

Social Activism and the Internet

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Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke, *Global Showdown: How the New Activists Are Fighting Global Corporate Rule* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2001)

Jeremy Brecher, Tim Costello, and Brendan Smith, *Globalization from Below: The Power of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000)

Craig Warkentin, *Reshaping World Politics: NGOs, the Internet, and Global Civil Society* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001)

IT WAS NOT SO LONG AGO that globalization had only one face, that of a restructured capitalist economy employing new informational technologies to network and operate on a global scale. Globalization, in this form, seemed unstoppable, out-flanking the nation-state, labour, and popular movements, pushing aside anyone or anything that stood in its way. Today, however, that one-dimensional view no longer holds sway. Protests over the meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle in 1999, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas in Québec in April, 2001, and the G-8 in Genoa and Kananaskis in 2001 and 2002, speak to a new activism that has brought another face and dimension to globalization. Increasingly economic globalization from above is being challenged by globalization from below. Yet, while different, these competing visions of globalization have common features. Both rely heavily on new technologies and means of communication to operate on a global scale within organizational contexts that increasingly take a horizontal and networked form.

Each of these books makes a distinctive contribution to understanding the rise of anti-corporate forms of globalization. Collectively, the books also offer the reader a grasp of changing concepts of politics and the political. Until recently the state was seen as the territorial space, the place of politics, and international relations were a state-to-state affair. The new politics speaks not of parties and obtain-

ing state power, but of global civil society, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and social movements.

Of the three books, Warkentin's is the most academically detached, written not so much to exhort and motivate as do the other two, but to assist the reader in understanding the veritable explosion of NGOs and the challenge they pose to conventional state-referential theoretical frameworks used in the study of international relations. Indeed, rare is the international issue that does not attract a transnational network of NGOs organizing and mobilizing to express their point of view. The author places a special emphasis on the role of the Internet and NGOs in creating a global civil society. While all three books stress the importance of the Internet in the growth of global civil society, only Warkentin offers a detailed discussion of the development of the Internet, its inherent characteristics, and its transnational reach. He argues that the Internet is an "effective tool for establishing and maintaining social connections that contribute to global civil society." (33) He also explains how the Internet facilitates the ability of NGOs to pursue their organizational goals by, for example, facilitating internal communication, disseminating informational resources, and encouraging political participation.

Prior to establishing an analytical framework to discuss the role of NGOs in global civil society, Warkentin reviews the contested meanings of civil society. He then discusses global civil society in terms of three elemental characteristics, dynamism, inclusiveness, and cognizance, the latter addressing primarily the goals of NGOs. This framework is then applied to case studies of eight environmental, developmental, and online resources of NGOs, assessing the contribution of the Internet to each organization.

The case studies are particularly useful for those who want a more detailed understanding of how the organizational structure and dynamics of activist NGOs — their flatness and networked form — reflect qualities of the Internet itself. Clearly the Internet has empowered each NGO in the case studies. While six of the NGOs have a definite offline aspect to their activism, two of the NGOs are online resource networks, that is NGOs who owe their existence solely to the Internet. Online resource networks provide Internet-based tools, support services, and Internet access to thousands of NGOs wishing to communicate with each other and pursue their goals and activities. One World, a non-profit United Kingdom super-network, exists to open new political space, to serve as an information resource site for an interested public, and, in its own words, "to harness the democratic potential of the Internet to promote sustainable development and human rights," (157) which it does in large part by serving as a gateway to over 700 NGOs worldwide.

As valuable a study as it is, Warkentin's book has its limitations. For example, despite claiming that the NGOs he studies are representative of activist NGOs, all are Northern-based, omitting such influential NGOs as the Third World Network in the South. In addition, while Warkentin acknowledges that global civil society is complex, varied, and full of groups with differing interests, his focus is only on progres-

sive NGOs. Yet, the Internet facilitates activities of other marginalized reactionary and anti-modernist groups such as the neo-fascists in Europe and al-Qaeda in the Middle East. Finally, one has little sense from reading Warkentin's book of the dynamic and contentious struggle occurring over globalization today.

For that, the reader must turn to the contributions by Brecher, Costello, and Smith, and Barlow and Clarke. Both books are intended not merely to describe and analyse but to motivate their readers and to provide an alternative to corporate globalization. Brecher, *et al.*, provides what Warkentin does not, a brief overview of globalization from above and the problems it has caused. While Brecher, *et al.*, write extensively on the role and activities of NGOs, they do so within their roles as constituent parts of social movements resisting globalization from above. The authors insightfully observe that social movements are playing a key role in resisting globalization from above by serving to withdraw support from established institutions of governance, thus leading to their increasing de-legitimatization. Their model of power is very much de-centralized, eschewing political parties and the capture of state power in favour of a networked structure of organizations whose activities are facilitated by the democratization of communications embodied in the Internet.

The authors are acutely aware, however, that building solidarity across nations is no easy task, that globalization from below faces internal tensions between those in the rich North and those in the impoverished South. Moreover, the authors realize that resistance is not enough, that those opposing globalization from above must present an alternative program. Their chapter, "Draft of a Global Program," is a necessary contribution not only for the proposals it makes but as a catalyst for debate and dialogue.

