



## The Ethics of Engagement Revisited: Remembering the ESF 2004

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This is totally unacceptable ... there is no room for this in our movement...<sup>1</sup>

The organisation of the third European Social Forum (ESF) in London was fraught with clashes between the different actors within the UK movements. My contribution here is a short excursion into my memories of the British preparatory process (also see piece by Laura Sullivan, this issue). I don't intend to provide a political analysis, but rather to give a few glimpses of a personal story of a participant in the process. What struck me most about the organising process was the huge discrepancy between the political and ethical visions held out as alternatives by the activists involved in organising the ESF, and their actual behaviour towards one another in the process. Here, I explore some of the intense difficulties I experienced in trying to participate and describe some instances where my own political and ethical ideas clashed with those of the actors dominating the process. I conclude with a brief reflection on my views about political organising, ethics and social transformation.

In December 2003, the UK networks and organisations wanting to be involved in the ESF had their first meeting at the London Mayor's headquarters, City Hall, to discuss the possibility of holding the Forum in the UK. On this occasion I entered the room early and watched it fill with people. Noticeable was a core of 'busy-bodies' rushing around, arranging the meeting. The first two rows of chairs were filled by people (mainly men) huddled in groups in pre-meeting discussions. I asked my friend to tell me who they were: so and so from the SWP (Socialist Worker's Party), so and so from x trade union, so and so from the GLA (Greater London Authority). All were sat near the front, ready to rush to the infamous microphone and reel off their political speeches. It was an exciting atmosphere: I felt I was 'at the heart' of the UK anti/alternative globalisation movement. As the meeting began, about forty people lined up to speak and we spent two hours listening to their visions for the ESF. Nothing really happened, except that I began to understand that there were two camps in the room,<sup>2</sup> both wanting

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1 These two sentences were articulated like a mantra by various 'vertical' players on many different occasions when dealing with people who disagreed with them. It was a way of claiming ownership over 'the movement', and with that the knowledge about what 'the movement' did or did not require.

2 With a history of involvement or conflict with each other.

the ESF to be organised their way. On the one hand, were those who were to become dubbed the ‘verticals’: representatives of trade unions such as the RMT (Rail and Maritime Transport Union, [www.rmt.org.uk](http://www.rmt.org.uk)), TGWU (Transport and General Workers Union, [www.tgwu.org.uk](http://www.tgwu.org.uk)) and NATFHE (National Association For Teachers in Higher Education, [www.natfhe.org.uk](http://www.natfhe.org.uk)), some NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) (e.g. The Tobin Tax Network [www.tobintax.org.uk](http://www.tobintax.org.uk) and CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, [www.cnduk.org](http://www.cnduk.org)), and the GLA. Also in this ‘camp’ were individuals who were unknown to most other activists I talked to, but who appeared to belong to Socialist Action ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist\\_Action\\_%28UK%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialist_Action_%28UK%29))<sup>3</sup> – a Trotskyist organisation connected to and, in the ESF 2004 process, seemingly acting on behalf of, the Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. These individuals avoided declaring their involvement with this organisation, but acted as a bloc under the guise of numerous peace, anti-war, anti-racism, and ‘women’s issues’ organisations, as well as for GLA-backed campaign groups for ‘a multicultural London’. Further, there were representatives of the Stop the War Coalition, Globalise Resistance (GR) and Project K. Representatives of these three groups, as well as some of the trade unions involved,<sup>4</sup> were all also members of the SWP political party, and acted mostly as a bloc in line with their party’s objectives.

