

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW AT THE DAWN OF THE NEW MILLENNIUM: WHOSE RIGHTS? WHOSE JUSTICE?

Alf Gunvald Nilsen

Alf.Nilsen@sos.uib.no

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INTRODUCTION

This essay engages with the collective political agency of dominant and subaltern groups in the era of global neoliberal capitalism from three different angles. The first part of the essay outlines the basic framework of a Marxist theory of social movements, which proposes that the collective political agency of dominant and subaltern groups be conceptualized in terms of social movements from above and below. Moreover, the argument is made that the making and unmaking of historically specific social organizations of human practice are fundamentally animated by the dialectical relationship of conflictual process between the two. The second part of the essay applies this framework in a prolegomenon to an analysis of, on the one hand, the implementation, consolidation and globalization of neoliberal restructuring since the 1970s, and, on the other hand, the transition from defensive to offensive struggles against neoliberalism and the emergent crystallization of a new political subject in the form of the movement of movements. The third part discusses the role and relevance of normative ideals of rights and justice for the movement of movements, and argues for the development of an ethics of praxis through which new universalisms can be articulated. The essay concludes with some reflections on the role of activist research vis-à-vis these processes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK¹: MARXISM AS A THEORY OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS – SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE

What I want to propose here is that Marxism does not have a specific theory *about* social movements because it is in itself a theory *of* social movements. To say this suggests a much broader view of social movements than that dominant in much mainstream sociology, where social movements are thought of as field-specific institutional formations – i.e. unconventional or informal political organizations and campaigns, but excluding (with a few honourable exceptions) such issues as revolutions, political parties, popular culture and consciousness, states and capital. What I propose is that the conflictual historical process of developing needs and capacities through the social organization of human practice constitutes the kernel of Marxism as a theory of social movements. Rather

¹ This section draws heavily on my joint work with Laurence Cox, especially our recent co-authored paper on Marxism as a theory of social movements (Cox and Nilsen, 2005). However, I and I alone am responsible for the arguments made in this paper.

than taking the status quo for granted and examining social movements as ripples on the smooth surface of society, this means seeing the *whole* of society as socially produced through collective agency – and hence open to contestation and transformation.

This understanding of social movements, drawing in particular on Western Marxist theory, revolves around a view of history and the making and unmaking of social structures as the product of human practice – and, more importantly, the outcome of collective human practice, articulated in and through conflicts which encompass the totality constituted by a given social organization of human practice, and in turn define that totality. These conflicts are not only grounded in the material activity of human beings; they also revolve around how that activity and its social organization are to develop: as Touraine (1981) puts it, these are conflicts over historicity, over the ways in which societies produce themselves.

Social movements, in this perspective, are not considered as ruptures of an otherwise passive or institutionalized social/political landscape. They are the ways in which human practices are socially articulated. Thus, the following definition is appropriate:

A social movement is the organization of multiple forms of materially grounded and locally generated skilled activity around a rationality expressed and organized by (would-be) hegemonic actors, and against the hegemonic projects articulated by other such actors (Cox, 1999: 99; emphasis in original).

For activists, this approach means two things. On the one hand, it means demystifying their own action – or more exactly pushing beyond a narrow, “technical” or field-specific understanding of their own activity to one which identifies both its roots in everyday practice and the nature of the opposition it encounters. On the other hand, it means demystifying that opposition: moving beyond seeing it simply as that of a poorly-informed, or consumerist, “mass”, or (at a more refined level) of simply expressing a “system” or a “society”, to a point where activists can see the active role of their opponents *within* society and as *constructing* a system.

This is then a view of social movements as being *in movement*. In place of the focus on static institutions that dominates much mainstream social movement theory, I propose a developmental theory of the direction of collective action, dealing specifically with how the scope of collective action is widened and deepened through reflexive self-activity, in other words the development of practices and ideas grounded in human needs and capacities.

Movements From Above and Below

This perspective in turn leads to a significant element of the theoretical framework, namely that I conceive of social movements not only as the collective agency of subaltern social groups, but also the collective agency of dominant social groups. Ahmad has argued about the tendency towards one-sided understandings of class struggle:

We tend to think of class struggle only in relation to the proletariat, as revolutionary struggle. Marx's point is that the possessing class itself wages a brutal and permanent struggle in defence of its own class interests, through violence and threats of violence, through exploitations both extensive and intensive, by maintaining a permanent army of the unemployed, and through thousand other means in the social, political, ideological and cultural arena. Class struggle has, in other words, not one side but two (1998: 34).

Hence I propose a logical analytical distinction between social movements from above and social movements from below. In what follows, I shall elaborate briefly on the specific forms of movements from above and below respectively, and then chart their dialectical interrelationship in the making and unmaking of social organizations of human practice².

Movements From Above: Defensive/Offensive

The concept of *social movements from above* is proposed for the theorization of the collective agency of dominant social groups to maintain or extend social organizations of human practice that sustain their dominance. The specifics of such movements vary, most obviously as between capitalism and other historical epochs, but also within capitalism. Nevertheless, they tend to be able to mobilise characteristic resources, such as a directive role in economic organisation, control of the state, and a leading position vis-à-vis everyday routines and “common sense”.

An investigation of the collective agency of dominant social groups can help activists in avoiding the reification of exploitative and oppressive social structures. Hegemony is not a given or the result of “conformity”; it is the (temporary) outcome of political projects to establish and maintain a certain way of socially organizing human practice through leading, organising and articulating other people's practice. Similarly, activists are not as alone in their struggles against hegemony as they may feel. Hegemonic projects from above invariably meet with resistance from below (albeit often fragmented and isolated), from subaltern social groups struggling against exploitation and oppression – a resistance which is in turn countered with a mixture of attempts at consent and coercion. Thus hegemony must be viewed as a process, as opposed to an achieved state of affairs:

... active or passive affiliation and the preservation of mentalities are placed within a dynamic range of actions, positions, and possibilities, a range that includes the formation of new organizations and institutions, the pressing of claims, the assertion of autonomy ... [T]he relations between ruling and subaltern groups are characterized by contention, struggle and argument (Roseberry, 1996: 80).

How can activists understand their opponents? It follows from the discussion of the duality of movements that they exist in relation to each other. Social movements from

² For the sake of “brevity” I have omitted some of the details and examples of the original elaboration of these concepts in Cox and Nilsen (2005).

above, then, can be either *defensive* or *offensive*, depending on whether they are responding to movements from below, or the reverse.

In the first case – *a defensive movement from above* – we are dealing with political projects that seek to counter challenges from below to the status quo. Such responses can be either *accommodative* or *repressive*. An accommodative project typically seeks to grant certain concessions to the claims emanating from social movements from below so as to appease and thus also defuse a political force that threatens to destabilize the social totality. A typical example here would be the various reforms that were implemented throughout Western Europe in the early and mid-twentieth century in response to the increasing strength of the workers' movement. This was of course a crucial dynamic in the establishment of the social compact between capital and labour which underpinned the political economy of organized capitalism.

A repressive project typically counters insurgent political projects through violent coercion and the curbing of civil rights so as to silence or erase resistance. A typical example here would be the state terrorism unleashed by Latin American dictatorships upon campaigns for democracy in the 1970s and the 1980s. More recently, state practices have come to centre increasingly around control and discipline through legislation that curbs civil liberties and the containment of dissent through various forms of policing and surveillance.

I want to emphasize here that I am not suggesting that accommodative projects are purely oriented towards the gaining of consensus, nor that repressive projects rely on coercion alone. Rather, they differ above all in their response to large-scale, organised movements from below: the accommodative response to such movements does not exclude coercion vis-à-vis ethnic minorities, the lumpenproletariat or the radical wing of such movements (consider e.g. the Italian *compromesso storico* between Christian Democracy and official Communism, achieved at the expense of the autonomous Left). Nor does the repressive project abandon all attempts to gain consent; rather, it restricts these to narrower social groups than before.

