

## Whither the Global Justice Movement?

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### Abstract:

The large anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 announced the anti-globalisation, or global justice, movement's dramatic entry to the global politics of dissent. Subsequent anti-summit protests over the next few years also attracted considerable support. However, by as early as 2001, especially after one of the largest protests in Genoa saw a protestor killed, nervous questions were beginning to be asked about both the viability and longevity of this form of oppositional politics. Certainly in 2006, the global justice movement is generally viewed as, at best, considerably diminished or, at worst, a spent force. But this paper argues that to evaluate the 'movement' in these terms is to misrepresent and misunderstand it. Rather than a singular movement, the global justice movement is in reality a 'movement of movements' – a diverse collection of independent, autonomous and local groups who have come together for some big global protests but who retain localised and distinct social change commitments. These localised commitments do not necessarily mirror the visual feast of large global rallies and hence attract limited media attention. Even so, the 'movement' continues to retain its momentum through the global justice principles it helped launch – principles that now increasingly cohere in the anti-war movement.

### Introduction

The large anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999 announced the arrival of the anti-globalisation movement onto the global oppositional stage. Followed up over the next few years by other large anti-summit protests in different parts of the world, the anti-globalisation movement quickly carved out a distinctive space in the annals of movement politics. To signal what it was for as well as against – and to rid itself of a negative 'anti' identity that misrepresented its goals, especially in the media – the movement soon 'rebranded' itself as the global justice movement (GJM). But its anti-globalisation stance remained pivotal to its identity, even if its opposition was not to globalisation *per se* but to its neo-liberal form. It was unequivocally opposed to a neo-liberal globalisation directed by the powerful for the benefit of the few. The global

justice movement thus named as its 'enemy' this neo-liberal version of globalisation that it claims transfers power to corporations who then direct increasingly emasculated states to do their bidding. In this scenario, justice is trammelled and democracy a sham. The anti-globalisation movement thus set itself the task and the principle of global justice.

Over the past few years, however, the movement's momentum appears to have waned. By as early as 2001, especially after one of the largest protests in Genoa saw a protestor killed, nervous questions were beginning to be asked about both the viability and longevity of this form of oppositional politics. By 2006, the GJM is generally viewed as, at best, considerably diminished or, at worst, a spent force. But this paper argues that the GJM, far from being a spent force, has instead reconceived itself to respond more effectively to its new, particularly post-September 11, political environment. One of the reasons the GJM is relegated to the political 'scrapheap' is because of a widespread proclivity to misrepresent and misunderstand it. It is misrepresented in two main ways – misrepresentations that this paper challenges. First, rather than a singular movement, the global justice movement is in reality a 'movement of movements' – a diverse collection of independent, autonomous and local groups who have come together for some big global protests but who retain localised and distinct social change commitments. These localised commitments do not necessarily mirror the visual feast of large global rallies and hence attract limited media attention. Second, the commitment to global justice assumes myriad forms. While in the first few years, beginning with Seattle in 1999, the movement may have targeted global economic and political summits such as the World Trade Organisation, World Economic Forum and the G8, more recently its focus has been anti-war, as discussed below. This focus nonetheless remains closely linked to its core justice principles and in this way maintains its momentum. In what follows, we discuss the nature of the GJM, identify its main features, and conclude on its future directions as a continuing source of oppositional effectiveness.

### **The Global Justice movement**

The GJM has targeted the central forums of global governance – the World Trade Organisation, World Economic Forum, G7 and G8, International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and so on. These organisations make major global political and economic decisions at annual summits across the globe – decisions that affect the operation of

globalisation worldwide. They are thus seen as the representatives and drivers of neo-liberal globalisation. Protest against the November/December 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle constituted the GJM's first major action, and introduced it to the world as such. The 'Battle for Seattle' involved an estimated 100,000 protestors and was notable for its compositional diversity – environmentalists, unionists, anarchists, peace activists, church groups, international socialists, farmers, and many others (Hari 2002: 20).

