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The Globalization Movement

Some Points of Clarification

David Graeber

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A great deal of nonsense has been written about the so-called antiglobalization movement – particularly the more radical, direct action end of it – and very little has been written by anyone who has spent any time inside it. As Pierre Bourdieu noted, the neglect of the movement by North American academics is nothing short of scandalous. Academics who for years have published essays that sound like position papers for large social movements that do not in fact exist seem seized with confusion or worse, highminded contempt, now that real ones are everywhere emerging. As an active participant in the movement as well as an anthropologist, I want to provide some broad background for those intellectuals who might be interested in taking up some of their historical responsibilities. This essay is meant to clear away a few misconceptions.

The phrase “antiglobalization” movement was coined by the corporate media, and people inside the movement, especially in the non-NGO, direct action camp, have never felt comfortable with it. Essentially, this is a movement against neoliberalism, and for creating new forms of global democracy. Unfortunately, that statement is almost meaningless in the US,

since the media insist on framing such issues only in propagandistic terms (“free trade,” “free market”) and the term neoliberalism is not in general use. As a result, in meetings one often hears people using the expressions “globalization movement” and “antiglobalization movement” interchangeably.

In fact, if one takes globalization to mean the effacement of borders and the free movement of people, possessions and ideas, then it’s pretty clear that not only is the movement a product of globalization, but that most of the groups involved in it – particularly the most radical ones – are in fact far more supportive of globalization in general than supporters of the International Monetary Fund or World Trade Organization. The real origins of the movement, for example, lie in an international network called People’s Global Action (PGA). PGA emerged from a 1998 Zapatista *encuentro* in Barcelona, and its founding members include not only anarchist groups in Spain, Britain and Germany, but a Gandhian socialist peasant league in India, the Argentinian teachers’ union, indigenous groups such as the Maori of New Zealand and [indigenous federations] of Ecuador, the Brazilian landless peasants’ movement and a network made up of communities founded by escaped slaves in South and Central America. North America was for a long time one of the few areas that was hardly represented (except for the Canadian Postal Workers Union, which acted as PGA’s main communications hub until it was largely replaced by the internet). It was PGA that put out the first calls for days of action such as J18 and N30 – the latter, the original call for direct action against the 1999 WTO meetings in Seattle.

Internationalism is also reflected in the movement’s demands. Here one need look only at the three great planks of the platform of the Italian group Ya Basta! (appropriated, without acknowledgement, by Michael Hardt and Tony Negri in their book *Empire*): a universally guaranteed “basic income,” a principle of global citizenship that would guarantee free

movement of people across borders, and a principle of free access to new technology – which in practice would mean extreme limits on patent rights (themselves a very insidious form of protectionism). More and more, protesters have been trying to draw attention to the fact that the neoliberal vision of “globalization” is pretty much limited to the free flow of commodities, and actually increases barriers against the flow of people, information and ideas. As we often point out, the size of the US border guard has in fact almost tripled since signing of NAFTA. This is not really surprising, since if it were not possible to effectively imprison the majority of people in the world in impoverished enclaves where even existing social guarantees could be gradually removed, there would be no incentive for companies like Nike or The Gap to move production there to begin with. The protests in Genoa, for example, were kicked off by a 50,000-strong march calling for free immigration in and out of Europe – a fact that went completely unreported by the international press, which the next day headlined claims by George Bush and Tony Blair that protesters were calling for a “fortress Europe.”

In striking contrast with past forms of internationalism, however, this movement has not simply advocated exporting Western organizational models to the rest of the world; if anything, the flow has been the other way around. Most of the movement’s techniques (consensus process, spokescouncils, even mass nonviolent civil disobedience itself) were first developed in the global South. In the long run, this may well prove the most radical thing about it.

Ever since Seattle, the international media have endlessly decried the supposed violence of direct action. The US media invoke this term most insistently, despite the fact that after two years of increasingly militant protests in the US, it is still impossible to come up with a single example of someone physically injured by a protester. I would say that what really disturbs the powers-that-be is that they do not know how to deal with an

overtly revolutionary movement that refuses to fall into familiar patterns of armed resistance.

Here there is often a very conscious effort to destroy existing paradigms. Where once it seemed that the only alternatives to marching along with signs were either Gandhian non-violent civil disobedience or outright insurrection, groups like the Direct Action Network, Reclaim the Streets, Black Blocs or Ya Basta! have all, in their own ways, been trying to map out a completely new territory in between. They're attempting to invent what many call a "new language" of protest combining elements of what might otherwise be considered street theater, festival and what can only be called non-violent warfare (nonviolent in the sense adopted by, say, Black Bloc anarchists, of eschewing any direct physical harm to human beings). Ya Basta! for example is famous for its *tuti bianci* or white overalls: elaborate forms of padding, ranging from foam armor to inner tubes to rubber-ducky flotation devices, helmets and their signature chemical-proof white jumpsuits. As this non-violent army pushes its way through police barricades while protecting each other against injury or arrest, the ridiculous gear seems to reduce human beings to cartoon characters – misshapen, ungainly but almost impossible to damage. (The effect is only increased when lines of costumed figures attack police with balloons and water pistols or feather dusters.) Even the most militant – say, eco-saboteurs like the Earth Liberation Front – scrupulously avoid anything that would cause harm to human beings (or for that matter, animals). It's this scrambling of conventional categories that so throws off the forces of order and makes them desperate to bring things back to familiar territory (simple violence): even to the point, as in Genoa, of encouraging fascist hooligans to run riot as an excuse to use overwhelming force.

