

another world is thinkable

*citizens' movements, global governance
and the creation of alternatives*

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abstract

Global governance should be the the major issue for the alternative globalisation movement. In what way are the alternatives to the global order put forward by social movements relevant, integrated and coherent? Are those alternatives really alternative? And what are the strategies put in place by the citizens' movements to make this other world possible, or at least thinkable?

résumé

La gouvernance mondiale devrait, a priori, être la grande affaire de l'altermondialisme, c'est-à-dire de ce courant qui aspire comme son nom et sa devise l'indique à un autre monde. Mais quelles sont donc les propositions portées par les mouvements sociaux et citoyens en matière de gouvernance mondiale ? Ces alternatives sont-elles réellement alternatives ? Et quelles sont les stratégies mises en place par ces mouvements pour faire cet autre monde possible, ou au moins pensable ?

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history

The different waves of capitalist globalization have always motivated strong opposition from movements, and those movements have always tried to organize themselves at a global level. The previous wave of globalization, characterized by colonial imperialism and international division of labour, gave rise to Lenin's Internationale and to anti-colonial nationalism. The actual wave of globalization, characterized by neoliberal globalization, fosters movements which come together at a global scale and act at a grass roots level as well as through counter-criticism. If those citizens' movements are the successors of the struggles for peoples' emancipation, they present some singularities:

- they are heterogeneous, based on dialogue, and do not intend to unify the resistances under a single umbrella but stress the differences as a strength
- they are organized horizontally rather than vertically and strongly mobilizing
- they are supranational rather than national
- their intention is not to take the power but to act as a counter-power and to create a public space (such as the social forums) to influence the political space

In the 60's and the 70's in Eastern Europe and Latin America, movements reclaimed a public space where they could criticize the power. In the beginning of the 70's in the United States, students and feminist's movements, joined by the ecologist movement, questioned the content of the social contract arisen from the second world war. For there were nothing in this contract about some minorities (such as women, homosexuals and immigrants) and major issues (such as cultural diversity and ecology).

Because the issues the most obviously global in the 70's were pollution and ecological disasters, the environmental organizations were among the first to locate their action on a global scale (temporary and spacially). The first "Earth Day" is celebrated in 1970, April 22 (which is also Lenin's birthday), and the reflexion opened up through the decade foreshadowed the idea of Global Public Goods.

Little by little, as globalization appeared as the constituent phenomenon of the time and the favoured tool to decipher everything that happens on Earth, citizen's movements became more and more conscious that the solution to the problems they were fighting at a very local scale needed an answer at a global scale. Meanwhile, as information became another favoured tool to decipher everything that happens on Earth, they broadened the scope of their considerations and started to develop their proper appraisals. And thus began the cognitive and symbolic battle.

Our purpose here is not to oppose local pragmatism to global theory, but to underline that this shift from a scale to another had two major consequences: firstly the movements had to form coalitions if they wanted to carry weight at a larger scale. And they had to develop an analysis on topics far more abstract and complex than their traditional actions required.

Indeed, during the 1980's and particularly the 1990's, global issues were all at once a subject, a project, a catalyst and a battle field.

Global actors such as the World Bank and the IMF and global mechanism such as debt and structural adjustments were identified as the sources of major problems. Subsequently a counter-assessment was developed to counter-attack the neoliberal

dogma. Meanwhile, counter-summits were organised. The first TOES took place in London in 1984, and the first NGO meeting about the GATT in 1986. In 1988, during the World Bank and IMF annual assembly, a demonstration gathers 80.000 people in Berlin. The next year, while those two organisations were meeting again, citizens' movements from the North and South worked together on a common counter-discourse. It is the first time, but soon it becomes a ritual, and counter-events mixing wide-ranging mobilizations "reclaiming the street" with proposals of reform discussed through round tables and conferences grow more and more all through the nineties. Their number will explode after Seattle¹. During the 90's decade, United Nations conferences (such as the Rio summit in 1992) had also given NGOs opportunities to come together and develop alternatives. Indeed, the World Social Forum has not come from nowhere.

"Against the neoliberal globalization: the globalization of resistances." Thus would be the leitmotif of these activists' gatherings. In other words, the mobilisation around global issues has led actors which were previously heterogeneous, sometimes in competition and other times in conflict, to find a common ground and to share their objectives and their appraisals.

