

The 'cancer stage of capitalism' and the politics of resistance

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Abstract

Until the rise of the anti-capitalist movement, lack of resistance has been a feature of the globalising world order. John McMurtry has referred to the present era as 'the cancer stage of capitalism': the host body's immune system does not respond to the cancer's advance, because the communication systems of host social bodies across the world are themselves subordinate to transnational capital and largely reject and refuse to disseminate messages that identify the source of the disease. The academic fashionability of post-Marxism is an aspect of this failure of recognition and response. So too is the quiescence of labourist or social democratic 'reformists'. Without social democracy's critique and its practical solutions to age-old capitalist contradictions – such as how to keep workers alive and well and functioning – globalising neo-liberal capitalism appears increasingly to be a threat to itself. Even aside from the potential for wholesale systemic crisis, neo-liberalism's assault on the economic security and the social rights of the workers – on whom capitalism depends – is encouraging new and deeper forms of anti-capitalist resistance that are potentially more dangerous to capitalism than the restoration of the gains of social democracy. Antonio Negri's notion of 'cycles of struggle' can be used creatively to interpret the current moment. Reformists within transnational agencies, such as the WTO and the World Bank, are now seeking to make the world safer for continuing corporate globalisation by ameliorating some of its worst effects. Such developments have been prompted only by protest movements threatening the legitimacy of unreformed globalisation and highlighting its contradictions. Without anti-capitalists to threaten revolution, global civil society would not insist upon reforms – and the cancer stage of capitalism would proceed apace. Is anti-capitalist radicalism therefore functional to capitalism?

Until very recently, lack of concerted intellectual resistance to globalisation has been an obvious feature of the globalising world order. ‘The intellectuals’, as Pierre Bourdieu has observed, ‘have remained silent, when they have not simply echoed the dominant discourse’.¹ Referring to media intellectuals such as journalists, as well as academics, Bourdieu argues:

the strength of the new dominant order is that it has found the specific means of “integrating” (in some cases you might say buying, in others seducing) an ever-growing fraction of the intellectuals, all over the world. These ‘integrated’ intellectuals often continue to see themselves as critical (or simply on the left), according to the traditional model. And that helps to give great symbolic efficacy to their work in rallying support for the established order.²

Bourdieu does not enumerate (‘it would be too long and too cruel’) all the forms of surrender or, worse, collaboration. ‘I will simply allude’, he says ‘to the debates of the ... postmodern philosophers, who ... offer a supposedly postmodern but in fact ‘radical chic’ version of the ideology of the end of ideology, with the condemnation of the great explanatory narratives...’³

Absence of critique: Strength or weakness?

Bourdieu identifies absence of critique as a source of systemic strength of neo-liberal globalisation. Certainly, absence of critique has, in the short term, facilitated the neo-liberal project that has been consciously pursued by business elites the world over. In the long term, however, absence of critique is arguably destructive of capitalism. Despite Fukuyama’s gloating at the ‘end of history’, at the triumph of free-market capitalism over contending systems, the economic systems of the western world endured and found acceptance and legitimacy in the period up to 1989 because they were *not* wholly free-market oriented. The presence of alternative ideas – socialism within and Communism

without – played an important role in encouraging governments to tame the excesses and to protect people from the worst effects of capitalism. Internally, socialist ideas acted as the conscience of capitalism; externally, ‘communist’ states functioned as a threat of what might happen if capitalism did not meet demands for some degree of security for the most vulnerable.

The absence of external opposition, celebrated by Fukuyama, is in fact fraught with dangers for capitalism, according to Zygmunt Bauman:

the waning of the communist alternative lays bare the inner shortcomings of the market-centred version of freedom, previously either de-problematized or played down in confrontation with the less alluring aspects of the system of comparative reference. Less can now be forgiven, less is likely to be placidly endured. An immanent critique of the maladies of freedom reduced to consumer choice will be less easy to dismiss by the old expedient of imputed approval of a discredited alternative, and the inanities the critique discloses will be more difficult to exonerate as ‘the lesser of two evils’. Market freedom would need to explain and defend itself in its own terms; and these are not particularly strong or cogent terms, especially when it comes to justifying its social and psychological costs.⁴

The collapse of the communist alternative has made internal criticism more difficult, according to Bauman. Yet the collapse of the discreditable and easily discredited ‘communist’ alternative should render the life of criticism easier. As Nick Dyer-Witheford argues, rather than identifying the disintegration of Bolshevism with the end of Marxism, it should be seen as opening a space within which other repressed branches of the Marxist genealogy can emerge and blossom.⁵ Bauman is right, however, that ‘the world without an alternative needs self-criticism as a condition of survival and decency’.⁶

John McMurtry has referred to the present era as ‘the cancer stage of capitalism’, because capital is now engaged in a systematic subversion of the ‘social immune system’. Previously restricted by the communist threat and workers’ movements, capital has now entered into a phase of uncontrolled expansion marked by global mobility and the explosion of financial speculation divorced from any productive function. This process is attacking the social institutions that maintain public health and life in a way analogous to the metastasizing encroachments of tumorous cells on a human body. Environmental despoliation, unemployment, the redistribution of income from poor to rich, and the dismantling of public forms of life-provision are the symptoms of a malignancy that diverts more and more social resources to fuel its own growth.

