

Peace and Justice, North and South

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From Fall 2002 to Spring 2003, much of my political activity focused on opposing the invasion of Iraq. Autumn 2003 was sandwiched by Cancun and Miami, and on all these occasions success seemed far away. September's euphoric WTO ministerial meeting spurred dissenters on, only to be trounced at the FTAA summit two months later. Setbacks are how we learn, right? In a single year of resistance in confrontation with both the neoconservative militarist and the neo-liberal strategies of world domination, I glimpsed two criss-crossed contrasts in protest culture coming into play. The first framed organizing either as antiwar or as global justice in the United States; the second framed global justice organizing differently in the north and the south. As we grapple with understanding the manifestations of power, and how resistance to it must evolve, there's a lot to be learned from these juxtapositions.

Peace vs. Justice in the Global North

While there is significant overlap, it is fair to distinguish two strains of relatively privileged dissent in this country, with identities constructed through different genealogies, mentors, organizations and seminal campaigns. In the loosest sense, one could track them through their faiths: in spirituality, or in some form of a radical left. From World War I to Vietnam to Iraq, parts 1 and 2, both movements have vehemently opposed American wars, though that opposition has not been based necessarily in identical rationales, or compatible tactics of resistance.

So in a sense, it was a relief for me to take the streets once again this fall against the institutions of global capitalism, after a year of protesting the invasion of Iraq. This was more my style. Meaning...what? That I'd prefer the dissentionary privilege of hanging out with white kids in black Carhartts and stenciled patches lining up for their vegan dinner from Food Not Bombs, over that of hobnobbing with cleaner, older white folks in sweaters and slacks bowing heads at a candlelight vigil? That I'd prefer ripping down fences to the beat of a bucket drum brigade over pledging not to raise my voice as I step across a line into the arms of the authorities? That I'd feel less discomfort with a culture that fetishizes tactics of confrontation and escalation, than with one that fetishizes tactics of non-confrontation and de-escalation? I won't deny my tendencies. But it's not quite what I mean. In any case these are superficial characterizations. And yet I do think that faultlines between organizing cultures often indicate deeper differences, both at the level of fundamental analysis and at the level of structural location, the latter especially when there is a subtext of race/class privilege involved. It's an acknowledged problem that global justice organizing in the United States tends to be dominated iconographically by a very specific subculture claimed by the crusty-punk-anarchist set, largely white; and that this very specific subculture can be alienating to people who are not young, not white, not male, or who just happen to like the wrong music. The underlying causes of such discomfort within a movement need to be addressed, if a movement is ever to gain critical mass — i.e. to become effective, and not merely an alternative enclave. Superficial stylistic expressions must not be mistaken for underlying substance, nor insular scenes for cohesive social movements. The Root Cause coalition, as a case in point, played a key role in the Miami mobilization; yet by default, the general atmosphere of meetings at the convergence center did not reflect this. Indeed, the reminder that it was Root Cause-affiliated activists who bore the worst instances of police brutality risked falling through the cracks.

But even among the relatively privileged, the targets we choose to focus on and the tactics we bring to bear offer clues to the way in which we understand the world, its structures of oppression, and our roles and identities in relation to them. My comfort level in a global-justice as opposed to a peace context goes deeper than demeanor. It has to do with the fact that here the target is more directly linked to an analysis of capitalism, and to a conception of the state as an essentially violent institution, rather than a welfare provider whose war-making is an aberration. In any case, a large component of this anti-war movement — as opposed to the ongoing, self-identified peace movement — was the global justice movement. Hence the instant shift from anti-IMF/World Bank to anti-war messaging in mobilizations dating from September 12, 2001 in New York City. Hence the recognizable ambience of the several days of chaos that engulfed San Francisco when the invasion was declared on March 19, 2003. Hence the continued emphasis by protesters on corporate profiteering by the likes of Bechtel, KBR/Halliburton, Carlyle, ExxonMobil, and ChevronTexaco.

But that was not the whole picture of a peace demo. Churches and faith-based organizations naturally have a long tradition of opposition to war in all its forms, in which political economy is often beside the point. They also have a long tradition of missionary work, which has all too often meant paternalistic charity paid for with cultural imperialism. Too, moderate democrats, liberals, intellectuals, and patriotic Americans could make a strong case against this war: as financial idiocy, as geopolitical blunder, as violation of the nation's founding principles. In other words, they could make a rational case that this war was and is against national self-interest. Similarly, some of the unions who oppose the WTO, NAFTA and the FTAA do so not out of any objection to capitalism, but because they very rationally deduce that the results are detrimental to their competitive advantage.

