



Neoliberal Globalization and the Internationalization of Protest: A European Perspective¹

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Assessments of the recent protest movements against neoliberal globalization differ considerably. Is it the “first social movement of post-modernity” (*Der Spiegel*) or a “Network Guerilla” (*Financial Times*)? Is it a corrective, or a fundamental opposition, to neoliberal globalization? Can we speak at all of *one* movement in the singular or is it not, rather, movements in the plural? Does it, or do they, struggle *for* a globalization with a human face, global justice, the disarmament of the (financial) markets, the re-regulation of the world economy, the democratization of international organizations, global socialism or communism? Do they struggle *against* neoliberal globalization, the commodification of ever further areas of life (“The world is not a commodity!”), the negative consequences of privatizations, the increasing division between North and South, institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization, brand-name fetishism (“No logo!”) and corporate rule? The list could be continued. It is just as diverse as the spectra of the movement are heterogeneous?

Approaches

To begin with, we wish to develop some conceptual approaches which will be helpful for the analysis of the present movements. First, it can be stated that the movements develop their effects to a good degree through their reception by the media, in social-scientific analyses, or in specific political contexts. In other words, they are dependent on producing *resonances*. The latter in turn shape the self-perception of

the movement's actors and enable them to satisfy themselves of their historical importance and—beyond all political differences—to understand themselves as part of a collective subject.

Secondly, international demonstrations as in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, Quebec, Florence or Evian are not the core of the international protest movements, but rather *crystallization points*. The movements are above all anchored in local and national contexts. The same applies to the World Social Forum which began in Porto Alegre in 2001. For a large part, the international protest movements developed from local, regional and national struggles against neoliberal globalization. The rebellion of the Mexican Zapatistas, which began in 1994, referred explicitly to the North American Free Trade Agreement; and also the strikes in France and South Korea in the middle of the 1990s criticized neoliberal policies. This is an indication of the important, but at the same time less visible, processes of the emergence of a foundation and a rebellious consciousness, which articulated themselves globally at the end of the 1990s. Thus, movements go through complex *processes of fermentation*. Traditional organizations such as trade unions can also play a central role in this. The concept of fermentation contradicts the picture frequently transported in the bourgeois media that the international protest movements in a manner of speaking suddenly appeared from nowhere.

Thirdly, the movements can be understood as an *expression of the politicization of the contradictions of neoliberal globalization*. At the centre of the criticism of very different groups and prominent individuals are deregulation and the associated dismantling of social rights, as well as the further (or re-)commodification of social relations, eg by the privatization of public enterprises, changes in social welfare assistance or the valorization of human and non-human nature. These are confronted with categories of justice, of diversity versus monoculture, the democratization of relationships (in which it is not clear whether this is to be achieved by fundamental changes in international political institutions or by their abolition) etc. There is a broad consensus that non-violent direct actions and civil disobedience are legitimate.

Fourthly, the struggles of the movements are substantially *struggles over concepts*. They aim at attacking the dominant patterns of interpreting social realities and at providing “representational strength” (Jane Jenson) to alternative interpretations which are suppressed and made invisible by the dominant patterns. This requires an organizational framework. In her well-informed analysis of the protests in Seattle, Jackie Smith applies the term “transnational social movement organizations”, which form the backbone of the international protests. They developed during the 1990s as an answer to neoliberal economic policies. The International Forum on Globalization (founded in 1994) or the Third World Network (founded in 1984) are described as

international “cadre organizations” and “paradigm warriors”, which aim to criticize the neoliberal paradigm and proclaim fundamental alternatives. Alternative expertise, organizational experience and identity formation are important for collective learning processes and these can be better provided by formalized organizational structures. Here also lies the meaning of critical NGOs. Moreover, according to Smith, extra-movement groups like churches or professional associations play an important role because they provide broader participation and legitimacy, even though their aims as a rule are less far-reaching.

