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WORLD BANK CAVES IN TO PROTESTERS.  
GLOBAL UTOPIA TO BEGIN IMMEDIATELY.

Such is not the stuff of which headlines are made. The satirical newspaper, *The Chaser*, continued with this report:

In a major victory for the opponents of the global capitalist oligarchy, the World Bank's intransigent resistance to the will of the people collapsed today, following a concerted campaign of marches and demonstrations, 'guerilla gardening', riots, counter-hegemonic T-shirts and carefully drafted letters to selected daily newspapers . . . At simultaneous press conferences, the World Bank and [World Trade Organisation] announced a joint initiative to 'dismantle the world military-industrial complex' in favour of a 'more gentle world which respects values of

biodiversity, cultural activity, the greening of public spaces and the riding of bicycles'.<sup>1</sup>

The humour, obviously, lies in the implausibility of such a triumph for 'the will of the people'. What, then, is the point of protest?

There is a widespread perception that even nation-states are powerless in the face of the external pressures associated with 'globalisation'. Now a commonplace term, 'globalisation' refers to the emergence of a global economy characterised by market forces and the prominence of economic actors such as transnational corporations, international banks and other financial institutions (Capling et al 1998, p. 5). Globalisation is marked, especially, by the growing power of international agencies of capital—notably the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Economic Forum (WEF).

Globalisation is also characterised by increasing socio-economic polarisation (with and between nation-states) and decreased political choice for citizens, because virtually all major parties across the world have committed themselves to globalisation. With hi-tech communications, lower transport costs and unrestricted trade turning the whole world into a single market, fierce global competition encourages 'downward adaptation' within each state towards lower wages and working conditions for most employees, decreased public spending on social services, and increased subsidies and tax-breaks to transnational corporations. 'And everywhere,' according to Hans-Peter Martin and Harald Schumann (1996, pp. 5–6), 'protest ends in resignation.' The implications of globalisation for social movements and social change are clearly immense. If nation-states are helpless, what role can mere social movements within these states possibly play in asserting people's rights?

## Understanding social movements

The study of social change through collective action was described in 1970 as 'one of the great *terra incognita* of sociology' (Gusfield 1970, p. viii). It is now a crowded space. Moreover, much of this territory now requires reconquering with new analytical equipment, because of challenges mounted by globalisation to both social movement action and previous ways of understanding social movement action.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, policies are being made and decisions taken by political units outside the nation-state; such



S11 protesters express concern about the nature of corporate globalisation, Melbourne, September 2000 (Susan Hawthorne, copyright 2000).

circumstances permit and impel social movements to go global.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, some fundamental definitions and insights remain valid.

Cyrus Zirakzadeh suggests contemporary social movements: comprise a group of people who consciously attempt to build a radically new social order; involve people of a broad range of social backgrounds; provide an outlet for political expressions by the non-powerful, non-wealthy and non-famous; and deploy confrontational and socially disruptive tactics involving a style of politics that supplements or replaces conventional political activities like lobbying or working for a political party (Zirakzadeh 1997, pp. 4–5). For Dieter Rucht, a social movement is ‘an action system comprised of mobilised networks of individuals, groups and organisations which, based on a shared collective identity, attempt to promote social change, predominantly by means of collective protest’ (Rucht 1999, p. 207). Manuel Castells (1997, p. 3) defines social movements as being ‘purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society’. It is helpful to flesh out such definitions, and in particular to consider the ways in which our understanding of social

movements needs to be broadened in the light of the recent phenomenon of concerted transnational social movement activity.

Firstly, a social movement—as its name suggests—is both *social* and distinguished by *movement*. A social movement is not a static group, but an enduring process of confrontation characterised by capacity for protest. Unlike a purely political movement, it operates at the level of civil society, whether national or transnational.<sup>4</sup> Robin Cohen and Shirin Rai (2000, p. 16) argue that the possibilities for opposition and protest in the global era are enhanced if a social movement has a transnational framework; hence there are distinct signs of an emergent alternative ‘global civil society’. A social movement, or a section of a social movement, might also operate within formal political channels, but this is never the entire and only aspect of a social movement. For example, the green movement in Australia has various political parties associated with it, but its range of activities far exceeds that of a purely political movement. A social movement generally makes demands upon the state, but it usually makes these demands from within society rather than from within the institutions of the state. In an analogous process, social movements contesting globalisation have focused their demands upon transnational institutions and agencies and from within global civil society.

The social movements that operate within ‘global civil society’, ‘transnational civil society’ or ‘international civil society’ are distinct from the myriad of international non-government organisations that are also a feature of this alternative political force, though their concerns frequently overlap and they do work together on campaigns. Essentially, the international non-government organisations are the respectable, reforming face of global civil society and are now courted by transnational corporations in attempts to ‘legitimate’ these corporations’ activities. By contrast, the transnational social movements are, to varying degrees, much more radical in their demands and less institutionalised in form, and face opposition from corporations and repression from states, especially those social movements or elements of social movements that participate in the anti-corporate globalisation movement.