Accommodative projects seek to separate movements from each other and to incorporate them in selective ways (since to incorporate a movement from below more fully would be to abdicate, both in terms of power granted and in terms of interests). Activists facing such projects need above all to stress solidarity and find ways of building links with one another. In facing repressive projects, which seek to exclude movements from below, activists need to treat civil and political rights as the gains of past movements (which they are), and understand that (whether legal or illegal) the exercise of such rights is the necessary precondition for movement action. This does not, of course, mean that movements from below should remain passive in this situation, which is after all one where movements from above are on the defensive. Rather, they need both to tackle these responses from above to their own movements and to find ways of taking the initiative further.

In the second case – *an offensive movement from above* – we are dealing with political projects that seek to attack the truce lines left by past movement struggles, particularly through undermining or reversing victories won by or concessions granted to movements from below. Through such attacks, offensive movements from below seek to extend ways of socially organizing human practice that consolidate social dominance. Privatization, for instance, can be understood as one such project, where the logic of commodification is

extended into more and more spheres of people's lifeworlds, thus expanding and consolidating the power of capital over labour (see Harvey, 2004). These offensive movements from above often emerge at conjunctures where an extant social organization of human practice, in whole or in part, starts to show signs of breaking down. Such tendencies towards crisis open up a space for a contestation of the existent, and in this space, movements from above will tend to clash with movements from below and their projects for social change. An example of this would be the space of contestation that emerged with the onset of the crisis of organized capitalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where the New Right emerged as an offensive social movement from above to propagate neoliberal restructuring as the way out of the crisis, and replaced earlier consensual conservatism or social democracy. Another historical example would be the emergence of Italian fascism and the German Freikorps in opposition to the “revolutionary wave” of 1916 – 1919.

In this context the difficulty for activists is often not to get locked into a purely defensive response, which often means defending institutions whose value is often very ambiguous. The crisis situation represents a moment of possibility, during which movements from below can not only attempt to hold onto what is valuable in existing institutions, but also to open up new spaces of conflict. At the core of their opponents' strategy is a situation of uncertainty and doubt about previous approaches, and this is important to understand, whether or not it is possible for movements from below to take independent initiatives. Practical activist choices necessarily depend on seeing the different ways in which these movements from above affect different social groups. There is always a need for two faces of power: one turned towards those whose practices and ideas are effectively organised and incorporated, in whatever form, and one turned towards those whose consent is not needed or sought within a particular regime. These two faces target different groups: within capitalism, the consent of large capital and those controlling the means of state coercion is needed almost by definition. At the other end of the spectrum, the “lumpenproletariat” and the least organised parts of the working class will almost always be targeted with coercive measures to some degree. Other groups, such as trade unionists or liberal professionals, may find themselves within the sphere of consent or within that of coercion.

Movements From Below: The Movement Process - From Local Rationalities to Social Movement Projects

If movements from above attempt to create structures, which in turn generate routines, the activist experience in movements from below tends to reverse this order. Thus the point of departure for my approach to the understanding of the collective agency of subaltern social groups – social movements from below – is that of the existential situation of activists and the learning processes that are inherent to movement activity. I start from people's situated experiences of a social world that is problematic relative to their changing needs and capacities, and their attempts to combine with other people with similar experiences to do something about this. This can be referred to as *the movement process* and I propose the terms *local rationality* and *militant particularism, campaign*, and

social movement project as conceptual prisms that might allow us to formulate a developmental theory of the direction of the collective agency of subaltern social groups³.

If we are to start with and from people's situated experience of a given lifeworld, we start from the context of everyday lives with all their manifold practical routines and received wisdoms. Gramsci's (1998: 333) concept of 'common sense' serves as an apt prism through which to view the experiential rationality that guides everyday activities and mentalities in the sense that it constitutes an amalgamation of two elements: Firstly, the established ways of doing things – that is, the routines that constitute the molecular workings of a hegemonic social organization of human practice, and its "received wisdoms" (the general outlook that this a natural way of doing things, "the way things have always been done", or "the only way of doing things"). Secondly, the practical but often tacit experience of the existent as somehow problematic in the form of "ticklish" knowledges or "grudges" that there is something wrong about the present state of affairs, that this is not due to individual maladjustment, and the subaltern skills and responses that are developed so as to act on such grudges. These knowledges and their grudges can perhaps be likened to what Scott (1985) calls everyday forms of resistance - i.e. half-submerged forms of practice geared towards countering frustrations with the everyday status quo. These practices can be understood in terms of Gramsci's 'good sense', by which he referred to those 'embryonic' aspects of subaltern consciousness that signify 'that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world' (1998: 327)⁴.

However, good sense coexists with hegemonic conceptions of the world - 'a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group' - that conditions and constrains our practical activity in "normal times" (ibid.: 327). The crucial point here is to avoid conceiving of the lifeworlds and lived experience of subaltern social groups as hermetically sealed, autonomous spaces of radical otherness⁵ but rather as hybrids of subaltern and dominant practices and worldviews (see McNally, 2001: 150). Subalterneity and the ways of being and doing that defines it should be 'seen to be forged relationally and historically' as opposed to 'an essential characteristic of social being' (Moore, 1998: 352). In other words, it is the shifting truce lines between movements from above (which tend to embed themselves as far as possible in hegemonic routines and "common sense") and movements from below (which attempt to articulate and develop the "good sense" of subaltern consciousness) which construct this particular context at any given point in time.

I follow Gramsci's insistence that good sense constitutes 'the healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense ... which deserves to be made more unitary and coherent' (1998: 33). Thus, I want to consider the nature and origins of 'good sense' as a *local rationality*. A local rationality can be defined as 'a *formal characteristic about the way people make sense of and engage with the world which is capable of being generalised and taking on a life of its own*' (Cox, 1999: 113). In this context, *local* refers to the situatedness of people's 'responses to given situations', whereas *rationality* 'is not a single monolithic "thing" ... but rather the

³ The sequence I suggest is of course a logical one, but not necessarily a chronological one in all cases. The abstraction from militant particularism to social movement project is not a foregone conclusion or a necessary trajectory, but an inherent potentiality of movement processes, whose realisation is contingent upon how actual struggles work themselves out. Hence, when I suggest that movements can develop from local rationalities and militant particularisms, to campaigns, and ultimately to social movement projects, I am initially suggesting these as logical - as opposed to teleological - categories.

⁴ I owe this point to Ytterstad (2004); see also Cox (1998).

⁵ This is a perspective most prominently present in the Subaltern Studies Project and in the work of post-development theorists such as Escobar. See Sarkar (1997), Moore (1998), Nilsen (2003, 2004a) for critiques.

way that actors practically engage with their world and make sense of their actions' (ibid.: 112). At the root of local rationalities, and across the spectrum of variations, we find those emergent radical needs that are frustrated or constrained by extant social relations – as well as existing needs under attack by offensive movements from above. Local rationalities are those oppositional ways of doing and being which people develop in their attempt to cope with such frustrations, constraints and threats – ways of doing and being that in more or less radical ways run counter to the routines and received wisdoms that characterize the hegemonic elements of common sense (or, in defensive situations, attempt to reaffirm an older common sense against attempts to impose a new one from above – the situation captured in the original “moral economy” discussion (Thompson 1993)).

At times, local rationalities may erupt in the form of overt acts of defiance and opposition to the dominant social organizations of human practice. What I want to consider is the nature of the struggles that might emerge when local rationalities are made more unitary and coherent. I propose the concept *militant particularism* as a tool for grappling with the forms of struggle that may emerge if such a process of extraction and development takes place. That is, militant particularisms are what emerge when local rationalities move from existing as tacit potentialities (latent within common sense) to becoming embodied in explicit practices (and good sense), through conflictual encounters with hegemonic forces. The concept 'militant particularism' was coined by Raymond Williams (1989: 249) and has later been developed by David Harvey (1996, 2000) to refer to the particularist origins of movement struggles. The concept refers to how 'politics is always embedded in 'ways of life' and 'structures of feeling' peculiar to places and communities' (Harvey, 2000: 55) and hence also bears the imprint of this specificity and situatedness, both in terms of the issues that are struggles over, and the practices, skills, idioms, and imaginaries that are deployed in the struggle. A militant particularism, then, can be defined as that those forms of struggle that emerge when a subaltern group deploys specific knowledges and skills in open confrontation with a dominant social group, in a particular place and at a particular time, in a particular conflict over a particular issue.

