

**Gal Kirn, Antonis Vradis:  
The Alterglobalisation  
Movement Today**

## **Introduction**

**Before talking about the alterglobalisation movement it would seem appropriate to begin with a disclaimer: to explain who we are and the stance that we take when we speak. We are speaking from the standpoint of the movement, not on behalf of the movement to be sure, but from within, not from an academic point of view, but from the point of view of struggles, from the point of view of the ‘political subjectivities’ that have arisen in recent years. These political subjectivities are in a state of a crisis – this is our central hypothesis and a rather evident one. What we seek to address here is where this crisis is rooted and its effects on the movement as a whole. It would be irrelevant, if not arrogant, to make specific suggestions with regard to an exit from this crisis. Rather, we will conclude this article with some questions, some openings that could hint toward ways in which to address the crisis within the alterglobalisation movement today, and the problematic break between theory and practice in particular. This paper is divided into four parts. The first part looks at the relationship of emancipatory thought and political practice; the second one examines the legacy of the alterglobalisation movement today; the third and the fourth parts address what elements are thought to be particularly damaging in the transformation of the alterglobalisation movement, causing it to become what will be argued a “bare movement”. The conclusion is substituted by a number of questions that might suggest ways out of the crisis, always essentially taking into account theory and practice.**

## **The Relationship between Theory and Practice – for a New Revolutionary Fusion?**

We can trace one very important characteristic in the emancipatory tradition (of the revolutionary Left), the tradition connected to communism and anarchism. This characteristic is a fusion of critical thinking and emancipatory political practices of movements. For example, the rupture that is represented by Karl Marx cannot be considered outside of his engagement within the workers' class movement. This also applies to Mihail Bakunin whose critique of state cannot be thought outside the scope of his class position, his radical political stance (in the International) against the dominant order. However, that is not to say that one needs to translate their political views, their practical experiences into the theoretical realm. This operation would be a crude vulgarisation of theory and would at best lead to a direct reflection of historical reality. In that case we would talk only in terms of descriptive sociology or ideology. The theory, if it is to be distinguished from ideology, needs a certain theoretical apparatus to grasp complex historical processes with. Emancipatory theory contributed many productive concepts during the past few centuries, ranging from mutual aid, an uncompromised critique of the state ("another world is possible"), class struggle, to unlinking violence from morality? For sure, thought is not immaterial; the process of conceptualising and thinking is a material one from the beginning. Thus, we are not talking about the traditional boundary between theory and practice. We are talking about the minimal difference between the two elements.

Even though there is a discrepancy between theoretical practice and political practice, in every major event a revolutionary fusion existed of theory and practice. In

other words, true, revolutionary politics always contains two elements: thinking as a material force and as a (political) subjectivity. But what would a new, revolutionary fusion of theory and practice be like, a fusion that would not reduce one to the benefit of the other? Firstly, let us answer this question negatively. There are at least two considerable dangers or incorrect ideological fusions that are endangering and re-appropriating the fusion of theory and practice. The first is a Stalinist type of fusion, which introduced politics (by directives) to scientific research (primacy of politics in theory). The second fusion is much more dangerous because it is dominant today: a neoliberal fusion. Neoliberal reforms of privatisation, especially the reform of the higher educational system in consequence of the Bologna Declaration, are transforming the process of appropriation of knowledge. Basically, one of the most important directives is that knowledge and theory become applicable, more practical. In other words, knowledge is understood as essentially useful for commercial appropriation, as teaching how to govern populations (politics), how to distribute money (economy), how to manage and control the city (urbanism, sociology), what the deadlocks of the clashes of civilisations are (cultural studies, anthropology), how to attain a common good (ethics). All these issues are of a strategic nature for the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. It is no coincidence that the Boys of Chicago School were reading Stalin. What we have today is a synthesis of Stalinism and neoliberalism. Undoubtedly, this kind of fusion does not spring to mind when we think about revolution, when we think about breaking with the dominant order. The problems with revolutionary theory appear at the moment when theory is used only for the purpose of revolutionary practice – in other words, when it gets sub-

