

On the Global Justice Movement

Mapping the movement

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The big success of the fifth World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre at the end of January 2005, proved that the social forums are not a passing phenomenon, but are now almost institutionalised as “the place” able to attract activist from all spheres, across the entire world.

The forums, both regional and international, are the place where campaigns are discussed and decided: during the 2004 European Social Forum it was decided to build a process of mobilisation for a social and peaceful Europe in 2005, including a big demonstration in Brussels with the European trade unions. Similarly the huge international protests against the war on Iraq on 15th February 2003 was decided and planned during the World Social Forum one month before.

In some countries, the impact of the “global justice movement” or the “movement of movements” has decreased since the heady days of Seattle and Genoa and in particular, media interest has waned. Some movements, such as ATTAC in France or Globalise Resistance in the UK, are less able than before to gather the social forces. But, despite these difficulties, six years after Seattle the social forum processes have developed and are able to link the different movements.

In this article, we will look at why the movement is able to attract so many social forces and what are the actual challenges ahead. But to start, we will sketch the different generations of movements and the way they build their networks and campaigns.

One of the first successes of the global justice movement is its capacity to link very different generations of organisations and movements: trade unions, NGOs, new social movements and to generate new forms of organisations and networks.

Eventhough trade unions date back to the 19th century, in the majority of countries their structures and traditions were built after the World War 2, in a different stage of capitalism, when the nation-states were the horizon of the economy, with a well identified working class and big factories regulated by Taylorian methods. This heritage explains the difficulties the trade unions have in overcoming their national viewpoint and to accept a equal relationship with others movements.

The great expansion of NGOs dates back to the 1980s, when very different economic and social factors were at play. First at all, there was a growing consciousness of the limits of an international order based solely on the absolute sovereignty of the nation-states: Amnesty International started in the 1960s as supra-national activists on human rights, quickly followed by Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace which grew out of the environmental movement of the 1970s. Women’s NGOs, development organisations and a myriad other NGOs blossomed during the 1980s, partly as a rejection of the “ideology” of the 1970s, as a response to the “failure” of the states to respond to emerging social issues such as environment and women’s issues, and to the increasingly “privatised” nature of social services resulting from neo-liberalism and a reduced role of the state. The last trend was especially strong in the South. NGOs have different organisational traditions, for some, their international perspective allowed them to be more flexible than the trade unions but even local NGOs were more flexible because they had a very different relationship to the state.

At the end of the 1980 and the beginning of the 1990s, new social movements with similar characteristics appeared in several countries. Similar to the NGOs, these movements focused on issues more than social composition: against dams and large scale development, as in the Narmada movement in India, against unemployment as the “Agir contre le Chomage” (AC!) in France, or for land reform as the MST in Brazil. But, even if they are not related to a specific political party, as were many organisations created during the 1960s and 70s (youth organisations, unions, and so on), they are more radical than the NGOs with a clear commitment for a radical change of the society. These “new” social movements are by and large “horizontal” in their structures and generally using consensus to take decision.

What is now called the anti- or alter-globalisation, or global justice movement, appeared during the mass protests against the WTO ministerial in Seattle. They had a distinctly international viewpoint, often originating in the processes linked to the UN summits of the 1990s (on environment, women, human rights and so on) but also coming from campaigns such as anti-sweat shop, debt, consumer and labour rights and so on. These movements expressed a global contestation of neo-liberal globalisation. In Europe, ATTAC was the key movement in France, Germany and Sweden, while Globalise Resistance in UK and the “Movimiento de Resistencia Global” in Catalonia were important. These movements had their apogee between 1999 and 2002, but since then their role has been overtaken by the anti-war coalitions but, more importantly, by the broad alliance of movements who are part of the social forum processes. Similarly in India and Brazil, the social forum processes have facilitated the building of broad alliances.