Indicative of the classic pattern of cancer mutation and spread are the synergistic effects of money capital’s cumulative destruction of the planet’s basic conditions of life (air, sunlight,

water, soil, and biodiversity), its increasingly aggressive invasions and assaults on social infrastructure and self-protective systems of life sustenance and circulation, its systemic intolerance of bearing the costs of maintaining social and environmental carrying and defence capacities, and its rapidly escalating, autonomous self-multiplication that is no longer subordinated to any requirements of life-organisation.

The host body's immune system does not respond to the cancer's advance. In the case of capitalism, this occurs because the communication systems of host social bodies across the world largely reject and refuse to disseminate messages that identify the source of the disease, because these communication systems are subordinate to transnational capital.⁷ More precisely, these communication systems are themselves transnational corporations.

The academic fashionability of post-Marxism, according to Dyer-Witheford, is an aspect of this failure of recognition and response. In its refusal to acknowledge the full depth of capitalism's subsumption of the planet, and in its dismissal of the very political and intellectual tradition that has consistently applied itself to this issue, it is part of a problem of globally life-threatening dimensions.⁸

The collapse of reformism

Yet it is not simply the absence of Marxist critique that has become part of the problem but the quiescence of those whom Marxists throughout the twentieth century have identified, somewhat scornfully, as labourist or social democratic 'reformists'. In the current context, a healthy dose of reformism would go a long way to confront neo-liberalism, because it is precisely the reformist gains of the twentieth century – the welfare state, minimum wages, penalty rates for antisocial working hours, job security, strong trade unions, public ownership of utilities and transport, public and universal systems of health and education – that neo-liberalism attacks. While Marxism has tended to consider such reforms inadequate and far short of the socialist ideal, the odium with which these reforms are viewed by the forces of neo-liberal globalisation renders these mere reforms all the more significant and worthwhile.

Yet genuine reform, and persistent defence of still-existing reformist achievements, is largely absent from the mainstream political and intellectual agenda of western societies. That this is so is apparent in the degradation of the term itself through its bipartisan misuse. The word 'reform' once indicated a policy that was progressive and/or redistributive and was a term that was identifiably the property primarily of the reformist

left. The important changes historically designated as 'reforms' – the Reform Acts in Britain that extended the right to vote, universal elementary education, the abolition of slavery and the end of child labour, for example – were properly progressive measures aimed at greater rather than less equality.⁹ Now, in the absence of real reforms, the word 'reform' has been hijacked by neo-liberals and is now used by all parts of the mainstream Australian political spectrum and the media to indicate policies that are regressive and/or inegalitarian. Thus Peter Reith referred to his waterfront 'reforms', Peter Costello labelled the GST a tax 'reform' and Tony Abbott pursues further industrial relations 'reforms'. The Labor Party echoes the usage, standing shoulder to shoulder with the Coalition in the debasement of political vocabulary.

The genuine reforms once pursued by the ALP and its counterparts elsewhere in the world, and by the Democrats in the United States in the period of the 'New Deal', provided capitalism with the vital economic and social infrastructure that gave it stability and acceptance. Bauman argues that social systems such as the welfare state, which focused on the ends which capitalist modernity neglected, 'enforced corrections which prevented the accumulation of potentially lethal dysfunctions'.¹⁰ With the dismantling of much of social democracy's legacy, and in the absence of social democratic arguments against allowing the market ever fuller rein, neo-liberalism has reshaped capitalist societies to such an extent that considerably fewer systems exist to alleviate the harmful effects on the majority of the increasing prosperity of the minority. Lacking social democracy's restraint and critique, and many of its practical solutions to age-old capitalist contradictions – such as how to keep workers alive and well and functioning – globalising multinational capitalism appears increasingly to be a threat to itself. The internal opposition to capitalism of the old social movement of labour, especially the unions, had protected people, and thereby the system, from capitalism's own worst tendencies.