Spectra

Due to the diversity of the global social movements, they have no lowest common denominator. Nevertheless, we can differentiate between three “typical” political approaches. First, since the “Battle of Seattle” a spectrum of groups and individuals which can be described as a *radical international protest movement* has been at the centre of public attention. It is characterized by its anti-institutional and confrontational attitude. International neoliberal institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the IMF and the World Bank are identified as opponents which cannot be democratized and therefore should be abolished. On the basis of local struggles, this part of the movement directs itself towards events such as the WTO ministerial conferences, IMF and World Bank meetings and World Economic Summits. An important organizational form is the network, and a prominent example is Peoples’ Global Action (PGA), which was founded in 1997 and which sees itself as a platform for the diverse radical global protest movements all over the world. In particular, PGA draws attention to the increasing struggles in peripheral countries, which should provide impulses for the metropolises. Thus, European activists, in the run-up to the Cologne G7 Summit, organized a caravan through Europe of 500 members of an Indian radical farmers’ organization. On the national scale, the Italian *Disobbedienti* (the former *Tute Bianche*) are an example of the anti-institutional movement spectrum in Europe. They strive to intensify conflicts politically by actions of “social disobedience”. They aim thereby at preventing the domestication and defusing of the protest and at clarifying the antagonistic character of social struggles.

Secondly, there are internationally acting NGOs. They mainly strive for the democratization of international organizations whose decisions they attempt to influence from a human rights, environmental, developmental or feminist position. They rely especially on expertise and the strength of the better argument. During the 1990s the cooperative and state reformist politics of the NGOs was the prevailing type of “civil society” protest on an international scale. In parts, that changed with the rise of more confrontational approaches

since the late 1990s. Today, NGOs can no longer claim for themselves the sole representation of international criticism. Also, some critical NGOs take the new movements very seriously and are part of them. In particular, the failure of the so-called Rio process, which became obvious at the “Rio + 10” conference in September 2002 in Johannesburg, was significant here. One important horizon of strategy building of critical NGOs is that co-operation and conflict should be brought into an appropriate relationship.

The third current within the movements against neoliberal globalization can be located between the first two. With the second current it shares the rather state reformist approach, which differentiates it from the radical forces of the first current. With these radical forces it shares the bid for a mobilization “from below”, which distinguishes it, among other things, from the lobbyist policy style of many NGOs. The third current, on the one hand, is represented by actors who try to strengthen the ties between intellectual criticism and social movements. The most prominent example in Europe is the French group *Raisons d’agir* (“reasons to act”), which was initiated by Pierre Bourdieu, the sociologist, who died in 2002. It represents a more left-Keynesian position struggling especially for a fairer distribution of wealth. The state is seen as an integral component of neoliberal politics. But via a shift of societal power relations it can and should be (re-)oriented towards welfare politics. Capitalist production as a comprehensive social and international relationship of domination is hardly analyzed. The criticism of state policies is directed at their current neoliberal form rather than at the fundamental power structure incorporated in the state as such. Some intellectuals use Polanyi’s metaphors of the “double movement” and the “re-embedding of markets” in order to give an orientation and a historical example.

A second force within this third current is the network Attac, which has gained great importance, particularly in Germany and France. At its beginning was an article by the editor-in-chief of the left liberal monthly newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Ignacio Ramonet, in December 1997. Against the background of the Asian crisis, Ramonet demanded “the disarming of the markets” and proposed the establishment of an “association for the taxation of financial transactions for the welfare of the citizens”—in French abbreviated as “Attac”. The suggestion met with a large resonance, in many places groups formed spontaneously, and starting from France Attac spread worldwide. Meanwhile the organization has abandoned its sole focus on the international financial markets and their taxation and turned to a broader spectrum of issues (which are nonetheless closely connected with developments on the financial markets) like the privatization of public goods and institutions and the dismantling of the welfare state. Thus, institutions like GATS, the service agreement of the World Trade Organization, have also moved into the focus of Attac.

Ambiguities

All parts of the international protest movement necessarily find themselves in various dilemmas. Applying oneself to the contradictions of post-Fordist capitalism is a contradictory process in itself. In our opinion, there is a necessity to reflect the dilemmas and to deal with them consciously, because the integrative and de-politicizing suction effects of bourgeois society are very strong. In addition, although the criticism of neoliberal globalization is experiencing increasing resonance in the media, and global social movements also intelligently produce this resonance, this changes little in regard to the neoliberal-dominated societal power relations. On the contrary, instead of the protest also producing resonance in the state apparatuses, there are signs that national governments are acting increasingly violently—both at home and abroad. In domestic policy, liberal-democratic essentials are openly ignored, while in international relations international law is dismantled. It would naturally be unreasonable to blame such a young and still constituent movement for this. Nevertheless, it is necessary to explore prospectively the possible dangers and dead ends.

