



On Open Space: Explorations Towards a Vocabulary of a More Open Politics¹

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Abstract: Drawing on my work in and on architecture, urban planning, and socio-political movement including the World Social Forum (WSF), I attempt to critically engage with the increasingly widely used concept of *open space* as a mode of social and political organising. Arguing that open space, horizontality, autonomous action, and networking are now emerging as general tendencies in the organisation of social relations, and that the WSF is a major historical experiment in this idea, I try to open up the concept to a more critical understanding in relation to the times we live in. In particular, I argue that the practice of open space in the WSF makes manifest three key movement principles: *self-organisation*, *autonomy*, and *emergence*. By exploring its characteristics and contradictions, I also argue that open space cannot be provided and only exists if people make it open, and that in this sense it is related to, but different from, the commons.

Keywords: open space, horizontality, networking, autonomy, emergence, movement, politics

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 (Agamben 2004:58, 57, citing Martin Heidegger).

Introduction

The concept of open space arises in many fields. 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 social and political practice.

In particular, it has gained special currency in social and political practice in recent years, along with related concepts such as horizontality and networking, by virtue of its use since 2001 in connection with the phenomenon called the World Social Forum (WSF). For instance, to help people understand this concept, Chico Whitaker, one of the founders of the WSF, compares it to a “square” in a city, or a *praça* in the original Portuguese (Whitaker 2004); and the WSF has also adopted

the slogan “Another World Is Possible!”, which signals, and symbolises, an openness to the future.

On account of the extraordinary proliferation of the WSF that has taken place over these years, this idea and its related concepts seem to have widely caught the imagination of people and organisations across the world (Alvarez 2007; Conway 2005; de Sousa Santos 2006). On the surface, this has happened as a result of the polemical challenge that this proliferation has represented to neoliberalism. Initially, this was symbolised by the WSF being held to coincide with the World *Economic* Forum in Davos, Switzerland. In longer measure, 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—in particular because of its embodiment of the idea of open space.

The idea of “open space” has seemed to appeal widely not only because of the evident failure of conventional practices of politics and community organisation, but also because open space has seemed to be part of a new culture of doing things that is emerging in our times. As a consequence, the WSF is now widely read and portrayed as an *alternative* to traditional movements, including those of the left (de Sousa Santos 2006). It is also read as offering a possible way out of the limitations of traditional movements, rather than as a complement.

I suggest, however, that this is only on the surface, and there are in fact three central principles to this concept that inform the WSF and that have contributed both to its “success” and to the proliferation of these ideas, concepts, and practices: *self-organisation*, *autonomy*, and *emergence*. Specifically, it is the resonance of these concepts with the world emerging around us today that is responsible for the “success”.

The WSF itself, and most of its participants, use just one of these rather specialised political terms—self-organisation. Further, the only term the WSF’s Charter of Principles employs is *open space*, through which it signals all these vital political principles. Perhaps the initial organisers of the WSF felt that a hard sell of quite overt “political” principles would be contradictory to the very spirit of open space, and would discourage some who might otherwise participate.

On the other hand, the WSF’s use and practice of the concept of open space has been under intense debate from the very outset, much of it from within the Forum (Sen 2004); and the debate has 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 its insufficient effectiveness in the struggle against neoliberalism, and for its vulnerability to being used 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 acquire both a clearer

political programme as well as a more defined, linear structure—characteristics that I, and some others, believe will unalterably change the Forum.

Certain critics 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 (James 2004; RUPE 2003).

As this essay will try to show, this debate echoes the intense self-critique that has taken place as part of similar experiments over the past half century. Such introspection is in the very nature of the new movements that have been emerging, and of openness itself; and of the WSF. Yet, the future of the experiment called the WSF currently hangs in the balance. While I respect many of the criticisms put forward of the WSF and of the idea and practice of open space, I believe that it is crucial at this juncture to critically engage with the ideas that are at stake, understand the meaning, power, and utility of the concept, and only then take positions.