A fundamental aspect of militant particularisms is the fact that the practices, skills, idioms, and imaginaries of which they are made up can be generalized; these can then transcend the particular locale in which they have emerged and thus be applied across a spectrum of specific situations and singular struggles. This is one reason for speaking of local *rationalities*, as something which can firstly be derived from experience and hidden transcripts and articulated in public ways. This process of practices, skills, idioms, and imaginaries specific to a given site of conflict and struggle transcending the boundaries of this site is fundamental to the process of abstraction and translation through which activists *go beyond* the immediate parameters of the local of resistance in which they are situated. These are processes of learning, cooperation, and organization through which the scope of social movement activity is broadened and deepened, i.e. they are processes through which militant particularisms communicate and interconnect with each other, develop common strategies and identities across socio-spatial boundaries, and simultaneously deepen their self-understanding. I use the term *campaign* to conceptualize the organization of a range of local responses in ways that connect people across multiple such situations and challenge the construction of those situations.

While the development of campaigns entails the transcendence of the boundaries of militant particularism, the generalization of and abstraction from local struggles, and the development of collective identities that cut across socio-spatial divides, they are still

limited forms of movement activity in that they do not address the issue of the social totality. Campaigns typically construct themselves as field specific in the sense that the organization of local struggles against waste incinerators or hospital closures, for example, limits itself to a questioning of a particular kind of environmental or health policy. They do not automatically, or for all their participants, bring into question the larger question of the social totality - the particular social organization of human practice - within which such field-specific policies are fostered and implemented⁶.

However, they do contain – in the local rationality that spawns them – a germ of transcendence. As activists “join the dots”, connecting different issues, linking up with different groups, and criticising the structures that cause their problems or frustrate their campaigns, they are starting to move beyond this field at the same time as they find their place within it. (Those who have already reached this point nevertheless have to argue their case with those who haven’t: Barker and Cox 2002). Such movement processes emerge when activists take the process of abstraction one step further and relate the particular issues around which local struggles and field-specific campaigns emerged to the logic of a social totality and articulate a politics which seeks to rupture and go beyond this totality, towards the constitution of a political project for an alternative social organization of human practice. I propose the term *social movement project* to conceptualize the development of a politics which connects campaigns with what from a local or situated perspective is seen as diverse origins around a challenge to the way situations are constructed in general. Social movement projects are defined by the following features: (a) they pose challenges to the social totality which (b) aim to control the self-production of society and (c) possess or are striving to develop the capacity for the kind of hegemony - i.e. giving direction to the skilled activity of different subaltern social groups - that would render (b) and thus (a) possible. Drawing on Touraine (1981, 1985) one might argue that a social movement project stands out from other forms of collective agency from below by virtue of its capacity to *identify* (i) its actors socially; name its central *opponent* (o), and recognizing that the social *totality* (t) is the product and object of such struggles. In other words, there is a return “up” the sequence from opposing routines to opposing the structures which generate them, and finally to directly confronting the movements from above which have constructed the whole⁷.

Social Movements and Social Worlds: Organic Crises and World Historical Movements

What follows from the approach to social movements as coming both from above and from below is a notion of *social structure as the sediment of social movement struggles*. An extant social organization of human practice – a society – can be conceived of as a “truce line” between collective actors from above and below, with inherent antagonisms and contradictions that may give rise to new rounds of contestation and struggle that may engender new processes of change in this social organization. In this section I outline very briefly some concepts that allow us to grapple with these processes of change.

⁶ Obviously individual activists bring this perspective with them from previous campaigns (see Allen and Jones 1990), or from growing up within a movement culture transmitting the knowledge gains of previous movements. More generally, the movement process as we present it here is logical, but not always chronological, for these and similar reasons.

⁷ We should note that social movement projects can in turn develop towards the development of dual-power and thus of revolutionary situations, although this last point is beyond the scope of this paper.

Organic Crises as Catalytic Moments

Such rounds of contestation and struggle will tend to take place between movements from above and below in the context of what Gramsci (1998) called 'organic crisis'. What I suggest is that organic crises be thought of as catalytic moments where an extant social organization of human practice - itself an outcome of past struggles over historicity - moves from relative stability to thoroughgoing volatility where new struggles for control over historicity unfold. The truce lines of the past give way to open articulation of the antagonisms and contradictions that they once held in check; spaces of contention and terrains of struggle emerge where social movements from above and below clash over the direction of the imminent changes in the social organization of human practice. These are ultimately struggles between hegemonic projects for the future development of the social organization of human practice.

World Historical Movements – From Above and Below

Organic crises can be thought of as constituting the terrain of what Katsiaficas (1987) calls 'world-historical movements'. With this term he refers to '[p]eriods of crises and turmoil *on a global scale*' that are 'relatively rare in history'. He identifies 'a handful of such periods of global eruptions', namely the movements of 1776-1789, 1848, 1905, 1917, and 1968 (ibid.: 6, 18). Now, what is it that qualifies these movements as being 'world-historical'?

In each of these periods, global upheavals were spontaneously generated. In a chain reaction of insurrections and revolts, new forms of power emerged in opposition to the established order, and new visions of the meaning of freedom were formulated in the actions of millions of people. Even when these movements were unsuccessful in seizing power, immense adjustments were necessitated both within and between nation states, and the defeated movements offered revealing glimpses of the newly developed nature of society and the new kinds of class struggles which were to follow (ibid.: 6).

Katsiaficas' perspective engages with those movements that erupt and ascend from below to challenge the extant social system. However, the perspective suggested in this essay entails that both social movements from above and social movements from below move in the spaces of contention that open up through organic crises, and, furthermore, that their roles may be both offensive and defensive. Social movements from above may be defensive in that they seek to defend social structures and power relations that underpin a social order that serves the interests of hegemonic social groups. However, they may also be understood as being offensive when they set out to change social structures that bear the imprint of the victories of social movements from below, i.e. social structures that constrain the power of hegemonic groups. Similarly, social movements from below can be understood as being defensive when they seek to defend the outcomes of their own past

victories, while they are on the offensive when they set out to challenge the hegemony of dominant social groups.

The Contingency of Crises and Contention

One last point need to be made. Organic crises are *contingent conjunctures*; the outcome of the struggles cannot be foretold. Rather, what emerges from the space of contention that has been created depends on the dynamic of the struggles as such. As a particular movement project gradually attains hegemony - i.e. wins partial and/or total victories - this space is constrained and narrowed down. The attainment of a greater or lesser extent of hegemony creates a greater or lesser extent of 'path dependency', in that a certain kind of direction is given to the changes in the social organization of human practice which in turn excludes alternative possibilities. In the next part of the essay I present a prolegomenon to an analysis of the current conjuncture in capitalist development according to this framework.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FROM ABOVE AND BELOW: THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE – A PROLEGOMENON TO AN ANALYSIS

The current conjuncture, I submit, is one of a nascent organic crisis and contention between emergent world historical movements from above and below. From above, there is the project of neoliberal restructuring. From below a 'movement of movements' for global social justice is in the process of crystallizing. In what follows, I offer a brief and broad-brushed sketch of this scenario.

The Crisis of Organized Capitalism and the Emergence of Neoliberal Restructuring

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked the onset of a profound crisis in the social structure of accumulation commonly referred to as 'organized capitalism' (see, e.g., Lash and Urry 1987). The golden age of capitalism that had lasted since the end of WWII crumbled:

By the end of the 1960s [organized capitalism] experienced cracks in its foundations and began to fall apart under conditions of stagnant production, declining productivity, and intensified class conflict over higher wages, greater social benefits and better working conditions. These conditions created a profit-crunch on invested capital' (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001: 14; see also Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison 1984 and Harvey 1990).