Seattle symbolizes this convergence of workers unions and peasant movements, Trade unions, development NGOs, ecologist movements and consumers associations. While the Social Forums in general and the World Social Forum in particular put forward the creation of an alternative way of thinking, if not another ideology.

From the first WSF to the second ESF, the alternative globalisation movement (or global justice movement, being understood as the gathering of movements which have formed under the banner "another world is possible") shifted from negative opposition (anti-globalization) to creative alternatives (alter-globalization). This resistance is no longer merely a negative reaction (the real anti-globalization movement is the nationalist and localist forces which struggle to keep safe the borders of their community safe and relevant) but a positive construction of another world. The movement has come into its own maturity, and the battle field is now both practical and theoretical.

practical battle

from the local field...

Most of the citizens' organisations have focused their effort on the "field" on the one hand, and on the defense of general principles on the other hand. For some organisations (in France for instance), there is a gap between action and reflexion and reflexion is slowing down action. For some others, taking the arms of the adversaries would dirty their hands.

Whilst opinions vary on the development, lobbying and contestation methods, and whilst there may be a different of approach between latin and anglo-saxons, or between North and South, there is nonetheless a wide consensus on a core set of principles and values such as human dignity, respect for the environment, equality

¹ Cf. PIANTA Mario, SILVA Federico, "Parallel summits of global civil society: an update", in Anheier, H., Glasius, M., and Kaldor, M., eds., *Global Civil Society 2003*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.387-394

between men, between men and women and between peoples, the rule of law, etc. Those “causes without adversary¹” form the ethical basis of every single action.

Historically, the citizens' movement have built up their legitimacy of speech on the defense of those without (without rights, without education, without health care, without shelter, without work, etc.), and focused their attention more and more on the causes of these problems (structural adjustment, immigration policies, corruption, etc.)

... to the global field

Things have change since twenty years, and the field of action is more and more global as we dive into globalisation. In this falsely “brand new” global framework, the current GJM is not outside of globalization and the processes of governance. As the governance model suggests, so-called “civil society” must play a specific role on the global stage, debating with the corporate and public worlds to bring about a consensus. Thus is the faustian dilemma that faces the alternative globalisation movement: to be a part of the system in order to have the possibility to reform it, or to stay outside and push for change?

Most of the propositions carried by the alternative globalization movement give a special role to the organisations of the movement. A role of monitoring, of control and of evaluation. Today the NGOs are admitted in some international organisations (consultative status within the ECOSOC, important participation of trade unions to the ILO) but they lack political legitimacy. As a result, most of the citizens' movements do not fight the state, and leave alone issues considered as regalian (demography, security, etc.). They interact with states, call them to act and support the progressist ones. It could seem paradoxical: the alternative globalisation movement, which is considered by some as a terrorist movement, is fighting for the respect of the rule of law, promoting taxes, and asking for the state interventions. This very radical movement is, most of the time, only asking everyone to respect the rules of the game. The most radical reform of the UN would consist, in this perspective, to respect every statement of its Chart (equality between nations = suppression of the Security Council; major importance of the UN in economic policies = reintegration of the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO inside the UN system; “we the people of the United Nations = creation of a World Parliament; and so forth).

cognitive battle

from the theoretic field...

The first legitimacy of the citizens' movement is practical, grass-rooted, built on action. Analysis and reflexion are almost always considered as a luxury, if not a waste of time. Even if things have been changing since the 70's.

The last thirty years have indeed seen the movements building up their own appraisal on debt, Bretton Woods institutions, trade policies and the UN¹. Backed by

¹ JUHEM Philippe, « SOS-Racisme, histoire d'une mobilisation "apolitique". Contribution à une analyse des transformations des représentations politiques après 1981 », thèse de science politique, <http://juhem.club.fr/index.html#t>

scholars and experts², the most important of the citizens' organisations have developed a corpus of analysis and propositions widely used by the citizens' movements to reinforce their counter-discourse. This cognitive battle is an aspect of the practical one. It consists mainly in promoting and defending rights that are the translation of ethics principles they believe in (such as the Economic, Social and Cultural rights), fighting those which contradict them (WTO trade rules for instance) and trying to create a global order based on rights and justice.