Secondly, the basis of a social movement lies in the acknowledgment of a common interest among a specific group of people against another, equally defined, group of people (Scalmer c. 1994, p. 6). Social movements are thus ‘imagined communities’ of the oppressed, disadvantaged or threatened.<sup>5</sup> Green activist Brent Hoare describes how it feels from the inside:

Sharing common cause with others in response to the crises that affect us all brings forth incredible feelings of solidarity, camaraderie,

empowerment and joy. The shared conviction that arises from standing up against what is plainly wrong is a tremendously positive and sustaining experience, and is without doubt the most effective remedy to feelings of hopelessness, despair and surrender (Hoare 1998, p. 22).

In a way, a social movement is an assertion of community; and a community of the oppressed can, under the right circumstances, become or remain the base for a social movement. Michael Connors has observed of the gay community in Australia that, while it has been forced on homosexuals by society's prejudice, it has also been created by homosexuals. For that reason, it is 'a potential base for radicalisation and struggle, giving homosexuals a sense of strength and, at the same time, a knowledge of their twilight existence in society' (Connors 1989, p. 7).<sup>6</sup> Recalling the mid-1990s mobilisation of gays against Tasmania's anti-gay laws, the solidarity of Aboriginal communities against deaths in custody and the defiance of draft dodgers during the Vietnam War, Marion Maddox observes: 'When individuals engage in collective protest action or solo acts of resistance which are supported by webs of association, they assert their membership in particular communities against the wider society' (Maddox 2001, p. 17). Now, too, transnational communities of the oppressed, disadvantaged or threatened, imagined even more creatively than those within nation-states, assert themselves in the movement against corporate globalisation.

Despite the fact that many theorists regard identity-formation as a prerogative of what came to be known in the 1990s as 'identity politics', social movements have always constructed 'new collective identities', in a manner comparable with self-identity. However, group identities are more significant because they endure through time and over space; they render collective actions possible and therefore they have more significant social effects. According to Paul Bagguley (1999, pp. 75–76), social movements as phases of *collective* action involve a collective reflexive monitoring of action by the individuals involved, but they are acting reflexively *together*, rather than as isolated agents: 'Social movements are centrally an expression of collective reflexivity and not just an aggregation of, nor merely an arena for, self-reflexivity.'

Social movements invariably develop a group identity, shaped by the nature of its participants but which also shapes the consciousness of those participants. Out of this process, movements often create a distinctive 'movement culture', invisible and unstated yet also instantly discernible—almost predictable—and consisting in shared likes and dislikes pertaining to many

## 6 Power, Profit and Protest

aspects of social and political life (Lofland 1995). Activists create social movements, yet are themselves politically constructed by these social movements. A symbiotic relationship exists between movement and participants: they make each other. A movement is defined by the aspirations of its supporters, yet the image of the movement becomes part of the self-identity of its adherents. Bagguley emphasises 'the unintentional transformation of self-identity through collective action'; it is a common occurrence in social movements for individuals to find themselves transformed in quite unpredictable and unintended ways through their involvement in conflict with others, and through induction into the habits of social movement activity (Bagguley 1999, p. 76).

Thirdly, and stemming from this identification of a common interest in opposition to an 'enemy', social movements are capable of effecting social and/or political change, because they engage in deliberately collective action towards challenging this enemy and promoting the common interest identified. The forging of a common self-identity enables the group to have a political impact, because it makes a collection a collectivity, a mass a coherent political actor. Social movements are not the simple accumulation of individual actions—like the massing of vehicles on a city expressway at rush hour. Social movements, unlike traffic jams, are characterised by 'socially shared activities and beliefs directed toward the demand for change in some aspect of the social order' (Gusfield 1970, p. 2). For example, the movement against corporate globalisation has named multinational corporations as the 'enemy' and it challenges these corporations by amassing supporters to converge *en masse* at their international meetings with the purpose of disruption and public exposure of their global operations.

In *Nomads of the Present*, Alberto Melucci declares himself uneasy with the treatment of social movements as historical agents, 'living subjects who act as homogeneous entities, expressing the deepest contradictions of society or its values'. Sociological analysis, he claims, must reject 'the assumption of collective action as unified datum' and 'discover the plurality of perspectives, meanings and relationships which crystallize in any given collective action' (Melucci 2000, p. 25).<sup>7</sup> Such an approach might well inform a more sophisticated sociology of social movements, yet there is an important sense in which social movements only matter inasmuch as they *are* living subjects who act as unified entities, who act as coherent forces for change.

Karl Marx distinguished between the working class as a class-in-itself (those who sold their labour power and were therefore objectively working class by virtue of their relationship to the means of production) and the

subjective category of the working class as a class-for-itself (those who were objectively working class *and* were also aware of their exploitation and prepared to struggle against it). Extrapolation from Marx's distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself aids understanding of social movement action, because a movement is interesting primarily as the means by which opposition becomes politically effective. Atomised discontent—opposition-in-itself—has little political impact; however, collectivised grievances held self-consciously in solidarity with others and acted upon—opposition-for-itself—can effect political change.

Social movements often develop and grow as the discontented discover that normal channels of political communication are not open to them. Blockage encourages both spectacular forms of action and more critical forms of analysis. When people make what they perceive to be eminently reasonable demands upon relevant authorities and find these authorities either resistant or incapable of offering redress, direct action is a common resort, and the formation of a social movement a logical outcome.

