically different from the tradition of the commons, open spaces, and open planned offices, are thus not open by themselves, and it is not their apparent physical reality that matters; they become open – or tend to become open, and/or are made open – only when those who use them take part in decisions regarding their creation, planning, design, maintenance, and use. As John Holloway has argued, we need to understand 'open space' not as a passive concept but as an active concept and construct; and secondly, not as a positive concept but as a negative concept, as a struggle against enclosure.³³ And in this sense then, open space and the commons become, under existing conditions, complimentary concepts and strategies.

One key further point : Under contemporary conditions this process of appropriation of what was historically the commons – land - within processes of urbanisation is being dramatically widened. It is today being extended from a control only of land (including forests) to include water, air, and cyberspace,³⁴ and also – in yet another dimension - genetic knowledge; and under current conditions of neoliberalism, this is also no longer a question of expropriation by the state for socially planned use but a process of privatisation and enclosure, for hand-over to private commercial interests.

It is important to repeat and to underline that these conditions do not apply uniformly across the world, even within specific continental regions. We need therefore to not take this discussion for granted or to assume that it necessarily means the same thing everywhere. Only one thing, perhaps, is absolute : That what is referred to as 'planning' is very much a function and expression of politics.

Open space and open society

Finally, the concept of open space can also be compared to the more specific term *open society*. Drawing again from the Wikipedia, and paraphrasing a little :

Originally developed by philosopher Henri Bergson, [the term *open society*] referred to societies where government is responsive and tolerant, and political mechanisms transparent and flexible. The state keeps no secrets from itself in the public sense; it is a non-authoritarian society in which all are trusted with the knowledge of all. Political freedoms and human rights are the foundation of an open society. The term however, is most closely associated with Karl Popper, who defined an open society as one which ensures that political leaders can be overthrown without the need for bloodshed, as opposed to a "closed society" in which a bloody revolution or coup d'état is needed to change the leaders. Developing this interpretation in the 1950s as a philosophical and ideological critique of contemporary totalitarianism, he further described an open society as one "in which individuals are confronted with personal decisions" as opposed to a "magical or tribal or collectivist society".³⁵

As I hope is evident, the idea of open space is thus both similar and different from that of open society. It is similar in that it is also based on personal decisions (and actions); and it is different in that although also political in nature, it is not tied to or dependent on another concept (in the case of open society, the state), nor necessarily suggestive of a social collectivity (community, or society). It is an organic, open-ended concept, rooted in our nature.

IV

Characteristics and Contradictions

Based on the discussion so far, I now attempt to draw out what I understand as being some of the fundamental characteristics of open space as a concept and as social and political practice, and then to move to also discussing some of its key contradictions.

The pregnancy, and life, of the open

At the most basic level, the idea of open space not only appeals to us as human beings but, as argued above, the open is innate to human existence and to human nature (Agamben 2004). As a consequence, arguably perhaps all cultures attach a normative value both to the open and to openness, and to space in the sense of an open expanse; and especially when the terms are combined to refer to *open space*, this lends it a quality of a certain pregnancy. The conventional definitions and perceptions of the term *open space*, in all their variations, come out of this underlying idea – and of our nature, as human beings.³⁶

Most crucially, and in terms of the way we as human beings relate to the world, the term *open space* is suggestive of freedom, liberty, and life, and therefore the possibility of self- (or auto-) determination and autonomy : On the one hand, of freedom of access and entry (though not necessarily without boundaries or gates), freedom of use and action, freedom of association and of exchange, freedom of expression, and freedom to leave (and to re-enter) at one's free will; and on the other, also of an indeterminate openness and elasticity. It is therefore suggestive of a condition of a certain kind of liberty, safety, and inclusiveness – and possibility - that is rare.

Importantly however, if the concept suggests the possibility of self-determination, then this raises the interesting and significant possibility of the freedom also to define the nature of the space – in principle, also individually but in practice collectively – and thereby to set the rules of the space (ie, of our freedoms), including its enclosure; but from within. This

then however challenges both its openness and also begins to define those who might act in this way as a community. The idea of open space thus in a way contains the seed of the idea of a commons, but without yet being there; and if it gains a community that defines its boundaries, then indeed that open space is no longer an open space but, I would argue, becomes a commons.

The first key concern here is for the space to be open, these rules have to be defined from within – by those who use it -, and not by those who initially create the space or who manage the space. As I come to below, openness and closure are thus dialectically linked as two inseparable dimensions and aspects of the same action, the same movement.

These qualities, of liberty and inclusiveness, in turn suggest a *safety* to an open space, or at least the potential of safety; though in practice the feeling of being safe is also a function of other factors such as an individual's perception of and relation to indeterminacy, so this is very relative.

The second key characteristic of open space is the possibility of random encounter.

And in turn, and especially if all these factors come into play, then they also tend to make open space a space for *learning* – where we ourselves become more open, more receptive (Andreotti and ors, nd, c.2006b; Andreotti, forthcoming (2009)).

Open space therefore becomes a very special kind of space – and when compared to the rest of our lives, where things tend to be so structured, bounded, and/or segmented, it becomes a liberated, and perhaps even a liberating, space. It appeals to our most basic instincts and to our fundamental attributes as human beings. It also reinforces our assumption, and our assessment of ourselves, that we are (or potentially can be) free human beings. Open space offers, or seems to offer, the possibility of our realising our humanity and our freedoms.

Beyond this, but implied within it, is also the implicitly *unbounded* nature of the space. As vestigial wanderers and explorers, dating back from when humankind first emerged, this possibility is of enormous importance for us as human beings, even if for most of us now remaining in our subconscious (Sagan 1985). What is open signals the possibility of worlds beyond, and of a future.³⁷

But, and here drawing on and paraphrasing John Holloway's work, open space is also a crack within a much larger universe : An opening (Holloway, nd, c.June 2007). A crack in a wall that has the potential of being opened up, even to the extent of demolishing the wall – and thereby to opening up and making visible to each side what earlier lay on the other.