New social movements, like the labour movement, played a role in securing legitimacy for the system by prompting reforms of a different kind; they were thus beneficial to the societies that brought them forth. Alberto Melucci, for example, contended that contemporary social movements played a vital role in 'complex' systems: social movements affect the dominant institutions by modernising their cultural outlook and procedures, as well as by selecting new elites. 'Contemporary social movements stimulate radical questions about the ends of personal and social life and, in so doing, they warn of the crucial problems facing complex societies.'¹¹ For Kuechler and Dalton, the determining impact of new social movements on modern societies could well be the 'unintended consequence of securing the long-term stability of the political order'.¹² To some extent at least, this has always been an important consequence of protest. Melucci was writing in 1989, Kuechler and Dalton in 1990. By this stage, large sections of the new social

movements were well on the retreat into identity politics, abjuring their particular reformative project as obviously as the mainstream labour movement was neglecting its own.

A crisis of capitalism?

Globalising capitalism is now beginning to show signs of a crisis of legitimacy, and one clearly of its own making. David Marquand comments pointedly:

By eroding the values of the public domain, incessant marketisation has undermined the foundations of the market order itself. It has also undermined the foundations of democratic governance. Citizenship rights are, by definition, equal. Market rewards are, by definition, unequal. If the public domain of citizenship and equity is annexed to, or invaded by, the market domain of buying and selling, the primordial democratic promise of equal citizenship will be negated.¹³

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Marx identified the state as 'the executive committee of the bourgeoisie for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Standing apart from any particular capitalist or group of capitalists, the state was able, when necessary, to persuade or force capitalists as a whole to make concessions to subordinate classes that were in the long-term interests of capitalism as a system. It was by the state acting as the executive committee in the interests of the whole capitalist class that the social democratic project notched up such notable gains during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. However, the rise to power of the transnational agencies of globalisation have annulled the restraining and stabilising roles for capitalism of nation-states – with the exception perhaps of nation-states that club together, such as the European Union, which has on occasions demonstrated a capacity to resist transnational corporate edicts.

If the transnational agencies – the usual suspects such as the IMF, WTO, WEF, World Bank etc – are to become truly the executive committee of the international bourgeoisie for managing the common affairs of the whole international bourgeoisie, these agencies must necessarily persuade or force multinational corporations not to imperil continuing opportunities for capital accumulation by threatening the very conditions that make this possible: not just a sustainable environment but also a satisfied workforce.

Far from being a passive object of capitalist designs, the worker is in fact the *active* subject of production, the wellspring of the skills, innovation, and cooperation on which capital depends Labor is for capital always a problematic 'other' that must constantly be controlled and subdued, and that, as persistently, circumvents or challenges this command. Rather than being organized by capital, workers struggle against it.

Most Western Marxists have emphasized only the dominant and inexorable logic of capital. Its accumulative logic, unfolding according to ineluctable, even if finally self-destructive laws, figures as the unilateral force shaping the contemporary world. The autonomist Marxists rediscovered that Marx's analysis affirms the power, not of capital, but of the creative human energy Marx called 'labour' – 'the living, form-giving flame' constitutive of society.¹⁴ The working class is what autonomist theorist Antonio Negri terms a 'dynamic subject, an antagonistic force tending toward its own independent identity'.¹⁵

Class composition is in constant change, but since capital is a system that depends on labour it cannot completely destroy its antagonist. New technology is reducing capital's dependence on labour, but history reminds us that previous moments of technical innovation have been succeeded by long periods of employment growth. Each capitalist restructuring must recruit new and different types of labour, and thus yield the possibility of working-class *recomposition* involving different strata of workers with fresh capacities of resistance and counterinitiative. This process of composition then decomposition then recomposition of the working class constitutes a *cycle of struggle*. For Dyer-Witheford, this concept is important because 'it permits recognition that from one cycle to another the leading role of certain sectors of labor, of particular organizational strategies or specific cultural forms may decline, become archaic and be surpassed, without equating such changes, as is so fashionable today, with the disappearance of class conflict'.¹⁶

Despite the current crisis of technological unemployment, the ultimate dependence of capital upon labour is most evident in the case of technologically highly skilled labour. Just as the skilled engineers of the nineteenth century were often at the forefront of labour struggles, because of industrial capitalism's dependence upon their skills, postindustrial capitalism has also created a layer of workers upon whom it relies. In Marxist terms these people are exploited, possibly more so than less well-paid workers, for the surplus value produced in such sectors of the workforce is immense. There are at last signs of mobilisation amongst such workers both in the workplace and as anti-corporate netwarriors, based upon the realisation of this exploitation.