Much of my normative commitment to the concept of open space is due to my background: training as an architect in the 1960s; exposure to anarchist ideas in the 1970s; a long involvement with social and political issues as 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. In particular, my work through the 1990s on the dynamics of the internationalisation of movement led to my responding viscerally and intellectually to the WSF’s usage of the concept when I came across it during 2001–2002. I got heavily involved with the WSF, first in India and then internationally, initially as an organiser and then as a commentator working from the “outside”. And, over time, I have also attempted to both use the concept in the pedagogic aspects of academic courses and workshops and also to critically explore the concept through such processes (Hayes, Nelson and Sen 2007; Sen 2007a).

In the following section, I review the expression of the principles of autonomy and emergence in the WSF. In the third section I present a synopsis of the history, nature, and politics of open space, and an exploration of new horizons and conceptualisations that have emerged recently and are continuing to emerge. In the fourth section, I discuss its characteristics and contradictions; and I conclude, with the delineation of a framework of some organising principles for open—and for opening—space.

The WSF and Autonomist Politics

Even if there has been and continues to be intense debate on its record in terms of its overt objective—the struggle against neoliberalism—there is no doubt that the WSF is an extraordinary and sustained experiment in the practice of the first two of the three principles listed above, *self-organisation* and *autonomous action*—at an enormous, historically unprecedented scale, and with a wide range of more “local” interpretations and manifestations. The WSF is based on the idea of self-organisation; those who elect or volunteer to “organise” Social Fora are meant simply to coordinate 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, the WSF has—so far—followed the policy that it will itself take no political positions and make no statements. This is a key aspect of a wider Charter of Principles that it has adopted (WSF Organising Committee and WSF International Council 2001), thus encouraging and enabling a political culture of self-organised and autonomist action by those who enter this space.

This practice has developed significantly since the formation of the WSF. The initial Fora included “major events”, featuring famous personalities, which drew participants away from the less glamorous events organised by smaller participant organisations. The big centrally organised events have been progressively cleared out, first to the physical periphery of the Forum, and by 2005, entirely. The WSF took a huge conceptual step forward when it organised a “Global Day of Action” on and around 26 January 2008, during which some 1500 autonomous, locally self-organised actions took place across the world, in place of the traditional single (even if huge) world meeting of the WSF. As I have argued elsewhere, the WSF is a key example of *emergent politics*, learning as it goes along (Sen 2007). However, this culture is different from—even if related to—the practices of *autonomist politics* and of *autonomous space*, which have also been manifested at the WSF (Juris 2005; Nunes 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 to the Zapatista uprising in Mexico), and more generally deriving from the new cultures of autonomous movement politics that took shape in many parts of the world in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the idea of the WSF took shape. It was an idea, I would like to argue, that *could only take form* in a non-centralised way, 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.

This document draws heavily on pedagogical ideas contained in the formulations of the progressive Church in Brazil and Latin America, in particular liberation theology (Levy forthcoming); and on the work of Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (2007 [1970])—his theory of conscientisation and a pedagogy of the oppressed. But I believe that there were also other influences. I suspect that the Brazilians, at least, drew lessons from the manner in which the more conventional, centralised social and political movements in Latin America were ruthlessly repressed during the previous three decades. If the experiment they were proposing succeeded, it would no longer be possible for conventional forms of repression and/or disruption to work. The fact that the vision of the experiment—made possible by new technological possibilities and as part of a new, emerging political vision and practice—was not located within the confines of any given nation-state and the reach of its security apparatus made this escape from history only the more emphatic. It also invited and made possible an unprecedented richness of cultural and political expression.

Over the subsequent years there has been a wide range of experimentation with this idea. 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 often been informed by a spirit of what Jeff Juris (2008b) has termed “intentionality”. 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; to the idea of deliberately holding one of the Polycentric World Social Forums in 2006 in a closed society such as Pakistan, as an internationalist action of solidarity; or, to the manner in which the organisers of the US Social Forum in 2007 deliberately designed the organising process so that grassroots groups dominated and the big movements of prior times, from civil liberties to labour, were sidelined.

