

Anti-capitalism, social forums and the return of politics

Wednesday 22 February 2006, by [NINEHAM Chris](#) (Date first published: February 2006).

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Six years after its coming out party at Seattle, the anti-capitalist movement faces its biggest challenges yet.

The movement has made huge advances. Its basic critiques have become mainstream. Walk in to virtually any bookshop in the world and you will find a shelf of popular books putting the case against corporate power and the neo-conservative warmongers. Few now believe that privatisation delivers better services, that the international financial institutions like the WTO and the IMF are there to help the people of developing countries, or that the occupation in Iraq has anything to do with liberation.

Huge mobilisations against the neo-liberals continue. Some 100,000 marched against the G8 at Geneva and Annemasse in 2003, 300,000 protested at last year's G8 summit in Scotland, up to 5,000 attended the Southern African Social Forum in Harare in October 2005, and a month later George Bush was greeted by tens of thousands of protesters when he flew in to the Summit of the Americas at Mar del Plata in Argentina. The protests helped block the implementation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas. Meanwhile, the first electoral successes for the radical left in generations show how far the aspiration for another world is gaining ground.

On the other hand, political issues are arising that challenge some of the movement's basic assumptions. Some of its characteristic methods are faltering. In Britain and elsewhere the anarchist or autonomist inspired street actions peaked early and have virtually disappeared. [1] The protests at economic summits continue to inspire but appear to be changing. Whereas the early protests at Nice, Gothenburg, Genoa and Cancun were multinational, recent summit protests have been more local affairs. The great demonstration in Edinburgh at last year's G8 was the biggest ever in Scotland, and comparable in size to the Genoa G8 protest of 2001. But unlike Genoa or Geneva in 2002, this was basically a national rather than an international protest. It was a testament to the depth of anti-capitalist feeling in Scotland and England, but also maybe a sign that summithopping is losing its appeal.

The other big difference with past protests was the politics. In Scotland for the first time a

mainstream political party made a play to coopt a global justice protest. Through its influence on the NGOs, New Labour helped define the protest's agenda and publicly claimed the marchers' aims as its own. [2] This made the protests highly contested. In line with government thinking, the big NGOs in the Make Poverty History coalition fought hard to keep the main demonstration single issue. They excluded Britain's main anti-war organisation, the Stop the War Coalition, from their alliance, and tried to keep the left away. [3] This approach was a depressing betrayal of the promise of unity in diversity on display at Seattle, Genoa and the other great mobilisations.

The attempt to limit the protest largely failed because it contradicted the protesters' mood. Most of the marchers took it for granted that war and poverty are linked, and that it makes sense to protest at the two together. Up and down the great 2 July demonstration, anti-war placards, T-shirts and slogans mixed comfortably with calls for debt cancellation and trade justice.

The attempt at co-option by the Blairites is just one example of the way in which politics is becoming inescapable. In many European countries new left parties or coalitions have suddenly started winning mass electoral support. In Latin America the left's one-time hero, Lula, has capitulated to the globalisers in office in the birthplace of the World Social Forum, but Chavez has become an electrifying symbol of more serious opposition. A series of insurgent movements have shaken the regimes in Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador. In Bolivia last year the insurgency swept away two presidents and became so threatening in June that the government couldn't meet in the capital, La Paz, to choose a new candidate. The central demand of the mass movement was the renationalisation of hydrocarbon reserves. Up to now the anti-capitalist movement has downplayed politics in general and avoided the issue of state power in particular. It now needs to reconsider.

The origins of a movement

Seattle was the outcome of 20 years of struggles against neo-liberalism. Throughout the 1980s workers and the poor, North and South, fought IMF and World Bank programmes, but most of the struggles in this first round were defeated. The experience of defeat led to demoralisation and retreat into identity politics. Through the 1990s the impact of the neo-liberal programme became clear to more and more people and new struggles broke out from South Korea to Bolivia displaying a new spirit of militancy.