But just like a crack can be catastrophic in its consequences, open space, and openness, can also be sometimes unpredictable and explosive, not by itself but on account of the force that has created it :

What is this force that is breaking through? We can go back to the old formulation of classical Marxism. It is the force of the forces of production breaking through the integument of the relations of production. But the forces of production are not the impersonal force of technology, as the tradition of Communist-Party-Marxism put it, but rather the creative-productive power of our doing. Behind its violence and its injustices, capitalism is a system of frustration: the systematic frustration of our social-creative powers, our power-to-do, our power-to-create, our drive towards the self-determination of our own creation. The strength of the forces of production does not express itself in the nationalisation of ever-bigger units of production, but rather in millions and millions of people all over the world saying "No, we will not subordinate our life-activity to the command of capital and money, we shall do what we consider necessary or desirable." These refusals, these dignities can be seen as cracks in the texture of capitalist domination, cracks through which the seeds of a new society are pushing. Sometimes I think of these as cracks in a wall, sometimes as cracks in a pavement, but the

Free Association article I mentioned suggests also the idea of cracks in an ice floe, cracks that can spread with incredible and unpredictable speed.
(Holloway, nd, c.June 2007, p 3, citing The Free Association, June 2007)

All these qualities spelt out above – openness, freedom, liberty, self-determination, and safety, a space where we can be more open and thereby exchange and learn more freely, and the possibility of other worlds – also mean that open space is a space, a context, where we are led to authentically come into full and uninhibited contact with our environment, our surrounds, and with each other and with ourselves, as cognate and sensate beings; and to self-actualise and realise our power-to. It is a space where the separation between our environment and our bodies dissolves; where we as human beings - as denizens of that open space - are momentarily united; and where the present comes into contact with and becomes the future. Where, as Erin Manning and Brian Massumi suggest, perception becomes action and action perception, and where this cross-genesis of action and perception in time opens into thought (Manning and Massumi, nd, c.2006).

Open space is therefore, paradoxically, simultaneously a safe space, at a fundamental level; an exciting, stimulating space; but also a possibly dangerous space, pregnant with the risk and chance of life and of change.

And so, open space is like life itself (at least, for many of us, if not for all) : Open-ended, seemingly boundless, and where we always move between perceiving it as finite and infinite.

Open space as self-organisation

We have already discussed the question of open space as self-organisation at some length, in terms of the WSF – of how it has been and continues to be an extraordinary and sustained experiment in self-organisation, and a struggle for the meaning of this. I would now like to draw from that, and from the above subsection, and briefly focus on the more generic question of how the constitution and experience of open space can be a process of self-organisation, at a very fundamental level.

In short, it is precisely because open space enables us to come into authentic contact both with ourselves (and to realise our powers of power-to) and also with our environment, and if we are willing to respect the principle that what is available to us we must also want to make available to others, that the primary precondition for genuine individual and collective self-organisation is met : An ethic and practice of transcommunality and respect (Childs 2003).

Open space as emergence

Drawing on the work of Steven Johnson, Arturo Escobar, and Jane Jacobs (Johnson 2002, Escobar 2004, Jacobs 1961), and continuing on from the assertions I make in the opening section of this essay, I also suggest that open space – and especially as manifested in large physical open spaces in which human beings physically meet and cross paths – plays the vital role of being a context where we, as members of a biological species, exchange pheromones (trace chemicals containing information about our past, present, and future) and through this, gain a more complete organic understanding of our present condition and of the future, and through this how we, as individuals, can and should act; and where, as Jane Jacobs suggested in her seminal work on cities in the 1960s, this is a crucial factor in the life and death of societies.³⁸

This process takes place aside from, and above and below, the more obvious exchange of information, experiences, and ideas that (appears to) take place in such spaces. In turn, this random and open-ended exchange then *creates*, and in a way *becomes*, open space itself. Open space – and public space more generally - is thus, to repeat, not separate from the forces that create it. More precisely, it is the most significant opportunity and

context in our daily lives where this vital human act takes place, and it is therefore an organic and integral part of human nature and activity.

More specifically in relation to the concerns of this paper, I suggest that at this juncture of planetary and human history, where the human species is becoming conscious of the crisis that life as we know it is itself facing - and that it is therefore facing as a species, major and repeated manifestations of collective gathering such as the World Social Forum are playing precisely such a role, where certain sections of humanity – here, 'activists', in the generic sense of the term; individuals who are intensely concerned and engaged with the world around them -, are coming together, as they seek ways to address the crisis, to search for other futures (Sen, January 2007) :

I want to build here on the thesis that we, as human beings, and like other living beings, communicate and exchange information at levels other than the obvious, but which is no less 'rational' than the obvious. Flowing from this, and building specifically on the work of Steven Johnson and Arturo Escobar, I suggest that the Forum is today playing roles that Jane Jacobs and others have argued that public spaces such as footpaths play in the emergence and lives of great cities: of being spaces where ordinary, 'local' / locally-rooted individuals, going about our own everyday work and lives, and who may not necessarily have complete knowledge about what is happening in the wider more 'global' world, communicate with each other and exchange information both at conscious and other levels, and through this develop a wider picture and thereby become 'global' actors (using the term 'global' in its generic sense, as distinct from and counterposed to 'local').³⁹

In this understanding, we - each one of us - not only collect information but are also the carriers of information, which we give out as we move around during our life and work. But in reality, and in a larger scheme of things, this process of 'giving out' - and also of taking in and feedback that accompanies this – is a vital part of our role in life as human beings and in the evolution of life in this world. We do this not only by formal modes of communication but also through looks, glances, eye contact, smell, sound, touch, and physical behaviour, and perhaps, like ants and other insects, also by exuding and leaving lying around pheromones or their equivalent.... Perhaps we ... even subconsciously go to what we call 'public spaces' precisely in order to look for pheromones (or their equivalent) – and that the Forum is today the spectacular success that it is because it makes this foraging possible at an unprecedented scale.