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 (2005) and Rodrigo Nunes (2004) have argued, they have been pushed hard to allow ever-greater autonomy within the Forum because of these actions.

Thus, there have been actions from within the body of the Forum (such as the Assembly of Social Movements) as well as the growing incidence of autonomous, parallel activities that have taken shape and place just outside the WSF. 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 eruption of autonomous zones especially

when the European Social Fora are held. Initially perceived 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 even come to love and value it as part of a much larger “Forum”.

It 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 stronger and more robust political phenomenon. I suggest that this phenomenon of symbiosis is in the very nature of open space; and that the organisation of such activities is a direct result of organising the Social Fora as open spaces.

There is however also another dimension to this. 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 a greater and lesser extent, by particular ideological formations that end up practising either direct sectarianism or what Massimo De Angelis (2004) has called “discursive sectarianism”. This is different to the practice mentioned above, of affirmative inclusiveness or “intentionality”. Examples include the WSF in India in January 2004 or the European Social Forum in London later that year.

Different to this but parallel, the Nairobi Forum in 2007 saw the event being conducted in a manner that showed that it had been 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 (Oloo 2007).

As a partisan participant in these debates and struggles, I would suggest that we need to see these varying dynamics as part of a much larger struggle between different cultures of politics. Despite the inversions just mentioned, we need to perceive the extraordinary larger attempt towards self-organisation and organisational autonomy that the WSF process as a whole represents. At the same time, we need to recognise and name the 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 and provide a framework of relational practices between different WSF bodies in the world.

The WSF’s main contribution to world politics, however, because of the scale involved, has perhaps been in terms of the third principle listed, a culture of *emergence*. The open space that the WSF is trying to be represents a new form of politics. More accurately, it is a form

of organisation and structure 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*. As Arturo Escobar (2004:351) has argued:

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 . . . 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.

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

. . . macro-level outcomes that are not always apparent to their participants. . . . 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.

One of the persistent controversies about the WSF is, indeed, 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 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. In fact, it is precisely in its openness and its “construction . . . as process rather than event” and in the “weak ties” that come into play (Chesters 2008:5), that the strength and effectiveness of the WSF resides.

Before closing this section on the WSF, it is important to underline that these practices are by no means true of the WSF alone or are its exclusive trademark. They are common to and characteristic of many parts of what is referred to by some as the “global justice movement”; for instance, the PGA (Peoples’ Global Action), whose “hallmarks” also provide a similar, open-ended framework. These practices therefore need to be seen as common characteristics of emerging experiments in the practice of autonomist action.

Towards Opening up Open Space

I now attempt to place in a larger context 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, and follow this by a discussion of its nature and politics.

On Openness

As Agamben has argued, of all living beings—indeed, of everything that we 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, and carrying on from the thought cited at the beginning of this essay, Agamben (2004:51) explains that this is a uniquely human capacity:

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*].”

In these terms, the crucial difference that Agamben draws between the animal and the human is that for the former the environment is open but not openable, while humankind has the capacity to open up the world; *we can disconceal it* (Agamben 2004:55):

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, beings 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 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. For instance, in many ways the feminist movement in North America, and elsewhere, practiced something very close to this idea from the late 1960s onwards: a free, unstructured, and non-hierarchical movement

(Hayes forthcoming). This attempt, however, became the subject of intense critical reflection within the movement in terms of what one participant, Jo Freeman (nd, c 1970–1971), famously called “the tyranny of structurelessness”. Freeman wrote this essay in response to the frustrations of trying to organise non-hierarchically and as a critique of masculinist forms of organisation (and not to abandon the practice, as the title of the essay might suggest). This social experiment was not restricted to the feminist movement alone, but was part of general articulation of a counter-culture in North America from the 1960s, and also, for instance, in India in the 1970s, although coming from very different roots.