Most of these were single-issue campaigns and remained isolated. There were two significant exceptions. French public sector strikes in 1995 received huge popular support, became politicised and challenged the authority of the government. On 1 January 1994, on the day of the implementation of one of the most aggressive free trade agreements of the decade, a mysterious army of peasants emerged from the Chiapas Forest in south eastern Mexico. They called themselves the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, Zapatistas for short). They were carrying guns, demanding autonomy and declaiming poetic slogans. 'They are trying to turn Mexico into a shopping mall,' they said. 'We thought we were up against the state of Mexico, but in reality we were up against the great financial powers'. [4] Images of the indigenous uprising that followed were beamed round the world, and lifted the spirits of millions hurting from the globalisers' shock therapy.

By the late 1990s millions had rediscovered that what was good news for the corporations was bad for workers and the poor. Free market triumphalism had raised expectations that never came through, and at the same time advertised the scale of the globalisers' superprofits. Even when there were no struggles, people were searching for ways to express their discontent. In 1998 in France the founders of the anti currency speculation ATTAC network were overwhelmed at the response to their tentative launch letter:

The appeal was launched like a bottle in to the sea, without any idea of what the reaction might be. But no sooner had the article appeared than we were deluged by phone calls and letters. I have never seen any article generate such a response. Normally, a piece of paper will generate half a dozen letters... This time we were filling boxes with them day after day... I was astonished by the speed with which the different organisations decided financial commitment that accompanied it to take part, including trade union committees not usually quick off the mark. [5]

Seattle and the summits

It was the new visibility of the financial summits, particularly the WTO, which really focused the international movement. The 1999 Seattle protests against the WTO were the turning point. They had a huge impact because they took place at the heart of the beast and in the home of Microsoft, and because they so visibly encapsulated a new alliance between trade unionists and young activists. A series of protests followed that brought hundreds of thousands of activists together at summits in Prague, Stockholm, Brussels, Bangkok, Washington, Barcelona and Genoa.

The summits conveniently embodied the connections between ecological devastation, sweatshop labour, privatisation of the public realm and corporate greed. They illustrated the global ambitions of the big corporations, so underlining the possibility of North-South alliances. The summit protests generated widespread support and helped put the anti-capitalist critique on the map. The Economist was expressing alarm back in 2000:

The protesters are right to say that the most urgent political moral and economic question of our time is Third World poverty. They are also right to say that wave of globalisation, however powerful it may be, can be turned back. It is the fact that these two things are true which makes the protesters, and crucially the current of opinion that sympathises with them, so terribly dangerous. [6]

The protests had an electrifying effect on activists. Genoa rejuvenated the Italian left and helped inspire a run of monster demonstrations in Spain and elsewhere. In fact it is probably the movement's very success that has made international summit protests less of an activist priority over time. They fitted the movement when it first emerged. They offered a convergence that gave fledgling movements and networks the confidence of numbers and suggested a whole range of possible new alliances. As the movements have grown in social weight, activists have focused more on the domestic agenda.

Also, it has become obvious that action on the streets against the summits on its own cannot stop the neo-liberal juggernaut. The ambush at Seattle shook the WTO. The recent protests at the Summit of the Americas in Argentina have graphically underlined Bush's isolation in the world. It is humiliating that the G8 have been literally driven out of the cities into the hills. But at the same time WTO and G8 leaders have learnt how to deal with protests and continue to meet. And the summits themselves are not make or break for the neo-liberal order. The G8 is a discussion forum with no joint staff or institutional memory. The WTO is a much more important forum for pushing the Western globalisers' agenda and attempting to resolve trade disputes. But WTO negotiations are currently two years behind, and the world trading system continues to function. Even when a combination of protests and deadlock between rival blocs disrupted the Cancun WTO in 2003, the terms of trade were not radically overhauled. Business continued either on the basis of the status quo or through new bilateral agreements.

International mobilising is here to stay. It hardly needs saying that the struggle against the war in Iraq has been hugely strengthened by international coordination. The same is likely to be true for

climate change campaigning. Domestic European opposition to the neo-liberal EU constitution and the Bolkestein directive was boosted by the fact that tens of thousands marched against them in Brussels in March 2004. This incredibly resourceful movement will no doubt invent new forms of international solidarity and networking. But it remains the case that neo-liberal policies are mainly implemented at the level of the nation-state. If we are to stop them there is no getting round the fact we have to be able to stop them at home.