I believe that the WSF is able to play this role because it offers a scale and a continuity of exchange that has, arguably, never happened before in history.⁴⁰ This, I suggest, is indeed its real function and nature as an open space; and that it is this apparently random but internally ordered dynamic that gives rise to and sustains it as an open space. And in turn, it is precisely this empowerment through the exchange of pheromones that enables us as participants in such spaces to continuously expand them, giving them new shape and new inertia, and thus also to renew ourselves. This process of learning and self-organisation can then be understood as a process of *emergence* (Johnson 2002, Escobar 2004).

But – if true – then this proposition also radically redefines what open space is and how space becomes open. For here, rather than someone offering a space to others to converge (which is how the WSF is presented to the world, just as parks and squares have been, historically), *space becomes open* precisely as a function of the fact of large numbers of human beings converging with this open-ended, primal purpose of exchanging information and thus giving order to their lives; and behind this, because of the innate ability, and drive, of humankind to perceive and enter the open. This radical 'openness' of space is a function of its *open-endedness* and of the equally open-ended, apparent randomness of the exchange, both conscious and subconscious, and of the myriad connections that get built and conspiracies defined.⁴¹

Open space as opening space

The notion of open space itself thus also undergoes a fundamental change if one shifts from viewing it as something one simply gains 'access' to and uses to something one

creates or expands, and crucially, that is created as one acts and that gains its life from our acting. When, drawing on the work of Buckminster Fuller, open space moves from being a noun to being a verb (Fuller, Agel, and Fiore, 1970). At another level, the shift also reflects moving away from seeing open space as being provided by others, to something one gives shape to oneself through one's actions. Nothing is open by itself; it is open because we make it so, and also because of *how* we make it so – what the social relations of the space are.

Indeed, it could be said that open space does not exist by itself; it only exists, and has meaning (and openness), because we create it. As Massimo De Angelis has argued in relation to the WSF, it must "move a step forward towards becoming a self-declared space for the *constitution* (rather than simple promotion) of alternatives, and an open space through which this de-fetishising is promoted. It is important that the Social Forum (whether at the local, regional or global scale) increasingly becomes a space of experimentation for democratic inclusive processes and coordination and facilitation of existing alternatives" (De Angelis, December 2004).

Open space as cloud

A fourth fundamental characteristic of open space is its random, open-ended, and indeterminate and constantly emergent nature. The cultural logic of open space is in the nature of a cloud, and not of a (linear, determinate, programmed) clock.

It is precisely this character – true also of larger public spaces and gatherings, and for which large cities have been celebrated (Jacobs 1961; Johnson 2002)⁴² - that enables such spaces to become opportunities for the open-ended biological exchange and emergence that I have suggested above, and that makes it impossible for more programmed encounters to play this role.

Seen in this way, open space becomes a context of radical autonomy and anarchy; a context of the absence of pre-ordained or hierarchical order, and of the presence of organic order and of political self-determination.

Conversely however, and precisely because most of us are, in our more conscious actions, educated and rooted in linear, hierarchical, and programmed processes and organisations - even as we are also being conditioned by our contemporary experience of intense networking and the media to more open-ended exchange - the actual function and experience of open spaces to which we consciously go (though, according to my argument above, impelled also by deeper biological urges) is generally a mix of the programmed and the unprogrammed; of the closed and the open. More crucially, as a result of this mixed background we experience periodic reflexive reversions to the need for greater programme, and therefore periodic expressions of uncertainty about the nature of unprogrammed encounters, questions as to their effectiveness, and a desire to bring in greater programme; as I have argued above has taken place in relation to the WSF (Sen and Kumar, compilers, January 2007).

Although we do not think of it in this way, to act in a clockwork fashion and to believe in the efficiency of clock-like programmes and processes despite their obvious failings and contradictions is in reality equally a huge act of faith. It speaks for the degree of socialisation we go through, certainly in urban-industrial/post-industrial cultures. But given this intense conditioning, and despite the contemporary counter-conditioning that we are going through as a consequence of the massification of media, as argued in this paper, most of us still find it difficult to surrender ourselves to open-endedness and to believe in the open-ended outcomes of clouds and of self-organisation and emergence; that open-endedness can also be 'effective'. Part of the problem is that the criteria we use to make our assessments are always those of closed systems.

Although this is changing, and even though we are gradually becoming accustomed to this openness, most of us, and especially those associated and working through / representing traditional hierarchical organisations, will nevertheless continue to experience this uncertainty for some time to come. This is the case even though we are, in our times, witness to (and some of us, participants in) a process of the articulation of social, economic, and political cultures that are embedded in values and norms that signal and celebrate openness, and even though we are in the process of the crystallisation of a vocabulary of actions that reflect this new culture.

In addition, there is reason to think that even those of us who today remain embedded in more closed systems are perhaps, as a part of and perhaps in reaction to the worldwide cultural changes taking place, trying to be more flexible in how we change, reconstruct, and play around with different 'closed systems'; that we are trying to become alert to the struggles of subjects who are invisible from the perspective of given 'closed systems', and in ways so as to be more *open* to their struggles.⁴³

The contradictions of open space

This said, the concept and practice of open space in politics and movement is nevertheless also full of apparent and real contradictions, as well as paradoxes – which are also among its inherent characteristics. Many of these have in fact been widely articulated over the past three decades (at least since the early-mid 1970s) – but, and perhaps this has taken place in different circles, they have been debated all too little given how critical and common this concept has come to be in contemporary cultural-political practice. Although this present discussion focuses on the social-political, the occurrence of very similar contradictions in physical open spaces and in management practices will be readily evident.