On the other hand, there were the as yet unnamed ‘horizontals’ – a loose group of independent activists (associated, for example, with the independent Left publication Red Pepper ([www.redpepper.org.uk](http://www.redpepper.org.uk)), Indymedia ([www.indymedia.org.uk](http://www.indymedia.org.uk)), the organisation Just Peace ([www.4justpeace.com](http://www.4justpeace.com)), London Social Forum participants ([www.londonsocialforum.org.uk](http://www.londonsocialforum.org.uk)) environmental activists, libertarian-anarchists and autonomist Marxists, human rights campaigners, some NGOs such as Friends of the Earth ([www.foe.co.uk](http://www.foe.co.uk)), and ATTAC UK ([www.attac.org.uk](http://www.attac.org.uk)), the organisation I was representing.<sup>5</sup> It was a little tricky to pinpoint precisely who was a ‘horizontal’ and who

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3 These individuals never declared their affiliation to Socialist Action, and knowledge of their involvement either came through my own research, or through conversations with other activists or local politicians who could share information. When they were associated with the organisation at meetings, none of the individuals ever denied their affiliation, although they never actually confirmed it either. To this day, I am intrigued as to why they were so secretive about it.

4 E.g. UNISON, the union for public service workers, as well as workers employed in the private and voluntary sectors, [www.unison.org.uk](http://www.unison.org.uk), AMICUS, the manufacturing, skilled and technical workers union, [www.amicustheunion.org](http://www.amicustheunion.org), and CWU, the Communication Workers Union, [www.cwu.org](http://www.cwu.org).

5 ATTAC stands for Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions in the Aid of Citizens and has become a global network of independent local and national, groups, now comprising of 84,000 members in total ([www.attac.org](http://www.attac.org)). ATTAC is involved in the antiglobalisation (or altermondialiste) struggle, campaigning in particular on issues concerned with the democratisation of global financial and political regimes (e.g. Tobin Tax, Water privatisation and GATS). ATTAC has been a leading actor in the development of the WSF and other Social Forums and was originally set up in France in 1998 by the editors of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignacio Ramonet and Bernard Cassen. The idea was to create a broad-based campaign network including different types of organisations (trade unions, NGOs) to lobby the government for the introduction of the Tobin Tax, a currency transaction tax intended to curb short-term currency transactions that are used for pure profit making and that have contributed to causing severe currency crises in developing economies. The idea behind ATTAC is that both local and national groups are as autonomous as they wish to be, meaning that ATTAC could and has managed to bring many different activists together under the one banner. For this reason, it also has quite different organisational structures in different places, and the extent to which ATTAC groups actively collaborate with each other transnationally varies. In the UK, ATTAC has four active

was not. Certainly there was a core group of self-declared ‘horizontalists’ subscribing explicitly to the type of politics associated with the term (see de Angelis, Juris, Laura Sullivan and Tormey, this issue), but included in this group were people who might prefer the broader title of ‘democratic opposition’<sup>6</sup> to the ‘verticals’, made up of people who shared the same goals within the process, and who increasingly worked together to achieve them. This ‘democratic opposition’ included people from groups as diverse as the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB, [www.cpgb.org.uk](http://www.cpgb.org.uk)), the World Development Movement (WDM, [www.wdm.org.uk](http://www.wdm.org.uk)) and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, [www.wilpf.org](http://www.wilpf.org)). These two adverse groups – the ‘verticals’ and ‘horizontalists’ – left not many ‘diagonals’ in between as time went by and the process of organising became ever more polarised.

The most arduous dispute amounted to a battle for control over the organisation of the event, whereby the ‘vertical’ coalition acted in line with the maxim that the ends (controlling the Forum as event) justified the means of organising. But entangled in this battle for power over the event, was not only a battle over the ESF organising process, but also a battle over the most pertinent question of the antiglobalisation movement, namely *how* to ‘change the world’. This entanglement makes sense if one recognises that the way the event itself is organised – how decision-making processes are conducted and what thematic content is given to the Forum – is intricately bound up with its politics. These issues are two sides of the same coin. In this process, the outcome of the battle was pretty much determined at the outset, given that some (the ‘verticals’) had more access to resources and political clout than others (the ‘horizontalists’). Nevertheless, the struggle continued to play itself out in the organisation of the ESF.