The international social forums

The idea that the new movement should have its own gatherings flowed from the same logic as the summit protests. Bernard Cassen, who had helped found the Attac network in France, was one of the prime movers of the World Social Forum. For him the purpose of such gatherings was 'to give a global visibility to struggles that are atomised and aren't even aware of each other. It also exposes what they have in common...we will analyse but we will also outline propositions for action over the coming months and years'. [7] Travelling across countries or continents was a step towards the kind of global movement which was felt necessary to challenge the globalisers. Like the summit protests, it was a chance to escape the frustrations or relative isolation of your own country or community.

The WSF has spawned regional forums that have galvanised the movement in many parts of the world. The Florence European Social Forum in 2002 was an important moment in European politics, ending as it did with a million-strong demonstration against an attack on Iraq and a call for anti-war demonstrations across Europe on 15 February 2003. The Asian Social Forum in Hyderabad in 2003 helped kickstart a new dialogue on the left in South Asia, leading to the coalition of the left and the NGOs that hosted the massive 2004 Mumbai World Social Forum and a new optimism in the movements in India.

The World Social Forum continues to be an inspirational gathering for tens of thousands of activists. At its best it brings together activists from different countries, backgrounds and campaigns in a creative maelstrom of debate and discussion. But there is a worrying lobby in the movement for decentralisation. This year a 'polycentric' WSF is taking place in three locations. It is too early to tell what impact this will have, but the tendency towards fragmentation at the events themselves is undoubtedly damaging. Organisers at last year's WSF at Porto Alegre built sectionalism into the event by assigning different areas of the huge site to single issues. Such segregation deadened and depoliticised the event.

The WSF has fitted a need of the movement, but it was initiated and organised from above by a small group of activists from Brazil and France. This has had important consequences for internal democracy. The ruling International Council was self-appointed at the start and remains unelected to this day. Initially decisions were taken by a handful of people-the decision, for example, about where to hold the second WSF was taken in a restaurant in Porto Alegre. [8]

This lack of democracy remains. There are still no democratic decisionmaking bodies or meetings at the WSF at all. In fact the WSF is constitutionally unable to make decisions, and political parties are banned from participating, despite the fact that a huge number of the activists involved are members of left wing parties. This is no accident. The given reason was that the only way to persuade moderate organisations to enter the political ring with thousands of radical activists was to promise there would be no conclusions, no decisions they had to respect. The underlying truth is that adherence to these rules allows moderate, reformist forces to dominate unchallenged.

Some regional forums have had a big impact. The European Social Forum has been an important

gathering for the movement since its inception in 2002. The recent Southern African Social Forum was a success but drew people overwhelmingly from the host country, Zimbabwe. But the picture is mixed-the Mediterranean Social Forum has never reached out beyond a hardcore of activists.

The international forums mainly continue to thrive because they have a specific purpose-to provide a chance for activists to meet at regional or global level. However, their continued success shouldn't hide important limitations in the way they are conceived and the way they work.

Local social forums

Some predicted that social forums would become the cornerstones of the anti-capitalist movement in every locality. By and large this has not happened. Italy is the one country that came near. In the year after the great Genoa demonstration forums sprung up across the country. In October 2001, 2,000 delegates met in Genoa from 92 local forums and announced the formation of the Italian Social Forum. [9] At the movement's peak 18 months later there were perhaps 170 forums around the country meeting with various degrees of regularity. The forums were able to mount significant mobilisations in different parts of the country. [10] But today, just three years later, the forums have collapsed and activists have moved on. Elsewhere citywide or national social forums are sometimes successful as annual gatherings for the movement, but they hardly ever meet more regularly. Many appear to have fizzled out or become refuges for one or other strand of the movement [.11] Unlike the international forums, the local forums could easily become one more meeting for activists who were in contact anyway through campaigns. They could work when focused around a particular mobilisation. At other times they were in danger of becoming talking shops. Bernard Cassen's vision of 'a thousand forums' spreading across the globe never materialised.