**merged in political practice. Theory cannot be anticipated; what is even more peculiar, theoretical discovery is most frequently produced unconsciously. In order to avoid a possible lapse into the neoliberalism of political activism, we suggest to radicalise the point of revolutionary fusion even more and argue that the practice of radical thinking is in itself rebellion; it is a material force.<sup>1</sup>**

**One of the biggest problems within the new realities of the alterglobalisation movement and within academia today is a double-sided one, which we touched upon in the first part of this article. On the one hand we are frequently confronted with anti-intellectualism, with an anti-theoretical attitude of some political activists, of people in the movement (“let’s not theorise, let’s take some action...”), while on the other hand we also meet many academics who mainly write recipes for political actions or oppose any political-practical engagement. To think is already enough for them: an armchair attitude, or an understanding that times are too obscure to undertake any action; or even, that any revolutionary action might lead to totalitarianism. At this point we should also ask ourselves: how is it possible to remain radical thinkers within academia, without performing a democratic function (one that offers illusionary freedom) within the institution?**

## **2. Alterglobalisation Movement**

**Nowadays, the political agency that undermines global order, locally as well as globally, is a political and paradoxical entity (subjectivity) of the alterglobalisation movement. We have both experienced the political realities of the Seattle-movement generation, within specific local contexts, but also participated in the counter-summit organisation. We**

**asked ourselves one fundamental question: Has this movement produced a clear fusion of theory and practice? Generally speaking the answer is no. Apart from this failure, the alterglobalisation movement (that reached its peak in Seattle, 1999 and Genoa, 2001) is dead, or at best in a state of major crisis. Genoa signalled a radical shift: the massive violence and criminalisation was later on increased by the aftermath of 9/11. The imperial answer to the system crisis began. Yet still, for all the evident failure of the movement it remains important to talk from within. Only by thinking from within the movement intends to remain loyal to a revolutionary fusion, a tradition that was already paved two centuries ago. This is not to say that we are only directly thinking what is happening in the movement, with the movement, but we are addressing the need to develop new theoretical concepts that could help us consider historical processes, and possibly of ways in which to invest these new and old discoveries for political struggles. As mentioned before, it is necessary to work on two fronts (that are in fact one): the fronts of radical theory and practice. Thinking radical politics is already being political, but the opposite is not true. Making radical politics does not mean one is already thinking politics. That does not imply a priority in the struggle; organising the struggle and thinking of the struggle are both equally important.**

**Stating that the alterglobalisation movement is dead does not mean that nothing is happening at present. Another movement has arisen these past years that carries a strong legacy from the past movement. It has some similar characteristics: it orientates itself towards counter-summits, it has a network and decentralised type of organisation, it is a global movement that crosses borders and addresses local and global issues.**

At this point it would be important to stress one very crucial and positive point of the alterglobalisation movement, which is its disruptive and revolutionary beginning – its character. For this purpose, Jacques Rancière’s central conceptualisation in his book *Disagreement* (1998, University of Minnesota Press) will be employed. It will first be briefly explained in the following sentences. Politics according to Rancière is something rare – it is something that breaks up with the logic of the police. The logic of the police is the dominant and existing order of counting, counting the social groups that are recognised by the order. Apart from this logical function of counting, the police are connected to the partition of the sensible – what things can be seen or heard? The police are part of the order of dominant institutions – in Foucauldian terms, they are a biopolitical machinery. Opposite to the police, politics is something of a radical different order, it dismantles the logic of counting and the partition of the sensible. Rancière calls politics something that disrupts and breaks with the police (in the field of police), something that inscribes new horizons, groups, thinking into the world. It shows the existence of more worlds in one world. Politics usually emerges in the places that are not expected to be political, and by the groups that are not visible – not counted in the dominant order. One only needs think of the example of the plebeians in Roman times, or proletarians in bourgeois times, of feminists... The excluded, “part without parts” as Rancière coins it, are excluded and then included in the order. They pinpoint the radical contingency of every power. There is no (political) justification of holding the place of power. Politics happens with a symbolical act, with a certain enunciation, but what is more important is that the political procedure is egalitarian. It is addressed to everyone and not

just to that particular group. Politics is always dissensual, based on a conflict with the existing order.