There have been equivalents and expressions of this idea in many parts of the world and in many fields. For instance, as already mentioned, the work of Paulo Freire and his theory of conscientisation and a pedagogy of the oppressed, or the articulation of liberation theology in the 1960s and 1970s.

This experimentation continued right through the 1980s and 1990s. In each of these instances the concept of openness was rigorously practiced, debated, and critiqued. The emergence during the 1990s of PGA and of Direct Action in the USA, and of the organisational culture underlying the direct actions at Seattle 1999 and the series of “global actions” that took place during the early 2000s, including the WSF—all of which were manifestations of a new politics founded on ideas of horizontality and open-endedness—was a natural outcome of these stirrings, experiments, and movements.

In other words, the idea and practice of open space is a generalised, widespread, and non-centralised political-cultural phenomenon of the second half of the twentieth century, one that is continuing to widen and deepen in our own times. A key issue, however, is how other developments in the second half of the twentieth century have changed the way we relate to each other and to the world around us. 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.

As Nunes argues, the recent intensification in social networking and in networked politics as a common social practice is 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” (Nunes 2005:301, emphasis added).

Social movement activists have perhaps made among the most active and imaginative use of these new possibilities, 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 it also fundamentally informs contemporary debate on science, knowledge systems, and intellectual property.

The social and political use of the concept of open space, and the rise of this concept, must therefore be seen 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 idea is being used equally by those seeking to exercise centralised power, then we need to critically reflect on what, more specifically, its liberatory potentials are and where they lie.

New Horizons of the Open

It is worth pointing out here that the conventional visualisation and conceptualisation of “space” fundamentally changed during the last 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 the reconceptualisation is continuing to evolve rapidly.

At one level, this has been simply a function of the popularisation of new understandings of space in many spheres of life—art, music, science, and even everyday consumption. Humans—albeit with variations across contexts—visualise and therefore conceptualise space very differently today 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.

The first major steps were taken in the first half of the twentieth century. In the visual 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.² Similarly, in music, the emergence and articulation of jazz from the early twentieth century onwards opened up new dimensions of time and space. These ideas continued to be developed and explored in literature and art from about the 1940s onwards, perhaps particularly in the course of the school of magic realism which emerged in the 1960s, where through the playing with (or “distortion” of) both time and space, new understandings emerge.

These great developments in art and literature paralleled—and sometimes preceded—developments in science, especially through Einstein’s discovery of relativity in the early twentieth century, where time and space were revealed as one. The subsequent explorations and development of these ideas have included theories of uncertainty, indeterminacy, and chaos.

But only in the second half of the twentieth century have we seen the more generalised *socialisation* of these perceptions; and it is during

this same period that the practice of open space in social and political movement emerged. With the launching of the first space satellites and subsequent space missions, and the fairly widespread availability of new images through photographs and television, it became possible for ordinary humans to be 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; and indeed, even as consumers.

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—(Cosgrove 2001) it became a phenomenon, perception, and virtual experience available to the species as a result of rapidly changing information and communication technologies: to humans 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—especially, in a state of ecological crisis—we have begun to be aware of the Gaian nature of the planet, as a system and as a living organism (Lovelock 2000).

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 (an organic conception radically distinct from the colonialist tendency to define the Amazon especially as part of “humankind's patrimony”, thus laying claim to it) has meant that “open space”, locally and globally, has become more than something one can create/enter/use/inhabit; it is now popularly understood as having an organic, ecological, and *systemic* function, fundamentally interconnected with its surroundings.

Third, our conceptualisation of open space has of course been dramatically expanded by the invention of the worldwide web, with all its apparent open-endedness. Beyond the openness, it is now common to see references to the internet as the model on which social movement organisation is increasingly based. (This despite the known reality of the new disparities that the invention and use of computers and the web have produced; the so-called digital divide.)