Most famously, and as already mentioned, the practice of an open, free, and unstructured space (or more correctly, practice similar to this, then not yet called this) was analysed back in the early 1970s in the context of the feminist movement in the US by Jo Freeman, in terms of what she termed "the tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, nd [May 1970/1971]). (Though, as Nunes points out, her conclusion was not at all to abandon the concept of openness and structurelessness - which is how her essay has been widely interpreted, perhaps because of its title - but to search for ways to address the deep contradictions that arise in such practice (Nunes, November 2006 [2005]).)

Within this was (and remains) the particular contradiction that Freeman pointed out, of the emergence and functioning of hidden elites or vanguards, and/or of what Nunes calls "supranodes" and hyperconnectivity by a select few, thereby concentrating power in undeclared ways (Nunes, November 2006 [2005]).⁴⁴ More generally, there is the problem that those with resources will necessarily always have greater access to and influence over open space than those with less, which leads to the abuse of such spaces (but where this, as with the thrust of Freeman's essay, is widely misread as being a function of the open space itself 'failing' to be open, as if it has a life of its own).

As Nunes has pointed out, the conditions that make possible horizontality – and therefore openness and open space – in social and political movement in (most parts of) the North are widely not available in most parts of the South – and likely also in the South in the North (such as resources, high mobility, and high technology and connectivity). On the one hand, this underlines the necessity to see and to comprehend the practice (and therefore theory) of open space differently in different contexts, even as we attempt to articulate a common vocabulary (or vocabularies) of such practice; on the other, it points to the contradiction of how important a role resource disparities play, even in something like an element of social and political practice.

A further contradiction is contained in the inherent dynamics and dialectics of open space where, and as pointed out already, the special quality that open space offers, of the potential of freedom and self-determination, also tends to the possibility of the determination

of limits and closure. To repeat, openness and closedness (and finally, closure) are manifestations or expressions of the same movement, including movement for freedom and self-determination. The very act of defining a space – whether open or not – necessarily defines its limits, in this case as informed by the values and norms that are implicitly or explicitly contained in the definition; equally, the very action of opening up space further defines directions, dimensions, and limits – and relations.

Again citing Nunes (Nunes, November 2006 [2005], p 4), and carrying forward points made earlier on this essay,

The very idea of an 'open space' is contradictory – for it to be opened, it must be opened by someone, for some purpose and with some people in mind; no matter how open this first determination is, it always already creates an exclusion. This leads on to a larger problem: the fact that every determination is a closure – every saying 'this is the problem', 'this is where we stand', 'this is what we have to do now' narrows down the terms of a debate, and therefore (at least in thesis) excludes people who think differently in the same way that hallmarks, for example, do.⁴⁵

Equally, and insofar as open space as conceived by the World Social Forum is an emancipatory and empowering space – one that can be an incubator of movement to oppose neoliberalism and capital (Whitaker 2004) – it is an ironic reality that some of the characteristics of open space, such as boundlessness, are equally a feature of capital (in the form of boundless accumulation); and as already pointed out, its basic features - and those of related concepts such as horizontality - are equally exploited by big business and the military.

Similarly, when reflecting on open space, we need also to confront the reality that historically the 'unbounded' quality of openness has also been the basis of the ideology of much colonialism, such as in and through the doctrine of *terra nullus* (vacant land), on the basis of which whole continents were declared open for occupation for occupation and exploitation; and in turn of capitalism (Pasternak, August 2007).

Again, returning to De Angelis, open space can only transcend its apparent complicity with capital and colonialism if we make it open, and specifically, and as argued above, if we engage in the social constitution of open space as an alternative to capital and colony (De Angelis, December 2004).

There is also the often-subliminal contradiction that arises as a part of what Oishik Sircar, citing Foucault and his examination of a panopticon, terms the *liminality of open space* (Sircar, May 2007). In his argument, those consciously constructing open spaces often deliberately make themselves visible, as a political-cultural act; but by virtue of doing so and of the complex social dynamics involved, the inhabitants and practitioners of open spaces ironically often end up regulating themselves (and excluding others) by establishing norms of conformity to that political-cultural position. There is now a small but definite literature that shows that this pattern is very true in the case of the World Social Forum, and more generally of movements that like to consider themselves progressive (Daulatzai, December 2004).

Finally, a quite common argument, especially by those in organised movements, organisations, and political parties, and especially of the more radical Left, is that it is precisely the indeterminacy of an open-ended process such as an open space that "dissipates" the energies of those who take part in such spaces, and therefore also the (radical) political potentials of such collective gatherings – thereby rendering them not just ineffective but even contradictory to change, let alone radical change (Revolutionary Writers' Association, December 2002; James 2004). In the case of the World Social Forum, and as mentioned before, while some have left this at the level of critique and opposition others have argued that what is necessary is a much more defined political programme.

I would argue however, along with Chesters and others, and as already presented above, that it is precisely this 'dissipation' into a cloud- or swarm-like energy and power that is today becoming more generalised in societies as a whole, and that it is the self-organisation inherent in such complex systems that is the strength of new movement and of new politics (Chesters 2008). And which is why this politics – that moving like this – is such a challenge to conventional politics and movement, and why it is being attacked as it is.

V

Towards a definition ? Outlines of some organising principles of open space

In this final section before concluding, I offer - drawing on the discussion so far - certain formulations as suggestions towards developing a vocabulary and grammar for the practice of open space. I will not even begin to attempt a singular definition of the concept or practice, or put forward a suggestion of a common meaning. In the belief that it is more useful for each one of us to define our own frameworks for critical thought and action rather than depending on singular, universal prescriptions, and moreover that while definitions have their value, for complex and syncretic concepts such as this frameworks that allow for multiple interpretations are more powerful - and appropriate.