Yet, most of the propositions carried by the movements are either borrowed to scholars and institutions or counter-propositions (i.e. opposite propositions). Concerning the UN reform, on the one hand a large part of the movements supports propositions arisen from the institution itself through experts panels' reports. On the other hand most of the researches led by activists laboratories consist in dismantling and criticizing reports issued by the global institutions they have identified as the major source of global problems (OECD, WB, IMF, WTO, etc.). In the same perspective, the counter-summits are following the international agenda, trying to put their issues on the forestage and to inflect the international debates.

Some might say that the movements are suffering from a lack of unity and visibility. The same is also true with regards to their proposals, for as soon as we enter technical issues there is no longer any consensus. Let's cancel the debt? All right, but which one? The private debt, the internal debt? The multinateral debt? And how? In this case, the movements concerned with building up a counter-appraisal face a problem usually reserved for scholars and academics: the specialisation, and sometimes hyperspecialisation of the field of research may lead to segmentation of the issues and the impossibility to grasp an integrate view of it. Yet major victories have been won by linking issues such as development and environment (sustainable development), economy and society (social economics), etc.

Conscious of this disparity, the WSF has always refused to agree on a declaration, as a result of its diverse nature. In 2005, being conscious of the importance to have some visible alternatives to show to their detractors, nineteen of the leading entities in the alternative globalisation movement, tried to sum up the consensual propositions inside the movements. The result was a huge backlash from the majority of the participants.

... to the symbolic field

The main battle is perhaps taking place at the symbolic level and what is at stake in the match opposing neoliberal forces and the alternative globalisation movement is the way we consider nature and human beings, culture and societies.

Neoliberalism is exceptionnaly gifted in shaping knowledge and using the media. Its doxa seems to be naturally flowing from think tanks to medias and from medias to common sense. Its main power would therefore be a "symbolic power", as Pierre

¹ Transnational Institute in 1974, CETRI in 1976, The Third World Network in 1984, INTRAC in 1991, 50 Years Is Enough in 1994, Bretton Woods project in 1995, World Forum of alternatives in 1997

² Often issued from the same institution they criticize, some as concerned citizens, some others because they were quite marginal in the scientific community, and most of them because they could find here a tribune, if not a grandstand, from where their could speak without being censored.

Bourdieu might have described it (a brief description of which would be the power to make things out of words).

The neoliberal system is not based on reality but on a vision of reality. Almost every study led by economists has shown that neoliberal economic theories were not giving the results they had announced. And the way the neoliberal thought was spread in the mass-media is well documented today¹. For instance, the term “governance”, which is now becoming a kind of dogma, should be considered as another ideological trick created by the neoliberals. So why not clearly point out governance as a major enemy, since it supposes:

- a restriction of democracy (negotiation with experts and so-called representatives of the civil society, suffrage based on a tax qualification, citizen turned into a consumer)
- the demolition of the welfare state
- the prevalence of economical factors and technical approaches upon social and political considerations
- the shift from hard-law regulations to soft-law regulations (whereas the alternative globalisation movement continues to stress the importance of law to empower people)

The movements have the responsibility to do so. They also know how to use symbolic power. Counter-summits are an attempt to drag the spotlight of the media from a neoliberal event to a alternative one. The subversion of adverts is another example. On a larger scale, the setting up of alternative media centres all around the globe testifies the will of the citizens’ movement to fabricate their own interpretation of reality and to create a counter-power to the power which does not yet have one, i.e. the media.

In that perspective the use of the web to organize campaigns, to raise public awareness, to share knowledge and spread a message banned from the mass media shines a light on the movement’s capacity to tackle the omnipresent neoliberal discourses’ problem head-on. Still, some questions remain: Can we think against the power if we think with the power’s ideas? Is it effective to shout against the power with the words of the power? Should we build another language? Are “democracy” and “participation of the civil society” equivalent? Is free-trade really free? Are we clients or users? Should we say an “illegal immigrant” or an “asylum seeker”, “to restructure” or “to lay off”, “making flexible” or “making precarious”?

A semantic battle on the use of the words may be necessary as language becomes a screen hiding reality from our eyes.

as a conclusion

The movements’ alternative though is a work in progress (and we could say so about the whole movement). It evolves in two different times (the short term of medias VS the long term of change) and in two different spaces (the local and national space VS the global space).

¹ See HALIMI Serge, *Le Grand bond en arrière. Comment l’ordre libéral s’est imposé au monde*, Paris, Fayard, 2004; BAGDIKIAN Ben H., *The New Media Monopoly*, 20th anniversary Edition, Boston, Beacon Press, 2004