Another related new understanding of openness has come about in terms of the fundamental role that systems, networks, and emergence play in all physical, natural, and social processes, 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 all sciences, and its popular influence is growing.

Finally, we need to locate “open space” in a longer political history of cyberspace—of so-called “virtual space”. As Shuddhabrata Sengupta (2010) has argued, the invention of the printing press, and with this the invention of the idea of artificial *media* by which humans 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. Each successive step in this process—from books and newspapers to television and the web—can be considered to have been steps towards opening new spaces. And significantly, just as with physical space, 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 state or market corporatism, and/or by fundamentalist forces within societies.

All these developments—all during the twentieth century—have intertwined, and have profoundly shaped our thinking and perceptions. Equally, however, attempts at planning, control, and enclosure are as true of these new dimensions of space and openness as of 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. We must therefore ask the same critical questions as we do of the physically open space, and develop the vocabulary necessary to understand and act on what is happening.

The Nature of Open Space

The question of nature brings up the question of context. At a quite fundamental level, what do 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? To a sculptor, or a dancer, or a physicist? To the physically or visually challenged, or to someone dying of a terminal disease? Are each of these different meanings? Or is there a common meaning across different subjectivities? Open space seems to exist only when we construct it—and whatever we construct will necessarily be a function of the conditions that prevail at that time.

Partly as a consequence of being a member of a community of like terms and practices with much overlap, and partly because of quite different interpretations and uses of these terms in different fields and contexts, there is perhaps no one definition of open space. As Nunes (2005:302–3) points out in terms of horizontalities, there are many open spaces—and many meanings of open space. 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 concept does not only represent what already is, but is also a symbol of possibilities; a metaphor. The possibilities of its existence are as important as actually practising or experiencing it. For instance, the slogan of the WSF, “Another World Is Possible!”, 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 2004).

It is also crucial to recognise 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, every practice of open space and horizontality must be recognised as a significant polemical challenge to empire and to hegemonic politics. 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, art, faith, and to the conditions of everyday life, as it is to politics and social movement.

The Politics and Meta-politics of Open Space

In order to reveal the politics and meta-politics of open space in the field of movement, I will briefly look here at particular uses of the term “open space” in urban planning. In doing so, I also question the usually implied normative equation of the term *open space* with the apparently similar and related term *the commons*—where 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.

In the field of urban planning the term “open space” carries a physical and apparently apolitical connotation, of being a relatively large, open, unbuilt / “undeveloped” space, usually but not always made available either for recreational or (in some particular contexts) agricultural purposes. Like many definitions, this usage sounds universal but is in fact culturally quite specific—and it is significant as much for what it does not say as for what it does. First, by definition, it refers only to *urbanised* conditions (which means conditions where most land is built upon and “open space” is the exception).

This 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 are a function of traditional communitarian decision (though also subject to local social segmentation). As Massimo De Angelis (2006) argues, for every commons, there is a community.

Planned “open space”, on the other hand, does not have a single, defined community, but rather is—in theory—a public space, open to everyone. The commons was not and is still not today referred to as being “open”, by locals. Beyond this, planned open space is by definition centrally planned, managed, and owned. The kind of open space that is created through centrally planned intervention is therefore not a commons, and should not be confused with this.

Second, looking at these conditions historically, the “open spaces” that our planners construct refer in fact 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. 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 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.

Third, even while planned open spaces in urban areas provide for some relief and the chance of random encounters, it is crucial to be alive to the reality that urban parks were originally created not so much to provide relief and/or recreation 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 Haussmann’s Paris). This “dark side of planning” continues in our times in the form of Israel’s urban planning actions in relation to Palestine and Palestinians (Yiftachel 1998).

To conclude this point, even though 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 such spaces in the city are in fact neither a commons nor open then this demands that we revisit and critically reflect on the otherwise memorable metaphor used by Chico Whitaker, as one of the founders of the WSF, to explain the idea of open space—the idea of a “square” in a city.