Actually, the Zapatistas, who inspired so much of the movement, could themselves be considered a precedent here as well. They are about the least violent "army" one can imagine (it is

to act like an anarchist in the present, your long-term vision is pretty much your own business.” Its ideology, then, is immanent in the antiauthoritarian principles that underlie its practice, and one of its more explicit principles is that things should stay that way.

There is indeed something very new here, and something potentially extremely important. Consensus process – in which one of the basic rules is that one always treats others’ arguments as fundamentally reasonable and principled, whatever one thinks about the person making it – in particular creates an extremely different style of debate and argument than the sort encouraged by majority voting, one in which the incentives are all towards compromise and creative synthesis rather than polarization, reduction and treating minor points of difference like philosophical ruptures. I need hardly point out how much our accustomed modes of academic discourse resemble the latter – or even more, perhaps, the kind of sectarian reasoning that leads to endless splits and fragmentation, which the “new new left” (as it is sometimes called) has so far managed almost completely to avoid. It seems to me that in many ways the activists are way ahead of the theorists here, and that the most challenging problem for us will be to create forms of intellectual practice more in tune with newly emerging forms of democratic practice, rather than with the tiresome sectarian logic those groups have finally managed to set aside.

something of an open secret that, for the last five years at least, they have not even been carrying real guns). These new tactics are perfectly in accord with the general anarchistic inspiration of the movement, which is less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule while winning ever-larger spaces of autonomy from it. The critical thing, though, is that all this is only possible in a general atmosphere of peace. In fact, it seems to me that these are the ultimate stakes of struggle at the moment: a moment that may well determine the overall direction of the 21st century.

It is hard to remember now that (as Eric Hobsbawm reminds us) during the late 19th century, anarchism was the core of the revolutionary left – this was a time when most Marxist parties were rapidly becoming reformist social democrats. This situation only really changed with World War I, and of course the Russian revolution. It was the success of the latter, we are usually told, that led to the decline of anarchism and catapulted Communism everywhere to the fore. But it seems to me one could look at this another way. In the late 19th century people honestly believed that war had been made obsolete between industrialized powers; colonial adventures were a constant, but a war between France and England on French or English soil seemed as unthinkable as it would today. By 1900, even the use of passports was considered an antiquated barbarism.

The 20th century (which appears to have begun in 1914 and ended sometime around 1989 or ’91) was by contrast the most violent in human history. It was a century almost entirely preoccupied with either waging world wars or preparing for them. Hardly surprising, then, as the ultimate measure of political effectiveness became the ability to create and maintain huge mechanized killing machines, that anarchism quickly came to seem irrelevant. This is, after all, the one thing that anarchists can never, by definition, be very good at. Neither is it surprising that Marxism (whose parties were already organized on a command structure, and for whom the organi-

zation of huge mechanized killing machines often proved the only thing they were particularly good at) seemed eminently practical and realistic in comparison. And could it really be a coincidence that the moment the cold war ended and war between industrialized powers once again seemed unimaginable, anarchism popped right back to where it had been at the end of the 19th century, as an international movement at the very center of the revolutionary left?

If so, it becomes more clear what the ultimate stakes of the current “anti-terrorist” mobilization are. In the short run, things look very frightening for a movement that governments were desperately calling terrorist even before September 11. There is little doubt that a lot of good people are about to suffer terrible repression. But in the long run, a return to 20th-century levels of violence is simply impossible. The spread of nuclear weapons alone will ensure that larger and larger portions of the globe are simply off-limits to conventional warfare. And if war is the health of the state, the prospects for anarchist-style organizing can only be improving.

I can't remember how many articles I've read in the left press asserting that the globalization movement, while tactically brilliant, has no central theme or coherent ideology. These complaints seem to be the left-wing equivalent of the incessant claims in the corporate media that this is a movement made up of dumb kids touting a bundle of completely unrelated causes. Even worse are the claims – which one sees surprisingly frequently in the work of academic social theorists who should know better, like Hardt and Negri, or Slavoj Zizek – that the movement is plagued by a generic opposition, rooted in bourgeois individualism, to all forms of structure or organization. It's distressing that, two years after Seattle, I should even have to write this, but someone obviously should: in North America especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization; it is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology; those new forms

of organization are its ideology. It is a movement about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down (especially, state-like, corporate or party) structures, networks based on principles of decentralized, nonhierarchical consensus democracy.

Over the past 10 years in particular, activists in North America have been putting enormous creative energy into reinventing their groups' own internal processes to create a viable model of what functioning direct democracy could look like, drawing particularly, as I've noted, on examples from outside the Western tradition. The result is a rich and growing panoply of organizational forms and instruments – affinity groups, spokescouncils, facilitation tools, break-outs, fish-bowls, blocking concerns, vibes-watchers and so on – all aimed at creating forms of democratic process that allow initiatives to rise from below and attain maximum effective solidarity without stifling dissenting voices, creating leadership positions or compelling people to do anything to which they have not freely consented. It is very much a work in progress, and creating a culture of democracy among people who have little experience of such things is necessarily a painful and uneven business, but – as almost any police chief who has faced protestors on the streets can attest – direct democracy of this sort can be remarkably effective.

Here I want to stress the relation of theory and practice this organizational model entails. Perhaps the best way to start thinking about groups like the Direct Action Network (which I've been working with for the past two years) is to see it as the diametrical opposite of the kind of sectarian Marxist group that has so long characterized the revolutionary left. Where the latter puts its emphasis on achieving a complete and correct theoretical analysis, demands ideological uniformity and juxtaposes a vision of an egalitarian future with extremely authoritarian forms of organization in the present, DAN openly seeks diversity: its motto might as well be, “if you are willing