As Nunes points out, while all of the arguments cited and developed in this essay may be true and relevant, the problem is the tendency to make these positions – for or against the concept - absolute and to fetishise the qualities of open space and of related practices such as horizontalism. It becomes a question of *all or nothing* (and all too often, of them and us), and when the ideal is not achieved, it tends to lead to paralysis and alienation (Nunes, November 2006 [2005], p 5). To the opposite, we must recognise that open space is inherently ambiguous, as are networks :

... on the one hand, they are what we perceive as the conditions of possibility of horizontality, the means by which it can be achieved; on the other, they are only partial actualisations of the idea they make possible. (Nunes, November 2006 [2005])

The first principle would thus seem to be accepting, and respecting, both partial achievement and also the need for sustained struggle in order to attempt complete achievement.

The fundamental problem here is of conceiving of open space as an object and as a fixed state of being. To the contrary, open space needs to be understood both as a *tendency* (as in *openness*, *open-endedness*) and also as an *activity* (such as dialogue), and not as a fixed state. This seems to have the makings of a second primary principle of open space.

Beyond this, we must accept that *open space is not inherently open, neutral, or equal*, let alone progressive; it can only be so if we struggle for it to be so.

The idea that an open space – in the sense of a space declared open by someone – is inherently or necessarily open, or is permanently open, is, even if alluring, illusory. Indeed, an uncritical and closed approach to open space is liable to lead to disappointment and disillusionment. Equally, we tend to perceive (and are often led to perceive) open space as being neutral (in the sense of a 'level playing field'), and equal. It is not. It is subject to all the same forces as exist in life in the society within which it is created or practiced, of segmentation, marginalisation, and exclusion, and of resource concentration, power play, and privilege. Again, it can only be open and equal if we constitute it to be open and struggle for equality within it and in relation to it, and take affirmative actions in support.

As a consequence of the above, another basic characteristic of open space – of space that is made open and is to be kept open – is *reflexivity* on the part of participants. Precisely because of the inherent presence of the intense contradictions and paradoxes that we have

discussed, and because of the organically dialectic nature of the phenomenon, open space can only be open when we actually practice openness in a critical and reflexive manner and when it is a conscious, sustained critical practice. Open space must be conceived, perceived, and practiced as struggle; as critical action.

In turn, opening space – the creation, existence, nurturing, and protection of open space – needs to be seen as an intensely *human* act, of recovering and/or uncovering our freedoms, our power-to, and our humanity. It is, as above, and as life itself is, full of contradictions and paradoxes, and – as above – we can only begin to achieve its potential if we struggle for it; but the struggle for openness is by definition life-creating; and to return to Agamben, world-forming. It is a struggle for life itself.

But it is not the absoluteness or completeness of an open space alone that is important; it is also its very existence and the energy that it radiates, and the influence it has on that which is around it – such as stimulating replications, reactions, or refractions – that are as important as what takes place inside. As much as anything else, open space is a symbol of what is possible, and especially in contexts of relative or absolute closure or of closing spaces, such as the times in which we today live.

A further principle is that even while recognising the above, we need always to be aware that openness and closure are two dimensions of the same movement; twin, related, and inseparable aspects. To act is to open and also to close, and to define both openness and closure, simultaneously.

Equally, we need also to perceive that open space, and openness, has a skin, and is alive, and that it exists - like all live things – in dialectical tension with its environment; and we need to be consciously aware of and work with this reality. The skin is alive and permeable; but more, the skin is the point at which the inside not only meets and contaminates that which is 'outside' but also *becomes* the outside, and vice versa.⁴⁶ Open space is fundamentally emergent and autopoietic (Varela, Maturana, and Uribe, 1974; Capra, 1997).

Moving on, open space perhaps 'works best' when there is a multiplicity of spaces and possibilities available within or in relation to the space, allowing participants maximum freedom of opportunity; and when it is large enough, and complex enough, to allow participants to be anonymous and therefore autonomous and free. Conversely, the smaller and more particular or singular the space, the less likely it is to be open and the more it becomes necessary to consciously aim to overcome this and to act in terms of all the other organising principles of open space.

The WSF is again a good example : Whereas the larger world meetings have tended to be the most open (and uncontrollable), particular 'national' and local Fora have usually been somewhat more mono-ideological and monocultural, being more controlled and 'run' by particular ideological groupings; where anonymity and autonomy tend to become reduced.

Open space, and openness – as tendencies – also need to be perceived not as ends but, like networks, as the *means* by which horizontal politics can be practiced and relations established (Nunes, November 2006 [2005]). I would argue that it is only in open space that we can begin to achieve what John Brown Childs has urged - moving from a politics of conversion to an ethics of respect (Childs, 2003). Indeed, creating an open space is one of the first steps in such a shift and in the practice of this ethic.

Further, although to speak of open space as structure and organisation might seem contradictory - because these terms are associated with hierarchy – this is precisely what open space does : It challenges and subverts the idea that structure and organisation are necessarily vertical or programmed. It offers an alternative; a horizontal structure, a web. It

contaminates and subverts conventional structure – and conventional conceptualisation. It gives us a new, more organic vocabulary for structure and form.

The concept and practice of open space challenges conventional organisational thinking in the civil world, at local, national, regional, and global levels, and conventional ideas and practices of organisation and association. This is not to assert that it is superior; only that it challenges other practices. It frees – and challenges - us to think and act freely. By virtue of its nature, it is, moreover, not just an organisational form. As I have earlier written in terms of the WSF, it

.... places a demand on us that we keep the space free of control and resist temptations to try to control it. This poses a challenge not only to mainstream, orthodox, and conservative thinking and practice but also – and perhaps even more so - to all those organisations and initiatives that consider themselves to be 'progressive' or claim to be working in terms of 'alternatives' but that are doing so through forms and relations that remain conventionally bounded and territorial. It therefore represents a radical challenge to most existing organisations and movements at a very basic level. (Sen, January 2007)

The fundamental participant in open space would seem to be, ultimately, the individual; as an individual and not in terms of communal identity or in representation. Open space, indeed, when open, tends to subvert communal and organisational identity – though equally, communal and organisational identity tends to subvert open space.