The NGOs

NGOs are among the biggest and best funded, and therefore most influential, participants in the international movement. They gave the movement an important early boost. The formation of the NGO coalition Jubilee 2000 in Britain in 1996 led to an 80,000-strong mobilisation at the Birmingham G8 in 1998, an important prototype for later summit protests. The rise of the NGOs was a product of the privatisation of aid. Between 1975 and 1985 the amount of aid transferred from developed to developing countries nations via NGOs shot up 1,400 percent. [12]

On the one hand neo-liberalism has radicalised the NGOs. The international business meetings were a legitimate lobbying target for them, and they had the resources and the infrastructure to coordinate internationally. At the same time there has been an active programme by neo-liberal governments and international agencies to shape NGOs to their own ends. Given the tendency of neo-liberalism to undermine democracy and create popular resistance, the guardians of the New World Order have turned to NGOs as agents of 'local development' and controlled participation to offset the emergence of real popular mass movements.

As early as 1994, the World Bank had identified both the unique ability of NGOs 'to reach poor communities and remote areas, promote local participation, and operate at a low cost, identify local needs and build on local resources', but also the drawback of the direct democracy some NGOs promoted with 'its limited replicability, self-sustainability, managerial... capacity, narrow context for programmes and politicisation'. [13] Funding bodies have spent a huge amount of energy trying to pressure NGOs to accept a narrow and apolitical approach to working with the poor, and to limit local participation to small-scale local projects that raise no questions about broader social

priorities.

A study of Latin America explains how ‘the micro-reforms and NGOs promoted a pacific or “civil” [non-confrontational] form of politics, turning the rural poor away from the social movements into local self-help “projects” funded [and designed] from above and the outside. It also created the conditions for an adjustment to the discipline of globalisation and its governance requirements’. [14]

In the worst cases NGOs are directly manipulated-and sometimes even created-by governments to help open up the public sector to private capital. This appears to be the recent experience in Singapore, for example. [15] Most NGOs have more distance from politicians, but they are at least partially dependant on governments. So though many NGO workers and activists, North and South, support the general aspiration for global justice, they are often wary of mass movements. The experience of Make Poverty History shows how this instinct can lead to efforts to gag sections of the movement and to attempted hijack by neo-liberals. The spate of Live 8 concerts that accompanied the MPH campaign reflected popular concern about global poverty but ended up promoting Blair’s pro-market initiatives for Africa.

Of course there are important dissident voices coming from many NGOs, and the most mainstream NGOs often express frustration with politicians. After the event many British NGOs criticised the deals over debt, aid and climate change made at the G8, for example. But this cycle of lobbying and disappointment only illustrates the problem. NGOs cannot tackle the deep structural problems of neo-liberal capitalism head-on. Even the most radical NGO activists who reject the state tend to adopt autonomist politics that ignore it rather than finding ways to change it or confront it.

For all these reasons NGOs tend to push for a movement structured around single issues. They try to keep radical political parties at arm’s length and avoid opening themselves up to the democracy of the movements.

Autonomism

As Stathis Kouvelakis has pointed out, one of the reasons neo-liberalism created a crisis of legitimacy for the capitalists was that it depended on abandoning Keynesian social compromises. [16] The hollowing out of social democracy helps explain why the anti-capitalist movement emerged in such explosive and unexpected ways. It also helps to explain the kind of ideas that flourished early on.

The movement developed at a time when most of the left was in some disarray. On the one hand social democrats everywhere were embracing the market. On the other hand much of the socialist left was still demoralised and confused by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Meanwhile workers were only slowly regaining the confidence to fight. Whereas in the late 1960s in many places a militant working class was present at the birth of the movement, in the late 1990s that was a minority experience.

So the ideas that dominated early on reflected growing resistance to and rejection of neo-liberalism but also a feeling that traditional left strategies had failed. Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos expressed this combination crudely but clearly in his parody of ‘old left’ practice: ‘There is an oppressor power which decides on behalf of society from above, and a group of visionaries which decides to lead the country on the correct path and ousts the other group from power, seizes power, and then also decides on behalf of society.’