Indeed, more than once in articles and letters to editors last year I heard “respectable” protesters register distaste for fringe extremists who, by bringing lefty rhetoric into it, threatened to discredit the entire upsurge of popular anti-war feeling. True, in some cases they were talking about International ANSWER, whose sketchy crypto-Stalinism I’m as eager to disavow as are moderates. Nevertheless the point is just as applicable to others tarred with the radical brush. But war is not bad just because Jesus and Gandhi did not like violence, or because it is not what’s best for America. “Peace” that is actually unilateral acquiescence to an unjust status quo is not a sufficient rallying cry.

Global Justice, North and South

Peace vs. justice: from the perspective of the global south, the duality of such movements (or even of, say, God and Marx) does not play out in the same way. It’s common sense: U.S. military force is linked to the institutions of economic globalization. Plainly, the U.S. dominates these institutions, as it dominates other transnational bodies. Plainly, securing the interests of American corporations is a guiding mission for the U.S. military.

Of the two crude poles I’ve sketched above, both protest cultures are those of relative elites; they are movements of the global north. But they do not represent the range of counter-hegemonic political activity in the United States.

Complicating this polar pattern are many embattled communities — immigrant, indigenous, of color and poor peoples movements — who whether by structural analogy or direct personal

connection are functionally part of the global south. When I speak of the need for horizontal solidarity between organizers of the north and south, this applies structurally to those located within the official borders of Amerika — the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Kensington Welfare Rights Union, Desis Rising Up and Moving, to name a few — as well as beyond them.

Nevertheless, let me step across that political border for a moment to illustrate some differences between protesting in Cancun and in Miami — aside from the fact that least in Cancun the problem of disproportional whiteness was somewhat lessened. Walking in the encampamiento and eco-village set up jointly by thousands of Via Campesino organizers, UNAM students from Mexico City, and an international Green Bloc, I remember commenting in delight, “Here itos normal to be anti-capitalist!” Granted, these were self-selected populations of dissenters, but they still play a much more prominent, recognized role in mainline politics than such dissenters do in the United States. Furthermore, among indigenous campesinos, a culture of resistance to globalized capitalism and its vehicle, U.S. imperialism, is based in identification with, not alienation from, learned traditions. They are a source of strength. It’s worth asking whether the value of our own subcultural self-images are anchored in their very oppositionality, their self-conscious marginalization, or in their actual content.

As far as the logistics of protest go, in Cancun there was room to move. In Miami all movement was forestalled, thanks to the homeland security funding and military technology that’s available to U.S. police forces and not to Mexican. Eight and a half million dollars of Bush’s \$87 billion appropriation for securing Iraq and the Homeland was earmarked for the FTAA meetings, and the preemptive rationale that applied here was the same as that applied in the wars on terror and Iraq: Get them before they even think of getting you. And get them hard. In the words of a colonel quoted in the Miami Herald on Nov. 21, regarding the new air strikes simultaneously being carried out in Iraq, “You crush a walnut with a sledge hammer. That’s war.” That’s law enforcement too.

In Cancun, when 80 demonstrators infiltrated the hotel zone to blockade the road outside the conference center, government and police officials negotiated in more or less good faith for several hours in two languages until our demands were addressed. In the end, they refrained from arrest; we rode back to town on top of two buses they provided, and were triumphantly received. In Miami, at a prison solidarity rally aimed at ensuring fair treatment for those being illegally held on felony charges, we were surrounded by rows of cops in full riot gear while representatives attempted negotiation and discussion. Apparently growing bored midway through this process, the cops abruptly ordered us to disperse, after which they attacked and arrested those who had consented to leave as well as those who had refused. About 70 of us spent the night in jail. Similarly, at the previous day’s action, several hundred of those targeted as the most “radical” were detained en masse and never made it to the morning rallying point.

And yet it was not just because of policing that we fell short of the critical mass to implement the ambitious goal of breaching the security fence around the conference center. Of those who made it to the action, there simply were not enough people prepared to hold a line, let alone to advance if it meant physical confrontation with the police. The majority was willing to melt back obediently when the cops instructed them to leave an intersection, consoling themselves with a street party on a neighboring block. Later that day, after a permitted though tightly constrained labor march, the police routed the regrouped “radicals” with tear gas and rubber bullets. We had only the excuse of outrageously disproportionate physical force to assuage our pride as we retreated amid what felt was utter failure to achieve any concrete, immediate goals.