Simultaneously, the advanced capitalist state and the social compact that underpinned it faced a loss of legitimacy. From below, this was evident in the global uprisings of 1968 (Katsiaficas 1987; Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1989; Wainwright 1994). From above, a "New Right" crystallized around a political project that sought to vindicate the

liberal economic doctrines of Hayek, Von Mises and Friedman that had been marginalized by the hegemony of Keynesianism (see Harvey 2003: 157; see also Holloway 1995, Bonefeld 1995, and De Angelis 2000a).

In the face of economic stagnation and loss of legitimacy, social democracy generally resorted to its conventional strategy of stimulating demand through such measures as increased public spending and credit expansion. This strategy staved off the crisis temporarily, but by the mid- and late 1970s, it was clear that the crisis was of a structural rather than conjunctural character and that the tried-and-tested crisis management of social democracy were insufficient to address this structural crisis (Bonefeld 1995, Fagerberg et. al. 1990). By this time, the uprisings of 1968 had waned and assumed the character of a ‘war of position’ as opposed to a ‘war of manoeuvre’ (Cox 2002). From the space of contention that opened up in the 1960s, the New Right emerged as a social movement from above capable of implementing and giving direction to a process of change in the social organization of human practice that centred on a project of global neoliberal restructuring.

The politics of monetarism revolved around curbing public expenditure, tax-cuts, wage-freezes and so on – it was a call for ‘a return to the market’ and its rationale can be explained as follows:

... capitalist reproduction depended on a deflationary integration of labour into the capital relation so as to reduce the ratio of debt to surplus value through an effective exploitation of labour. In other words, money has to command labour for the purpose of exploitation rather than keeping unproductive producers afloat through an inflationary expansion of credit ... The regaining of control over the money supply involves a deflationary attack on social relations through the intensification of work and a reduction in public spending that put money into the hands of workers (Bonefeld, 1995: 45).

Monetarism represented a direct effort to restructure the social structure of accumulation that defined organized capitalism – the rise of monetarism, then, was the emergence of a social movement from above to dismantle organized capitalism yet ‘contain social reproduction within the limits of its capitalist form’ (ibid.: 49). In the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Western Europe, this process was spearheaded in the 1980s by conservative parties, the epitomes of which are of course Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher (see, e.g., Piven and Cloward 1982 and Jessop et. al. 1988). During the nineties, reformed social democratic parties – “New Labour” – appeared at the helm of the project of restructuring (see, e.g., Jessop n.d., Hay 1999, and Watkins 2004). Neoliberalism assumed a global character through the imposition of structural adjustment programmes by the World Bank and the IMF in the post-colonial world; firstly on African and Latin American countries in the 1980s, and then on crucial Asian economies such as India (early 1990s) and South Korea and Thailand (late 1990s) (see, e.g., Cheru 1989, Green 1995, Petras and Veltmeyer 1997, Ghosh and Chandrasekhar 2000, Corbridge and Harriss 2000). The collapse of Stalinism opened up the economies of Eastern Europe to restructuring by “shock therapy” (Gowan 1995).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the process of neoliberal restructuring had given rise to an epochal shift towards ‘global capitalism’ characterized by ‘the rise of transnational capital and the supersession of the nation-state as the axis of world

development' (Robinson 2003: 12; see also Robinson 2001 and 2004). The epoch of global capitalism emerged through a process of 'intensive expansion' in which 'those cultural and political institutions that fettered capitalism are swept aside, paving the way for the total commodification ... of social life worldwide' (Robinson 2001: 159). This process has been designated by David Harvey (2003: ch. 4) as 'accumulation by dispossession' – a contemporary form of 'primitive accumulation' where social, ecological, cultural, and intellectual "commons" are commodified 'and brought within the capitalist logic of accumulation' (ibid.: 146). This unfettering has altered the power relations between capital and labour:

The liberation of transnational capital from the constraints and commitments placed on it by the social forces in the nation-state phase of capitalism has dramatically altered the balance of forces among classes and social groups in each nation of the world and at a global level towards a transnational capitalist class and its agents (Robinson 2003: 37).

The restoration of the power of capital over labour is evident in sense that the mechanisms through which the process of accumulation by dispossession is effected have been redistributive rather than generative: while economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s fell far behind the average rates of the 1960s and 1970s, such mechanisms as privatization, financialization, crisis management and manipulations, and state redistributions have increased the incomes and decreased the expenditures of capital and, vice versa, decreased the incomes and increased the expenditures of labour (Harvey 2004: 27-34). The outcome? A world where Bill Gates, the Walton Family of Wal-Mart fame and the Sultan of Brunei were worth the combined national income of the 36 least developed countries of the world (Callinicos 2000: 1).

Making Another World Possible: The Emergence of the Movement of Movements

The recent cycle of protests against the summit meetings of the transnational capitalist class and the transnational state – Seattle, Quebec, Prague, Gothenburg, Genoa – and the creation of spaces and networks of communication between the many movements that animate these protests – the WSF and its regional progenies, People's Global Action, Via Campesina – has signalled to the world that neoliberalism will not proceed uncontested. A slogan such as "Our World is Not for Sale" testifies to a refusal to submit to the intensive expansion of capitalism, while "Another World is Possible" constitutes an insistence that alternative ways of socially organizing human practice are within reach. Klein has labelled the former refusal as resistance to 'the privatization of every aspect of life, and the transformation of every activity and value into a commodity' which amounts to 'a radical reclaiming of the commons' (2001: 82). Sousa Santos (2003) conceives of the latter insistence as a 'critical utopia'. The utopian dimension consists, basically, in rejecting the 'conservative utopia' of neoliberalism and 'its radical denial of alternatives to present-day reality' and 'in claiming the existence of alternatives to neoliberal globalization' (ibid.: 6, 7).

In order to understand why resistance to global neoliberal capitalism can rightly be referred to as a 'movement of movements', we need to understand how 'the spontaneity of

Seattle was a long time coming' (Wilkin 2000: 42; see also Broad and Heckscher 2003). Whereas the transnational capitalist class was able to implement and consolidate neoliberal restructuring as a hegemonic project of global reach from the late 1970s to the 1990s, this does not mean that subaltern social groups merely acquiesced to this process. Throughout much of the postcolonial world, structural adjustment programmes were met by protests since their very inception in the mid-1970s:

During the decade or so from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, a veritable wave of more-or-less spontaneous popular protests engulfed those countries, mainly in the Second and Third Worlds, in which austerity measures had been adopted as part of structural adjustment and economic reform programmes – often under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – which forced rapid economic liberalisation and the dismantling of many forms of state control, state intervention and state subsidy. The characteristic form of protest was the 'bread riot', although this combined in many instances with other forms of protest and struggle (Seddon and Dwyer 2002: 1).

Similarly, deindustrialization and the direct attack on labour through the casualization of work was met by militant strike action in Europe and the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. This being said, we need to recognize how these were essentially defensive struggles. The IMF riots sought to defend and retain the moral economy of the developmental state, i.e. a social compact between state elites and (primarily) urban groups where the state elites garnered support through various welfare policies (Walton and Seddon 1994: ch.2). Similarly, Massimo De Angelis argues about labour struggles in the 1980s:

In the countries of the North ... at first, neoliberal strategies were met with the resistance of social subjects whose main socio-economic characteristics and political/organizational imaginary were typical of the class composition of the Keynesian era. These struggles were mostly reactive in nature and mainly defensive of rights and entitlements threatened by the new neoliberal policies (2000b: 14).