It is really left nationalism he is critiquing here, but his attack is aimed at the left as a whole. His

conclusion is that all leadership is a problem:

We could not and should not try to lead the struggles encountered on our journey, or fly the flag for them... We had imagined that those below would not be slow to show themselves, with so many injustices, so many complaints, so many wounds... In our minds we had formed the image that our march would be a kind of plough, turning the soil so that all this could rise from the ground. [17]

These sentiments were taken up by many of the movement's most popular writers. They gave a new lease of life to the tradition of 'autonomist Marxism' that had seemed buried in the rubble of the Italian left in the late 1970s. Though there are different strands of autonomist ideas, they share the belief that capitalism creates the conditions for its own transcendence through spontaneous action by individuals or networks. 'Old left' concepts of organised confrontation are useless or worse because they deal in notions of power and class that inevitably lead to new hierarchies. The stress is on the paradoxical notion of spontaneous, decentralised organisation. For the most influential autonomist writers, Tony Negri and Michael Hardt, 'each local struggle functions as a node that communicates with all the other nodes without any hub or centre of intelligence'. [18]

For John Holloway, author of *Change the World Without Taking Power*, any attempt to understand or describe the nature of the system that we face is suspect: 'There is nothing fixed to which we can cling for reassurance: not class, not Marx, not revolution, nothing but the moving negation of untruth'.¹⁹ All the autonomists are wary of any politics that addresses the issue of the state, as if even admitting the possibility of a concentration of power in society will lead to betrayal: 'Power is not possessed by any particular person or institution. Power lies rather in the fragmentation of social relations... The state is not the locus of power that it appears to be'. [20]

Politics returns

Though these ideas have had an influence way beyond autonomist circles proper their hold has been progressively weakened. Violent state repression at the Gothenburg and Genoa summits threw the idea of 'non-confrontational confrontation' into question. Events post-9/11 have dramatically confirmed the importance of state power in shaping world politics. While initially most writers influenced by autonomist ideas played down the importance of the war on terror, many have now recognised the geopolitical importance of the war and have therefore had to amend their approach. [21]

The seriousness of the left electoral alternatives challenges the idea that politics can be ignored. The Italian Disobedienti, largest and most influential of the European autonomist groups, is split over whether to support the electoral alliance between Rifondazione Comunista and the centre-left in next year's presidential election.

The mass struggles in Latin America have put further strain on autonomism. It is hard to ignore the issue of power in Chavez's Venezuela when the elites have tried to remove Chavez from office three times. In Ecuador, Bolivia and elsewhere organised workers have played a vital role alongside peasants and indigenous peoples in struggles which have had to confront state power head-on. In situations like these the movement has to discuss how to respond collectively.

The December 2001 uprising in Argentina which removed the De la Rúa government was marked by a high degree of spontaneity. It led to months of permanent mobilisation and the creation of popular neighbourhood committees in many urban areas that rightly celebrated their autonomy from old clientist political structures. Commentators on both left and right talked of a pre-revolutionary

situation. But in the course of just two years the movement for democracy from below petered out, and the Kirchner government has managed to organise a return to 'normal capitalism'.

The basic problem was that the spontaneous and autonomous nature of the uprising—originally a strength—became a strategic weakness. No national leadership emerged that could unite the diverse elements of the movement behind a coherent programme aimed at taking state power. There was no systematic effort to challenge the union leaders' attempt to insulate organised workers from the movement. After a while the insurgency fragmented into a series of smaller movements, each dominated by a leader or a small left party. After a period of panic and confusion the ruling class was able to restore order by dividing, isolating and co-opting the movement. [22]

Despite all this, autonomist ideas still have an influence. [23] Many of the movement's writers are reluctant to discuss strategy, still less to talk about it in terms of class. [24] There is still hostility to left parties in some circles. Partly this is because the radicalisation in society has yet to be matched by breakthrough class struggles in most parts of the world. Partly it reflects the heavy involvement of NGOs in the movement. NGO intellectuals naturally tend to privilege new, non-class based social movements and identity politics. They lose sight of the state in a fuzzy discourse of 'civil society'. There is an identifiable continuum from autonomist language proper right through to the official developmental rhetoric of 'self-help', 'participation' and 'empowerment'. [25] But autonomist prejudices against party politics and centralised organisation are also built into some of the practices of the movement because they benefit the more moderate forces involved.

Limits of the forums

The ban on political parties and the lack of decision-making in the forums is important for the NGOs. But paradoxically it is highly convenient for any moderate political parties trying to relate to the movement. The Brazilian Workers Party gained a lot of credit from hosting the first WSF in Porto Alegre. Despite its drift towards neo-liberalism it could happily associate itself with the forum, because its leaders knew the forum could not become a centre of practical opposition. Deliberately or otherwise, the growing fragmentation of the forums makes them safer from the point of view of the social liberals.