In Cancun, we not only had room to move, we also had a potential critical mass of those willing to act decisively. Twice, diverse groups of people managed to take down large sectors of the security fence, with minimal police interference. Yet at a critical moment on the second occasion, the rising energy was dissipated into speeches instead of a plunge en masse through the gap. I have my own theories on how and why this happened; suffice it here to say that wherever you are, it seems that critical mass is as much a function of attitude as of gross numbers. How many people does it take to generate enough energy? And to channel it effectively? Fewer, if each individual is fully committed and empowered. The way to change that is directly related to questions of communication, dialogue and mutual intelligibility between protest cultures.

Bridging the Gaps

My goal here is not to parse the results of the trade talks, or developments in economic and military policy. But it is relevant to note that neither in the WTO nor in the FTAA negotiations is everything going in accordance with the U.S. master plan: thus the shift toward more military and unilateral approaches in U.S. international relations.

In the textbook Gramscian sense, hegemony means a form of domination in which the component of persuasion outweighs that of coercion. Correspondingly, consent outweighs resistance among those subordinated. If the level of force is being ratcheted up, whether in silencing domestic dissent, quelling international opposition, or securing access to key resources, it's a sign that hegemony is precarious, that consent is slipping. It's an indication of weakness, not strength. However, this does not mean that control is slipping — yet. only that it's being obliged to change its form.

Identification of target, like choice of tactic (whether as a philosophical or strategic good), is intrinsically linked to personal identity within a specific culture of resistance. The peace movement generally prioritizes manifestations of state power favored by the neo-con hawks: nuclear and other high-tech weaponry, open wars and military interventions. The global justice movement has generally prioritized those forms of power deployed via the neoliberal economics of monopoly and asymmetrical trade, yielding the violence of poverty and starvation.

But for maximum effectiveness, both the peace movement and the global justice movement must recognize the periodicity, and the symbiosis, of the two modes of dominance that the U.S. empire has employed. We need to see that globally it's the same as the partnership between good-cop and bad-cop. And that response offers us the same choice as that between applying for a permit to hold signs behind a blue barricade, or getting beaten and gassed from streets we claimed without permission. The question for us is whether or not to collaborate in the process that shores up the empire; whether or not to cooperate in our own policing. So when I call on privileged activists to be willing to risk higher personal stakes, what I'm saying is that in order to unseat hegemony, more of us need to take the decisive plunge toward rejecting consent.

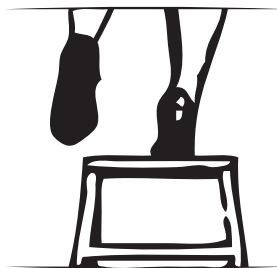
What would this mean? For one thing, it means insisting upon a free speech that is true political participation, and not just a sanctioned pressure valve for siphoning off dangerous steam. It means taking responsible initiative. It means forging respectful alliances. Where war is concerned, it means deepening analysis beyond sympathetic liberal and/or Christian conscience, to the mechanisms of imperialism and capitalism. It means setting goals that reach beyond the

amelioration of unpleasantness and the tempering of conflict, to the structural underpinnings of injustice.

For privileged organizers, it means commitment to intelligent planning and to dialogue that reaches outside the subcultural comfort zone. We need to recognize the importance of context in conditioning our tactics, and this requires the ability to locate our own personal decisions in a much wider field of vision. Strategic coalition both within this country and between countries means being aware of our positionality within the structure of the capitalist system, and within the structure of the U.S. empire. Cultures of resistance stem from the interaction of ideology with location. In other words, we make choices from within given locations, in conjunction both with those who share compatible principles but have different structural locations, as well as with those who share a location in the structure but who have different ideas about what should be done. It means maintaining horizontal communication lines to coordinate the concerted efforts of those at multiple locations.

Thatos solidarity: neither a watering-down to the lowest common denominator acceptable to the American mainstream, nor a macho appropriation of the revolutions of our neighbors. I refuse to believe that resistance is futile in this country. In this country, resistance is imperative. The immediate failure of any given action does not mean that we should give up, but rather that we should tailor our tactics to the evolving situation. The past year's conjunction of ideologies and contexts, modes of power and modes of resistance, has offered a unique learning experience. It's served to clarify and reinforce that peace is best framed as global justice, and that global justice is best framed beyond the north alone.

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I feel it is important to acknowledge the distortion implicit in describing the Mexican police as less repressive than those in Florida, as I do below. These descriptions are specific to very particular instances. However, many young Mexican activists protesting at the may 28, 2004 trade summit in Guadalajara were subject to arrest, severe penalties, torture and sexual abuse. Some have still not been released from detention. Public pressure must continue on media and Mexican consulates in order to ensure justice.

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