

20 years of alterglobalism in Quebec: Review in 3 points

Wednesday 23 June 2021, by [CANET Raphaël](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2021).

April 2001. 60,000 people walked the streets of Quebec City to denounce the imposition of neoliberal globalization through the signing of free trade agreements by our governments behind closed doors. The gap between the worldview of the economic-political elites and that of the people, opened in Chiapas (1994) and Seattle (1999), continued to widen.

April 2021. The milestone of 3 million deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic is reached. After a year of sanitary containment measures that drastically limit local and international mobility of populations, the race to vaccinate reveals an accentuation of inequalities between countries of the North and the South, and within each of them.

At 20-year intervals, two portraits of the world that bear witness to the slow agony of the dream of a *happy globalization* that has turned into a nightmare. What assessment can we make today of twenty years of alterglobalist struggles to build a world emancipated from neoliberalism? Here is a three-point review.

1. We were right

The alterglobalization movement has won the battle of ideas. The critical analyses of neoliberal globalization, of the *unique thought* and of the *Washington Consensus*, the demonstration of the dead ends of a dominant model of extractivist, energy-consuming and polluting development, based on the exploitation of human beings and the planet, all these efforts of reflection, sharing and, in many ways, education, have proved to be well-founded. World is not for sale. Excessive relocation has a human and environmental cost. Unlimited growth in a limited world is a chimera. Capitalism cannot be moralized because “always more” often rhymes with “everything for me, nothing for others”. We were right to criticize the project of neoliberalization of the world which, in spite of the dominant speeches of the time reproduced *ad nauseam*, did not have at all the objective to build a harmonious and bucolic common world. Happy globalization was only for a tiny minority, an oligarchy living in golden bubbles that prefers to look to the stars (colonizing Mars, Mr. Musk?) rather than concede their privileges.

Adam Smith, the founding father of classical liberalism, recognized this in his time: “Any proposal for a new law or regulation of trade which comes from this class of people [merchants] must always be received with the greatest suspicion, and never adopted until after a long and serious examination, to which the most scrupulous, but the most suspicious attention must be paid. *This proposition comes from a class of people whose interest can never be exactly the same as the interest of society* [emphasis added], who have, in general, an interest in deceiving the public and even in overcharging it, and who, consequently, have already done both on many occasions.” [\[1\]](#)

2. We lost

The alterglobalization movement has lost the political battle. We can go to the sky but politics is

often very down to earth. There is no need to go back to Plato's cave to see that the most beautiful ideas, or the most well-founded in reason, are not those that generally triumph in the political arena. Trumpism has given us a striking illustration of this, demonstrating in the same breath that the second myth of the turn of the century (after the one of happy globalization), that of the *Information Society*, is just as fallacious, since the rise of social networks in the era of digital capitalism results in fake news and ideological manipulation. The social use of technological innovations constrains more often than it liberates.

Despite the immense work that was done during the darkest periods of Latin American democracies to converge social forces into political movements capable of taking power, the pink wave of progressive governments that took hold in Latin America at the turn of the 2000s has disappointed. Whether in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil or elsewhere, undeniable advances have been made to improve the lives of the poorest and to put an end to unabashed social dualism. And yet, these progressive regimes have not succeeded in setting in motion the great transition needed to reconcile social justice and environmental justice in order to face the challenges of the 21st century. The same bitter observation can be made about the radical left parties in southern European countries (Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain) which, in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis and the vast social mobilizations that followed (Indignados, Occupy) took power, but did not change the world. And this is without mentioning the Arab Spring that became winter in many countries (Libya, Syria, Egypt, but also Tunisia, Algeria...). The alterglobalist movement has lost the political battle because it has not been able to transform its alternative ideas into government programs and above all into concrete policies, national and international, enabling it to change the system and satisfy the immense hope of building a better world.

3. We must change

The alterglobalization movement must review its strategies. As the activist Lorraine Guay so rightly writes, *who are we to be discouraged?* [2] We are part of emancipation struggles that unfold over the long term and in the face of the challenge of collapse towards which the politics of the status quo seems to lead us inexorably. We must change our strategy and take action. It is too late to be pessimistic.

Faced with global policies imposed by nation-states (and mainly ours, those of the global North), the alterglobalization movement has assailed the major international economic organizations (WTO, IMF, World Bank, Davos...). It has even taken power in some peripheral states and yet the multitude has not overthrown the Empire. The economic crisis of 2008, which struck at the heart of the system, did not bring financial capitalism down. On the contrary, it was saved by public funds and then converted into digital capitalism in accordance with the fourth industrial revolution praised by the founder of the World Economic Forum. [3] Then, in order to face the multiple forms of social protest that erupted in the four corners of the planet at the turn of the 2010s to denounce austerity, the oligarchy became more radical, not hesitating to convert to neoconservatism, which combines economic freedom with strict social control. The anti-globalization movement, whether at the COP 15 in Copenhagen in 2009, or at the G20 summit in Toronto in 2010, has not been able to take advantage of the serious economic crisis and social upheaval to change the system (and not the climate!) and bring global finance to its knees (by imposing the Tobin tax, abolishing tax havens and adopting the Pigou principle [4]). Once again, we have been very good at thinking about alternatives, but not at transformative action. The powerful of this world did not bend. The governments did not follow us. And now, ten years later, we are facing a new major crisis.

