

The future of civil society opposition to neoliberal global economic governance

THE END OF ANTI-GLOBALIZATION ACTIVITY?

Recent years have witnessed substantial activity by a so-called anti-globalization movement of opposition to prevailing regulatory arrangements for the world economy. Manifestations of these challenges have included street demonstrations alongside multilateral conferences (at Seattle, Prague, and Genoa) and targeted issue campaigns (against the MAI, for debt relief, against the FTAA). Other initiatives in the movement like the World Social Forum have sought to develop alternative frameworks for global economic order.

Last autumn some commentators announced that September 11 had put an end to this activity. Two months later the streets of Doha were indeed quiet. Recently, however, the World Economic Forum brought protesters back to New York City, while Porto Alegre attracted several times more participants than a year before. Civil society mobilization against what is variously dubbed “neoliberal,” “corporate-led,” or “imperialist” globalization looks set to continue for the time being. Therefore, the question is not whether these challenges will persist, but on what scale, in what shape, with what aims, with what impacts, and with what credibility?

SCALE

Opposition to existing mechanisms of global economic governance has recently attracted a considerably enlarged following. Before 1998, these actions rarely involved more than several hundred people at a time. Now the main protest events regularly draw thousands, if not tens of thousands of participants. For example, the ATTAC (Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens) movement has rapidly expanded to encompass 26 countries, with around 23,000 active members in a hundred lo-

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cal branches in France alone. Some 50,000 to 60,000 people attended the second World Social Forum, February 2002, with more than 700 program events on offer. In this country the Council of Canadians has likewise attracted tens of thousands of supporters to its opposition to neoliberalism.

WILL THE ANTI-GLOBALIZATION MOVEMENT CONTINUE TO GROW?

One key question for the future of this movement therefore concerns scale. Will growth continue on its steeply ascending line of the past several years and, if so, for how long and to what ultimate proportions? Or has active participation reached a plateau, so that the movement will stay vociferous and occasionally influential, but remain at the

fringes of politics? Or is current anti-globalization activity merely an ephemeral burst of mass political energy that will recede as quickly as it rose, leaving behind a small core of dedicated activists on the sort of scale that sustained critiques of neoliberalism during the 1980s and early 1990s?

The current situation seems sufficiently fluid that any of these scenarios could unfold. Given that most citizens across the world feel some degree of concern about negative implications of existing forms of globalization, the potential constituency for the movement is huge. On the other hand, a prevailing climate of political passivity and cynicism inhibits greater activism, and most people direct their limited political energy to local and national politics. In addition, most school and university curricula give, at best, passing consideration to the global economy, and the mass media gives critiques of neoliberalism little serious attention. Moreover, the principal civil society organizations that promote this opposition face severe resource constraints. Hence, considerable forces both encourage and discourage an expansion of the movement.

In these circumstances, heavily contingent factors will determine if, when, and where discontents with global economic governance will turn into added force for the anti-globalization movement. In particular, it depends on whether the relevant civil society associations can secure more staff, funds, office facilities, etc. It also depends on whether the movement can attract a larger following with effective civic education, *inter alia*, through public meetings, publications, the mass media, and the Internet. And it substantially depends on whether additional shock events in the global economy will trigger further mobilization, as the Asia financial crisis did in 1997-98, for example.

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ORGANIZATIONAL SHAPE OF THE MOVEMENT

General forecasts about the future organizational shape of the “anti-globalization movement” are easier to make than those about its scale. On the one hand, the recent upsurge in activism has involved formal civil society associations like churches, labour unions, NGOs, and think tanks. On the other hand, it has encompassed informal groups like anarchist cells, listserv subscribers, and unaffiliated students. Coalitions between these different circles have been generally loose and often fragile. Attempts to forge a unified, centrally directed movement under a single, precisely articulated platform have thus far come to naught.

This situation seems unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Trade unions and NGOs have a long history of mutual suspicion, as do secular and faith-based groups. Practitioner–researcher divides are also strong in some, though by no means all, countries. Many free-floating anti-globalization activists have no appetite for the disciplines of hierarchies and manifestos. Moreover, the vagueness and openness of the “globalization” theme has been crucial in attracting many malcontents to the movement. Efforts to narrow, specify, and impose agendas would drive away many of these people and keep countless more from joining in the first place. It seems far more likely that the movement will retain its present form—that is, a fluid network of networks with multiple campaigns and no fixed leadership.

AIMS

A third key issue for the future of civil society mobilization against neoliberal global economic policies concerns the type of change pursued. The movement has always had to negotiate tensions between rejectionism, reformism, and transformism. The first of these strategies has aimed to unravel globalization processes and dissolve global economic governance. The second line has sought

incremental adjustments to institutions and policies, while the third stream has advocated comprehensive transformation of the prevailing order. The situation has been further complicated inasmuch as the approaches of many individual activists and associations have shifted over time and between settings.