For example, when women found their attempts through prevailing avenues to achieve equal pay for equal work were getting nowhere, a woman chained herself to a public building in Melbourne to draw attention to this demand. The builders labourers' green bans movement in Sydney was kick-started when residents of a certain suburb discovered that traditional petitioning and lobbying tactics were useless to protect a local bushland area from destruction; only the withdrawal of labour could protect the bush. In France, José Bové had for some time been leading a farmers' lobby group that had worked in circumspect ways to express grievances, and few people took any notice; however, when the government in Paris informed Bové it could do nothing about the trade sanctions hurting his Roquefort cheese sales to the United States because of rulings by the WTO, and he subsequently returned home to Millau and drove a bulldozer through the local McDonald's outlet, this spectacular incident advertised loudly the presence of a social movement, greatly aiding that movement's expansion.<sup>8</sup> In the furore surrounding such direct actions, the people concerned seized the opportunity to explain their motivations to the public. In the process, they were reconstituted as more than themselves; they became social movement activists.

Fourthly, as social movements act upon society, words and actions are reciprocal components in their political repertoire; articulation and agitation are mutually dependent aspects of social movement action. Language is crucial in the mediation between an individual's being and their consciousness, and therefore between individuals and social structures.

Words are political and they are needed to voice grievances—the feelings of a group that they are being denied rights or opportunities important to them. As Miguel Cabrera argues:

In general, the mere existence of subordination (real fact) is not enough for it to be converted into oppression (meaning). Instead, for this to happen appropriate discourse must mediate actively between these two entities. For this reason relations of subordination only convert themselves into relations of oppression, and generate the corresponding social practice, when a particular body of categories (for instance, the modern democratic humanist one) articulates social, political, sexual, racial or any other inequalities as oppression (Cabrera 1999, p. 86).

In other words, articulation—the public expression of grievances—is a crucial component in effective agitation; and agitation facilitates articulation by securing the means by which the oppressed can be heard. Amory Starr notes of the groups comprising the anti-corporate movement that they all use discourse in the form of truth as part of building the movement and in the process of presenting themselves to outsiders (Starr 2000, p. 156).

Language plays an active role in the creation of aspects of social reality. Knowledge and interpretation are not automatically given in ‘reality’ and ‘experience’. The formation of social identities—and thereby of social movements—is accomplished in large part by words; however, emphasis on the significance of language in the mobilisation of subordinate groups does not entail commitment to post-structuralist theories that wrench political languages and concepts loose from their material and other influences (Kirk 1994, pp. 233, 235, 237). It is important to attend to language in ways that are instructive—to be attentive to the contextualised emergence of new verbal frameworks or vocabularies within which experience is expressed and communicated (Palmer 1990, pp. 64, 86, xiii, 122, 143).

Social movements that successfully articulate grievances invariably create new verbal frameworks and vocabularies, thereby converting relations of subordination into perceived relations of oppression. Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* (1974) is useful for understanding ‘framing processes’—the patterns of perception or the ideological filters that organise how people process information. David Snow (1986, pp. 464–81) has described ‘framing’ as the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate

collective action. Through language and within social movements, framing processes become collective rather than individual, and can therefore lead to social change. Through the formation of social movements, subjects participate in active ways in creating meanings, and language is crucial in mediating between being and consciousness. 'Black Power', 'Gay Pride', 'The Personal is Political', 'Indigenous Rights'—numerous slogans come to mind, reminding us of the ways in which social movements have created new verbal frameworks and articulated inequalities as oppression.

Attention to the language of protest also simplifies social movement analysis. It is not necessary to develop elaborate typologies such as those favoured by most social movement theorists. Social movements, as Manuel Castells (1997, pp. 69–70) argues, 'are what they say they are. Their practices (and foremost their discursive practices) are their self-definition.' In other words, articulation (discursive practices such as language) and agitation (practices) define a social movement.

When thousands disrupt a meeting of business leaders while chanting 'Human Need Not Corporate Greed!' and waving banners declaring that 'The World is Not for Sale', it is appropriate to designate this protest as part of an anti-corporate—possibly even an anti-capitalist—social movement. Amory Starr's extensive study of the anti-corporate movement reveals how such a diverse movement, composed of anti-corporate discourses emerging in many places and in a variety of different ideological approaches, can nonetheless be deemed a movement because it names a common enemy (Starr 2000, esp. p. x). Since the publication of Starr's study, the anti-corporate movement has increasingly added the practice of *disrupting* the enemy to the discursive practice of *naming* the enemy, indicating its growth as a social movement and also the logical tendency for some degree of articulation to precede agitation.

## *American versus European approaches*

It is commonplace nowadays to view social movements as explicable and rational, even if one disagrees with the movement's aims. This has not always been the case. For several decades in the United States, theorists developed a confusing array of approaches to understanding the formation and operation of social movements, precisely because the existence of social movements was assumed to be problematic.

American Functionalist approaches largely dismissed social movements as symptoms of dysfunction rather than sources of possibly constructive