Moreover, there has always been a fundamental contradiction in capitalism: employers wish to pay their employees as little as possible, but depend on the buying power of

employees in general as a market for the products exchanged under capitalism. Is it any wonder that banks are so anxious to press credit cards on people, so that ever greater levels of personal debt can substitute for stagnant wages? However, there is a limit to the capacity of indebted individuals to solve this problem for capitalism, a contradiction that is heightened greatly by globalisation, as whole domestic economies exert downward pressures on real wages in order to sustain competitiveness internationally. Thus, to make themselves competitive, capitalist economies restrict the buying power of the very consumers they are competing to reach. As Ellen Meiksins Woods notes: 'You can't get much more contradictory than that.'¹⁷ For Amory Starr, the fact that economic globalisation is destroying consumer purchasing power is a 'gruesome paradox'.¹⁸ The universalisation of capitalism means that capitalism, more than ever, is riddled with internal contradictions, 'a reason for stepping up, not abandoning, anticapitalist struggles'. Capitalism's strengths are also its vulnerabilities; globalisation may be widening, not constricting, the space for oppositional politics.¹⁹

The basic tendencies of the capitalist economy – generating inequality, insecurity and instability alongside prodigious capital accumulation – are strikingly evident in the current era, as Frank Stilwell observes. It is because capitalism is rapidly becoming an integrated global system that its inherent contradictory characteristics are becoming ever clearer in the process.²⁰ Even aside from the potential for wholesale systemic crisis, neo-liberalism's assault on the economic security and the social rights of the workers – on whom capitalism depends – is encouraging new and deeper forms of anti-capitalist resistance that are potentially more dangerous to capitalism than the restoration of the gains of social democracy. As Leslie Sklair notes, 'for every act of foreign investment there is a potential for local groups in contact with global networks to expose exploitation of labour, violation of human rights and the degradation of the environment'. He cites the Stop MAI campaign and the anti-capitalist movement as examples of resistance.²¹

With class disparities widening and absolute and relative levels of poverty on the increase, with whole communities being ripped apart by plant closures and capital flight, and with the previous protective infrastructures of the state progressively demolished, multinational capitalism appears to be starting to produce its own aspirant gravediggers.

According to Dyer-Witheford a crisis beckons because:

The unleashing of computerization, telecommunications, and genetic engineering within a context of general commodification is bringing massive crises of technological unemployment, corporate monopolization of culture, privatization of bodies of knowledge vital for human well-being and survival, and, ultimately, market-driven transformations of humanity's very species-being.²²

At the very least, as international studies of labour movement mobilisation reveal, sharpened degrees of class division have brought with them increased levels of class conflict.²³

Possibilities for the future

Antonio Negri affirms the possibility for workers to use the creative capacity on which capital depends for its incessant innovation in order to reappropriate technology. This possibility arises because, in its attempt to technologically control labour, capital cannot avoid creating new types of technologically capable, scientifically literate workers.²⁴ Negri's notion of 'cycles of struggle' can be used creatively to interpret the current moment. Over and above the potential for such workers to contest their own exploitation, the technology associated with globalisation also facilitates the globalisation of resistance to the neo-liberal form assumed by globalisation. Computer expertise is a recognised feature of the anti-capitalist protest movement. The new forms of knowledge and communication are instruments of capitalist domination, but also potential resources of anti-capitalist struggle. For Hardt and Negri: 'The creative forces of the multitude that sustain Empire are also capable of autonomously constructing a counter-Empire, an alternative political organization of global flows and exchanges.'²⁵

This is the first way in which the current system can be observed forging the weapons of its own destruction. The second way is in the increasing conflation of new social movement concerns with those of the labour movement. This situation has not only brought about alliances between the radical wings of the new social movements and the more militant sections of organised labour, but has tended towards a reformulation of radical new social movement analysis. One might commence a critique of genetically modified foodstuffs from an eco-feminist perspective but it is difficult, given the logic of the situation, not to conclude with an anti-capitalist perspective as well – or instead. By the end of the 1990s there were signs that activists had discovered in the course of struggle the need for such a perspective. Not only were class inequalities widening dramatically, but it was becoming apparent that, in the absence of support from organised labour, protest movements were achieving little more than what transnational capitalism was happy to concede. The evidence from community-based protest movements in Australian society in recent years suggests that those with links with organised labour have a better chance of success than those that lack such connections. This has certainly been true of community

actions against environmental hazards. However, there are many hazards to community existence short of environmental ones.