Let us consider what happened at the Seattle demonstrations. Nobody, not even protesters, expected this rainbow of agents to come together; nobody expected the protests would block the summit of big international organisations. The protests radically undermined the whole organisation and the subjugation of the city-regime to the meeting of the international organisation. The movement took back the streets, it did not take any prescribed routes, it drew its own map of the city. It effectively blocked the regular meetings of the global leadership and set on the agenda issues that were not frequently heard of, especially after the proclaimed end of history. It started addressing global issues; as a result, people began to see the connection between farmers from India and steel workers in the US. In ’99, on the streets of Seattle, the politics of alter-globalisation emerged. Two further important elements were characteristic of this politics. Firstly, there was the violence. As always, the media focused on the escalations of violence during the protests. We believe that the question of violence should be addressed outside its normal moral framework, arguing that violence is putting the protests in a bad light. Without violence people might never hear of a protest. But apart from this pragmatic argument, what is more important is the following. The violence showed the power of the state, but also of imperial order – of who was defending whom at the moment of the protests. In this sense, the violence actually fixated the order of the police, the dominant order that does not want to acknowledge certain groups or voices. Apart from that, the only legitimate form of violence is that directed towards forms of exploitation and hierarchies. Global institutions, the IMF, WTO and G8 are

new global centres of power that were correctly targeted by the Seattle movement. The use of violence is therefore completely legitimate. It is true though that this violence, a radical encounter with the order, should produce some political demands. Here, the political process gets complicated. Dissensus and violence are the first steps, but formulating political demands are further essential effects of political thinking and political practice. The absence of hierarchies and the decentralised framework of the movement are both its good and its bad side. The positive side can be seen in the fundamental gesture of the movement: it did not look for any compromise or dialogue with the institutions of hierarchy/exploitation. Its politics was actually to subtract from the State, it did not want to formulate its politics as part of the (etatist) order of the police.

### **3. The Image of the Alterglobalisation Movement**

The question about the relationship between theory and practice might be answerable, and this may seem odd, through looking at the movement's relationship to the media. One should bear in mind that what caught the media's attention in Seattle was the level of violence at the protests – this attention contributed, in its turn, to the movement spreading and growing, while the violence reproduced itself at different gatherings and demonstrations across continents. The media became – largely unwillingly – a bearer of that message.

Up until Genoa, then, the alterglobalisation movement's protests were at the centre of media attention. What happened after Genoa – and perhaps more crucially, after 9/11 – is that the alterglobalisation movement put media at the centre of its own attention. With a newly-emergent spec-

tacle having superseded the spectacle of the alterglobalist demonstrations (the terrorist attacks were simply more spectacular than any black block, i.e. the most radical wing of protesters) the alterglobalisation movement struggled to fit itself once again into the media frame. The result was demonstrations of the type of the *Climate Camp* (in the UK and Germany), which seem to dominate the current demonstration landscape. Participants have to be or seem clean, educated, middle class, explicitly non-violent, campaigns need to be single-issue and hence a-political – all this in order to create an image that is as media-friendly as possible.

The question is, how do both of these tendencies (if this is the appropriate term) respond/interact with revolutionary theory? The alterglobalisation movement as it appeared in the late 1990s is, quite clearly, non-ideological (in the sense that it is against dominant/dinosaur ideologies; a primarily anti-authoritarian response both to the collapse of the Soviet ideology and the dead-end of neo-liberalism). At the same time it is of course political – and very much so. For all its diversity in tactics the then emerging movement quite clearly opposed neoliberalism, largely anti-capitalist and anti-hierarchical/anti-authoritarian in its structure and operation.

The biggest change in the alterglobalisation movement after Genoa was comprised in the fact that its nature shifted from non-ideological to non-political. The overall systemic critique that held all the different elements of the alterglobalisation movement together was replaced by a dominance of single-issue campaigns, whereby broader theoretical and political elements are muted in the name of effectiveness and maximum outreach. The danger in this tendency is fairly clear; the movement might be recuperated by Statist/reformist elements and of course might diffuse to the point where it is no longer relevant. The image of the

well-dressed climate camp demonstrator can easily sit next to that of a government official announcing “greener policies”; it can be used in supermarket posters advertising greener consumer practices.