Under contemporary conditions this process of appropriation of what is common is being dramatically widened. It is being extended from a control only of land (including forests) to include water, air, cyberspace, and also—in yet another dimension—genetic knowledge; and under current conditions of neoliberalism, this is 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.

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 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.

All this holds lessons for us as we attempt to explore and understand the politics of open space. Planned open spaces are thus not open by themselves; they become truly open only when those who use them take part in decisions regarding their creation, planning, design, maintenance, and use. In this sense then, open space and the commons become, under existing conditions, complimentary concepts and strategies.

Characteristics and Contradictions

Based on the discussion so far, I now attempt to draw out some of the fundamental characteristics of open space, and then move to discussing some of its key contradictions.

Open Space as Life

As argued above, the open is innate to human existence and to human nature. As a consequence, perhaps all cultures attach a normative value both to the open and to openness, and to space in the sense of an open expanse; especially when the terms are combined to refer to *open space*, this lends to it the quality of a certain pregnancy. The term 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 (although not necessarily without boundaries or gates), freedom of use and action, freedom of association and exchange, freedom of expression, and freedom to leave (and re-enter); and on the other, of an indeterminate openness and elasticity.

The idea of self-determination raises the interesting and significant possibility of defining the nature of the space, and thereby of setting the rules of the space, including its enclosure. But 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 it. Setting the rules however challenges openness and also begins to define those who might act in this way as a community. The idea of open space thus contains the seed of the idea of a commons; and if it gains a community that defines its boundaries, then indeed it is no longer an open space but, I would argue, becomes a commons.

The qualities of liberty and inclusiveness in turn suggest a *safety* to an open space, or at least the potential of safety; although 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.

Another key characteristic of open space as life is the possibility of random encounter—and therefore being a potential space for *learning*—where we ourselves become more open, more receptive. Especially when compared to the rest of our lives, where things tend to be more structured, bounded, and/or segmented, it becomes a liberated, and perhaps even a liberating, space. It also reinforces our assumption that we are (or potentially can be) free humans. Open space offers, or seems to offer, the possibility of our realising our humanity and our freedoms.

Implied within this is 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 humans. What is open signals the possibility of worlds beyond, and of a future.

All these qualities also mean that open space is a space where we are led to authentically come into full and uninhibited contact with our environment, 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 humans are momentarily united; and where the present comes into contact with and becomes the future. Open space is therefore simultaneously a safe space, an exciting and stimulating space, and also possibly a dangerous space, pregnant with the risk of change. And so, open space is like life itself: 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. Drawing from that, and from the previous subsection, I briefly draw attention here to how

the constitution and experience of open space can be a process of self-organisation in itself.

It is precisely because open space enables us to come into authentic contact both with ourselves and with our power-to—and if we are willing to respect the principle that what is available to us must be made 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 (2002), Arturo Escobar (2004), and Jane Jacobs (1961), I also suggest that open space—especially as manifested in large physical open spaces in which humans 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 therefore of how we, as individuals, can and should act.³ Jane Jacobs even suggested, in her seminal work on cities in the 1960s, that this exchange is a crucial factor in the life and death of societies. 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.

More specifically, at this juncture of planetary and human history where the human species is becoming conscious of the crisis that life itself is facing, major and repeated manifestations of collective gathering such as the WSF are enabling certain sections of humanity to come together, as they seek ways to address the crisis and search for other futures. I believe that the WSF is able to play this role because it offers a (global) scale and a continuity of exchange that has, arguably, never happened before in history.⁴ This, I suggest, is its real function and nature as an open space. This process of learning and self-organisation can then be understood as a process of *emergence*.

This proposition 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 that large numbers of humans are converging with this open-ended, primal purpose of exchanging information and thus giving order to their lives. What organisers do therefore is to offer the possibility of convergence and not open space itself; or, looked at another way, it is the possibility they offer that is the open space.

Opening Space as Open Space

The notion of open space thus 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. Drawing on the work of Buckminster Fuller, open space moves from being a noun to being a verb (Fuller, Agel and Fiore 1970). It becomes opening space. 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 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 . . .” (De Angelis 2004:591).