What has changed? As essentially defensive movements, the IMF riots and strike waves of the 1980s and 1990s had found it hard to move beyond militant particularisms. Even sectoral campaigns were hard to sustain, let alone social movement projects. The actual social movement projects of those years, growing out of the "new social movements" (see e.g. Antunes et al. 1990), came from very different places, and ones which were still marginal to the traditional structures, organisations and languages of the largest movements. This is not simply to say that the IMF riots and strike waves were mistaken in their ideologies. As defensive movements from below, they found themselves defending a moral economy whose practical basis was being cut from under their feet by capitalist restructuring. That in itself did not mean that the victory of capital was a foregone conclusion. However, the truce line implied by that moral economy had already proved intolerable for many movements from below during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, within the context of organic crisis, once capital had won the essential battle about the direction of social change, subsequent attempts to reconstruct a political alliance in defence of

Keynesianism were highly unlikely to succeed. The process of “disorganisation” (Lash and Urry 1987) was too far gone at this point.

The new movements of the 1960s and 1970s had highlighted popular discontent with Fordist society, a discontent which they were not initially successful in channelling and which was drawn on by the ideologues of the New Right (Wainwright 1994) in the construction of a popular base for monetarist policies. It is only with the emergence of the movement of movements that it has become possible to construct a new social movement project from below, not in defence of Fordism but in an attempt to take that popular discontent – whether it be a rejection of organised capitalism or of the developmental state – on board. This has involved a number of processes. Firstly, the development of new militant particularisms and their coming together around new campaigns (e.g. over landlessness, in opposition to dam projects, in opposition to the MAI or NAFTA, etc.) Secondly, the construction of a new political subject in bringing movements that previously opposed each other together. This has been achieved, more than anything, by the omnipresent forces of neo-liberalism, which have forced together movements that twenty years ago still had the luxury of not seeing one another as allies. Since a return to Fordism is no longer a serious option, movements are freer to think in broad terms – and to raise the stakes in terms of their own movement processes.

Another way of putting this is that in the process of articulating new demands (moving from militant particularisms to campaigns) movements from below have created a space where isolated defensive struggles have been able to come together into one offensive struggle: one which no longer takes the terms of reference of Fordism for granted, but which (because of neo-liberalism’s success in erasing those terms of reference) has been forced into defining new, and more radical, goals than were possible for most movements of the 1980s. As Gill writes:

Thus, the battles in Seattle may link to new patterns of political agency and a movement that goes well beyond the politics of identity and difference: it has gender, race and class aspects. It is connected to issues of ecological and social reproduction, and of course, to the question of democracy. This is why more than 700 organisations and between 40,000-60,000 people – principally human rights activists, labour activists, indigenous people, representatives of churches, industrial workers, small farmers, forest activists, environmentalists, social justice workers, students, and teachers – all took part collectively in the protests against the Third Ministerial on 30 November 1999 ... **In this regard, the effectiveness of the protest movements may well lie in a new confidence gained as particular struggles come to be understood in terms of a more general set of interconnections between problems and movements worldwide** (2000: 138; emphasis added).

That movement now represents a social movement project grounded in a self-identification around diversity and human need; in naming neo-liberalism or global capitalism as the common enemy, and in a clear identification that the struggle is about the whole of global society. The outcomes of those struggles will have a determining effect on what it means to live on planet Earth in the 21st century. In the next part of the essay I engage with the role and importance of normative ideals of rights and justice for this social movement project.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS FROM BELOW AND THE MEANING OF RIGHTS AND JUSTICE⁸: TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF PRAXIS

In his essay on 'the moral economy of the English crowd', E. P. Thompson (1993) contrasts the notion of 'moral economy' to the notion of 'riot', with the latter implying 'a spasmodic view of popular history' where the popular classes are seen as intruding only occasionally and chaotically on the historical stage as a kind of 'sudden social disturbance' (ibid.: 185). In this view, the food riots of the eighteenth century are understood as compulsive, almost biological acts of desperation – 'rebellions of the belly' – rather than as conscious acts mediated through sets of belief systems. As Thompson argues, such perspectives stop short of asking 'being hungry ... what do people do? How is their behaviour modified by custom, culture, and reason? And ... does their behaviour contribute towards any more complex, culturally mediated function which cannot be reduced ... back to stimulus again?' (ibid.: 187). Thompson argues that rather than being mere reactions to immediate, external stimuli, the eighteenth century food riots were mediated and legitimised through a complex perception of 'moral economy' where custom guards appropriate practices pertaining to the provision of basic goods and staples. It was not as if 'the eighteenth-century English collier [clapped] his hand spasmodically upon his stomach, and [responded] to external economic stimuli'; rather, crowd action was inevitably mediated by 'some legitimising notion' (ibid.: 187-8):

It is of course true that riots were triggered by soaring prices, by malpractices among dealers, or by hunger. But these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices in marketing, milling, banking, etc. This in its turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy of the poor. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action (ibid.: 188).

What Thompson points out here is the basic insight that social movements do not arise from structural contradictions alone⁹. If the point of departure is a conception of human practice as being a conscious and creative activity, then it also follows that 'transformative human actions do not result automatically from material conditions; they are mediated by subjective meanings and conscious intentions' (Peet and Watts, 1993: 28).

When approaching social movements and their politics, then, the foundation is that of the moral interpretation of experience:

[Processes of change], if they are within 'social being' seem to impinge upon, thrust into, break against, existent social consciousness. They propose new problems, and, above all, they continually give rise to *experience* ... Experience arises spontaneously within social being, but it does not arise without thought; it arises because men and women ... are rational, and they think about what is happening to them and their world ... What we mean is that changes take place within social being, which gives rise to changed *experience*:

⁸ This part is adapted from Nilsen (2004b).

⁹ Early social movement theory, drawing on structural functionalism, for instance, explained the emergence of social movements with reference to systemic strains (see Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: Chapter 1). Similarly, Marxist approaches to social movements have tended to posit structural contradictions as the "be all and end all" of social movements (see Cox, 1999: 75-77). Such structuralist conceptualizations of social movements have been harshly criticized in much of the literature on "new social movements" (see Touraine, 1981; Melucci, 1989).

and this experience is *determining*, in the sense that it exerts pressures upon existent social consciousness ... (1995: 9-10).

These experiences are then ‘interpreted’ by human agents in the light of cultural systems of meaning and belief:

... human consciousness [is] produced by creative human beings trying to understand their existence so that they can purposefully choose how to better organize their efforts to fulfil their potentials. And the understanding of experience is mediated by beliefs, which rationalize and make sense of experience ... Beliefs reflect individuals’ experience, which is culturally filtered to make individual actual experience commensurable to the wider, social, real world (Cole, 1999: 250-51).

The process at play is an active, creative one: a process where people actively use normative ideas and beliefs to make sense of the contradictions and constraints that their movement activity aims to challenge and change, and to endow that activity with direction and justification. The use of ideas may, if the movement activity develops in the direction outlined above – from local rationalities, via campaigns to social movement projects – gradually come to assume the form of ‘a matrix through which this resistance [defines] itself’ (Sundar, 1997: 6). Such a matrix, such a way of knowing the world can be called a discourse of resistance. A definition would perhaps run as follows: a politico-cultural imaginary that identifies the contradictions of a given social organisation of human activity and challenges its legitimacy with reference to a set of moral principles that it violates; the challenge of the present state of things revolves fundamentally around an awareness that the here and now is not the only possible and legitimate way of organising social life, and is thus also likely linked to projects for more or less radical change in extant power relations¹⁰.

My contention is that such discourses of resistance can and should constitute a foundation for an ethics of alternative global futures. This is not a contemplative ethics, one which arises from reflection insulated from real, conflictual social processes, nor is it a fully-formed ethics that appears ‘suddenly like Athena, from the head of Zeus, in complete armour’ (Chattopadhyay, 1990: 101), nor is it an immutable ethics to be guarded from the whims of the swinish multitude by the stewardship of “the defenders of the faith”. What I am proposing is an *ethics of praxis* which is rooted in the politics of social movements from below, which, like these movements, are always in a process of becoming, and hence always emergent as opposed to fully-formed, and which is open to change through democratic deliberation. Let me try and clarify this point through a discussion of issues of rights and justice are or can be articulated in movement processes in opposition to neoliberalism.