One of the Brazilian pioneers of the World Social Forum, Chico Whittaker, compares the forum to 'a square without an owner':

If the square has an owner other than the collectivity it fails to be a square and becomes private property. Like the public square, the forum is an open but not neutral space. The forum opens from time to time in different parts of the world with one specific objective: to allow as many individuals, organisations and movements as possible that oppose neo-liberalism to get together freely, listen to each other, learn from the experiences and struggles of others and discuss proposals of action; to become linked in new nets and organisations aiming at overcoming the present process of globalisation dominated by large international corporations and their financial interests. [26]

To take him literally for a moment, Chico must know that under capitalism no space is altogether open. Even so-called public spaces have administering powers. The organisers of every world and regional social forum have had to negotiate with local authorities who have had certain concerns and requirements. The presence of politicians at or around all the forums shows that, despite the nominal ban on political parties, the space of the forum is in fact affected by the balance of power in the real world. At last year's WSF in Porto Alegre the speakers at the biggest venue, the 20,000-seat Gigantino stadium, were Lula at the start of the event and Chavez at the end. These were fascinating events, but the fact is these men represent the two dominant strands of politics in Latin America

today. There was no debate at the events. Trade unionists and socialists who opposed Lula's neoliberal reforms were reduced to heckling during his speech

The notion that the social forums operate independent of party politics was always a myth, but it is becoming harder and harder to sustain. One of the 'polycentric' forums this year is taking place in Caracas, Venezuela. It is difficult to see how the forum can ignore the struggle between Chavez and his supporters and most of Venezuela's capitalist class. The movement in Italy has actually demanded that this year's European Social Forum be postponed so that it does not interfere with the Italian elections! And the organisers of the 'polycentric' World Social Forum in Karachi, Pakistan, can hardly feel like they are operating in a political vacuum.

But in this model of a structureless open space there is nowhere to collectively discuss the big questions about how to tackle neo-liberalism. Some participants see this lack of formal politics as a plus: 'Like the jazz of Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, the forum is experimenting with a politics that can cope with uncertainty and is not constantly straining for formal harmony (in political terms, political unity)'. [27] In reality such lack of definition suits the reformists more than anyone. In fact autonomist language often barely disguises a defence of gradualism: 'The WSF privileges rebellion and non-conformity at the expense of revolution. There is no unique theory to guide the movements, because the aim is not so much to seize power but rather to change the many faces of power as they present themselves in the institutions and sociabilities'. [28]

Just as crucial for the reformists, the autonomist conception of the forum rules out collective strategic thinking on more immediate issues as well. As Chico says, 'Nobody in the forum has the right or the power to say that one action or proposal is more important than another'. [29]. In fact the forums have no capacity to make any proposals for action at all. Activists within the forum have invented the Assembly of the Social Movements to try to overcome this problem by producing a list of upcoming campaigns for the movement. The assembly has done some important work, and was crucial to launching the 15 February global day of action in 2003. But while it is action-orientated, it runs by consensus as opposed to democracy and it has no elected leadership. Deciding priorities without voting is virtually impossible. In so far as there are decisions, they are taken at interminable and dwindling pre-meetings. The assembly itself is experienced by many as the presentation of a list predecided by unknown persons somewhere else.

Consensus decision-making is not just slow and unwieldy-it builds in a veto that can be used by any group, however unrepresentative. Despite massive support for the initiative, some French groups tried to use a veto to stop the launch of the global day of action against war on 15 February 2003 at the Florence ESF. More recently the European Preparatory Assembly was blocked from sending a message of support to the campaign against the EU constitution in France on the grounds that the assembly was not allowed to take political positions!

Social forums are partly shaped by what is going on around them. The Florence ESF was so dynamic because the Italian movement was on the rise after Genoa and because opposition to the war on Iraq was coming to boiling point. In that situation many of the limitations of the forum model were swept aside. Whatever the technicalities, people will remember the forum for its call for action against the war. At other times even the great World Social Forums can feel like tamed incarnations of the movement. They collect the movement's energy without giving it direction. They bring together tens of thousands of activists in discussions without conclusions. They are the foremost gatherings of a movement that demands people power but are themselves undemocratic, and therefore open to co-optation and manipulation by mainstream political forces. Of course the WSFs continue to be useful gatherings for activists who would otherwise have no global meeting point-they fit our need for international contact, and exchange of ideas, information and perspectives. They have a huge inspirational charge. But some of their weaknesses will surely have to be addressed if they are to

have a useful future as strategic centres for the movements.