The shared complaint was against a neo-liberal globalisation that degraded the environment, created unemployment, worsened working conditions, threatened farming livelihoods, destroyed communities, exploited indigenous peoples, abused the third world, produced the conditions for war and, overall, undermined equality, justice and democracy (see Curran 2007). In September 2000, the S11 protest in Melbourne against the Asia-Pacific Economic Summit of the World Economic Forum, drew over 20,000 protestors for what was to be an event marred by charges of police brutality. In April 2001, the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City drew a crowd estimated to be even bigger than that of Seattle. The subsequent July 2001 protest against the G8 summit in Genoa proved a pivotal moment in GJM actions. With an estimated 200,000-300,000 protestors – two or three times the number of Seattle – the Genoa protest claimed its first casualty, 23 year old Italian student Carlo Giuliani. Genoa was marked by claims and counter-claims of police brutality and protestor violence, property damage estimated at over \$50 million, and negative media coverage overall. Regardless, the subsequent March 2002 action in Barcelona attracted over 300,000 protestors (Hari 2002: 20).

The most recent large anti-globalisation event was that against the 31<sup>st</sup> G8 summit held from July 6 to July 8, 2005 at the Gleneagles Hotel in Perthshire, Scotland. Its agenda items included the 'problem' of African poverty, global aid and debt strategies, counter-terrorism measures, reform in the Middle East reform and climate change. Two main strands of anti-globalisation opposition coalesced during the Scottish event. One, Bob Geldolf's *Making Poverty History* Live8 campaign collected together an umbrella group of church groups, charities, trade unionists, celebrities and general protest groups to demand debt relief, and improved aid and trade, for Africa. Attracting a crowd of over 200,000, the pre-summit event was claimed to be Scotland's biggest demonstration. Not necessarily aligned with the GJM – and indeed

incurring considerable criticism from it for upstaging its own anti-summit event and 'celebritising' protest in general – the *Making Poverty History* demonstration attracted extensive, and largely positive, media attention.

### **Key features of the GJM**

Despite different organisational forms, most social movements share some defining components. Following Touraine (1974), Castells (2004: 74) highlights three of these components. The first is the movement's *identity*, that is, how it sees itself and 'on behalf of whom it speaks'. Second, since movements stand in opposition to something, each has an *adversary* or 'enemy' that it must clearly identify. Finally movements are motivated by a *social vision* – a transformational goal to which they aspire and towards which their opposition is directed. While a movement made up of many other movements, the GJM still fits these criteria well. It has a clear identity, a specifically named adversary and a shared vision of global justice. We will briefly outline some of its main, and interrelated, features.

First, the movement is clearly a global movement, or what others have called a 'global dialogue of the oppressed' (Tormey 2004: 62). While the movement's northern arm is clearly visible, its southern one is equally significant. Observers have noted that, since 2000, anti-globalisation protests took place in approximately 75 cities on six continents around the globe (Buttel 2003: 99). Even a very quick glance of anti-globalisation actions in the past few years demonstrates their global spread. These include the landless movement of Brazil, the protest villages of Thailand, the mobilisation against Monsanto in India, resistance against the 'oil occupation' of the Niger delta, Kenyan resistance to World Bank policies, Argentina's movement of unemployed workers, anti-eviction actions in Johannesburg, the Zapatista insurgencies in Mexico, to, of course, the north's Seattles, Pragues, Melbournes, Quebec Cities, Genoas and Edinburghs (see Notes from Nowhere 2003). The First Intercontinental Eucentro (meeting) for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism, held in the depths of the Chiapas jungles in Mexico, attracted thousands of people from five different continents (Notes from Nowhere 2003: 126-7). Burgmann (2003: 264) labels the GJM 'the new internationalism', highlighting the plethora of community-based actions throughout the globe, while Starr (2000) details a number of these local, national and global movements, and, importantly, how they intersect. Nonetheless, reflecting superior access to resources and a media willing to report them, northern

actions capture considerably more attention. But this should not deflect from the fact that against the expectation of a north dominated movement, 'the lion's share of protests have actually occurred in the South ... particularly ... in Bolivia, Argentina, Thailand, India, Brazil and Indonesia' (Buttel 2003: 99). Indeed, greater network capacity, powered by new technologies, have helped develop a 'global (anti-capitalist) village' enhancing 'the *capacity* of activists to organise and cross-pollinate', to undertake a genuine global dialogue, to coordinate their activities, and for the disparate protest groups, in realising that they were not alone, to offer each other visible encouragement and support (Tormey 2004: 63-9).