The Movement Process and Struggles over the Meaning of Rights and Justice

David Harvey (2003: Chapter 4; 2004) argues that, through the social process of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, neoliberal restructuring entails a restoration of class power in favour of capital. Like all social processes, this restoration of the power of capital ‘throw[s] up and rest[s] upon certain conceptions of justice and of rights’ (2004: 38). In

¹⁰ This is not the place to discuss the dynamics of the process of knowledge production in social movement activity, but see Nilsen (2004c) and Barker and Cox (2002).

opposition to 'idealist specifications of rights and of justice' which obfuscate the connection between ethics and social process, Harvey (ibid.: 39) argues that the neoliberal regime of rights 'cluster around two dominant logics of power – that of the territorial state and that of capital'. The imposition of a regime of rights hinges basically upon the state and its protective capacities; in this respect, rights are 'fundamentally derivative of and conditional upon citizenship'. He sums up rights as they are defined by the logic of the power of the territorial state:

The territoriality of jurisdiction ... becomes an issue. This cuts both ways. Difficult questions arise because of stateless persons, migrants without papers, illegal immigrants and the like. Who is or is not a "citizen" becomes a serious issue defining principles of inclusion and exclusion within the territorial specification of the national or local state. How the state exercises sovereignty with respect to rights is itself a contested issue, but there are limits placed on that sovereignty ... by the rules embedded in neo-liberal capital accumulation. Nevertheless, the nation state, with its monopoly over legitimate forms of violence, can in Hobbesian fashion define its own bundle of rights and interpretations of rights and be only loosely bound by international conventions (ibid.: 39).

An ideal-typical example of this would be the refusal by the USA to submit to the jurisdiction of international law in questions of crimes against humanity. Rights as they are defined according to the logic of the power of capital centre on property and profit:

To live under neo-liberalism also means to accept or submit to that liberal bundle of rights necessary for capital accumulation. We live, therefore, in a society in which the inalienable rights of individuals ... to private property and the profit rate trump any other inalienable rights you can think of. Defenders of this regime of rights plausibly argue that it encourages "bourgeois virtues", without which everyone in the world would be far worse off. These include individual responsibility and liability, independence from state interference ..., equality of opportunity in the market and before the law, rewards for initiative and entrepreneurial endeavors, care for oneself and one's own, and an open market place that allows for wide-ranging freedoms of choice of both contract and exchange (ibid.: 39-40).

Now, Harvey's project is not one of outright denunciation of any notion of rights. Rather, he stresses their importance as a vector in social movement politics: 'There is a battle to be fought not only over which universals and what rights shall be invoked in particular situations but also over how universal principles and conceptions of rights shall be constructed ... The positive sense of justice as a right has ... been a powerful provocateur in political movement: struggle against injustice have powerfully animated movements for social change' (2004: 38)¹¹. His project is one of disputing the 'uni-accentual'¹² character of the neoliberal regime of rights:

I cannot convince anyone by philosophical argument that the neo-liberal regime of rights is unjust. But the objection to this regime of rights is quite simple: to accept it is to accept that we have no alternative except to live under a regime of endless capital accumulation and economic growth whatever the social, ecological or political consequences ... But these are not the only sets of rights available to us. Even within the liberal conception as laid out

¹¹ See also Harvey's (2000: Chapter 5) discussion of human rights as a basis for a radical politics of transformation.

¹² The term 'uni-accentual' is derived from the linguistics of Valentin Volosinov (1986).

in the UN Charter there are derivative rights such as freedoms of speech and expression, of education and economic security, rights to organize unions, and the like. Enforcing these rights would have posed a serious challenge to the hegemonic practices of Neoliberalism. Making these derivative rights primary and the primary rights of private property and the profit rate derivative would entail a revolution in political-economic practices of great significance. There are also entirely different conceptions to which we may appeal - of access to the global commons or to basic food security, for example (ibid.: 40).

Harvey's motivation, then, for challenging the uni-accentuality of the neoliberal regime of rights is a refusal to accept what Miliband (1994: 2) has termed 'the fetishism of the here and now', i.e. a reified conception of an existent social organization of human practice that revolves around 'the belief about everything that exists, that it is 'natural', that it should exist, and that however badly one's attempt at reform may go they will not stop life going on, since the traditional forces will continue to operate and precisely will keep life going on' (Gramsci, 1998: 157). This refusal of the fetishism of the here and now is carried out through struggles over how extant rights are to be interpreted, which/whose rights are to be prioritized and how we might conceive of new and expanded notions of rights: '... political struggles over the proper conception of rights moves center stage to how possibilities and alternatives get represented, articulated and eventually born forward into transformative political economic practices' (Harvey, 2004: 40-1).

This approach to rights, however, is not merely an act of discursive struggle. Just as the neoliberal regime of rights is linked to a definite social process, so alternative conceptions of rights are linked to political projects seeking to promote a transformation or abolition of the dominant social process of our time; to challenge the rights of neoliberalism is inevitably 'to challenge the social process in which they inhere' (Harvey, 2004: 38). The relationship is one of dialectical emergence:

The critique of endless capital accumulation as the dominant process that shapes our lives entails critique of those specific rights - to individual private property and the profit rate - which inhere in that process and vice versa. To propose a different bundle of rights carries with it, therefore, the obligation to specify a dominant social process within which such rights can be inherently embedded (ibid.: 49).

This should make clear what I mean by an ethics of praxis as an ethics rooted in the politics of social movements from below. However, a rights-based critique of endless capital accumulation and a vision of an alternative social process, or social organization of human practice, in which these rights are manifest amounts to something along the lines of what I referred to above as a social movement project. These do not fall out of the sky, ready made; they emerge as a product of political and intellectual labour. This takes me to the always-emergent character of the ethics of praxis and its relation to the movement process.

The politics of social movements are processual in nature in that they emerge through a learning process which emanates from the dynamic of conflictual encounters:

... social movements from below ... often need to conquer or produce their means of intellectual production. Social movement *actors*, for their part, have to 'create a new language' ... another way of thinking which is more or less adequate to their new way of acting. Activist theorizing, then, is in important ways a process of cognitive liberation. The starting point is often the practical critique of 'common sense' ... For many activists ... it is a turning point to be at the receiving end of police aggression and to discover that

an institution they have been brought up to see as underwriting their safety and the moral order is in fact prone to violence against 'ordinary people' ... pursuing what they perceive to be eminently moral ... pursuits ... When budding activists start to think their way out of 'common sense' ... there is often an interest in forms of generalized understanding that might offer clarity, justification and a broader vision to underpin their activity ... Activist theorizing can thus present itself as a process of throwing off the contemplative 'muck of ages' gathered by traditional intellectuals within universities, or perhaps more exactly its creative reworking, its cultivating for other purposes (Barker and Cox, 2002: 10-11).

Movements exist, almost by definition, as part of a learning process of interaction with the outside world. A simplified model, by way of example: people experience a need, try to meet it through 'appropriate channels' ... and find that they don't get anywhere. In the process, they meet other people, and discover that this is a general situation, not just a reflection of their own inadequacies. They form an organization and try to lobby, but run up against increasingly systematic opposition. This experience brings it home to them that the problem is not simply ill-will on the part of misguided individuals, but has deeper roots' (ibid.: 37-8). The development of social movement politics must be understood as '*achievements*', and these achievements are 'subject to constant revision as movements develop and change in interaction with opponents and allies' (ibid.: 39).

Such processes of conflictual encounters, discovery and dialogue also entail abstraction in the sense of the move from local and specific conflicts – i.e. militant particularisms (Harvey, 1996, 2000, 2001) – towards the articulation of more totalizing political projects outlined above:

The theory of 'militant particularism' argues that all broad-based political movements have their origins in particular struggles in particular places and times ... Many struggles are defensive ... But some forms of militant particularism are pro-active. Under capitalism this typically means struggles for specific group rights that are universally declared but only partially conferred ... The critical problem for this vast array of struggles is to shift gears, transcend particularities, and arrive at some conception of a universal alternative to that social system which is the source of their difficulties ... [T]he oppositional movements of socialism, communism, environmentalism, and even humanism and multiculturalism have all constructed some sort of universalistic politics out of militant particularist origins (ibid.: 244).