To understand how all these organisations and movements, that have very different cultures and traditions, work together, it is useful to go back to a more global appreciation of the new “great transformation” this world is experiencing. Several authors, such as Luc Boltanski and Saskia Sassen, emphasize the isomorphism between the new organisational forms of the capitalist company or the international institutions and those of the organizations criticising them. To be effective and to deploy a relevant criticism, activist organisations must borrow their shape and their resources from the world they contest. The hierarchical companies, criticised for their verticality and centrality by many sectors, including activists, are now organising themselves by “project” borrowing from networks their horizontal and decentralised structures. In return, several activist circles endorse as well the network structures as a positive evolution instead of the classic bureaucratic trade unions or associations. In addition, the technical networks are deeply embedded in these evolutions, in particular through the development of communication systems such as Internet which has a decentralized and co-operative infrastructure.

The “network” is an organisational form with a decentralized structure that gives an important margin of autonomy to the actors. It allows those in the network to coordinate with other entities and it uses consensus as the decision-making process.

The social forum process is a network-based process. Even if the organisations and movements who are part of the processes have very different structures, and are often internally far from the horizontal, this requirement to be horizontal is a desirable principle of coordination for the organizations themselves, but especially for the huge majority of the activists attracted by the Social Forums.

Given the global character of neo-liberalism, it is necessary for affected people to coordinate their answers. For example, the international movement of small peasants Via Campesina was created in 1993 as a reaction to the trade negotiations in the GATT and later in the WTO. In addition, the rapid transformation of companies, outsourcing more and more their factories and production lines, requires new alliances between north and south trade unions but also between trade unions, movements of consumers, environmentalists, farmers organisations, and so on. The social forums

are the best place to create and develop these networks and coalitions.

Concretely, the social forums could be described as big machines for creating and coordinating projects to contest the extension of neo-liberal globalisation.

To come back to the actual challenges for the movements, we must look at the recent evolutions in the international political economy: today the world is very different than in 1999, after the Seattle demonstration. The global justice movement is affected by two major factors: one coming from the movements themselves, the social enlargement of the mobilisations and the other being the consequence of the new world situation.

In its first phase, from 1998 to 2002, the global justice movement had three important characteristics: the global character of its targets, in particular the big international institutions; the global character of its claims, such as the cancellation of the debt or the rejection of the IMF interventions; and the social homogeneity of the majority of activists, young people possessing significant cultural capital. This movement had a considerable impact because it was a direct response to the globalisation of capitalism: a movement able to mobilise against neo-liberal globalisation because it was also global and international.

In 1999, only 30,000 militants blocked the conference of WTO in Seattle. In 2001, 300,000 demonstrated against the G8 in Genoa and, to remain with the Italian example, three million protested on the street in 2002 against a new labour law and three million again, in 2003, against the war in Iraq.

The massive and international mobilisation against the war in Iraq reinforced the global and unified character of the movements. But even if the anti-war mobilisations were extremely important, the unity given by the issue (against the war) and the forms of the action (mass demonstrations) masked to some extent an essential change: the social rooting of the mobilisations. It is obvious if we look at Europe, but it is also true for Asia and especially Latin America. In Europe, after 2002 many countries experienced general strikes - extremely rare thing in the 20 last years - and significant social mobilisations. The issues that mobilised people were the defence of the democracy (against the extreme right wing presidential candidate Le Pen in France or auto-amnesty of Silvio Berlusconi in Italy), defence of the environment (stopping the proposed diversion of Ebre river in Catalonia) and especially social issues such as the Italian, French and German mobilisations against various national labour reform proposals which would reduce workers conditions, compensation for the unemployed and retirement benefits. These social mobilisations appeared in response to the reforms proposed by the various governments in the name of the constraints of competitiveness imposed by globalisation. These mobilisations were then part of the movement against neo-liberal globalisation, and around the same time the trade union movement became much more engaged at the European level in the social forum processes.

