

Whose Movement?

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A couple days ago, I was talking to an editor at a certain look-down-its-nose-at-activism newspaper of record, when I referred in passing to "the movement."

"Which movement?" she asked impatiently. "The sweatshop movement? The environmental movement?"

I paused, realizing with surprise what I had just said. "No," I answered. "For the first time since the late 1960s, I think it's becoming possible to talk about 'the' movement, something greater than the sum of its parts."

She wasn't convinced. (No surprise there.)

But, I wondered, was I?

Everyone who cares about such things is pondering the state of activism, in the wake of the plucky D.C. protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Are we witnessing the birth of something truly historic, or is it only a blip? Are disparate fights amassing into one mega-movement, and do we want them to be?

It's worth taking a closer look at what this current upsurge of activism is, and is not, in order to clarify what it might become.

Direct action is the driving force behind the new unrest. Direct action can entail civil disobedience -- the deliberate breaking of an unjust law -- but it's a far broader category. It encompasses everything from blockades and banner hangs to strikes, boycotts, and pickets: the whole panoply of pressure tactics that are not mediated by the political or legal system.

Engaging in direct action doesn't necessarily mean breaking the law or getting arrested. It can involve, for example, jamming the telephone lines of one's opponents, as supporters of the jailed protesters in D.C. did for days after their arrest. When direct actionists do break laws, they're often benign ones like traffic rules, rather than laws that are intrinsically immoral or unjust.

The key is action: not dull rallies where one speaker after another drones on, or meetings that just lead to more meetings, or studies that never end. The most dynamic movements today -- from the most daring segments of U.S. labor to grassroots campaigns against police brutality -- spend very little time debating doctrine. They generally lack manifestos, programs, or platforms, relying instead on shared values as the basis for action.

"A lot of us feel that the issues that we're faced with are so urgent that it's not about arguing over this and that ideal, but it really is just getting to work," explains Lilianne Fan, an activist with

the New York-based Students for Solidarity and Empowerment, one of countless new groups formed after the Seattle WTO protests.

Some activists feel that there's too little political discussion happening in political circles today; it's a concern I've heard repeatedly voiced about the New York City Direct Action Network, for example.

But the emphasis on action over ideology has helped facilitate a range of novel political collaborations in recent time, perhaps the most distinctive feature of the new unrest.

I'm not talking so much about the vaunted "teamsters and turtles" alliance on view at the Seattle WTO actions, but about the earlier pairings that laid the groundwork for such an alliance.

Since at least the mid-1990s, an array of activist agendas and styles have been converging in potent campaigns. The movement against sweatshops, for example, has brought together not only students and labor, but also Central American solidarity activists and women's rights advocates.

"There's an understanding that these issues are tied up together," notes Laura McSpedon, a student anti-sweatshop organizer at Georgetown University, "that to separate culture and identity and race and gender from class and the concerns of working people is artificial, and divides us in unproductive ways."

The character of U.S. environmentalism, meanwhile, has changed dramatically in recent years. In many parts of the country, the leading edge of current on-the-ground organizing is environmental justice activism, which links the fight against economic and racial inequality to concerns about pollution, toxic wastes, and dumping.

Earth First! now combines social issues and radical ecology as a matter of course. This radical environmental network was infamous in the 1980s for the misanthropic sputterings of its self-styled spokesmen (and I do mean men), who heralded AIDS as a useful form of population control, among other too-deep-ecology nonsense.

But at the instigation of the late Judi Bari and dozens of less prominent activists, EF!ers in the 1990s began to build unlikely alliances at the grass roots: between tree huggers and timber workers, white hippies and Native American elders, forest blockaders and urban community-based groups.

Still, however powerful these blends are, the strength of contemporary activism lies in the autonomy of the agitators. There neither is nor will be a single organization -- be it a political party or a movement group like the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society -- that can remotely claim to represent the many strains of action.

Forget stifling calls for "unity": Activism now is neither singular nor unitary. It is the combined product of many small and independent groups, rooted in many different communities. It's not a single coalition but a spectrum of self-determined movements -- who are finding each other, and figuring out how to collaborate.

That's what made me hesitate after I invoked "the movement" to that editor the other day. When activism is as decentralized as it is now, does it make any sense to talk of "the movement"? The term is so easily and often employed to exclude -- as when people use it to refer to globalization activism alone.

But there's an electric appeal to the phrase "the movement" when it expresses an aspiration, still a good way out of our reach. Not an aspiration to unite and homogenize, but to combine and augment. I don't know if I'll keep saying it, but I sure like the dream.

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