Open Space as Cloud and Uncertainty

Yet another fundamental characteristic of open space is its random, open-ended, indeterminate and *constantly* emergent nature. The cultural logic of open space is in the nature of a cloud, and not a (linear, determinate, programmed) clock. It is precisely this character 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 this way, open space becomes a context for radical autonomy and anarchy; a context for the absence of pre-ordained or hierarchical order, and of the constant presence of organic order and of political self-determination.

Conversely, because most of us are educated and rooted in linear, hierarchical, and programmed processes and organisations, the actual function and experience of open spaces is generally a mix of the programmed and the unprogrammed; of the closed and the open. 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 has taken place in relation to the WSF.

In fact, to act in a clockwork fashion and to believe in the efficiency of clock-like programmes despite their obvious failings and contradictions is equally a huge act of faith. It speaks for the degree of socialisation we go through that most of us still find it difficult to surrender ourselves to open-endedness and to believe 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 we are gradually becoming accustomed to openness, most of us will continue to experience uncertainty for some time to come. However, there is reason to think that even those who 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.

The Contradictions of Open Space

The apparent and real contradictions, as well as paradoxes, of open space are also among its inherent characteristics. Many of these have been widely articulated over the past three decades (at least since the early–mid 1970s), but they have not been debated enough. 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.

As already mentioned, a practice similar to an open, free, and unstructured space was analysed back in the early 1970s by Jo Freeman (nd, c 1970–1971). The particular contradiction that Freeman pointed out was the emergence and functioning of hidden elites or vanguards, and/or of what Nunes (2005:303–4) calls “supernodes” and hyperconnectivity by a select few, thereby concentrating power in undeclared ways. More generally, there is the problem that those with resources will necessarily have greater access to and influence over open space, which leads to the abuse of such spaces.

As Nunes (2005:303) has pointed out, the conditions that make horizontality possible in social and political movement in (most parts of) the North are not widely available in most parts of the South (such as resources, high mobility, and high technology and connectivity). On the one hand, this underlines the necessity to see open space differently in different contexts, even as we attempt to articulate a common vocabulary (or vocabularies); 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, as pointed out already, the potential of freedom and self-determination coexists with the possibility of the determination of limits and closure. The very act of defining a space necessarily defines its limits; equally, the very action of opening up space further defines directions, dimensions, limits—and relations. More subliminally, the inhabitants and practitioners of open spaces ironically often end up regulating themselves (and excluding others)

by establishing norms of conformity to particular political-cultural positions (Sircar 2010).

It is also an ironic reality that some of the characteristics of what we would conceive of as an emancipatory open space, such as boundlessness, are equally a feature of capital (in the form of boundless accumulation); and its basic features—and those of related concepts such as horizontality—are equally exploited by big business and the military.

Similarly, the “unbounded” quality of openness has been the basis of the ideology of much colonialism (and in turn capitalism), such as in and through the doctrine of *terra nullus* (vacant land), on the basis of which whole continents were declared open for occupation and exploitation. As De Angelis (2004) suggests, open space can only transcend its apparent complicity with capital and colonialism if we engage in the social constitution of open space as an alternative to capital and colony.

Finally, a quite common argument, especially by those in organised movements and/or of the more establishment 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. In the case of the World Social Forum, some have even argued that what is necessary is a much more defined political programme (Sen and Kumar 2007).

I however argue, along with Chesters (2008), that it is precisely this “dissipation” into a cloud- or swarm-like energy that is becoming more generalised in societies as a whole, and that it is the self-organisation inherent in such complex systems that is the strength and power of new movement and of new politics. And which is why this politics poses such a challenge to conventional politics and movement, and why, along with other reasons, there are such constant attempts to control or capture the WSF.