Shaping up to the future

It is not possible for the movement to progress without drawing millions more into action and that means tackling political questions head-on. But it is not enough simply to preach. One of the problems with the forums is that they aspire to mass participation on the basis of generalised opposition to neo-liberal capitalism. Despite the rhetoric of openness and inclusivity they are not designed to attract people just getting active. Officially the WSF is open only to 'groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism'. [30] It is a mark of the depth of radicalisation that they have thrived at all on that basis. But the reality is, whatever their general view of the world, most people actually get involved in political activity first round some specific issue and develop their politics as they go. Single-issue coalitions or united fronts round the most pressing issues of the day are therefore crucial to maximising involvement.

That was the nature of the victorious French campaign against the European constitution and the German coalition against Schröder's welfare reforms that shook the government in 2004. It was the basis for the antiwar mobilisations that took the movement to a new level at the beginning of 2003 and continue to destabilise Bush and Blair. Such campaigns have drawn millions of people into action for the first time. They bring together existing activists with what the British media have called 'virgin protesters' in a mutual learning curve. Though this kind of encounter generates fantastic debate, its strength depends on staying practical and keeping demands as simple as possible.

In this context setting priorities is crucial. It is not true that all campaigns should have an equal importance. Serious opposition to the neo-liberal project means prioritising the campaigns that can mobilise the maximum numbers and inflict maximum damage. These kinds of judgments involve a political analysis. Those that wanted to downplay the anti-war movement delinked war and neo-liberalism. Even after the attack on Iraq Bernard Cassen argued, 'War or peace, the problems of globalisation remained essentially the same on 10 September and 12 September-hunger, debt, inequality, AIDS'. [31] The revolutionary left and others argued that, on the contrary, imperialist war is wired in to the logic of modern day neo-liberalism. Because it is the most extreme expression of a system that puts profits before people, war is deeply destabilising. Because it is such a central priority for the US ruling class, a defeat in Iraq would be a disaster for neoliberalism generally. As the Economist warns about Iraq, 'A loss of nerve and a humiliating retreat might turn America into a shadow of itself, with consequences that would be felt well beyond the Middle East'. [32]

It is hard to see how we can build the broadest, most powerful movement possible if we duck these strategic debates and the exchange of political analyses that go with them. It is equally difficult to conceive of a successful movement in the 21st century that ignores the fight against imperialism. More than that, the prejudice that lingers in parts of the movement against politics with a capital 'P' is disarming. Despite growing cynicism towards mainstream politics, the social democratic parties still have strong influence and contain many strands of opinion. They particularly have close links with the leaderships of the trade unions, who use these links as a rationale for accepting austerity measures and not 'rocking the boat'. It is all too clear from the recent series of false starts and missed opportunities in the British labour movement that these arguments can demoralise militants unless an alternative set of ideas is widely available. Struggle is never purely spontaneous-the ideas in peoples heads always effect how they try to solve problems.

In country after country the movements are now being forced to take up political arguments and try

to find ways to challenge the social liberals. The nature of the arguments varies according to the state of the struggle. In Britain the war and the anti-war movement generated a demand for an electoral alternative to New Labour that is anti war and anti-neoliberal. Sections of the movement have set up Respect as a response. For many people politics is elections. Electoral campaigning in turn gives activists the possibility of systematically relating to millions of people. In Germany the mass movement against the 'Agenda 2010' welfare cuts helped to split the SPD and create a the new Left Party. In Brazil P-SOL is attracting many new members with a more clearly anti-capitalist programme. In Bolivia and Venezuela the issue of revolutionary politics is on the agenda. The movements cannot be reduced to the new political formations, but it would be suicide for activists to ignore the possibilities they open up.