This is a useful and insightful book, a valuable primer to readers interested in the phenomenon of globalization from below. Yet, one cannot but feel doubt about how their alternative program can be realized. The authors maintain that social movements "by linking from the nooks and crannies, developing a common vision and program, and withdrawing their consent from existing institutions, ... can impose norms on states, classes, armies, and other power actors." (25) One can, however, question the viability of this strategy. While the proponents of globalization recognize that political activity takes place on many levels and across borders, no longer a matter of either/or but both/and, they reject the idea of participation in electoral politics and the capture of state power, trusting that norms can somehow be imposed on the state. While the authors are obviously correct in their assessment that there is no global state to be taken over, it is the nation-state that charters corporations and acts on their behalf, negotiating with representatives from other states within those institutions that states multilaterally have created such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the WTO. Imposing norms may not be possible or enough and failure to have a strategy to capture state power means abandoning the state to those in power espousing neo-liberalism or those on the far right

who still view the state as useful in combating the ills and uncertainty of globalization from above as is now occurring in parts of Europe.

The final book by Barlow and Clarke has much in common with the first two books in that it recognizes the importance of the new activist politics associated with the Internet, NGOs, the rise of a global civil society, and a citizens' movement against corporate globalization. As acknowledged leaders in the struggle against what they describe as global corporate rule, they bring to their book an insider's view and commitment. Like Brecher, *et al.*, this book is intended not only to inform but also inspire and motivate. In doing so, the authors put aside the customary accoutrement of footnotes and references and proceed directly to telling their story.

This book complements the previous book in that it provides a much more detailed and readable account of the institutions of global governance, the IMF, World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which has now evolved into the WTO. The book also offers a useful account of the extent to which Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, like its counterparts elsewhere, has used globalization as a means of acquiring power within the state, indicating how, at the same time, the state itself has increasingly become the administrative arm of corporate capital.

Of particular interest to readers is the authors' discussion of the WTO. The WTO is now the key institution of global governance, in large part because it has "legal personality," that is, it can impose its decisions and sanctions on state governments, overturning in the process the applicability of internal law. Unlike the reduction of tariffs that affects only the commercial relations between states, WTO rulings affect what occurs within states, thus becoming a lightning rod for the sectors of society affected by its rulings. Barlow and Clarke lead the reader carefully through the arcane terms used by the WTO — GATT, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), Trade Related Property Measures (TRIPS), and Trade Related Investment Measures (TRIMS) — to name a few. As Barlow and Clarke correctly warn, no longer can the WTO and its activities be left to trade specialists negotiating in secret for the WTO does have a global reach. A new round of talks on GATS, for example, has been launched that deals with those services provided by government — health, education, social security, and water — that could become fully privatized and commercialized. In sum, the WTO has the potential to affect virtually every aspect of our lives, the food we eat, the water we drink, our environment and our daily working lives. Yet, as Barlow and Clarke note, it is not accountable to the everyday citizen. Barlow and Clarke, like Brecher, *et al.*, realize, however, that resistance is not enough, that it is necessary to offer an alternative that they provide in considerable detail in the latter stages of their book.

To a considerable extent Barlow and Clarke fulfill their objectives of informing and motivating their readers. It is impossible to ignore globalization once you have read their book. Yet it too, has deficiencies. Too often globalization is portrayed as a Manichean struggle between the forces of darkness (corporate global-

ization) and the forces of light (global civil society). As noted previously, however, global civil society may not necessarily be so civil as reactionary and anti-modernist forces have their own quarrel with globalization from above. The authors' program of reforms, while stressing the need for a revitalized and accountable democratic state, is vague on how it will be realized as the muck and toil of acquiring state power is left to others to work out. They argue that state institutions of policy-making, presumably government departments, must be re-designed so that "members of civil society could become effectively involved in policy making on all issues, including trade, finance, and investment." (175) This may sound wonderful but is one not entitled to ask who do these members and groups represent, are they authentic, who are they accountable to and by what means will they become part of decision-making? The matter of a suspect legitimacy is equally applicable to states and civil society organizations. Finally, the authors commit an occasional egregious error, for example, mentioning that Qatar decided to reverse its decision to host the November 2001 WTO summit when that was never the case. (211)

If there is a criticism that could be applied to all three books, it is the failure to put sufficient critical distance between themselves and their subject matter. While NGOs and global civil society have made noticeable gains in the struggle against corporate globalization, for example, bringing the once secretive institutions of global economic governance into public view, the WTO and its agenda continue to move ahead regardless. Moreover, a key means by which NGOs have mobilized and advanced their agenda, the Internet, excludes millions, if not billions, in terms of a digital divide. Its core features facilitate diversity, fragmentation, and dissent which, on the one hand, work in favour of marginalized groups but also make it very difficult to formulate a counter-hegemony. In the end, however, that may not be such a bad thing.

This reservation aside, these are three very good books. They inform, challenge, motivate and inspire their readers. All are slim, accessible volumes that deserve to be found in introductory university courses on globalization. I recommend them highly.

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