In terms of ideas, the ‘horizontalists’ were committed to developing an organisational process that lived up to the ideals of inclusiveness (regardless of whether an individual was from a large organisation or a small network), consensus decision-making in a non-hierarchical way, and an ethics that would reflect in the here and now the kind of world that was to be brought about through the anti-globalisation struggle. Some of the ‘verticals’ were motivated by their ideas for social and political change along Trotskyist-Leninist lines, where the ‘road to revolution’ is paved by those that know best, i.e. the Central Committee of the party. Others had much more immediate interests in either simply ‘getting the job done’ their way, or in promoting the Mayor of London as a progressive force for multiculturalism and ‘good governance’ in the UK’s capital. The strategic alliance between these so-called ‘verticals’ lay in the desire to have the event organised by a core group of ‘important’ Londoners, in a particular way, i.e. one

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local groups, ATTAC Jersey, ATTAC Oxford, ATTAC Cambridge and ATTAC London. ATTAC London became a convergence group for individuals with no local group in their town and recently became renamed ATTAC UK. The organisational principles of ATTAC UK are strongly influenced by the work developed by Toni Prug and Benjamin Geer (a founding member) on ‘Open Organizations’ ([www.open-organizations.org](http://www.open-organizations.org)), whereby participatory democracy, openness and transparency and a commitment to avoiding exclusionary hierarchical relations of power and knowledge are key.

6 This is the term used by CPGB member Tina Becker in her articles on the 2004 ESF preparatory process as published in the CPGB newspaper, ‘*Weekly Worker*’ (see, for example, *Weekly Worker* 533 Thursday June 17 2004, <http://www.cpgb.org.uk/worker/533/esfprov.html>)

that was professionalized and centralised, and produced a 'manageable', politically uncontroversial event. Thus, for example, the development and maintenance of the website for the ESF was subcontracted to GreenNet, with the whole tender process for this conducted and decided upon by the GLA directly,<sup>7</sup> and much of the management of the actual event, including security and catering, was subcontracted to profit driven companies. Forum themes also were somewhat predetermined to reflect the Mayor's and the GLA's interests, highlighting, for example, the Iraq war/occupation, fascism and racism, and many GLA/Socialist Action/trade union 'verticals' (not the SWP on this occasion) even tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent an explicitly anti-neo-liberal thematic axis.

In terms of behaviour and decision-making, the Charter of Principles of the WSF<sup>8</sup> is the only external guiding document for the conduct of the process. However, these abstract codes of conduct beg the same question as any international agreements between sovereign states that rely on good will. Namely, in the absence of any mechanism for enforcement or accountability, and given unequal political and economic power relations, how can abuse of such agreements be prevented? In the UK process, much energy and time was spent interpreting the Charter of Principles, where one faction would accuse another of not adhering to its principles, almost like in a court case, where 'the law' is called upon to mitigate a conflict as if this carries some sort of external, transcendental and objective reality, when instead 'the law' is open to different interpretations, not least in relation to the identities and experiences of whoever is doing the interpreting. In other words, a struggle for meaning occurred, which at times gave the impression of being a genuine search for what the Principles might mean, whilst at others seemed a more opportunistic use of the Charter for certain ends.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, there were those who argued that the Charter itself was problematic, requiring revision. For example, representatives of the political party Worker's Power and representatives of the political tendency League for the 5<sup>th</sup> International, who were in actual fact the same individuals, argued that the process by which the Charter of Principles had been drawn up was profoundly undemocratic and therefore should be reformed where necessary to include the wishes of the actors involved. In particular, they felt that the policy on excluding political parties should be reconsidered, because this exclusion lead to a 'dishonest' participation of parties through other groups and/or trade unions (see Footnote 9). In the midst all of this, the office of the Mayor of London, whose policies for London are predominantly neo-liberal (i.e. hardly in the explicitly anti neo-liberal spirit of the WSF Charter of Principles), was called upon to fund the event, thereby creating a further imbalance through the political and economic power that it could wield as a local authority with greater command over resources.

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7 The fact that there should even be a tender process was decided by the GLA too, when there would have been sufficient expertise amongst the participants to the organising process for the website to be managed internally.