However two elements complicated things for the global justice movements. First, the national character of these mobilisations developed in reference to governmental reform or legislation. Even if sympathies were expressed beyond the borders, the movements were national, and the success or failure of the mobilisations were an important precondition for further strengthening the movement. For example, in France, the relative failure of the strikes of May and June 2003 against the reform of the retirement had an effect on the growth of the movements.

The second great evolution of the movement returns to the international situation after September 11, 2001, the invasion and war on Iraq and the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004. We are in paradoxical situation where neo-liberal globalisation remains at the heart of economic policies, yet there are deepening divisions between large countries and regional groupings. From the economic

point of view, growth in 2004 restarted the flow of foreign direct investments and the expansion of the multinationals, which are the driving force of neo-liberal globalisation. At the political level, the re-election of George Bush, and fears that the US will continue its warmongering policies and unilateral administration, opened the Pandora's box of nationalism. For some of the powerful such as Russia, China or India, this nationalism can be expressed directly whereas for the average powers the mediation by regional alliances is the only means of reaching the critical size necessary. Thus, the European construction and the project of the European constitution are justified, for many political leaders, by the need to build strong Europe vis-a-vis US unilateralism. Indeed, the French Socialist Party uses this argument in support of a "yes" vote for the European Constitution. This new situation is problematic for social movements which choose, from time to time to align themselves with their governments against transnational capitalism or US imperialism. For example, a significant part of the "piqueteros", the unemployed movement of Argentina, decided to join the party of Kirchner, the president of the Republic and, in Europe, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) supports the proposed European constitution.

The social rooting, which goes hand in hand with a national anchoring and the deepening of international fractures, could combine to split or fragment alliances of social movements which are in the heart of the altermondialism. It would be the achievement, five years later, of the Financial Times' prediction the day after the Seattle demonstrations that the alliance between radical trade unionists, ecologists and young people could not last. However, this pessimistic scenario is far from being the most probable. Never before have the movements reached such a level of international coordination, and the direct relations, the woven bonds and confidence between actors engages tens of thousands of militants from across the world. This internationalization of the movements does not arise only out of principles or solidarity. As we saw before, it arises from globalisation itself: the opening of the markets imposes the need for coordinated answers, the transformation and the delocalization of companies requires new alliances. But if there are objective reasons for the Movements to work together at international level, they need tools and frames able to facilitate the processes of common actions.

The fifth World Social Forum in Porto Alegre marked an important new step in this way in experimentation of alternative practices, reflection and developing innovative organisational formulas to help the movements discuss, coordinate and act together. Previous forums were created, in Brazil, under the responsibility of a network of eight organizations including the MST, the CUT, the principal trade union, and the ABONG, the main Brazilian NGO coordination. These organizations were responsible for the choice of the speakers, at least in the plenary meetings, and for selecting the main themes of the Forum. For the 5th WSF, a radically open and bottom-up new methodology was used in the preparations. The program itself was completely constructed by the participating movements which proposed seminars, assemblies, reflections, debates, strategy sessions, workshops and campaign coordination, and so on: more 2600 activities in all.

The innovations were not limited to the development of the program. A particular effort was made to promote alternative practices. The stands of food and drinks were provided by small producers and local businesses and environmental questions were integrated in the physical design even of the venue. Data processing was entirely under free software and the priority was given to the activist initiatives: translations was ensured by Babels, gathering thousands of interpreters who take part voluntarily, and a system of digitalization, also using free software, could made possible to "stream" though the Internet the debates of the forum.

If the forums continue this kind of processes, the development of these new practices will help for the arrival of new actors and will make more easy to built common agendas and common campaigns. But, after that, it's up to the movements to find the way to develop efficient actions and campaigns to challenge neo-liberal globalisation: the European movements are, for example, discussing how to

have real European social mobilisations to change the EU policies, and several groups of movements, unions and NGOs start in Porto Alegre to work together how to dismantle the power of the transnational corporations.

This kind of debates are the future of the Global Justice Movement!

P.S.

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