



## THE GLOBALIZATION PROTEST MOVEMENT IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Bruce Podobnik &  
Thomas Ehrlich Reifer

Throughout the history of the modern world-system, projects of globalization promoted by world elites have been met with resistance from people on the ground whose livelihoods have often been threatened. As the geographic scale of global capitalism has expanded, and its penetration into daily life has deepened, the scale and intensity of resistance to this system has grown as well. Local efforts to protect traditional ways of life, for instance, have evolved into national campaigns for union protections and then into international movements for stronger labor, human rights, and environmental protections. Today, as global elites push for the final incorporation of all regions into a single capitalist system based on neoliberal principles, they are being met by an unexpectedly resilient, far-reaching, and multi-faceted coalition of resistance. Whatever it may be called—the ‘anti-globalization movement,’ the ‘global solidarity movement,’ or the ‘globalization protest movement’—it is clear that this anti-systemic movement has emerged as an important challenger to the dominance of global capital over the contemporary world.

This special issue of the *Journal of World-Systems Research* is dedicated to examining the modern characteristics and prospects of this coalition of resistance to elite-driven forms of globalization. We have gathered together ten articles that explore various facets of the contemporary globalization protest movement. While the authors draw on different theoretical traditions and make use of distinct methodologies, their central research questions are the same: What are the contemporary roots of various components of this anti-systemic movement?

Bruce Podobnik  
Department of Sociology  
Lewis and Clark College  
Portland, Oregon 97219 USA  
[podobnik@lclark.edu](mailto:podobnik@lclark.edu)  
<http://www.lclark.edu/~podobnik/>

Thomas E. Reifer  
Institute for Research on World-Systems  
and Department of Sociology  
University of California, Riverside  
[reifert@citrus.ucr.edu](mailto:reifert@citrus.ucr.edu)  
<http://irows.ucr.edu/ter/reiferhmpg.htm>

JOURNAL OF WORLD-SYSTEMS RESEARCH, X, I, WINTER 2004, 3–9

Special Issue: Global Social Movements Before and After 9-11

<http://jwsr.ucr.edu/>

ISSN 1076-156X

© 2004 Bruce Podobnik & Thomas Ehrlich Reifer

What beneficial synergies and/or tensions currently exist between constituent groups within the movement? And what are the future prospects of the globalization protest movement? By providing a collection of studies that approaches these common questions from different perspectives, this special issue hopes to significantly advance our understanding of what is probably the most important movement of the left in the current era.

Because the articles in this special issue examine dynamics of opposition to globalization in the contemporary period, we thought it appropriate to briefly sketch out in this introduction some of the earlier antecedents to this movement. Although we will not present a full-fledged analysis of the world-historical roots of the globalization protest movement here, we do want to compare and contrast dynamics of resistance in the first (late nineteenth century) and second (late twentieth century) major phases of financial globalization to have swept through the world-economy.<sup>1</sup> The articles in this special issue of *JWSR* focus on dynamics of contestation in the second phase of globalization. But there are useful insights to be gained by looking back at anti-systemic forms of resistance that emerged in an earlier era as well.

If we examine the period from 1870–1914, when the world-system went through a particularly intense phase of financial globalization, we find that a surprisingly rich array of transnational social movements were already contesting elite-driven projects. Undoubtedly the most important anti-systemic movement during this era was the labor movement. Not only were workers throughout the core and semi-periphery mobilizing to form unions at the national level, but laborers also forged impressive transnational organizations as well. Indeed, the formation of the First International in 1864 revealed that European workers were attuned to the need to organize on an international level from a very early period. The resiliency of this transnational movement was demonstrated when, after the collapse of the First International, it was replaced by a Second International that was even broader in size and scope. From 1889 to 1914, the Second International exerted considerable ideological influence throughout Europe—and even supported worker’s campaigns in North America and some parts of the semi-periphery.

In addition to the consolidation of a transnational labor movement, this period also witnessed the emergence of a variety of international human-rights

---

<sup>1</sup> For more complete analyses of the world-historical roots of globalization protests, readers are encouraged to consult the following sources: Walton and Seddon (1994), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Silver and Slater (1999), and Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2000). See Chase-Dunn, Kawano, and Brewer (2000) for a presentation of new evidence regarding successive waves of trade globalization.

organizations. Leading advocates for women’s rights from Europe and North America, for instance, came together in 1888 to found the International Council of Women. This organization not only demanded equality in legal and political realms, but it also pushed for improvements in working conditions experienced by women and children. Soon afterward, one of the first international human-rights organizations, the Congo Reform Association, was formed to publicize depredations occurring in the rubber industry of the Belgian Congo. By mounting effective media and legal campaigns in Europe and the United States, the association was able to bring about important reforms in the colonial administration of the Congo.