8 See WSF Charter of Principles at [www.forumsocialmundial.org.br](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br)

9 For example, the formal exclusion of political parties, supported by members of the political party SWP, actually enabled the SWP to have a larger presence in the process, because they could formally act through many other civil society organisations and trade unions, whilst informally effectively acting together along party lines, and thereby de facto increasing party influence.

Having participated only in the ESF 2003 as event, I came to the UK ESF 2004 preparatory process as someone who, somewhat naïvely, thought of the ESF as an ‘open space’, a friendly space in which anyone was welcome and everyone would be heard. What I found instead was a vicious power struggle and the most exclusionary, intimidating and emotionally draining process I have ever been part of (also see Laura Sullivan this issue for interpretations of the emotional implications of the ESF 2004 organising process). Sometimes it was like a bad dream, where your perception of reality is turned on its head and you find yourself aghast that the world around you is run on a different logic to the one you thought was in place. At the second European Assembly in March 2004, for example, ‘horizontal’ activists drew up some proposals for the UK process that would include their wishes, arguing that a decision on them needed to be made on a European level. They argued that they needed the support of European delegates due to the fact they were being ignored and excluded in the UK process. When actors of the ‘vertical coalition’ argued that it was not true that anyone was being excluded, Italian delegates from the trade union COBAS (Confederazione dei Comitati di Base, [www.cobas.it](http://www.cobas.it)) in particular retorted that it had to be sufficient for a person to state that they felt excluded for it to be acknowledged and acted upon. This reasoning was alien to the UK ‘verticals’ who believed that they held the necessary objective insight to decide who was excluded and who was not, regardless of what those who felt themselves to be excluded thought.

Working with other ‘horizontals’ in the organising process, I found myself at best ignored and at worst being branded ‘crazy’. If I were to side with certain groups or individuals involved, push for more openness, or make proposals for the planning of the event that were not liked by ‘the ‘verticals’’, I was accused of wanting to ‘wreck the ESF’. For example when I, with others from the Babels volunteer interpreting network ([www.babels.org](http://www.babels.org)), presented a proposal for a process for deciding on office workers, as well as a call for a finance working group, I was accused of being threatening and confrontational. When I drew up some guidelines on minute-taking for the meetings, the discussion of them was put off for so many weeks by the Chair due to ‘lack of time’ that it became irrelevant. Sometimes, when unfavoured individuals raised items for the agenda at meetings, ad hoc procedural rules might even be invented to stop the agenda item being accepted if it did not suit ‘vertical’ interests.<sup>10</sup>

Participants also found themselves being held to ransom by promises of trade union and GLA money. In Birmingham, at an Organising Committee Meeting, participants of the meeting were told by a representative of NATFHE and the GLA that if the proposal for a company structure drawn up by the lawyers of NATFHE and the GLA were not accepted by the meeting, there would ‘be no ESF’ and the trade unions along with the GLA would withdraw their involvement and most importantly, their resources.

The apparent lack of self-reflection by the more ‘vertical’ hegemonic actors led me to think more about the problems of individual behaviour in relation to political

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10 For example, at one meeting, someone from the GLA remarked that the person who had just made a proposal had to put it in writing, photocopy it and bring it to the next meeting, which was not a procedure that had previously been in place, or even been put as a proposal to the meeting there and then.

engagement and activism. Too many people involved seemed to have completely dislocated themselves from the worlds they were active in. Thus, imperialism meant the imperialism of a nation-state, notably the United States, over another country – not any attempts to control and manipulate the ESF preparatory process. Being against neoliberalism meant being against the WTO and the GATS or TRIPS agreements, not against allowing money to equal decision-making power in the ESF process. Being for diversity meant adding race/gender/disability/ethnicity or religion and stirring – i.e. a form of tokenism of the worst kind, not acknowledging (and respecting) different political views within the ESF organising process and trying to find a way of working together. Being against oppression meant, being against women being told whether or not they should wear the ‘hijab’, not about whether branding dissent as crazy, violent or racist was oppressive. Being for women’s liberation meant agreeing hook, line and sinker to certain abstract themes that some women invited to a poorly advertised meeting called by the GLA at City Hall had decided they wanted to have plenaries and seminars on; not about questioning the macho discourses and ways of behaviour with which some men and women dominated the preparatory meetings. Another possible world was going to happen sometime in the distant future, not in the here and now through our own behaviour towards one another. And most distressingly, the people behaving like this and dominating the process time and time again took the moral high ground, arguing that anyone not in agreement with them was a selfish misguided individual; part of a minority who did not understand how to ‘change the world’. Their utopia of another world obviously was going to be brought about with big money and professional ‘officials’. Furthermore, conflict was seen as the negative contribution made by ‘crazy horizontals’, not as a possibility through which to forge progressive, creative and dynamic consensus.