On the other hand, if open space only becomes open space if we make it so, and if progressively define principles and practices for helping to keep it open, this indicates and requires a community that becomes defined and constituted through the very act of opening space and of defining the relation of open space. Both individual and community are therefore fundamental to open space, and the emancipatory potential of open space moves from the individual to also embracing the collective.

We need also to recognise that as a consequence of the material conditions and general culture within which we today live, at least in many parts of the world, we are in the midst of a major process of reculturalisation. We are moving from a belief in linear, programmed, clockwork movement and politics (and life) to a far more open-ended culture, with a far higher degree of reliance on autonomy, self-organisation, and responsibility. We need therefore to reflect on our programmed tendencies to believe in linear programmes and organisations, and (for instance) our tendency to see only ordered spaces as beautiful; and to consider a willingness to open ourselves to critically embrace the outcomes of openness and of open-endedness - of clouds; of the beauty of clouds of society, of history, and of life itself.

Finally, while there may be no one definition of open space being dependent as it is on particular contexts, it seems possible that it can achieve a common *meaning* across different cultures the more that different communities, from different contexts, enter and share the same spaces. Perhaps this too is the magic of the World Social Forum, and what it is doing and offering to the world today.

VI

Closings

In this essay, I have attempted not to analyse and discuss the WSF as such but to use it spell out and discuss certain ideas and practices that I believe that it has, along with countless other contemporary practices, helped to bring to the surface of our existence and actions.

In my understanding, one of its most significant contributions has been its use of a seemingly-simple-but-in-reality-complex idea such as open space to open up an astonishingly large horizon for action. More specifically, I believe that it has done this through its

codification and articulation of this practice in the form of its by and large non-prescriptive Charter of Principles; its consistency in maintaining this stance through its vocabulary of actions over the years, even as it has kept on developing new practices; and its willingness to internally discuss what it does, to draw lessons from its practice, and to experiment with new ideas.

As I see it, and even if the actual practice of the WSF also has plenty of inversions and contradictions, all this – taken as a whole - constitutes a most significant contribution to a vocabulary of more autonomist movement and a more open politics; and as such, and even if the WSF has been and continues to be full of inversions and contradictions, its attempted practice of open space has contributed significantly to opening spaces for such action – and, in particular, for more such autonomist action.

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Notes

¹ This article is based on a 2007 discussion paper, 'Opening open space : Notes on the grammar and vocabulary of the concept of open space' (available @ http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=429). Even though finalised for publication here, it – following its subject - also represents continuing work in progress, and I welcome comments, suggestions, and rejoinders (@ jai.sen@cacim.net).

There are many I need to thank for bringing me to this footnote. I first wish to thank Paul Chatterton for inviting me to prepare an essay for this issue of *Antipode*, and for his immense patience with me in its preparation. While accepting responsibility for this essay as it stands, I warmly thank Ann Stafford, Dorothea Haerlin, Madhuresh Kumar, Nishant, and Sundara Babu for comments on the first

draft of my earlier essay, and John Brown Childs and Peter Waterman for their comments on (and contributions to) the second; and in particular, the three anonymous reviews commissioned by this journal for their comments and criticisms on the first draft of this essay that have immeasurably enriched my understanding. I also thank Sha Xin Wei for introducing me to Giorgio Agamben's *The Open : Man and Animal*, which has opened openness to me in entirely new ways and taken me into entirely new spaces; and the speakers and participants at the two workshops on open space that I ran at the anti-g8 demonstrations in Rostock, Germany, in June 2007, for the rich exchange we had there – and where it was the discussions at one of these that led to Paul to invite me to contribute an essay. Thanks, too, to Dorothea Haerlin for her enthusiasm inviting me to do those workshops, and for her critical encouragement; and to John Holloway for his critical engagement with the thoughts I tried exploring there.

In turn, this essay also draws on my rich earlier experience within the EIOS (Explorations in/of Open Space) Collective (<http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=EIOSCollective>) and on exchanges with several of the Collective's members, especially Anila Daulatzai, Chloé Keraghel, Jeff Juris, Michal Osterweil, and Vanessa Andreotti; on discussions with course participants in a course I ran at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, in the Fall semester of 2006, on Open Space and Dissent in Movement (SOCI 5805; see www.critical-courses.cacim.net for details), and in particular – in this area – Chris Hurl and Emilie Hayes; and I thank Emilie Hayes, Judy Meltzer, and Mat Nelson for the rigours and pleasures of revisiting and critically reflecting on the work we had done in the courses, in the form of the two joint essays we respectively co-authored. (See <http://critical-courses.cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CCReflections>.) I also very specially thank Rodrigo Nunes and Graeme Chesters for the many insights I have gained from their respective essays, as cited in this paper.

Finally, I am also grateful for the opportunities I have had to move in and explore the open, and through this to meet all these very special people. Among others, I wish to thank the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund for the Fellowship it awarded me during 2004-6, and my colleagues and community at CACIM for their constant fellowship as we have explored many of these ideas together over the years.

² For 'official' details of the World Social Forum process, see <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>, and for its own (very interesting) framework of how it sees the practice of an open space, see : World Social Forum Organising Committee and World Social Forum International Council, June 2001.

³ The fact that Chico Whitaker is an architect by training perhaps explains his particular crossover use of this metaphor. But more on this, below.

⁴ Just as a footnote to get history right, according to Kolya Abramsky the slogan *Another World Is Possible !* was in fact already visible at a meeting organised in Paris by ATTAC France and others in 1999; and the specific idea of a *World Social Forum* had been put forward by political economist Susan George – then and still a prominent figure in ATTAC – in 1997, and then concretised in 1999. "The 1997 meeting was an international seminar entitled 'Surviving in a Globalized World' in Aachen, Germany, where Susan George, drawing on the importance of Gramsci, gave a talk about the World Economic Forum and mentioned that it would be good to hold a parallel event called a 'World Social Forum' The 1999 meeting, entitled 'The dictatorship of Financial Markets - Another World is Possible', took place in Paris during June 24-26 1999, organised by ATTAC in partnership with CADTM/COCAD (Committee for the Cancellation of Third World Debt), DAWN (Development of Alternatives for Women in a New Era), the WFA - World Forum of Alternatives, and CC AMI/MAI (Coordination of Committees against MAI's Clones)." Abramsky, August 2008, endnotes.