In this respect, the 1980s and 1990s have been perversely illuminating. Any belief that the advent of the new social movements marked a transition from the 'old' struggle over social surplus must crumble away in the face of neo-liberalism's doctrinaire reaffirmation of the market, attack on the welfare state, and unconstrained expansions of commodity exchange.²⁶ The heightened forms of capitalist domination and exploitation have made it increasingly obvious to new social movement activists and theorists that it is neo-liberal globalising capitalism that most directly frustrates their efforts to protect the environment from the ravages of agribusiness, assert native title rights against the interests of mining companies, protect women from increasing 'flexibility' in employment or trafficking for sexual services, and so on. For example, when gay activists in Melbourne dismantled the floral clock in the Botanical Gardens to draw attention to multinational drug companies pricing AIDS medication beyond the reach of poorer countries, they did so as Queers Unite to Eradicate Economic Rationalism (QUEER). Dyer-Witheford remarks:

Because capital's *a priori* is profit (its own expanded replication), its logic in regard to the emancipation of women, racial justice, or the preservation of the environment is purely instrumental. The prevention of male violence toward women, the saving of rain forests, or the eradication of racism is a matter of bottom line calculus: tolerated or even benignly supported when costless, enthusiastically promoted when profitable, but ruthless opposed as soon as they demand any substantial diversion of social surplus. Hence capitalism is antithetical to any movements for whom these goals are affirmed as fundamental, indispensable values.²⁷

The empirical work of critical globalisation scholars shows how corporations are using all possible opportunities to exploit women and non-white people, preferring them amongst their workforces precisely because of their increased vulnerability; and corporations are more likely to poison communities that are both non-white and poor.²⁸ Starr notes that corporations take particular advantage of people of colour and women.

It is the third world 'other' who can be dumped on, worked blind at 30, policed by his or her own nation's military in service of the corporate elite, and starved within view of export crops ... Perhaps economic globalization is more essentializing than traditional communities were.²⁹

The increasing penetration of capital, the sweeping away of ancient and venerable prejudices, the pitiless tearing away of non-market based forms of hierarchy, that leaves no other nexus than callous economic relations, has in fact highlighted the points where

the interests of capital accumulation continue to coincide with, and therefore raise to a sharper level, the exploitation of subordinate peoples.

Cecelia Lynch concedes the possibility that the logic of capital accumulation and unequal distribution always formed the primary obstacle to the realisation of social movements' goals, but that it is only with the end of the Cold War that the negative effects of this logic have been able to take centre stage. Until the 1990s the social movements' inability to critique capitalism abetted 'the discursive and normative demobilization of social movements' in relation to the problem of globalisation. Now, by contrast, suggestions that it is the market, capitalism, corporate power, structural adjustment policies of international financial institutions, and various other forms and nomenclatures of globalisation, that hinder social movement goals have begun to abound within social-movement and NGO literature.³⁰

In the final analysis, as Carol Johnson argues, pro-capitalist positions place huge restrictions over democratic control and distribution of economic resources. A pro-capitalist position can advocate individual rights for women, Aboriginal people, gays and lesbians but will place severe limitations on re-allocating resources to these groups – on strategies, such as improving wages, which challenge profit levels, or on the degree to which there can be state or other forms of democratic intervention in the private sector to ensure equality for such groups. 'Right-wing economic policies have tended to have disastrous effects on groups, such as women, which are already disadvantaged in the labour market.'³¹

The new social movements can be seen, increasingly, not as a negation of working-class struggle, as the new social movement theorists would have us believe, but as its blossoming: an enormous exfoliation, diversification, and multiplication of demands, created by the revolt of subordinated and super-exploited sectors of labour.³² 'If capitalist production now requires an entire network of social relations', as Dyer-Witford observes, 'these constitute so many more points where its operations can be ruptured.' No longer is the undermining of capitalism the operation of Marx's singular 'mole' – the industrial proletariat – but rather of what Sergio Bologna termed a 'tribe of moles'.³³ Jameson looks forward to a time when a 'new international proletariat ... will re-emerge'.³⁴ However, this new proletariat will be an even more inclusive and all-embracing one than the proletariat of industrial society and better suited thereby for the emancipatory role assigned the proletariat in Marxist theory. This potential is now being realised, and under circumstances of increasing economic hardship and insecurity, which gives the new multifaceted movement a much greater seriousness and urgency. This tribe of moles is in earnest.

Commencing with social-movement unionism in the early 1990s, the creative convergence of new social movements with the old is an obvious feature of anti-capitalist mobilisations and one that rightfully alarms those who presumed their mutual antagonisms would indefinitely continue. For the demonstrators themselves it is a source of inspiration and hope. The contributions to anti-capitalist struggle of those from new social movement backgrounds have encouraged a loosening of the organisational forms of this anti-capitalist moment; they have given it an anarchic, ultra-democratic inflection that is reminiscent of the anti-capitalist movement in its ascendant phase late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century but largely discarded during the remainder of the twentieth century when labourist and Communist practices and styles predominated.