For some time, I was able to play an interesting role. Being from ATTAC, a founding organisation of Social Forums, I had some political clout in the process. However, I felt far too intimidated to ever get up and say anything in meetings and, with other people from ATTAC UK, I spent the first few weeks trying to figure out whose ‘side’ we were on. I was taken into the higher echelons of the process (albeit at a distance from any real decision-making) by virtue of being from ATTAC but also by virtue of being an unknown quantity with no history – a good-natured, willing independent activist with very little experience of politics on the British Left and with a good dose of naivety and trustworthiness thrown in. I trundled down to London every two weeks from Birmingham, spent most of my time on the phone to different people involved and rode the wave of excitement obsessively as City Hall became an almost pilgrimage-like destiny, spell-bound by the political fight that was unfolding. I saw how core people from the GLA, SWP, Socialist Action and some trade unions and NGOs drew up and fixed agendas before meetings and took decisions behind closed doors on how the event (and the imminent meeting) would be organised. The *modus operandi* was that all organisational matters, from the decision on the venue of the ESF to the design and printing of leaflets, were presented as *faits accomplis* to the Committee and objections were thwarted as being petty, time-wasting or even malicious obstructions by people ‘obsessed with process’ or, as already mentioned, ‘wanting to wreck the ESF’. From the ‘vertical’ side came constant comments of how this or that ‘horizontal’ was crazy and how the ‘horizontals were the laughing stock of Europe. No holds were barred – everything was fixed at all meetings – there was never any agenda item that was not

pre-ordained to be decided in a certain way and all dirty tricks were used to stop dissenters from speaking or when they would, a wave of 'Nos' or laughter would seize the room.

Having now figured out who was who and what was happening, I would feed back everything I found out to my 'horizontal' 'allies' and work with them – to the extent that I succeeded in bringing the Organising Committee meeting to Birmingham and chairing it, allowing for more 'horizontal' to speak during the meeting. This led to a complete break down of this meeting: because 'horizontal' voices were less stifled than they usually were and the existing conflict could actually feed into the meeting, rather than be crushed by the Chair, the apparent conflicts were brought to the fore. A breakdown of the meeting happened, in my opinion, due to the unwillingness of the 'verticals' to make any compromises whatsoever on key issues, which catapulted everyone into entrenched positions, and elicited unmanageable shouting and heckling on all sides.

At one of the European preparatory meetings, I agreed to take official minutes. My minutes included an account of what people had said at the meeting, as well as points of discussion and disagreement, rather than merely listing abstractly what had been agreed at the meeting, which was how the 'verticals' wanted minutes to be published. I was shocked to experience them being censored first by the Chair of the meeting, a representative of the trade union RMT, and then again by an employee of the GLA, with whom I had to argue about the nature of minute taking. The trade union representative sent me an email titled 'private and not to be circulated', which I already felt was rather intimidating. The content and tone of the email further led me to feel that he might be attempting to silence me. First, he alluded to the 'obsessive' way certain people kept bringing up matters of internal democracy and process, imploring me to not to 'rock the boat' at the next meeting and bring up process points like minute-taking, implying that this was a waste of precious time. Secondly, on a point I had raised about how the Chair had moved the meeting on without consensus when some people had tried to speak and introduce a petition of the 'horizontal' on inclusion and democracy (see [www.esf2004.net](http://www.esf2004.net)), he claimed that I had completely misinterpreted what had happened at the meeting, stating that he thought I had 'got completely the wrong end of the stick'. Clearly his memory of events was the correct one – after all, he had been the Chair of the meeting and 'things might seem a little different than they really are when you're part of the audience and not actually sat at the front of the room' (personal email correspondence).