(Susan George then later published a book specifically titled *Another world is possible, IF...* (London : Verso, 2004).)

But Chesters argues that the WSF can be traced back even earlier : "The intellectual origins of the WSF are traceable to 1996, when intellectuals and activists associated with the Tricontinental Centre (Belgium) proposed a counter-summit to the World Economic Forum, the 'informal' gathering of political and business leaders hosted yearly in Davos, Switzerland." Chesters 2008, p 3.

⁵ For 'official' details of the proliferation of the WSF process, see <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>; and for an unofficial record and archive, see www.openspaceforum.net. And for ongoing activities and discussion, subscribe to WSFDiscuss - simply send an empty email to worldsocialforum-discuss-subscribe@openspaceforum.net.

⁶ For instance : ILC – International Liaison Committee for a Workers' International, January 2002; RUPE (Research Unit for Political Economy), September 2003; and : James, 2004.

⁷ I take as my point of departure the position we at CACIM took on open space for a workshop that we organised at the WSF at Nairobi, Kenya, on January 23 2007, 'In Defence of Open Space'. For details of our position, see <http://cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CACIMWSF2007Events>.

⁸ I came to be invited to write this essay by Paul Chatterton based on his experience of one of the workshops at Rostock.

⁹ In 2008, and in place of its traditional global meeting of 'a thousand events' in one place, the WSF made a call for global mobilisation and a global day of action, with 'a thousand events' taking place all over the world. For details, see : CACIM, January 2008, and also the WSF's official site for the GDA, <http://dev.wsf2008.net>; for an initial discussion of the political meaning of the GDA, see Sen (on behalf of CACIM), November 2007c and the introduction to CACIM, January 2008; and for a reflection by one of its authors on the GDA as it took place, see Whitaker, January 2008.

¹⁰ For a history of the Zapatista uprising, see Holloway and Pela'ez, eds, 1998. Even if those who feel that the WSF and its Charter have been, like many others in the West, inspired by the Chiapas uprising in 1994 and by its subsequent politics of horizontality, it is a fact that the Zapatistas are proscribed from taking part in the WSF on account of one clause in its Charter of Principles, which excludes armed organisations (Clause 9 : "...Neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the Forum."). For the Charter, see World Social Forum Organising Committee and World Social Forum International Council, June 2001; and for a discussion of the evolution of the Charter and comments on the impact of this clause, see Sen, 2004d.

¹¹ The WSF's International Council decided, after the fiasco that took place at the WSF in Nairobi in 2007, to draw up a set of 'organising principles' that would complement its 'Charter of Principles', and appointed a commission / working group to draft them. As I understood the debate in the IC and the mandate given to the commission, as an observer, these principles should have covered this ground, but as it turned out it functioned very privately and ended up only listing out rules for organising events. According to its prime author, Vinod Raina of Jubilee South Asia and the All India People's Science Network, this document was approved by the WSF's IC in September 2008 and in February 2009 was posted at <http://wsfprocess.net/mem>. At the time of writing, I have not been able to find it there, so I give his address here in case readers wish to know where it can be found : vinodraina@gmail.com.

¹² I wish to acknowledge here my deep debt to the work of thinkers such as Steven Johnson and Arturo Escobar, who have opened this door for me through their respective work. Escobar speculates on how this dynamic is today transforming life and politics. As above, the motto of the World Social Forum is 'Another World is Possible!', but Escobar argues that other worlds *are in fact already here* – and suggests powerfully that movements, and the Left in particular, need urgently to take into account what is happening around us, in their thinking and strategising.

On the other hand, Johnson's detailed reference to and reliance on Jacobs' work has in fact made me very aware of my own debt to her, and so has closed important circles for me. Jane Jacobs was one of the seminal influences on me in terms of my understanding of cities when I studied to be an architect and planner back in the 60s. With Johnson's help, I now see her work in an entirely new light.

¹³ This definition is taken from discussions within the EIOS (Explorations in/of Open Space) Collective, during 2005-6, as above; see <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=EIOSCollective>. In the EIOS process, we have been looking at the question of whether and how effectively the notion of open space addresses the question of more democratic ways of conducting and understanding politics and organisation within movements, and to what extent it can also operate within more institutional political processes. During 2007-8, we continued to do this through the CEOS (Critical Engagement with Open Space) process - <http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=CEOSProcessIntroLetter>.

¹⁴ And in general, his chapter on 'The Open', pp 57-62. Agamben 2004.

¹⁵ As mentioned in the main text, I myself have tried experimenting with these ideas in the context of two courses I taught in Canada in 2006. For details, see www.critical-courses.cacim.net; and for critical reflection on the practice and experience of the courses, see Hayes, Nelson, and Sen, December 2007, and Meltzer and Sen, November 2007.

¹⁶ With the idea of Open Space Technology said to have been developed in the late eighties by Harrison Owen of Maryland, USA, the OST sites say – simply, and unrevealingly - that "this meeting methodology is now used around the world as an effective process for facilitating change in both organizational and community settings". Open Space World, nd.

¹⁷ For an elaborate early discussion of the material background to this phenomenon, and at an earlier stage (just ten years ago !, but where these ten years have been crucial in this field), see Keck and Sikkink, 1998.

¹⁸ Emphasis supplied.

¹⁹ Equally though, Breugel's work in sixteenth century Europe suggests he was already exploring simultaneity, but the cubists imploded, collapsed, space and time in a completely new way. I suspect however that these 'new' conceptualisations of space and time had already existed in, say, Indian and Tibetan art forms from much earlier on but have not had the kind of world impact the cubism did simply because the latter travelled with colonialism.