- (1) In a large spectrum of the movements—this is particularly true of the second and third of the currents outlined above—the socially dominant understanding of globalization is reproduced. According to this understanding, economic processes have become globalized, while state politics remained in a national, or at best European, framework. It is therefore necessary to “re-regulate” the economic processes at the international level. This poses the question, however, as to the role of politics in the recent changes. In fact, as part of the societal power relations, politics actively drove the neoliberal process forward. “Politics” at the local, national and international levels does not stand up against “economics” and neoliberal orientations, but secures neoliberal interests both institutionally and ideologically. If this is not, or not sufficiently, recognized, there is an impendent danger of being taken in by the illusion that it is possible to convince the enlightened elites of the necessity of a change in policies by means of “pressure from below”.
- (2) This is combined with a reduced concept of crisis. In the 1990s the criticism of the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes, which were disaster programmes for most people in the peripheral countries, found hardly any resonance. Rather, there has again been increasing talk of “crisis” only since the susceptibility of the international financial system can no longer be denied by the neoliberals themselves. This does not speak against the initiatives for the regulation of the financial

markets, but it does speak for taking into account with which interests and in which social context the debate on the financial markets takes place. What is necessary is a much broader understanding of crises and actions against them. It is not a question of appropriate techniques against some dysfunctionality of globalization, but of the irrationality of neoliberal globalization itself, societal structures and power relations.

- (3) A central constitutional condition for the international protest movement is the possibility of fast and relatively cheap communication. Thus, in a very short space of time, a close net of alternative communication was formed, in which not only is information exchanged, but also clarifying and organizational processes take place. Nevertheless, many effects first unfold via civil public opinion; it is here that struggles for the social legitimacy of demands and action forms take place, and here that neoliberal hegemony is questioned. One danger consists, however, in the confusing of short-term media successes with the lasting change of material balances of forces and dominant developments. Moreover, an important experience of recent years is that the individual parts of the movement do not only use media publicity for themselves, but are also subjected to its constraints. Media live from “events” like those in Genoa, but at the same time they produce pressure on the “good parts” of the movement to dissociate themselves for instance from actions of civil disobedience. The *good guys* are created, who formulate “legitimate requests”, and the *bad guys*, who should be treated with “all firmness”. In addition, there is a tendency to present “faces” and thus to create “stars” in and of the movement. Here lie dangers which must be discussed carefully.
- (4) Finally, the dilemma arises of the connection between radical criticism and concrete action. How can fundamental criticism of societal power relations be brought to a *political* head? How can criticism be both *radical* and *concrete* at the same time? How can one intervene in political debates with clear and mobilizing messages and at the same time retain the utopian excess, the moment of the non-integrable? This dilemma can only be met by the constant reflection of one’s own actions and the conditions under which these take place—a task not only for movement protagonists, but particularly also for the critical intellectuals closely associated with them.

Intellectuals

The neoliberal post-Fordist project would indeed not have received its outlines without its “organic intellectuals”, who contribute crucially to the elaboration of consensus and to the rendering plausible of

societal relations. Gramsci always stressed that subordinate forces also produce their own intellectuals. Therefore, the question arises right in the formation phase of a possible protest cycle as to how critical intellectuals relate to the protest movements.

We have already mentioned the network *Raisons d'agir* around Pierre Bourdieu. Intellectuals played an important role in the politicizing of the contradictions and processes of exclusion of the neoliberal-militaristic transformation of society. However, it must be stated, at least for Western Europe, that fundamental criticism of current developments is hardly to be heard from academia—there is a sharp distinction between intellectuals (of the movements) and academics. This also showed itself in the defamation campaigns against Pierre Bourdieu by major French intellectuals like Alain Touraine. Fundamentally, critical thinking has either withdrawn into niches or is marginalized. Relevant knowledge comes, if at all, primarily from the feminist spectrum. To summarize, it is, of course, chic to be critical. But it usually proves to be compatible with dominant tendencies. Anthony Giddens with his considerations on the “third way” or Jürgen Habermas with his repeated justification of wars are outstanding examples for organic intellectuals of dominant developments.

The meaning of the above-mentioned *paradigm warriors*, critical NGOs in the role of intellectuals, is therefore all the more important. It is here that analyses are made which represent an important knowledge base of the movements, and concepts are developed which provide an answer to the neoliberal *pensée unique*. A central function of critical intellectuals, apart from the elaboration of shared aspects, is to bring the criticism of power relations to a head and to let it culminate in practical criticism. Here, too, we can observe that the contributions with most originality come from Southern NGOs (like the Asian think tank *Focus on the Global South*) which, of course, argue from a very different background of societal experiences.