This was my most striking lesson from the process: that the tactics employed were on the level of reality construction, such that when I attempted to question some people's behaviour, I was told that I was under illusions, i.e. that *my* perception of reality was skewed whilst *they* held the 'truth'. As time went on, I grew tired, exhausted and disillusioned. I also became so nervous before meetings, I would be physically shaking. When arguments became particularly hostile, I felt the tears welling up in my eyes, afraid of the aggressiveness that would seize the room, sometimes from both 'sides'; and also so sad about how people would be silenced through the laughing off of their experiences or their branding as liars or fools. It really was like being in a dystopian film with no external point of reference.

These were two different realities clashing together with no common culture or language to communicate. I did not know how to express how I really felt in the presence of the 'vertical' players, as they would just tell me outright that what I was saying was 'absurd' or 'not true'. When finally I plucked up the courage to be more vocal in my opinions at another particularly antagonistic meeting, in which the 'verticals' ended up walking out because they didn't get their way, I received an angry phone call from the Chair of the meeting. When I uttered my disapproval about what was going on (on this particular occasion that people were being appointed jobs in the office who were all from either Socialist Action, the GLA or the SWP, with no fair advertising process or open call for volunteers), I was told that I was misguided and should not believe the rubbish I heard in the pub. In other words, not only discrediting my interpretation of events as 'rubbish', but also not crediting me with the ability to form an opinion at all, portraying me as someone who was merely repeating people's pub chatter.

In Europe, there were also disagreements on how to react to what was going on in the UK. On one occasion, when the 'horizontal' took their grievances to a European meeting in Berlin, some key people just didn't want to know: the office of the Mayor of London was hosting the event and thus UK internal politics were not to be discussed at transnational meetings. This, of course, elicited smirks from various 'vertical' players. It was like being back at school, evocative of plucking up all your courage to confess to the teacher that you're being bullied and the teacher telling you that s/he doesn't believe you, whilst you catch the playground bully smirking as he escapes a telling off. Where certain agreements would be forced on the 'verticals' at European meetings by those of the more understanding European activists, they would just pretend the decisions were never taken when we got back to London, or punish those that spoke out at the European meetings by making their lives in the organising process even more difficult – like when you get an extra beating from the bully for 'telling tales'.

On the other hand, there was an intervention from some individuals in the Italian and French delegations. In June 2004, the GLA-SWP-Socialist Action-union axis threatened to call off the ESF. It was suddenly announced that due to 'lies' that were being fed to the European delegations, some people from the French and Italian delegations had written letters of concern about the process to the UK Organising Committee. In actual fact, these 'lies' were based upon the personal experience of these delegations. In an unofficial report about a programme meeting in Paris at the end of May 2004, Italian delegates stated that "the meeting was more tiring than the previous ones and was often tense, conflictual and disagreeable [...] this was due mainly to the more powerful groups in the British delegation (the SWP, Socialist Action, [...] RMT, [...] and other small trade unions), who were constantly unwilling to enter real dialogue, attempted to impose their own way, were often arrogant or used blackmail, repeatedly refusing to accept decisions and titles which had already been decided hours before [...] in general terms, the work is still affected by the provincialism of the British contingent [...] who believe the matters they are dealing with in their 'province' are of universal importance and the whole thing is aggravated by their incapacity or unwillingness to discuss things [...] this does not concern the entire British delegation: the other half are not used to shouting and it would have been far more constructive if they had been allowed to play a part [...] before leaving Paris [members of the Italian and French delegations] agreed

on sending a letter to the UK Organising Committee outlining our criticisms of the way the ESF process has gone, explaining calmly but firmly that there is a need for them to find a much better way of working together and relating to others than they have at present, otherwise we shall pull out” (‘Italian document 10 June’, translated from Italian). At a UK meeting, it was argued that as a result of these letters, all of the UK trade union money had been withdrawn and the ESF would not be able to take place. When a week later it was announced that everything was going ahead after all, many of us were left musing whether the original crisis that had been evoked by the ‘verticals’ had perhaps been a desperate attempt to shock all dissenting voices in the UK into submission.