²⁰ <http://www.snopes.com/quotes/onesmall.asp>.

²¹ I am indebted to Peter for pointing this out to me, and in general for the content of this section.

²² In terms of cyberspace, see Sengupta, forthcoming (2009); and : Raju, forthcoming (2009). It is interesting, and not unimportant, that those in the FOSS movement have claimed, and named, the internet as a 'commons'; but where closer examination suggests that although there may be some commonalities between the ecological commons and the information and knowledge commons, there also seem to be some fundamental differences. See : CACIM, February 2008.

²³ From : Vajpeyi, forthcoming (2009).

²⁴ Wangui Mbatia, of KENGO (the Kenya Network of Grassroots Organisations), speaking at Workshop organised by the author on 'Open Space – New Ways in Theory and Practice' at the Alternative Summit in Rostock, Germany, on June 4+6 2007, as part of a wider programme 'Speak With Them : A project within the G8 Resistance' organised by Dorothea Haerlin and Oliver Pye (ATTAC Berlin) and John Holloway (Mexico).

²⁵ It would be very welcome, in the spirit of open space being explored in this paper, if those who hold the trademark to so-called 'Open Space Technology' were to now drop this claim and declare their ideas open !

²⁶ Referring to Childs 2003.

²⁷ This definition drew on the Wikipedia definitions of open space and related terms (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_space), among other sources.

²⁸ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commons> and <http://www.thecommoner.org>.

²⁹ See also my critique of Whitaker's usage and argument, in Sen, 2004b, where I argue that historically, squares have not generally taken shape by themselves or as the result of popular actions, but rather through patronage, private property, and centralised control; and so are just the opposite of what 'open space' is projected to be ! In other words, this is an illusion, and a dangerous one.

³⁰ I use the terms 'enclosed' and 'enclosure' here as used referring to a process that took place in Britain, where the "...old English commons were destroyed through a long process of 'enclosure', whereby the gentry took over land that had long been commons, enclosed it by hedge of fence, and turned it over to private commercial use". Kneen and GRAIN, October 2006, p 1.

³¹ My thanks to Oren Yiftachel for the term and concept of a 'dark side of planning'.

³² The irony is that in an office, even in those – and perhaps especially in those – with an 'open plan', is that the most open part of such spaces are often the coffee areas and the toilets, which is where genuine chance encounters take place ! My thanks to Raj Mathur of ILUGD (Indian Linux Users Group – Delhi) for pointing this out in the course of a series of seminars / encounters we jointly organised in Delhi during 2008, on possible convergences of the commons (see <http://wiki.kandalaya.org/cgi-bin/twiki/view/CommonsConvergence/WebHome>).

³³ At the second of the two workshops on open space that I ran at the anti-g8 demonstrations in Rostock, Germany, in June 2007, as in note 1 above.

³⁴ For a contemporary discussion, see <http://www.commoner.org.uk/>; also Kneen and GRAIN, October 2006.

³⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_society; and for what is often referred to as the classic on this subject, Karl Popper, 1945 - The Open Society and Its Enemies.

³⁶ See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_space.

³⁷ Even if the originators of the WSF were not necessarily conscious of this, I believe that it is not a coincidence that the World Social Forum, which declared itself to be an open space, also adopted as its slogan 'Another World Is Possible !'. Subliminally, this phrase suggests not only that another world / other worlds are possible – other than the troubled and violent one we are in now - but that entering the (open space of the) WSF is a step to these other worlds.

³⁸ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pheromone>. Although studies of pheromonic exchange have so far been largely limited to the behaviour of insects, they are gradually showing that this is true also of human beings. For a discussion of the idea of this exchange in relation to the life of cities, see Johnson, 2002; also Sen, January 2007.

³⁹ I wish to acknowledge here my debt deep to the work of thinkers such as Steven Johnson and Arturo Escobar, who have opened this door for me through their respective work. Escobar speculates on how this dynamic is today transforming life and politics. The motto of the World Social Forum is that 'Another World is Possible!', but Escobar argues that other worlds are in fact already here – and suggests powerfully that movements, and the Left in particular, need urgently to take into account what is happening around us, in their thinking.

Johnson's detailed reference to and reliance on Jacobs' work has in fact made me very aware of my own debt to her, and has closed important circles for me. Jane Jacobs was one of the seminal influences on me in terms of my understanding of cities when I studied to be an architect and planner back in the 60s.

⁴⁰ There are of course other and far more major confluences of humanity that also take place on earth, such as the annual *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca or the Kumbh Mela that takes place on the banks of the Ganges river in India, or the gathering at Lourdes in France; and it would be interesting to also try to understand these spaces and these gatherings in these terms. There are some fundamental differences however, insofar as all of these spaces are by and large limited to followers of particular faiths (and are therefore arguably less than open); and that they are limited to one place and time, and do not offer as widespread a possibility of confluence as the WSF does today; nor of planetary influence. But nevertheless, it is surely the case that these congregations, these *convergences* - which all take place in spaces that are of special meaning – are far more than simply the number of individuals gathered there.

For a discussion of the WSF and certain aspects of the politics of scale, see : Conway, February 2005.

⁴¹ Using 'conspiracy' in the sense of breathing and hoping together, as Brian Murphy has done : Murphy, 1999.

⁴² In particular, see Steven Johnson's discussion of Jacob's work and of cities in terms of self-organisation and emergence (Johnson 2002).

⁴³ I am not crediting the almost-anonymous reviews of the earlier draft of this essay for all their many inputs to this version, but I would like to acknowledge Reviewer 2 for his input to this paragraph.

⁴⁴ For the manifestation of this power within the WSF, see, for example, Albert, 2004.

⁴⁵ See also, in terms of the World Social Forum becoming a logo, Sen, 2004b, as above.

⁴⁶ Extrapolating from Manning and Massumi, nd, c.2006, as above.