These debates are bound to continue in the months and years to come. Will it be rejectionist refusals to repay debt, or reformist programs of partial and conditional debt relief, or transformist designs of comprehensive and unconditional debt cancellation coupled with a new system of development finance? Will it be a rejection of all structural adjustment, or market reforms with social safety nets, or a new paradigm of socially and environmentally sustainable economic restructuring? Will it be mercantilism, or global social democracy, or a post-capitalist mode of production? Arguments between rejectionism, reformism, and transformism have a long history that well predates the current anti-globalization movement, and it seems highly unlikely that today’s activists will get beyond their shared opposition to neoliberalism to a common vision of what should replace it.

STIMULATING PUBLIC DEBATE

Yet such a consensus is unnecessary and, in an important sense, undesirable. A key contribution of this civil society mobilization has been to stimulate public debate about global economic governance. In its heyday, the so-called Washington Consensus left little space for the expression of dissent and the exploration of alternative policies. Such an unhealthy situation invites complacency and mistakes in ruling circles, if not outright authoritarianism. The pluralism of the anti-globalization movement has provided a vital democratic antidote that should be nurtured rather than, as many in official circles would prefer, neutralized with cooptation.

Hence, the challenge is not to forge a common strategy for all civil society op-

position to neoliberalism, but rather to ensure that opposition (whether rejectionist, reformist, or transformist in orientation) is pursued on non-violent lines. Street battles and other scenarios of destruction bode ill for all sides. Maintenance of constructive politics requires restraint and readiness to listen among activists and authorities alike.

IMPACTS: POLICY PROCESS, CONTENT, AND DISCOURSE

Moving from aims to impacts, civil society activism is likely to persist in influencing three general aspects of global economic governance—namely, policy process, policy content, and policy discourse. The precise forms and extents of these effects are difficult to specify in advance; nor is it ever easy to separate the significance of civil society from that of other forces in play. However, experience of the last few years suggests that the impacts can be considerable.

On the first count, policy process, civil society activities will probably continue to shape a number of the mechanisms by which rules and programs of global economic governance are formulated, implemented, and reviewed. Such developments are no minor matter, of course, inasmuch as the ways that decisions are taken often significantly affect the substance of the resulting measures. Already, pressures from civil society quarters have encouraged many governments and multilateral economic institutions to create new offices, to undertake public consultation exercises, to implement measures for greater public transparency, and to develop independent official policy evaluation procedures. In addition, a number of civil society critics of neoliberal globalization have moved to the inside of policy processes as advisers to official circles. Key challenges for the future will be to further develop mechanisms of effective civil society engagement in global economic governance and to ensure that, in contrast to the present situation, they are available in all countries

and for all multilateral agencies.

On the matter of policy content, countless specific instances in recent history have seen civil society opposition help to initiate, propel, amend, or block measures of global economic governance. One need only mention the MAI, the HIPC Initiative (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative), the Sardar Sarovar-Narmada dam project, the series of UN global conferences, increased attention to the Tobin Tax, the proliferation of multilateral environmental agreements, etc. Broader issues for the future include the degree to which civil society critics of neoliberalism might reinforce recently observed moves in global economic governance toward: more proactive social policies; greater sensitivity to cultural, economic, and political context that is away from “one-size-fits-all” approaches to global policy; and increased attention to international human rights law.

ALTERING REIGNING IDEAS

Beyond shifts in policy measures lies the question whether civil society critiques of neoliberalism will alter reigning ideas and mindsets in global economic governance. As suggested earlier, civil society opposition has already played a part in denting confidence in ultra-liberal market capitalism as the guiding principle for the global economy. Even most former bastions of *laissez faire* have accepted at least some need for institutional and regulatory infrastructures that allow markets to perform to their optimum. Agencies of global economic governance have also adopted civil society language concerning “participation,” “transparency,” “poverty reduction,” “gender,” and “sustainable development,” although skeptics argue that these notions have become neutralized in the process. So it remains to be seen whether challenges from civil society and other quarters will push the so-called “post-Washington Consensus” beyond “neoliberalism with knobs on” to global social democracy or some other qualitatively different policy framework.

CREDIBILITY

As civil society groups pursue a variety of reformist and radical agendas for change in the processes, decisions, and discourses of global economic governance, they will face continuing—probably growing—questions about their legitimacy. Given the enlarged proportions and influences of civil society opposition to neoliberalism, it is right and proper for sympathizers and skeptics alike to scrutinize the competence and democratic credentials of these political actors.

On the matter of competence, civil society associations face important challenges to raise their general standards of knowledge about global economic governance. Senior veteran campaigners often hold a sophisticated awareness of the issues, but they form a minority in the overall movement. Most civil society opponents of neoliberal globalization need to build on their, usually honourably held, moral positions with more precise understanding of relevant legal instruments, institutional arrangements, empirical data, and dominant and alternative theoretical frameworks. In this regard the activists would do well to develop more training exercises, to enlarge their research capacity, and to build more bridges with academic circles.