Money was always a huge issue, as unsurprisingly, money equalled power: it was difficult to really know what the financial situation of the ESF was because budget information was never discussed in any detail at meetings and even the little that was, was kept out of all official minutes. I think this was for three perhaps obvious reasons. Firstly, I think that the GLA in particular may have been quite nervous about public opinion with regard to using public resources to fund the ESF, an explicitly left-wing event, especially as local elections were to happen in the midst of the preparatory process. GLA spending on the ESF indeed was a cause for some turmoil in the local press, prompted by the Mayor’s political opponents. Secondly, I think there were deliberate attempts to implore a sense of gravity and necessary secrecy around the issue of money, so as to be able to centralise decision-making and also, because money was the major ‘comparative advantage’ that the larger ‘vertical’ organisations held in the process, they did not want to weaken their bargaining power by opening up access to information about it, not to mention any wider involvement on deciding how it would be spent. Sometimes, even the ‘fascist enemy’ as the threatening ‘other’ would be invoked to instill a sense of necessity of this procedure in the people pushing for more openness. Thirdly, of course, access to and ownership of resources always is the ‘sensitive subject’ because it is the root of power in a capitalist society, which the ESF organising process, of course, does not exist outside of.

On the issue of secrecy, a clause was even added to the Organising Committee statement to prevent ‘sensitive information’ (money matters) being made public, on some occasions leading to the expulsion of ‘journalists’ from the meetings (which actually meant the expulsion of two specific people who happened to be particularly avid critics of the machinations of the ‘verticals’ and happened to be from newspapers of parties involved in the process).

If it wasn’t the money issue that was used to force agreements on people, then it was criticisms of behaviour; the times I heard the words, ‘this is completely unacceptable behaviour’ are uncountable – it was regarding behaviour that the most stress was placed when trying to de-legitimise people. Many times, the way that meetings were rigged made unsolicited interventions the only way to interfere with the monopolisation of the process. This would play into the hands of the ‘verticals’, as it would leave people wide open to accusations of misbehaviour, which would serve to put someone’s behaviour in the limelight at the expense of the concerns raised. I myself became so angry at one European meeting in Berlin at the persistent manipulation of the process by UK ‘vertical’s that I raised my voice at one of the women from the NUS (National Union of

Students, [www.nusonline.co.uk](http://www.nusonline.co.uk)) and Socialist Action, who had taken the microphone at the end of the meeting to (it seemed to me) prevent the meeting from deciding in favour of official support for autonomous spaces (by arguing that agreements could not be forced on people last minute with the excuse of there being no more time to discuss the matter). I raised my voice and accused her of insincerity as, apart from even discussing whether this were even the case on this occasion, this method she was now deploring was precisely the one employed by members of her organisation to force agreements on meetings in the UK. The next day I was advised by a female member of Socialist Action 'to apologise for my unacceptable behaviour' (personal conversation), accompanied by the statement that no matter what someone says, such 'abusive behaviour' is always uncalled for. I do not wish to unpack the wrongs or rights of either my behaviour or that of the other woman in this situation. What I am attempting to highlight, is that people, like myself on this occasion, cannot help but scream after having been constantly silenced and misrepresented: that they use the only means they have when all other channels of criticism and dissent are always already closed to them by virtue of the way 'reality' and 'truth' are constructed within a process. And that the occurrence of the supposed offending behaviour should be cause for reflection on its rootedness in a relationship of oppression, not an opportunity to condemn the person behaving in a (supposedly) offensive way; especially by using terminology such as 'abusive', i.e. to imply that something is morally unacceptable and very serious, thereby further delegitimising the dissenter and their concerns. Indeed, this was never acknowledged by the women supposedly championing women's liberation from oppression. To me, this was incredible and, as a woman, immensely problematic, not to mention upsetting and frustrating.