So what to do? Always the same nagging question. Without a crystal ball, we can only share and submit to the activist criticism (and not the gnawing of mice) some possible avenues of action.

1. **Let us organize resistance and build alternatives at the local level.** It is here and now, in our communities, our neighborhoods, our cities, our regions, in all these places that are our real contexts of life and the breeding ground of our local solidarities that our actions make sense. This does not mean that we should no longer care about what is happening at the international level, nor should we continue to play the game of representative democracy at the local and national level. But rather than waiting for our representatives and their experts to do things for us, we need to *take the time* to get involved in our communities to defend the causes we care about, and especially to practice the world we want to see happen, whether it is in our consumption and our work, but also in our relationships with our neighbourhood and our institutions. Taking the time to discover that we live in the heart of a social ecosystem (that we have come to know during these months of forced confinement) that is both fragile and precious and that gives meaning and happiness to our daily lives. *More links, less possessions*, it starts locally, because the scale of our daily action is local.
2. **Let us defend our territories and learn from indigenous peoples.** Local action certainly means promoting an economy of proximity and short circles, building new community solidarities on a human scale, but also, sometimes, resisting and opposing large useless projects, retrograde policies and social and environmental devastation. Because if we can have our heads in the clouds, we always have our feet on the ground. We have a lot to learn from indigenous peoples and it is now the moment to listen to their relationship to the territory, to time, to stories. And this posture is fundamental (it is even revolutionary), because in order to emancipate ourselves from the western capitalist and industrial modernity in which we are immersed and which constitutes our DNA, we will have to learn to unlearn and above all to re-root ourselves. Our territories (which can also be urban) are not just resources to be exploited or spaces to be developed, they are our life areas, they are living places that it is our responsibility to preserve. Adopting this ecosystemic and fundamental vision of things will lead us to look not only critically but also indignantly at large retrograde projects that are totally disconnected from current issues and that consume public funds, such as pipelines and other highways.
3. **Let us share our actions and experiments at the global level in an archipelago world built by our solidarities.** Acting locally and defending our territories does not mean turning inward. Alterglobalism does not advocate a sectarian survivalism, quite the contrary. This movement was born in the international solidarity of peoples against the globalization of markets and finance. It is therefore internationalist in essence, and the more accurate term would be *glocalist*. Since its beginnings, and in this sense the Zapatista spark [5] is very eloquent, the alterglobalization movement has deployed itself in a constant back and forth between the global and the local, thus putting into practice the slogan developed before it by the ecologist movement: *think globally, act locally*. It is this fundamental dynamic that allows us to preserve the diversity of the movement and that constitutes all its richness. Because there cannot be a mass solution to global disorder. Especially because this global disorder is precisely the product of this imperialist desire to impose a single model of development and, more broadly, of life (neoliberalism) on the whole planet (Mrs. Thatcher's famous *TINA*). What we need to spread are masses of solutions, experimented at the local level, then discussed, shared and exchanged at the regional, national and global levels. The emerging archipelago world presents itself as a network of original worlds that explore alternative ways of producing, organizing and living, in relation to each other, and whose cartography is being developed. [6]
4. **Let us act together, aware of our constitutive diversity and guided by the principles of social and environmental justice.** Finally, it seems essential to keep in mind that even if social innovations and initiatives of political transformation are often carried by active minorities, they are always realized in collective action. It is together that we will make this radical transition towards new worlds of proximity, respectful of the limits of the planet and

the human being, interconnected to each other in respect of their diversity. This collective transformational action must be guided by the complementary principles of social and environmental justice. This is how we will be able to practice a true revolutionary praxis on a daily basis that will counter all those values that permeate our every move and chain us to neoliberal globalization: speed, uprooting, standardization, individualism and greed.

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Footnotes

[1] Quote from his founding work *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), taken up and put back into the context of the struggle of the yellow vests in France by the Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debts (CADTM, Belgium):

<https://www.cadtm.org/Adam-Smith-et-les-Gilets-jaunes>

[2] Pascale Dufour, *Qui sommes-nous pour être découragées ? Conversation militante avec Lorraine Guay*, Montréal, Écosociété, 2019.

[3] Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, Geneva, World Economic forum, 2016.

[4] Susan George, *Leurs crises, nos solutions*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2010.

[5] The insurrection of the Zapatista indigenous movement in the southeastern Mexican state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994, when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, is considered a founding moment in the emergence of alterglobalism. See Jérôme Baschet, *L'Étincelle zapatiste. Insurrection indienne et résistance planétaire*, Paris, Denoël, 2002.

[6] In particular: <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/>