We started out just a few years ago full of excitement, travelling to international protests tens of thousands strong. Now there are monster demonstrations wherever George Bush's Air Force One touches down. In almost every country on the globe including the US, polls show a majority against the war in Iraq and the whole range of policies Bush stands for. The rejection of the EU constitution in France and the Netherlands shows that national majorities can be mobilised against neo-liberalism in the teeth of a united ruling class propaganda offensive. We have to continue to put our case in every forum available, but it's time to leave suspicion of politics and strategising behind us.

NOTES

1: For example, the high profile series of May Day actions in Britain that started in 1999 has petered out.

2: For detail of the relationship between Make Poverty History and New Labour see K Quarmby, 'Why Oxfam is Failing Africa', *New Statesman*, 30 May 2005; and S Hodgkinson, 'Make the G8 History', *Red Pepper* 132, July 2005.

3: See S Hodgkinson, as above, p20. 4: A Starr, *Global Revolt: A Guide to the Movements Against Globalisation* (London, 2005), p24.

5: B Cassen, 'Inventing ATTAC', in Tom Mertes (ed), *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (London, 2004), p152.

6: *Economist*, 23 September 2000.

7: B Cassen, *Tout a commencé a Porto Alegre* (France, 2003), p78.

8: As above, p62.

9: *Il Manifesto*, 21 October 2001.

10: See T Behan, *Italy: The Politics That Came in From the Cold* (Verso, forthcoming).

11: In the absence of any published overview this summary is based on participants' accounts from Italy, Germany, France, the US, Switzerland, Zimbabwe, Spain, Greece and some recent personal experience in Britain and Australia.

12: J Bunyarutanasuntorn, 'The Dynamics of Thai NGOs' in N Petprasert (ed), *NGOs 2000: Political Economy (For the Community)* no 11, p74. Quoted in J G Ungpakorn, 'NGOs: Enemies or Allies?', *International Socialism* 104 (Autumn 2004), p49.

13: Quoted in S Kamat, 'NGO's and the New Democracy: The False Saviours of International

Development', *Harvard International Review*, Spring 2003, p66.

14: J Petras and H Veltmeyer, *Social Movements and State Power Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador* (Pluto, 2005), p229.

15: See J G Ungpakorn, as above.

16: See S Kouvélakis, 'France: The Triumph of the Political', *International Socialism* 108 (Autumn 2005), p8.

17: Subcomandante Marcos, 'The Hourglass of the Zapatistas' in Tom Mertes (ed), as above, p5.

18: M Hardt and A Negri, *Multitude* (London, 2005), p217.

19: J Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London, 2002), p99.

20: As above, pp72-73.

21: Naomi Klein, for example, argued up until mid-2003 that the war was not the central issue for the movement and that it could be a diversion for the movement against neo-liberalism. By early 2004 she was emphasising the links between the war on terror and corporate globalisation and writing extensively about the occupation of Iraq.

22: See J Petras and H Veltmeyer, as above pp40-42.

23: See, for example, Naomi Klein in the Guardian, 5 November 2005. Here she argues that the indigenous struggles in Latin America provide the template for a new politics of autonomy.

24: It has been noticeable from the start that many leading figures including Klein, Chomsky and Monbiot as well as Hardt, Negri, Holloway, etc, are very reluctant to debate movement strategy. Sometimes this can be put down to the understandable wariness of the intellectual to prescribe to the movement. On closer inspection it is often down to a more thoroughgoing attachment to spontaneity. See, for example, Chomsky's comments on strategy in 'Movement Organising' in P Mitchell and J Schoeffel, *Understanding Power, The Indispensable Chomsky* (New York, 2003), p339.

25: See J Petras and H Veltmeyer, as above, p23.

26: C Whitaker, 'The WSF as Open Space' in *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires* (New Delhi, 2004), p113.

27: H Wainwright, 'The Forum as Jazz' in *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, as above, pxx.

28: B de Sousa Santos, 'The World Social Forum: Toward a Counter-Hegemonic Globalization (part 1)', in *World Social Forum: Challenging Empires*, as above, p243.

29: C Whitaker, as above, p114.

30: World Social Forum Charter of Principles, www.wsf-fsm.org

31: B Cassen, 'Inventing ATTAC', as above, p165.

32: *Economist*, 15 September 2005, p24.

P.S.

* Published in "International Socialism", issue: 109, 2006.