DEMOCRATIC CREDENTIALS

In terms of democratic credentials, civil society opponents of neoliberalism need to ensure that their associations maximize possibilities for participation. To date, the movement has largely conformed to hierarchies of opportunity that mark world social relations as a whole. Thus, the activists have been disproportionately northern, white, urban, and middle class. True, women and youth have arguably had more chances of participation in these campaigns than in politics at large; yet the leading figures have still been predominantly male and middle-aged. Even when these associations explicitly disclaim any pretension to be “representative,” they continue to have obligations to engage with and create space for the subordinated circles whose fates they purport to promote.

As well as problems of maximizing participation in the politics of the global economy, civil society associations face challenges of democracy in their own operations. Thus, for example, the movement needs to retain and promote pluralism and vigorous internal debate, avoiding impositions of orthodoxy and arbitrary, sometimes even physically violent, suppression of alternative opinions. In addition, many groups in the movement can be far more transparent about their membership, leadership, aims, decision-taking procedures, finances, and so on. In terms of democratic accountability, many associations can be much more rigorous about informing supporters of the results of campaigns, subjecting leaders to periodic and open selection, etc.

ENGAGEMENT WITH POPULARLY ELECTED LEGISLATURES

Finally, civil society critiques of neoliberal globalization must take care not to subvert other democratic mechanisms such as parliamentary processes. On the contrary, examples in Brazil, France, the United States, and elsewhere suggest that the anti-globalization movement can gain important reforms of global economic governance through engagement with popularly elected legislatures. The protesters have rightly highlighted the limitations of territorial-state mechanisms as a means of democratic global governance, but some have tended to let the baby go with the bathwater.

The foregoing critical reflections on the credibility of anti-globalization activities are not an argument for official regulation of the groups involved. National and transnational codes of conduct can never adequately respect the diversity of organizational forms and cultural contexts that mark—and enrich—this activism. Nor does the answer lie in accreditation procedures that allow global economic institutions to select favoured civil society “part-

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ners” and exclude “troublemakers.” For the moment, civil society bodies have ample positive incentives to enhance their credentials, including increased access to and influence on governance institutions, increased support from the wider public, increased backing from funders, and increased internal cohesion within the associations themselves.

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blocks in the path of the neoliberal engine, which in fact is getting its fuel from local polity and bureaucracy? Or should anti-globalization activists be a part of the process in a way that influences the terms of reference defining the movement and pace of the neoliberal engine?

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with enhanced efficiency. A rule-making organization such as the WTO should have more resources, both human and financial, and should be more management driven. It should have mechanisms that allow for routine decisions, both on management and on substance without going through the cumbersome process of the General Council. It should also allow initiatives to be taken by the director general on substantive issues. Last but not least, the organization should be able to take decisions in improving, adapting, and clarifying rules outside a round or a single undertaking.

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global governance is, in all likelihood, bound to grow and intensify. After 9/11, most observers concluded that the movements’ resistance had reached its peak at the G8 meetings in Genoa, in August 2001. But, by March 2002, the movement had rebounded with over 500,000 protestors on the streets of Bar-


THE CHALLENGE


Civil society agitation has grown in recent years to become a prominent feature of the politics of the global economy. Already, this activity has had notable policy impacts, and it could go on to acquire a much more substantial role. If and as this happens, it will be all the more important for the movement to have capacities for critical self-regard

HOPE, JUSTICE, AND EQUITY

It is always difficult to conclude with respect to movements, happenings, and situations in a state of flux. One can offer only an opinion about the level of maturity of this flux, the rate of change, and the type of energy that this change creates. The anti-globalization move-

and proactive self-improvement.


So neither implacable skeptics nor romantic enthusiasts have had it right regarding civil society engagement of global economic governance. This development has considerable positive potentials along with substantial negative possibilities. The challenge will be to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm. 

ment and the processes that are significant in defining its dynamics are indeed in a state of flux. What one can conclude from the discussions above is that this flux is indeed maturing and its momentum is spreading positive energies of hope, justice, and equity at local, national, and international levels. 

One cannot contemplate WTO reform without addressing the question of external transparency and accountability. Both have to start at home through a greater involvement of civil society and national parliaments in WTO matters, which call nowadays for a much broader constituency than the traditional trade policy community. We need to find the ways and means for a greater involvement of civil society and parliaments in Geneva as well. Otherwise transparency will be limited and accountability will suffer.

We are not likely to get there in the immediate future but we should reflect

on it. The globalization process should be matched by the capacity of the rule-making body to live up to it. At the same time we have to realize that the WTO on its own cannot eradicate poverty, ensure sustainable development, or promote our labour standards. The Doha Declaration usefully reminds us of this.

Other international organizations—Bretton Woods and the UN—will need more coherence and complementarity between themselves and with national governments. Only then can we respond to the challenges of globalization and address the needs of the developing world. 

celona at the European Union summit. Despite the anti-terrorist legislation and the concurrent criminalization of dissent that is sweeping across the world, the resistance is escalating, particularly in Europe and parts of the third world. Here, in North America, the events of 9/11 and the anti-terrorism legislation

has, for the time being, cast a cold blanket over this kind of protest activity. Undoubtedly, this will affect the G8 protests in Kananaskis this summer. But, even here, the crisis of legitimacy swirling around the WTO’s global governance will continue to spark new waves of resistance in the future. 