

MOBILIZING RESISTANCE WITHIN
GLOBALIZATION*

AS THE OCCUPY Wall St protests in the US and the connected protests outside St Paul's Cathedral in London in October 2011 dominate the headlines, reading Geoffrey Pleyers' account of the alter-globalization movement has a certain poignancy, as well as engendering a sense of excitement and the glimmer of new possibilities. What has characterised the global protest movement since the early 1990s is a position that is not about wresting power from the state or even taking a stance against globalization per se – an untenable position for a movement seeking and claiming global relevance and adherence – but the demand for “another way”, a world in which human rights, freedom and justice would be recognised within globalization. The activists involved strive, in fact, for an international space in which to solve the major problems of our times, for the recognition that citizens and global social movements can have an “impact on the way our common global future is shaped”.

What animates this huge and heterogeneous set of social movements and forms of activism is a set of shared meanings and principles, as Pleyers argues. The animating notion of freedom seems Kantian in its persuasion: what can I know; what should I do, what can I hope for? The movement has gone through a series of historical phases since the early 1990s, and has at different times been allied with, and momentarily defined by, pressing issues of the moment. As for example, in the case of action against the Iraq war in 1993 and 1994. Indeed, such movements, precisely because of the way they engage individuals as global citizens, are particularly responsive to the crisis ridden character of the contemporary world, at once focusing on anti-war politics, then international trade agreements, climate change, and now financial crisis. Consequently, “the movement” is not in any way a single movement or even a set of interconnected forms of activism, as Pleyers demonstrates, but a shared approach to social change, to a form of “globality” based on the principle that “we are all in this together”, and a demand for autonomous spaces freed from the determining and hierarchised hold of global markets. Like all claims for freedom in the context of solidarity,

* About Geoffrey PLEYERS, *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2010).

the movement is riven by contradictions, but Pleyers makes the convincing case that such structural tensions should be seen as productive rather than fatal. While it is true that targeted forms of activism and organising carried out by particular advocacy networks, trade unions, youth movements, social forums, indigenous peoples, human rights networks, green activists and many others have been successful at bringing about change at the national and local level, the movement's greatest success relates to something more nebulous, but arguably of more overarching and far-reaching importance: the discrediting of the Washington Consensus. In this sense, the movement has been a success, a powerful force for change and for good.

The combination of local and global forms of action and aspirations for change within the movement necessarily dictated Pleyers' approach to researching and writing the book. He not only conducted fieldwork in France, Belgium and Mexico, but at a variety of different levels, including world forums, local protest movements and European meetings. His knowledge and grasp of the movement, its history and character is truly impressive. However, the benefit Pleyers distils from this detailed ethnographic approach to his study is an analytic perspective that emphasises the energy and creativity of these activists in producing a distinct culture of activism, underpinned by a set of shared social meanings. If we can agree that the Occupy protest movements in the US, the UK and elsewhere are in part manifestations – or perhaps just the latest realisation – of the alter-globalization movement, we can sense just how successful the movement has been in changing our understanding of reigning assumptions about neoliberalism, markets, capitalism and the role of the state. In short, they have had a profound effect on the questions “what can I know”? and “what can I hope for”?

However, Pleyers writes amusingly and sympathetically about the difficulties the movement has experienced in addressing the question “What should I do”? Alter-activists stress grassroots participation and personal experience, ideas and interactions in the context of ways of living. Consequently, movement gatherings and protest camps are also utopian spaces in which to experience and experiment with alternative ways of life. There is a self-critical and very self-aware focus on the importance of process rather than just the desired outcome. “Our manner of working has to reflect the values we are defending as part of our resistance” as one activist is quoted as saying. This emphasis on internal democracy and autonomy is familiar, as are the limitations it imposes. A young Brazilian in Porto Alegre sums it up well: the “exchanges are amazing and the camp is very well run, but we have a hard time doing

something more permanent than camps”. The feeling of experimentation and participation is exciting, but often limits the ability to capitalise on past experiences and to focus on clear cut goals. Pleyers writes engagingly and produces the following vignette: As Tito, the teenager from the suburbs of Mexico City, broke into his third song during “The meeting of the Zapatistas commandants with youth and civil society” at around 3.20am, a Trotskyist, a long-time supporter of the Zapatista cause, moved closer to me and began to fidget: “This is all very well, but what use is it? What points can be drawn from these successive speeches and songs? What text will come out of this meeting?” If a text had come out of the meeting it is arguable whether it would have been of any more use than the songs and the speeches. Pleyers is very good on the limitations and constraints of forms of political organising and, for this reason alone, every student of politics should read this book.

However, Pleyers is never dismissive about the movement or about the idea that social transformation is an ongoing collective process for which we all have responsibility. And it is difficult to disagree with the activists’ conviction that if there is to be an alternative world it has to start here and now, and not be postponed indefinitely to some date after the revolution. The question of how we can change the world cannot easily be answered, but Geoffrey Pleyers has shown masterfully in this beautifully written and finely researched book that the way we now imagine those answers is changing, and in part because of the way the alter-globalization movement has altered our understanding of ourselves as global citizens. Neoliberal ideology may be under attack from all sides, including from some political leaders, but many alter-globalization activists are apparently disheartened believing that concrete policies have not really changed all that much. In consequence, Pleyers’ optimistic conclusion is that the alter-globalization movement has thus entered into a new phase “more focused on obtaining concrete results than on struggling over ideas”. It is impossible to argue against the necessity for specific outcomes and interventions, but perhaps important to remember that the movement’s greatest success to date has been about changing hearts and minds, and that is no small thing.

HENRIETTA L. MOORE