A second important feature of the GJM is its diversity. The movement contains not only the 'usual suspects', but also a broad range of others: unionists, church groups, the unemployed, farmers, consumer groups and so on. This was a novel, if not permanent, collaboration between different segments of social movements that were often oppositional to each other in the past. Others label this diversity a 'unity of many determinations', highlighting the 'unprecedented alliances' between these previously oppositional forces (Starr 2000: 158). These 'many determinations' include a broad array of autonomous and often allied players: opponents of structural adjustment policies, welfare reform alliances, peace and human rights supporters, land reform movements, the labour movement, anarchists, cyberpunks and consumer groups (Starr 2000: 158-161). Similarly, Klein (2001) calls the movement 'coalitions of coalitions' to identify a unifying protest core made up of many parts. These many parts reflect the various ways neo-liberal policies can damage communities throughout the world. Thus, despite the diversity, there remains a shared worldview and oppositional focus.

A third feature of the GJM is its acephalous network structure, a form assisted by the new technologies (Buttel 2003: 100). Klein describes the GJM's organisational form as protest 'hubs' incorporating a diversity of autonomous 'spokes'. This organisational form stands as a participative contrast to the hierarchical forms adopted by the institutions and corporations the GJM opposes. This 'model of *laissez-faire* organising' is thus not only 'extraordinarily difficult to control' but also 'responds to corporate concentration with a maze of fragmentation, to globalisation with its own kind of localisation, to power consolidation with radical power dispersal' (Burgmann 2003: 298). Starr agrees that the movement's strength lies in its constellation of non-

hierarchical alliances, in the ‘unprecedented alliances’ forged by ‘the very people who were expected only [to] be interested in particularistic, identity-based organising’ (2000: 158). Finally, Graeber insists that the movement is ‘less about seizing state power than about exposing, delegitimizing and dismantling mechanisms of rule’ in a ‘general atmosphere of peace’ (2002:69).

### **The GJM and the WSF**

While a separate process, The World Social Forum (WSF) is a closely related GJM ‘event’. The WSF is an annual global gathering of social movements, NGOs and other civil society organisations opposed to neo-liberal driven globalisation, and motivated by the conviction that ‘another world is possible’. As an open meeting outside the boundaries of the institutional state, the forum creates an autonomous space in which participants can share, debate and exchange ideas and proposals for the making of a better world. The forum process is also held nationally, with many countries hosting their own social forums annually or biennially. The first three WSFs were held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, before transferring to Mumbai, India, in 2004, and back to Porto Alegre in 2005. In 2006 the WSF was polycentric, held simultaneously in three regions: Africa, South America and Asia.

Like the GJM’s anti-summit strategy, the WSF is organised to run parallel to the World Economic Forum. Participants are from a wide range of backgrounds, herald from many different countries, hold an array of political views, and arrive armed with myriad proposals and strategies. But, like the GJM, the WSF shares an aversion to neo-liberal globalisation and the dispossession it imposes on their communities, and this shared opposition is the common thread cohering the two movements (see Tormey 2005). The WSF – and forums in general – are also dynamic events that incorporate new developments and reconsider strategy in response to changing political climates (see Hammond 2005; Patomaki & Teivainen 2004). In the light of Iraq, the WSF has, as with the GJM, incorporated a resurgent anti-war, anti-imperialist current (Sader 2002; Vaneik 2004).