Challenges

It is a paradox of the current societal transformations that they point out the limitations of national politics. That should not be taken as an occasion for snide remarks on the part of the Left, however, because it means above all that the fundamental rights of the subordinate classes and groups are being dismantled. Nevertheless, it also opens up areas for a left criticism. Relationships of power and domination must be questioned more comprehensively from an emancipative perspective, and in so doing the bourgeois-capitalist state must be seen as a central protagonist and terrain of the maintenance of power and domination and not be (mis)understood as a possible bulwark

against neoliberalism. To take up and advance this issue is one of the essentials of emancipative politics—and concomitantly also of critical interventions by intellectuals.

The present movements certainly have, in our opinion, the potential to radicalize and internationalize the practical criticism of the state and politics (and capital, of course), in order to take the current changes into account. The dominant concept of politics can experience a *radicalization* through the current protests. National politics are only understood as a part of comprehensive changes, which aim not least at fundamental changes in practices in everyday life and not (only) place the “question of power” on the agenda, but also aim at a more comprehensive politicization of, and change in, society in complicated “wars of position” (Antonio Gramsci). The close linkage between politics and the state can be dissolved. The movements also partly succeed in doing this.

In addition, the practical and theoretical criticism of the state and politics must be *internationalized*, however. This can be clarified by the example of the neoliberal international institutions, the World Trade Organization, the IMF and the World Bank. These continue to be expressions of the neoliberal transformation of society—which means in particular the subordination of social actions under the imperative of international competitiveness and the commodification of ever further areas of life. The international institutional system is not an “instrument” of the dominant countries or a henchman of capital. In it, however, worldwide bourgeois capitalist and imperialist power relations and the results of social struggles are condensed. These are, in turn, formulated as “national interest”, the expression of national struggles and balances of forces. Moreover, as we can see very clearly in the case of the World Bank, international institutions are constantly co-opting critical thoughts and talented people—especially from Southern countries—in order to integrate them without changing the fundamental orientations.

A central challenge consists, in our opinion, in formulating practical steps for political changes out of the criticism of the state and the dominant understanding of politics—not in the shape of an apparent “all-round alternative” or “blueprint”, but in the shape of concrete demands and experiences which bring certain contradictions to a political head and develop social explosiveness without dictating the goals of emancipative politics. Such demands can refer to the level of international institutions. It should be considered here, for example, to what extent the widespread proposals for the reform of the IMF, the World Bank or the World Trade Organization could be contrasted with the demand for their abolition in order to shift the focus towards the fundamental functions of the three institutions in the maintenance of existing power relations.

If one takes seriously that power relations do not exclusively reproduce themselves in a repressive manner but above all in a hegemonic one, then in our opinion a meaningful strategic orientation is that of “struggles of position” or of “radical reformism” (Joachim Hirsch). In short, it is a question, firstly, of a theoretical-critical knowledge of the structures of the dominant developments in capitalist societies today, which can produce *resonances* in the movements. This protects against voluntarism and contributes to the difficult search for scopes of action. Secondly, the insight is central that emancipative changes are complicated learning and experience processes and do not take place via the state.

Therefore, another challenge consists of shifting societal power relations by means of changes in everyday practices. Emancipative politics does not “happen” quickly—although “jumps” are indispensable, particularly at the symbolic level and at the level of a more positive self-assessment (therefore “Genoa” and “Seattle” are important)—but is a complicated process and must be linked to everyday practices in universities, firms, city quarters, political organizations and personal relationships. This cannot be compensated by media attention and the creation of recognized spokespersons because there is certainly the danger of becoming part of the “politics in the arena” (Wolf-Dieter Narr/Roland Roth) and underestimating the fact that neoliberalism was extremely successful precisely on the cultural and everyday level. It is thus not only a question of a different national politics, but of practical changes in the forms of work, of living and of societalization, of modes of consumption and gender relations. Both forms of the transformation into practice of the radical criticism of power relations—the confrontational attitude towards international organizations and the politicization of everyday practices—are expressions of a changed concept of politics. This no longer recognizes the state monopoly of politics, but redefines the forms and terrains in or on which politics takes place. Social-scientific research and theoretical advancements with respect to the global social movements have only just begun and could become an important part of the debates—which are themselves part of the struggles.

Endnote

¹ Translated into English by Sabah Alnasseri and Irene Wilson.