Towards a Definition? Outlines of Some Organising Principles

In this final section I offer certain formulations as suggestions towards developing a vocabulary and grammar for the practice of open space. I will not attempt a singular definition in the belief that it is more useful, appropriate, and empowering for each of us to define our own frameworks for critical thought and action.

As Nunes (2005:303) points out, a problem is the tendency to make our 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 leads to paralysis and alienation. To the opposite, we must recognise that open space is inherently ambiguous, as are networks.

The first principle would thus seem to be accepting, and respecting, both partial achievement as well as the need for sustained struggle in order to attempt complete achievement. The fundamental problem here is of conceiving open space as an object and as a fixed state of being. On 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. A verb, not a noun; where open space means opening space. This could be a second organising 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. Open space is not a “level playing field”. It is subject to all the same forces as exist in the society within which it is created or practiced, of segmentation, marginalisation, and exclusion, and of resource concentration, power play, and privilege. Open space is open space only if it is socially constituted. This is the defining characteristic and principle of open space that distinguishes it from the boundlessness, and openness, of capital.

Another basic characteristic of open space is *reflexivity* on the part of participants. Because of its inherent contradictions and its organically dialectic nature, 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. 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 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. 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. Further, 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.

Beyond this, open space is fundamentally emergent and autopoietic (Capra 1997; Varela, Maturana and Uribe 1974). Open space, and openness, has a skin, and is alive, and exists—like all live things—in dialectical tension with its environment. The skin is permeable, and

is the point at which the inside not only meets and contaminates that which is “outside” but also *becomes* the outside; and vice versa.

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. 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.

Open space, and openness—as tendencies—need to be perceived not as ends but, like networks, as the *means* by which horizontal politics can be practiced and relations established (Nunes 2005). Further, open space challenges and subverts the idea that structure and organisation are necessarily vertical or programmed. It offers an alternative; a horizontal structure, a web. It gives us a new, more organic vocabulary for structure and form.

The fundamental participant in open space would seem to be, ultimately, the individual. Open space, indeed, when open, tends to subvert communal and organisational identity—and vice versa. On the other hand, if open space only becomes open by our progressively defining principles and practices for helping to keep it so, then this requires a community that becomes defined and constituted through this very act. Both individual and community are therefore fundamental to open space.

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

Acknowledgements

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, Sundara Babu, John Brown Childs, and Peter Waterman for their comments on previous drafts; and in particular, the three anonymous reviewers commissioned by this journal for their comments and criticisms that have immeasurably enriched my understanding. I also thank Sha Xin Wei, Dorothea Haerlin, John Holloway, Rodrigo Nunes, and Graeme Chesters for helping me in undertaking this exploration in their different ways. And I thank Vipul Rikhi for helping me prepare this essay by so skilfully abridging its larger and original version.

This essay also draws on my earlier experience within the EIOS (Explorations in/of Open Space) Collective and on exchanges with several of the Collective’s members,

especially Anila Daulatzai, Chloé Keraghel, Jeff Juris, Michal Osterweil, and Vanessa Andreotti. I also thank the course participants in a course on open space that I ran at Carleton University, Ottawa, in 2006; in particular, Chris Hurl, Emilie Hayes, Judy Meltzer, and Mat Nelson.

Finally, I wish to thank my colleagues and community at CACIM for their constant fellowship, and the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund for the Fellowship it awarded me during 2004–2006.

Endnotes

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 at http://www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=429). It is also a heavily abridged version of a larger essay of the same title that is available at <http://cacim.net/twiki/tiki-index.php?page=Publications>. Even though finalised for publication here, this paper—following its subject—only represents continuing work in progress, and so I welcome comments, suggestions, and rejoinders at jai.sen@cacim.net.

² 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 that cubism did simply because the latter travelled with colonialism.

³ 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 also true of humans.

⁴ Please refer to the unabridged version of this essay, as above, for a full presentation of this argument; and also Sen (2007b). There are of course other more particular, and bigger, confluences of humanity that 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 try to understand these spaces and these gatherings in these terms.

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