The period 1870–1914 also witnessed the emergence of international conservation associations dedicated to protecting specific species and ecosystems from commercial exploitation. Nature reserves have a long history in Europe, but the modern conservation movement really took shape in the 1870s with the institution of a national park system in the United States. Similar administrative systems, containing some prohibitions against commercial enterprise, then spread through other parts of the core before the First World War. Efforts were also undertaken to protect certain environmental resources in colonial areas during this period. The creation of the Convention for the Preservation of Wild Species in Africa in 1900, and the formation of the Society for the Preservation of the Wild Fauna of the Empire in 1903, are examples of this embryonic international environmental movement.

Labor, human rights, and conservation activists clearly forged impressive transnational associations at the turn of the twentieth century. However, these organizations had important vulnerabilities that contemporary analysts would do well to note. Most significantly, virtually all the transnational organizations of that era were headquartered in core countries. And though many worked to address concerns of peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, these organizations were nevertheless dominated by European and North American activists. Consequently, there were paternalistic and racist tendencies within many nineteenth century transnational organizations that limited their expansion into the colonial world. For these reasons, the transnational organizations that arose during the first major wave of financial globalization remained vulnerable to disruptions that swept through the core of the world-economy.

While many of these transnational organizations collapsed under the pressures of two world wars and a great depression, they nevertheless left enduring legacies. Through the successes they achieved, late nineteenth century workers, human rights activists, and conservationists demonstrated that capital could be confronted on a transnational level. Moreover, they created organizational tactics and cultures of opposition that remain important in many parts of the world.

And, through their demise, they highlighted a crucial challenge that must be met by the contemporary globalization protest movement. Their example demonstrates that a movement of opposition to contemporary global capital must be deeply rooted in all zones of the world-economy, if it is to be truly enduring and egalitarian.

The second intense phase of elite-driven globalization, which has accelerated from the end of the Second World War to the present, has been accompanied by a movement of resistance that coalesced first in the developing world—and has since matured into an anti-systemic force of global proportions. The early manifestations of this movement came in the form of wide-ranging waves of anti-colonial and nationalist activism that swept through the periphery and semi-periphery from the late 1940s through the late 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Although these movements were generally rooted in specific countries, they also often generated regional associations and networks of mutual support. By the late 1970s, these anti-colonial and nationalist movements had brought about important transformations in the political and economic relations of power between elites in the global north and south.

Anti-colonial and nationalist movements were soon subjected to counter-offensives from domestic and international sponsors of neoliberal globalization policies. The re-assertion of a neoliberal form of globalization, spearheaded by the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, involved not only the intensification of military attacks against dissident governments and peoples, but also the imposition of increasingly severe austerity and deregulation policies throughout the developing world. The pressure exerted by the US and UK, as well as multi-lateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, succeeded in rolling back some nationalist and regulationist initiatives. However, structural adjustment policies also generated widespread protests from citizens throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

Into the mid 1990s, dynamics of contestation between proponents and opponents of neoliberal forms of globalization were centered in the periphery and semi-periphery. However, by 1994 a new round of trade negotiations was bringing increased scrutiny to policies that protected key industries in core nations as well. As pressures to liberalize core economies grew, so too did defensive reactions from workers, farmers, and environmentalists in North America, Western Europe, and East Asia. By the late 1990s, relatively new national and transnational

<sup>2</sup> Analyses of anti-colonial and nationalist movements of resistance can be found in: Girvan (1976), Bergquist (1986), and Cooper (1996).

activist networks headquartered in the global north began establishing links with more established, mature organizations centered in the global south. As a result, just as proponents of a neoliberal form of globalization intensified their efforts to apply their policies on a world-scale, they were met by a multi-faceted coalition of resistance that was also capable of mounting actions on a global level.

The articles in this special issue investigate the recent evolution and current characteristics of this coalition of resistance. In terms of temporal coverage, the articles focus on the period from the 1970s onward—which is when those phenomena characteristic of contemporary globalization took off in a major way.

Jeffrey Ayres' "Framing Collective Action Against Neoliberalism" explores the importance of the framing of collective action in the movement against neoliberal globalization. Ayers analyzes the ways in which the diverse regional and global currents of this developing movement provide an ongoing framework for counter-hegemonic activism. Jackie Smith's "Exploring Connection Between Global Integration and Political Mobilization"\* turns to focus on the relationship between changing forms of global integration and transnational social movement organizations (TSMO) in the aftermath of superpower competition. Using empirical indicators of size, issues orientation, geographical location and organizational structure, Smith is able to test a number of hypotheses regarding the evolution of TSMOs in the context of contemporary globalization.

Frederick Buttel and Kenneth Gould's "Global Social Movement(s) at the Crossroads" analyzes the trajectory of the anti-corporate globalization movement, looking in particular at its different currents, organizational and geographical components, non-governmental organizations, environmental, labor, social justice, North and South. Placing emphasis on the role of environmental claims and strategies in the contentious dynamics of the movement, they examine the dilemmas of its diverse constituencies, multiple discourses and aims, as it gropes its way towards a better future.