In 1987, in their contribution to the debate about the role of workers' organisations in social change, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argued that the more democratic-egalitarian discourses penetrated society, the less would workers accept as natural a limitation on their access to a set of social and cultural goods. Thus, they concluded, '*the possibility of deepening the anti-capitalist struggle itself depends on the extension of the democratic revolution. Even more: anti-capitalism is an internal moment of the democratic revolution.*'³⁵ The project which mattered, therefore, was radical democracy, built upon a plurality of forces, the new social movements between which there were no 'necessary links':

[through] the construction of a new 'common sense' which changes the identity of the different groups, in such a way that the demands of each group are articulated equivalentially with those of the others'.³⁶

The anti-capitalist struggle, they argued was only an 'internal moment' of this wider project, so the working class could not be assigned the role of central actor in this broader struggle.³⁷

The new anti-capitalist mobilisations suggest that Laclau and Mouffe are right to identify the significance of radical democracy built upon a plurality of forces but wrong to suggest that between the new social movements there are no necessary links and that the working class cannot be assigned a central role in this broader struggle. It is true that participants in anti-corporate struggles have differing views about the degree of centrality of the labour movement in the movement against neo-liberal globalisation; nonetheless, it is the rejection of increasing inequalities between labour (in all its varieties) and capital that binds the participants within this movement. Naming corporations as the enemy not only ensures the movement's coherence and effectiveness, but indicates clearly that its principal grievance is capitalism or at least a particular form of capitalism. It is for this reason that it

is no longer appropriate simply to 'add class and stir' – to the other ingredients of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and so on.

Analysis of class and exploitation cannot be deployed eclectically alongside other approaches, but must occupy a central position, because capitalism is a system based on the imposition of universal commodification. This reductionism of capital has today a totalising grip on the planet. Other dominations, too, are reductive – sexism reduces women to objects for men, racism negates the humanity of people of colour. But neither patriarchy nor racism has succeeded in knitting the planet together into an integrated, coordinated system of interdependencies. This is what capital is doing today, as, with the aid of new technologies, it globally maps the availability of female labour, ethno-markets, migrancy flows, human gene pools, and entire animal, plant, and insect species onto its coordinates of value. In doing so, according to Dyer-Witford,

it is subsuming every other form of oppression to its logic ... This is not to say ... that the corrosive power of commodification necessarily abolishes patriarchy or sexism (although it can sometimes work in that direction). Indeed ... the capitalist international division of labor often incorporates, and largely depends on discrimination by gender or ethnicity to establish its hierarchies of control. Nevertheless, sexism and racism do not in and of themselves act as the main organizing principle for the worldwide production and distribution of goods. Patriarchal and racist logics are older than capital, mobilize fears and hatreds beyond its utilitarian economic understanding, and are virulently active today. But they are now compelled to manifest themselves within and mediated through capital's larger, overarching structure of domination ... because of society's subordination to a system that compels key issues of sexuality, race, and nature to revolve around a hub of profit.³⁸

Times have changed since the 1970s and 1980s when new social movement theorists argued that the traditional ideological patterns of interpretation, and lines of conflict, had increasingly lost their meaning, that the 'new conflicts' of advanced Western societies no longer arose in areas of material reproduction, that the predominant social and political conflicts often cut across the distributive conflict between labour and capital.³⁹ Their arguments are now less plausible, even ludicrous. Ronald Inglehart wrote at this time of a 'silent revolution' which saw a shift in values away from materialism. This 'culture shift' was attributable to the economic prosperity, physical security and political stability of advanced Western societies during the postwar boom, allowing young people in particular the luxury of ignoring material considerations and producing new forms of consciousness.⁴⁰

Inglehart's 'silent revolution' has ended. For the vast majority of people even in advanced Western societies, life has now become a struggle and material considerations are at the

forefront of people's minds. While some respond to the insecurities caused by globalisation with increased forms of parochialism – such as the supporters of Hanson, LePen and their racist/populist counterparts elsewhere – others defect leftwards and desert the Labor or social democrat moderates for minor parties intensely critical of neo-liberalism. For example, there was significantly increased support for Socialist Alliance at the 2001 general election in Britain, for the Australian Greens at the 2001 federal election in Australia and for the array of far-left candidates at the presidential election in France, who together outperformed LePen. New forms of consciousness are as likely to be anti-capitalist as conservative. Although Hardt and Negri are overly confident in their assertion that the 'organization of the multitude as political subject, as posse, thus begins to appear on the world scene',⁴¹ there are nonetheless clear signs of increasing levels of radical discontent.

The mood of anti-corporate protesters has become more sombre since the unfortunate events of 11 September 2001 enabled corporate capitalism to regain much of the ideological momentum it had lost during the rise to prominence of the anti-capitalist movement. However, in the aftermath of the Seattle mobilisation late in 1999, euphoria pervaded radical speaking and writing. It is possible this euphoria expressed a tendency to view the lone swallow as the longed-for spring, to seize upon every struggle as evidence of the re-emergence of working-class consciousness so fervently desired.