#### 4. Bare Movement

As a result of all this, the alterglobalisation movement has paid dearly to survive in political terms in the post-Genoa era. Its transformation could be schematically/analogically described as being equivalent to what Agamben called the passage of individuals from political life to bare life. Stripped from its broader political characteristics (i.e. complete as opposed to single-issue political formations – however diverse these might have been) what remains of the alterglobalisation movement today could be regarded as a bare movement. It still exists, and it is still represented through the media. There is very little beyond that, however. The movement’s existence is understood to be bare since in its current form it has little or no potential to develop. The image-friendly action is not backed by political action. Rather than representing an existing condition or reflecting on a political identity, the image of the movement is sheer representation – representation for the sake of it. This representation, furthermore, is easily understood and decoded by the State and media, since it is set up for that very purpose. This, again, is a move in the exact opposite direction of what could be an emancipatory politics, one that would be intolerable to the State, one that would refuse to play by the media rules. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben speaks of the arrival of a movement that would allow for singularities to form “a community without affirming an identity”. He posits: “What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however,

is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (1993: 86).

This might be a direction that we should be looking into: possible ways to form communities that will move beyond representational conditions of belonging; emancipatory communities that will produce enhanced, rather than bare movements. In so doing, quite naturally, the notion of dissensus could prove crucial: an understanding that would help us overcome single-issue and identitarian politics and all the traps that they entail.

#### Instead of a Conclusion

Our central political stake is to promote thinking politics within the alterglobalisation movement. Against the sectarianism of the left, we would label radical thought “emancipatory thought” – where differences embody an advantage and not a disadvantage of the movement, of theories. Instead of rounding off with a summary of our arguments, we would like to end this article with some questions relevant for the future of the movement:

Having confirmed the crisis of the alterglobalisation movement today, how to prevent the movement from getting trapped by identitarian politics, where each group represents its own interests? If we do not ask this question the movement will become an alternative global forum and part of the global public opinion. Is this really what we stand for?

It is true that revolutionary politics is not just about numbers. However, it is also troublesome to note that many strategies of the alterglobalisation movement and anarchist groups centre on small groups rather than on masses.

**Why this loss of ambition? Is the fear of totalitarianism driving this minoritarian approach? Why not think politics that addresses the masses? How to include masses in the movement?**

**The movement should stick with the central elements of disruption and non-reformism. Apart from this central tendency, should we move to another level – and formulate political demands? How should we write a list of political demands? Who should do that? Who should these demands be addressed to? Without some basic organisational/political platform, we cannot expect the alter-globalisation movement to remain a subjective force and emerge from the crisis.**

**How to think new political subjectivities? If the alter-globalisation movement has problems with thinking up its own position, it does not spend enough time to consider other groups that are represented in large numbers: ‘new proletariat’ – a flexible, cognitive working force in the developed world AND excluded from the Third world – immigrants, slum-dwellers, (see Mike Davis’s *Planet of Slums* or some of Slavoj Žižek’s claims on the excluded).**

**As to the topic of violence, how to think violence today? Even though there is a strong antimilitarist tradition that has to be taken into account, one should not forget about the objective violence that is already a part of the ‘normalised’ system we live in. And specifically, in cases of alterglobalisation protests a state of exception and militarised zones are established by the sovereign power. This violence is ‘primal’, whilst the violence on the part of the protesters is a form of counter-violence. How to consider violence that is not part of the dialectic with power?**

**Apart from these questions, would you not agree that, today more than ever, it is necessary to imagine and to innovate new political forms that could exist outside the State?**

**1. This point was most lucidly elaborated on by Alain Badiou, whose fundamental tenet states that politics is a (new) mode of thinking to which the operation of producing Truth is central. See for example his *Metapolitics*, Verso, London, 2006.**