### **Global Justice and War**

Over the past few years in particular, there has been considerable reflection on the effectiveness of the GJM strategy of summit targeting. The diminished numbers at the Gleneagles protest in 2005, and even smaller ones at the anti-G8 in Russia 2006,

echoed this. As we saw, several factors contributed to this strategic reflection, including the post-September 11 environment, a growing anti-war movement to which many in the GJM turned their attention, as well as a general rethink of the continued efficacy of large summit protests. But the protest tide was turning even before September 11. The July 2001 protest against the G8 in Genoa represented its own turning point. Long held tensions in the movement between those who advocated violence – usually to property, mainly symbolic and largely led by the Black Bloc – and those who opposed it, bubbled to the surface after the tragedy of Genoa. The GJM could no longer ignore how its own strategies were being countermanded, and infiltrated, by police and other security forces, and how the media increasingly reported, and published images of, violence and destruction that distorted the image of the GJM. Even so, as Graeber (2002: 66) points out, “what really disturbs the powers-that-be is not the ‘violence’ of the movement but its relative lack of it”; this is because “governments simply do not know how to deal with an openly revolutionary movement that refuses to fall into familiar patterns of armed resistance” (see also (Panitch 2002). Fair play or otherwise, the movement was stung by such reports of violence and its image dented.

For some, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq represented a ‘godsend’ for the movement, stemming its seeming decline and resharpening its focus. The anti-war demonstrations that involved millions, and that were staged in all corners of the world on 15 February 2003 are generally considered one of the peace and anti-globalisation movements’ most spectacular mobilisations. It is also generally considered to be one of the most international anti-war efforts ever seen (Epstein 2003: 109). While anti-war and global justice remain distinct movements, there is considerable interchange of its participants, especially in a post-Iraq climate. Even so, some argue for broader and stronger collaboration (Epstein 2003).

## **Conclusions**

The question of ‘whither the GJM?’ nonetheless remains. This paper has identified some of the clues for answering this question in the main features of the movement it discussed (see also Dee 2004; Hari 2002). First, it noted that the movement is a global movement, with significant representation and activity in the south as well as the north. The better resourced north may attract more of the media attention, but to continue to measure ‘success’ in terms of northern visibility is to overlook the fact of

its size and impact in the south. In compiling its list of participants, the Notes form Nowhere collective observed that “there were many places we couldn’t reach, where barriers of language, culture and distance prevented us hearing the voices of those directly involved” especially in the South (2003: 15). As an affiliated movement, the WSF has also demonstrated its capacity to continue drawing considerable numbers to its meetings (Nanga 2006). Regional forums have also maintained their momentum. As Hayes (2006) points out, despite “widespread apprehension” within the GJM beforehand, the European Social Forum (ESF) held in Athens in May 2006 proved very successful, attracting considerably larger numbers than its London forum the previous year.

Second, the paper identified the movement’s diversity as a feature it wears proudly. However, this diversity can be a double-edged sword. Participant autonomy can run the risk of the movement being seen (and reported) as a fragmented, incoherent and chaotic movement, ultimately inviting the charge of irrelevance. This is a concern that also relates to the movement’s third identified feature: its acephalous nature. An acephalous form that eschews movement leaders and ‘celebrities’ opposes itself to a media that finds practical utility in identifying key people in the movement for commentary and information. This leader-less structure can thus frustrate media reporting and communication. Furthermore acephalous political structures have always attracted considerable mainstream derision and attracted charges of being hopelessly utopian. Depending on the observer, the GJM’s largely non-hierarchical, networked form can be viewed as a fundamental strength *or* a fundamental weakness.

In conclusion, while the GJM focus may have changed to be less anti-summit and more anti-war, and the target for seeking such justice may have shifted, the core motivating principle of global justice remains. As Mittelman (2004) points out, anti-globalisation conflict is now increasingly framed ‘as the conflict over the efforts to secure economic globalization by military means’. This does not signal the movement’s demise; rather, the movement retains and reinforces its oppositional potency through its adaptation to the post September 11 environment.

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