Given the way that consensus was evaded by the 'verticals' who implemented their visions for the event with little respect for anyone else involved, the 'horizontal democratic opposition' was often left having to claim its role as the 'oppressed': constantly reacting to the undemocratic manoeuvres described in this text, and trying to 'open up' the process and challenge the exclusionary discourses and practices of those dominating events, rather than being able to claim a space to put forward ideas that would be taken seriously, although many creative proposals for the event and the process did exist. In a situation of unequal power relations, where a non-oppressive and more inclusive, democratic politics is more likely to be crushed, one of the challenges for a 'horizontal' politics thus becomes how to move out of this victim role to an affirmative one in which its ethos can inform modes of being. And to do this without in turn becoming another dogmatic identity position, which is one of the problems that ideas invoked by 'horizontalism' seek to address.

By this I mean that the organisational process of any Social Forum brings together individuals, organisations, networks and groups of a diverse political background. This 'diversity' is heralded as one of the Social Forum's biggest successes. However, as my experience of the UK ESF organising process has shown me, this celebrated 'diversity' is not sufficiently deconstructed in terms of the unequal power relations that are played out in the process, beyond the statement in the Charter of Principles that the organising committee should not be used as locus of power to be disputed by its participants. There are no mechanisms in place to deal with the difficulties that arise when people try to work or indeed live together, if we think about the ESF organising process as a

microcosm of the bigger problems that this movement is trying to address. First and foremost, people are complex, they are not one-dimensional 'implementers' of static political principles or mere representatives of the organisations that ensue from such principles, although these may inform part of their behaviour.<sup>11</sup> In any social situation, people bring with them their personalities, their constructed identities, their behavioural patterns, their fears and their distresses, and these are acted out in some of the ways I have described in this text. Therefore, any emancipatory project needs to develop ways of addressing and working through assumed truths, conflict, oppression, exclusion and unequal power relations that exemplify the shortcomings of the neo-liberal model critiqued by Social Forum participants, to create that other, desired world that is invoked in the now infamous Social Forum slogan, 'another world is possible'. Elsewhere I have attempted to theorise what we can do in this respect. I have, with others, proposed an ethics of 'critical engagement', based upon self reflexivity and 'self de-colonisation',<sup>12</sup> as well as openness to the 'other' (see piece by S. Sullivan, this issue), in the spirit of what I understand as a 'horizontal' politics, as a way of dealing with problems that arise in our relationship with each other, so that we work towards undoing the world we are trying to change.

In conclusion, as well as hopefully leaving the reader with some provocative thoughts regarding issues of political organising, ethics and social transformation, as well as some compelling insights about the 2004 European Social Forum, I would like to share two questions that the ESF 2004 preparatory process has left me thinking about more concretely. First, how can we even get to a point where such an ethics of engagement and openness to the 'other', might be taken seriously, when the harsh realities of oppression and inequality even within 'our' own movements seem antithetical to creating the kind of environment necessary for this? And second, how can I and my fellow travellers involved in this political struggle even begin to reach out to others with proposals for a better world, when what we do too often reproduces the old in our ways of engaging with each other?

#### the author

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11 In this text, I have focused primarily on organisations and political tendencies. However, I hope that I have also conveyed something of the role of key individuals in the process, without singling them out either as heroes of my cause or perpetrators of what I deem as injustice. I have not wanted to write a text that reifies organisations over the individuals that make them up. At the same time, I have not wanted to single out individuals in a negative way; not only for the obvious reason of not wanting to become embroiled in any legal battles; but on a political level, because I wish to hold out for a transformative politics where certain behaviour can be criticised without this leading to condemnation of the person behaving in this way, as I believe this to be a counterproductive way of working through conflict.

12 See Andreotti and Dowling (2004): WSF, Ethics and Pedagogy, in 'Explorations in Open Space: The World Social Forums and Cultures of Politics', *International Journal of Social Science*, 182: 605-613.