Lesley Wood's "Breaking the Bank and Taking it to the Streets," takes a different approach, looking at the targets of global justice protests from 1998 to 2001, from transnational corporations, to governments, to supranational economic institutions. Wood takes into account continental variations, existing cultures of contention, and the role of social movement networks in processes of diffusion of mobilization targets. Robert Ross, in "From Antisweatshop to Global Justice to Anti-War,"† takes instead a comparative approach over time. Ross examines the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) movement beginning in the

\* Erratum: Jackie Smith's article appears pp. 255–285.

† Erratum: Robert J.S. Ross' article appears pp. 287–319.

late 1990s and compares its makeup and trajectory to that of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) of the 1960s. Tracing both similarities and differences in the diffusion of the movement from elite universities outward, Ross then goes on to trace their internal dynamics, ideological orientation and very different political alliances, most especially to labor, while situating these in the context of changes in the global political economy.

Kenneth Gould, Tammy Lewis, and J. Timmons Roberts' "Blue-Green Coalitions" trace the incipient alliance between blue-collar workers and unions and the environmentalist green movements. The authors engage in a nuanced analysis of the points of convergence and divergence between different elements of such groups, including through an exploration of the dilemmas of dependency on outside funding sources in the case of environmental organizations. They go on to suggest the best and most promising possibilities for convergence and coalition within sectors of these movements for greater blue-green alliances in the future.

Amory Starr's "How Can Anti-Imperialism Not be Anti-Racist?" explores one of the key issues that has arisen in the movement around globalization. Starr explores the discursive claims of activists and scholars involved in different spheres of the movements and their points of intersection, as well as concrete experience during different mobilizations. Starr moves on to conceptualize the contemporary movement and to examine the differences between tactics, goals and strategies, the various subcultures, and the problems and prospects confronting those who seek to ensure that the ongoing mobilization against top-down globalization and against global racism are critically entwined.

Thomas Hall and James Fenelon's "The Future of Indigenous Peoples," explores indigenous resistance to capitalist expansion far back into the past and project its likely trajectory into the future. In an analysis reminiscent of Fernand Braudel's famous remark, "events are dust," they argue that recent events, the fall of the USSR, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the war on Iraq are more likely "blips on the radar," obscuring much more significant patterns of large-scale, long-term social change. Exploring the myriad forms of indigenous strategies of resistance and survival to the expansion of state and commercial networks, they also outline a typology of indigenous societies in comparative world-systems perspective.

Gianpaolo Baiocchi's "The Party and the Multitude" looks at the role of Brazil's Workers Party (PT), and their sponsorship of the World Social Forum. the election of the PT's leader Lula, as the country's first working-class born President, and criticism of his administration and the party's relationship with social movements raises a host of questions about progressive politics in the twenty-first century. In examining these issues, the article speaks to the more

general question of the relationship between political parties and social movements in a global civil society today.

Finally, Peter Waterman's "Social Movement Unionism and the World Social Forum," looks at the development of social movement unionism and debates about this and related concepts. Waterman examines the combination of class and popular mobilization in contemporary labor struggles and social movements, as a challenge and alternative to contemporary international business unionism. Waterman goes on to explore the possibilities for a labor revival in the context of the global justice and solidarity movement and the emergence of the World Social Forum.

The articles gathered here are of course, by no means comprehensive. Regionally based studies and inquiries into a variety of issue based movements, from global feminism, the peace movement, or organizing in the South more generally, have all made contributions to our understanding of the battles over wealth and power and for equality and greater participatory democracy and socioeconomic justice in our own time. Nevertheless, it is hoped that these pieces contribute to an ongoing debate, about the past, the present, and the future, both in terms of understanding the contemporary world, and in the struggle to change it as well.

## REFERENCES

- Bergquist, Charles. 1986. *Labor in Latin America: Comparative Essays on Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Boswell, Terry, and Christopher Chase-Dunn. 2000. *The Spiral of Capitalism and Socialism: Toward Global Democracy*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.
- Chase-Dunn, Christopher, Yukio Kawano, and Benjamin Brewer. 2000. "Trade Globalization Since 1795: Waves of Integration in the World-System," *American Sociological Review*, 65, pp. 77–95.
- Cooper, Frederick. 1996. *Decolonization and African Society: The Labor Question in French and British Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Girvan, Norman. 1976. *Corporate Imperialism: Conflict and Expropriation: Transnational Corporations and Economic Nationalism in the Third World*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Keck, Margaret, and Kathryn Sikkink. 1998. *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Silver, Beverly, and Eric Slater. 1999. "The Social Origins of World Hegemonies," in: *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World System*, eds. Giovanni Arrighi, Beverly Silver, et al., pp. 151–240. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Walton, John, and David Seddon. 1994. *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.