Developing social movement practices and perspectives from militant particularisms towards more universal political projects entails "going beyond" the specific and the local. Anchored in the assumption that local conflicts will tend to be specific mediations of global conflictual processes, it entails an interrogation of the experience that has engendered this militant particularism in the first place so as to unearth the dimensions of conflict that point towards such universal processes. This is what Harvey refers to as 'the labour of translation' and 'abstraction':

The movement from particularity to universality entails a 'translation' from the concrete to the abstract. Since a violence attaches to abstraction, a tension always exists between particularity and universality in politics. This can be viewed either as a creative tension or, more often, as a destructive and immobilizing force in which inflexible mediating institutions ... claim rights over individuals and communities in the name of some universal principle (ibid.: 244).

To the extent that an ethics of praxis emerges, then, it does so from this labour of translation, which is the labour of practical social movement politics. This takes me to the last point of this essay, namely the challenges involved in thinking and practising universalism in a globalized world.

“Same, Same but Different”: Thinking and Practising Universalism in a Globalized World

Let me first state the obvious. If I was arguing for a closed ethical universe, I would in a sense, like Fukuyama (1992), be arguing for 'the end of history', although my preferred ending would be radically different to his. This is irreconcilable with a conception of development which focuses on perpetual processes of change animated by social movement struggles.

So how can we then conceive of the necessity to maintain a balance between universalism/inviolability and openness to change? Let us look at universalism first. David Harvey has pointed out the challenge of grappling with, on the one hand, 'uneven geographical developments', and, on the other hand, the agenda of 'universal rights':

Examination of the world at any one particular scale immediately reveals a whole series of effects and processes producing geographical differences in ways of life, standards of living, resource uses, relations to the environment, and cultural and political forms. The long historical geography of human occupancy of the earth's surface and the distinctive evolution of social forms ... embedded in places with distinctive qualities has produced an extraordinary geographical mosaic, of socio-ecological environments and ways of life ... This geographical mosaic is a time-deepened creation of multiple human activities (2000: 77).

Whereas these patterns of unevenness and difference 'plainly pose serious barriers to the 'proper bringing together' of multiple particular interests into some framework expressive of the general interest' it is equally clear that 'it is precisely in these localized contexts that the million and one oppositions to capitalist globalization also form, crying out for some way to be articulated as a general oppositional interest' (ibid.: 80, 81). In order to achieve this, we have to 'go beyond the particularities and ... emphasize the *pattern* and the systemic qualities of damage being wrought across geographical scales and differences' (ibid.: 81). A conception of 'a certain kind of universalism within which uneven geographical advancements of human interests might flourish in more interesting and productive ways' (ibid.: 84) will be at the heart of this project. The very fact of global capitalism imposes 'a certain commonality ... upon the whole world of difference and otherness' (ibid.: 84) creating a terrain where universal claims, while being based 'firmly on local experience', must operate 'dialectically in relation to globalization' (ibid.: 85). Such a project cannot afford the 'rigid Marxist stance' where notions of rights are dismissed as being 'captive to bourgeois institutions', nor the postmodern rejection of rights as 'a mere stepchild of erroneous patterns of Enlightenment thought':

The alternative is to recognize that all claims to universality are fraught with difficulty and that the distinction between reformism and revolution is never as sharp as some Marxists maintain. Nor can the distinction between particularity and difference be so easily defined. The problem is then to find ways to broaden and amplify the scope of

human rights in ways that are as sympathetic as possible to the right to be different ... (ibid.: 86-7).

Indeed, universalism, as Honneth (1985: 155) has pointed out, is a necessary condition for the right to difference: 'if recourse to universal norms is on principle blocked' or ruled out as a flawed aspect of modernist thought, 'then a meaningful argument in support of the equal right to the coexistence of all everyday cultures can not be constructed'; we will be incapable of establishing 'responsibility for the universal recognition of the equal rights of cultures'.

This still begs the question: what can be the real, material basis for thinking and practising universalism in a globalized world? In order to answer this, I turn to the philosophical anthropology of Karl Marx. The starting point for this philosophical anthropology is the interrelationship between human *capacities* and human *needs* (Geras, 1983: 69). Capacities can be thought of as the powers that are intrinsic to human beings: 'in the first place that of production, but also language, as embodying consciousness' (ibid.: 69). Needs can be thought of as 'universal and permanent human ... for other human beings, for sexual relations, for food, water, clothing, shelter, rest and, more generally, for circumstances that are conducive to physical health rather than disease ... [and] the need of people for a breadth and diversity of pursuit and hence of personal development' (ibid.: 69, 72). The interrelationship between capacities and needs is a dialectical one, where we as human beings deploy or capacities creatively and consciously in interaction with each other to satisfy our needs, and in doing so we also develop new capacities and new needs, and in turn alter the parameters of our interactions with each other:

... we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life ... the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act (Marx and Engels, 1999: 48-49).

Capacities and needs - and hence human nature - are not thought of as abstract and fixed, but as constituting 'an indeterminate constancy' (McNally, 2001: 7), as constantly evolving through social interaction, and thus as being inherently historical. The dialectical interrelationship between human nature and social change can in turn be stated as follows: on the one hand, 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual' but rather it is constituted by 'the ensemble of social relations' (Marx, cited in Foster, 2000: 113); on the other hand, 'all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature' (Marx, cited in Cole, 2001).

This anthropology of the indeterminate constancy of human species being has both an explanatory and a normative dimension. The explanatory dimension relates to the conception of history and historical development; history, it might be argued, arises at the interface of absolute and universal human needs and our capacity to satisfy these needs

through creative activity in a given social organisation of this activity. Indeed, it is this explanatory dimension that constitutes the bedrock of the theory of social movements from which this essay departs. Here, however, I want to focus on the normative dimension. The normative dimension relates to how the assumption of certain needs being intrinsic to human nature in fact constitute a benchmark of dignity against which a social order can be normatively assessed; an ‘adverse judgement’ is passed on social conditions which ‘fail the very needs common and intrinsic to human kind, adverse because they fail them’ (ibid.: 71). Now, if we accept the idea of a human nature of needs and capacities, then there is always already a notion of universalism and inviolability available to us. The universal claim must be that a legitimate social organization of human practice must enable and allow the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human capacities. The definition of those needs - for instance, what are false needs and what are genuine needs - and capacities – for instance, what capacities do we want to develop, and why? – will have to remain open to contestation and deliberation.

This, in turn, brings me to the question of why ethics must be open to change. Ethical and moral closure is irreconcilable with the basic premise of the perspective I'm proposing, namely the *indeterminate* constancy of human nature. As much as needs and capacities constitute the basis for universalism and inviolability, they are also defined by constant change and becoming. If the criterion of ethical judgment on a social organization of human practice is whether it allows the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human capacities, and these capacities and needs emerge from a perennial process of transmutation, ethics cannot be a static, immutable entity. To establish such an ethic would be much like establishing what Harvey (2000: 160) calls 'a utopia of spatial form' where 'the temporality of the social process, the dialectics of social change - real history - are excluded, while social stability is assured by a fixed spatial form' (ibid.: 160). This would in turn amount to doing the groundwork for a totalitarianism akin to that which have bedevilled utopias of spatial form. If ethics were absolute and immutable, who would act as the defenders of the faith, how would they be appointed, what would be their powers, and how would we impose checks and balances on the power of these high priests of everything that is good and right in this world? The ethics of praxis - by virtue of being rooted in praxis - must be dynamic, changing through open, critical dialogue as human potentials evolve.