Yet, a euphoric response to Seattle is arguably less ridiculous than to announce the end of history. As Eagleton has noted, the end of ideology, if not quite of history, was announced by Raymond Aron and Daniel Bell as long ago as the 1950s and, with Vietnam, Black Power and the student movement just round the corner, proved a singular inept prophecy. As Oscar Wilde might have observed, to be wrong about the death of history once is unfortunate, whereas to be wrong twice is sheer carelessness.⁴²

Just as the old anti-capitalist movements focussed their protests on the nation-state, so the new anti-capitalist movements are concentrating their efforts by protesting against the WTO, the World Bank, the WEF and the IMF. In the twentieth century the old anti-capitalist movements persuaded the state to restrain capital in various ways. So far, the transnational agencies that function as the executive committee of the international bourgeoisie have declined to perform such a role in relation to globalising capitalism, and are consequently reaping the whirlwind. What can the anti-capitalist movement achieve?

Revolution in the cause of reform?

A common criticism of this movement is that, as the name 'anti-capitalist' suggests, it lacks a coherent vision of a dramatically different world order. It is a movement that is clear what it is against, but less clear about what the alternative should be.⁴³ In its inability to imagine and outline a future, anti-capitalism is possibly prisoner of globalising capitalism. Zaki Laidi argues that the temporal experience of global/network culture is one directed to the present. Traditional societies are structured in terms of myth and the past; industrial society is organised in terms of the future (evident in the utopias of socialism); contemporary network society and culture is organised in terms of urgency, simultaneity and the present.⁴⁴ By comparison with the old anti-capitalism of the labour movement, the new anti-capitalism prefers not to paint any particular fanciful picture in the air; though it perhaps paints many. Is the movement's perceived imprecision about the future a shortcoming? Perhaps not. The competing utopias of hitherto-existing anti-capitalism were both manifest failures: the hopeless pursuit of socialism by legislative means and the totalitarian nightmare of official Communism.

But utopias are important, as Russell Jacoby reminds us.⁴⁵ Arguably, the current movement is utopian in its expectation that capitalism can be reformed to the extent that market forces do not rule regardless of other forms of value. If these expectations are disappointed, anti-capitalism could slide from a desire to rid capitalism of its neo-liberal form, which is the dominant position within the movement, to a conviction that capitalism must be rejected in its entirety. As many revolutionary outbreaks have revealed, if grievances that reformers regard as manifestly just and reasonable cannot be solved by the system, these same utopian reformers are easily persuaded to go further. It was not a long distance from the Grand Remonstrance to the execution of Charles I or from the 'cahiers' of grievances to the storming of the Bastille. Out of the questions raised, and the tensions created, by the anti-capitalist challenge, more could be forthcoming.

It is possible, too, that, as Immanuel Wallerstein has suggested, whatever disrupts world capitalism ultimately contributes to the transition to socialism.⁴⁶ Certainly, the precondition is there for a socialist world order, of a sort not yet tried, to emerge. The preconditions for a truly communist society consist in the new computer and communications technology that is a defining characteristic of globalisation. At one pole, this technology is an instrument of capitalist domination, a means for the intensification of exploitation and the enchaining of the world in commodity exchange. At the other, it is the basis for the freedom from want and the social intercourse that are prerequisites for a communist society.⁴⁷ Capitalist social relations are acting as fetters upon computer

technology in particular, preventing the realisation of its true usefulness to society. Owned and controlled by capital, its capacity to increase each worker's productivity is used simply to return higher profits to the few and increase unemployment (so as further to increase the power of capital) rather than to reduce working hours and increase the remuneration of the many.

Short of this utopia, the current movement's apparent negativity, its *anti*-capitalism, is necessary in the meantime as a desperate effort to prevent capitalism from wreaking further havoc upon the globe as globalisation develops apace. Negativity in this sense is a positive contribution to the planet and its people. A leader of the indigenous residents' resistance to construction of the Three Gorges Dam in China says: 'The highest expression of dignity can be summed up in the single word "No!"'⁴⁸ In any case, Starr insists the movements say more than 'No', that they propose a quite radical vision that has already demonstrated its ability to meet needs while protecting diversity.⁴⁹ The essential challenge for contemporary social movements, according to Louis Maheu, is that they can and must contribute to human survival.⁵⁰ Perhaps the most useful purpose the anti-capitalist movement could serve, short of revolution, is to prevent capitalism from poaching so much from the commons that the ecological and social wellbeing of the planet and its inhabitants are adversely affected in irreversible ways.