The alternative, however, is not to opt for an alternative along the lines of the 'utopianism of social process' (to remain within this metaphor), which 'have the habit of getting lost in the romanticism of endlessly open projects that never have to come to a point of closure ...' (Harvey, 2000: 174). It is rather, a question of carving out a project that advances a notion of ethics similar to 'spatiotemporal utopianism', which aims for 'tangible transformations of the raw materials given to us in our present state' (ibid.: 191). The raw materials would then be a universalism based on the inviolability of human needs and capacities as they have evolved in a given context, but which also appreciates that these raw materials are not fixed and immutable. The indeterminate constancy of human nature suggests that ‘whatever something is becoming ... is in some important respects part of what it is along with what it once was’ (Ollman, 1993: 29), and that social organizations of human practice constantly change through 'the real development of conflictual relations' (Bensaïd, 2002: 18) where the present constitutes not so much 'a mere link in the chain of time' as 'a moment for selecting among possibilities' (ibid.: 71), hence whatever regime of rights emerges from the ethics of praxis, and whatever institutional manifestations such a regime assumes, must be conceived of as both 'the result of a history

that has been made' and as 'the inaugural force of an adventure that is beginning anew' (ibid.: 71).

By Way of a Conclusion: Some Reflections on the Role of Activist Research

Rather than summarizing the above points and adding a couple of lofty sentences about the urgency of radical social change, I want to conclude this essay with some reflections on the potential role that academics who are prepared to venture outside the confines of the ivory towers of academe can play in relation to the processes sketched above. How can we exercise our capacity to act as 'organic intellectuals' (Gramsci, 1998: 6) or 'insurgent architects' (Harvey, 2000: 233)?

Above, I referred to Sousa Santos' (2003) conception of the emergence of the Forum and the larger project of counter-hegemonic globalization as a 'critical utopia'. This critical utopia is counterposed to conservative utopias which seek to discredit or silence alternative visions so as to consolidate the hegemonic fetishism of the here and now. Indeed, the aspiration of the neoliberal project to attain the status of *la pensée unique* provides the context for the WSF as critical utopia. This critical utopia is tied up with an 'epistemological alternative' centred on the claim that 'there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice' which again rests on two basic ideas: one, that 'if the objectivity of science does not imply neutrality, science and technology may as well be put at the service of counter-hegemonic practices', and, two, that 'the concepts of rationality and efficiency presiding over hegemonic techno-scientific knowledge are too restrictive to capture the richness and diversity of the social experience of the world, and specially that they discriminate against practices of resistance and production of counter-hegemonic alternatives' (ibid.: 11)¹³. The epistemological operation carried out by the WSF, then, is designated by Sousa Santos (ibid.: 11) as the 'sociology of absences' and the 'sociology of emergences' respectively. These are the concepts I want to investigate as tools for the insurgent architect.

The sociologies of absences and emergences, Sousa Santos (2003: 12) argues, are strategies that will allow 'social experience that resists destruction [to be] unconcealed, and the space-time capable of identifying and rendering new counter-hegemonic social experiences [to be] opened up'. The sociologies of absences can be defined as follows:

The *sociology of absences* consists of an inquiry that aims to explain that what does not exist is in fact actively produced as nonexistent, that is, as a noncredible alternative to what exists. Its empirical object is deemed impossible in the light of conventional social science, and for this reason its formulation already represents a break with it. The objective of the sociology of absences is to transform impossible into possible objects, absent into present objects (ibid.: 12).

The sociology of emergences can be defined as follows:

Whereas the goal of the sociology of absences is to identify and valorize social experiences available in the world, although declared nonexistent by hegemonic rationality and

¹³ There are elements that point towards relativism and a homogenizing romanticism of the South in Sousa Santos' arguments, akin to that found in post-development theory, but this is not the place to develop this critique. See Kiely (1999) and Nederveen Pieterse (1999) for representative critiques of post-development; see Nilsen (2004a) for my critique of post-development.

knowledge, the sociology of emergences aims to identify and enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge (ibid.: 21).

So how may we *do* the sociology of absences, then? A fecund point of entry might be to consider what is known within critical realism as the capacity of science for 'counter-phenomenality' (Collier, 1994: 7)¹⁴. Science, it is claimed, has the capacity to 'not just go beyond, and not just explain, but also *contradict* appearances'. It is this capacity for counter-phenomenality which 'makes science a force for human emancipation' (ibid.: 7). The power of counter-phenomenality lies in its capacity to question dominant explanations of social phenomena and conditions that fail to probe beyond appearances. This allows us, for instance, to question official explanations which attribute the moral responsibility for social suffering to the individual, and point out the systemic dynamics that generate exploitation and exclusion, turning these into 'public issues of social structure' as opposed to 'personal troubles of social milieu'. It also allows us to argue against ways of justifying political programmes that rely on reified conceptions of economic dictates - 'the global economy necessitates that we do this or that' - or ahistorical defences of the present - 'capitalism is merely a reflection of innate and unchangeable human nature' - by pointing out that the economy is neither a subject with its own will, nor a system without origin and end, but only one of many possible and particular ways of socially organizing human practice around the activities of production, exchange, distribution and consumption. This is a fundamental move in the struggle to open up the historical horizon of possibilities for alternative ways of socially organizing human practice. By virtue of its capacity for generating systemic 'explanatory critiques' (Collier, 1994: 170), counter-phenomenality, in short, can serve as a tool for the groundwork of that which is deemed impossible into something possible, and that which is absent into something which is present.

And what about the sociology of emergences? The task at hand is one of identifying and enlarging the presentiments of possible future experiences; how do we do this? I would argue that what is required is an engagement with the building of social movement projects. In his groundbreaking work on social movements, Alain Touraine (1981: Part 2) developed methodology of sociological intervention, a method he defines as being anchored in 'the action of the sociologist, whose aim is to reveal social relations and make them the main object of sociological analysis' (ibid.: 140) - i.e. what counter-phenomenal, explanatory critiques seek to achieve. This 'action of the sociologist' is intended to further the self-understanding of social movements and the stakes of the struggles they are involved in. I have commented elsewhere (Nilsen, 2004b) on how the extensive nature of Touraine's actual methodological design renders it a 'methodology out of reach' for many researchers¹⁵. This does not entail, however, the abandonment of aspirations towards a sociological practice which contributes to the development of social movement activity. What can be envisioned is the constitution of a dialogical terrain where activists and politically committed researchers can engage in exchanges around, on the one hand, the adequacy of the knowledge produced within a social movement in terms of understanding the wider ramifications of, say, a militant particularism or a campaign, or, on the other

¹⁴ This also entails that we accept the basic tenets of critical realist ontology, most crucially the notion of a stratified reality and the distinction between the empirical, the actual and the real. I shall not go into a defence of critical realism here, but see Collier (1994) and Bhaskar (1978, 1979, 1989).

¹⁵ This is of course not the only problematic aspect of Touraine's methodology – see Melucci (1989), Mathers and Novelli (2005), Papdakis (1989) and Rucht (1991) for important critiques.

hand, the political usefulness of the perspectives developed by academics for the development of social movement activity. The ambition would be to overcome the schism between academic and activist theorizing where 'social movement scholars produce knowledge *about* movements, but movement intellectuals produce knowledge *for* and *within* movements' (Barker and Cox, 2002: 7). Moreover, such dialogue should concern itself with how the politics of resistance can find a tangible manifestation in institutions and practices that embody the moral critique of the present, the fundamental question being: how can we organize human practice so as to secure the satisfaction of needs and development of capacities?¹⁶ It is through creating such institutions and practices that the interlinking of the critique of the neoliberal regime of rights and the actual social process it provides justification and facilitation to and the positing of an alternative regime of rights that provides justification and facilitation to an alternative social process can be achieved.

¹⁶ In particular, two sets of issues should arguably constitute the core of this agenda. Firstly, that of 'reclaiming the commons' that have been lost to 'accumulation by dispossession' (Klein, 2001; Harvey, 2003). This is a debate that has already kicked off (see De Angelis, 2003; De Marcellus, 2003; Barchiesi, 2003; Dalla Costa, 2003; Holloway, 2003 for a sample of perspectives). Secondly, that of expanding the notion and practices of democracy so as to build genuine participatory decision-making; again, this is already an emergent project (see Holloway, 2002; Wainwright, 2003; Fung and Wright, 2003 for a sample of perspectives).

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