Linda Weiss alludes to the emergence of a literature that could broadly be described as reformist within the globalising agenda: globalisation does not have to take such a harshly neo-liberal form. Economic openness does not require or compel state retreat from social protection and wealth creation. On the contrary, openness is more likely to be sustained and served by effective governance of such processes.⁵¹ A few years ago, too, discussion started about the competitive advantage of welfare nations. Recently, there has been considerable interest in the introduction of a tax (the Tobin tax) on international speculation in foreign exchange markets, this taxation revenue to be used for progressive measures, domestically and internationally. London's *Independent on Sunday* announced on 2 September 2001: 'TOBIN TAX' GAINS GLOBAL CURRENCY. French Premier Lionel Jospin responded by declaring: 'We must discuss the issues (of globalisation) and I am in favour of France taking an initiative so that Europe endorses the Tobin tax.'⁵² Considering the extent to which far-left voters declined to support Jospin's ill-fated candidature for presidency in April 2002, his response to the extent of anti-capitalist sentiment in France was obviously inadequate.

Responses to protests against neo-liberal globalisation such as the Tobin tax are couched within liberal frameworks, but are seeking to make the world safer for continuing corporate globalisation by ameliorating some of its worst effects. The reformers

acknowledge that capitalism could be undermining the conditions for its own continued profitability and realise therefore that the new world order might need to give a little in the interests of capitalist stability. The now frequent urgings within transnational agencies for such ameliorations will become stronger, if extreme protest movements continue to threaten the legitimacy of unreformed globalisation. 'Even the IMF and World Bank have agreed to meet with anti-globalisation activists', reports an international magazine, *Marketing*, on 30 August 2001. Almost certainly the activists invited to such meetings would be those wanting a 'seat at the table' rather than those preferring to overturn the tables; but invitations to anti-corporate reformists are currently more forthcoming precisely because the powerful now have anti-capitalist revolutionaries to fear. Efforts to reform are at their most effective when accompanied by the hint, at least, of insurgency from below. On 23 July 2001 the meeting of the G8 in Genoa issued a press release both deploring the anti-capitalist protests and pledging to do more to ensure the world's poor shared in the benefits of globalisation.⁵³

Without the protests to deplore there would be no promises to the poor. Without anti-capitalists to threaten revolution or at least query in no uncertain terms the legitimacy of the new world order, global civil society is unlikely to be able to insist upon reforms. Although the contradictions within capitalism that are now heightened by globalisation raise the possibility of systemic breakdown, it is more likely that capitalism will find ways to forestall crisis, as it has in the past. In the present circumstances, conceding a little to the anti-corporate movement would reduce profitability in the short-term but ensure the longer-term acceptability and viability of the system. Despite the trauma of 11 September 2001, hundreds of thousands of anti-corporate protesters have continued during 2002 to greet each meeting of transnational institutions. For the first time the operations of global capital, and the effects of its operations, are subject to critical scrutiny, to fast and furious protest. The best prospects for globalisation with a more human, less neo-liberal, face are continued extremist anti-capitalist protests. The counter-globalisation movement is a politically necessary and increasingly urgent response to increasing corporate power.

And what of the role of intellectuals? Appadurai has appealed recently for a 'new architecture for producing and sharing knowledge about globalisation' to create new forms of dialogue between academics, public intellectuals, activists and policy-makers in different societies. This dialogue would be academia's gift to the new movements challenging corporate globalisation, contributing to new forms of pedagogy (in the sense of Freire) that could level the theoretical playing field for grassroots activists in international fora.⁵⁴ Johnston and Goodman argue for such a dialogue; their central epistemological position is that detachment has to be combined with involvement if research is to have emancipatory or transformative effects. Theoretical reflection is

inherently impoverished without practical engagement with the issues at stake on an everyday level; equally, involvement in the absence of reflection can generate a directionless activism.⁵⁵

Emancipation, they note, hinges on informed or reflective agency, grounded in a healthy respect for the power and prevalence of structures.⁵⁶ For Johnston and Goodman, the dialogue between structure and agency provides an invaluable reference point when considering struggles against corporate globalisation. Critical globalisation theory must be capable of taking agency seriously, yet not obscure the power and persistence of powerful structures of neo-liberal globalism.

Discrediting the importance of agency and bowing down to the power of structural constraints offers no alternative – politically, analytically, or morally. Denying the role of movements acting against the seemingly unshakeable forces of neoliberal globalism not only writes off the possibilities for change, but denies the dialectical logic of capitalist development.

The proponents of globalisation deliberately encourage the notion that corporate globalisation is inevitable in order to wish fatalism upon its opponents. Such fatalism, becoming the typical response of nation-states, is avoided most obviously by the movements contesting globalisation. These creative forces recognise, as does Freire, that agency is limited by structure but it is not occluded; that humans are active and capable of transforming structures.⁵⁷ Freire writes: 'if humankind produces social reality ... then transforming that reality is a historical task, a task for humanity'.⁵⁸ People make history, though not under circumstances of their own choosing.

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