
THE ROAD FROM GENOA

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In the year and a half from the Battle of Seattle to the Battle of Genoa, the WTO, World Bank, IMF and G8 have provided spectacular ‘targets of opportunity’ for the transnational movement challenging top-down globalisation. The movement has re-framed the debate on globalisation, put its advocates on the defensive and forced change in the rhetoric if not on the actions of world leaders and global institutions. But these actions are only the shining tip of the iceberg that is the movement for ‘globalisation from below’. This movement is made up of grassroots groups around the world fighting to protect the environment, cancel Third World debt, prevent potential technological nightmares like genetically modified organisms, and recover democratic institutions from corporate domination. Also to mount effective global action against AIDS, halt capital punishment and other human rights abuses, and address a host of other problems that require global co-operation to solve.

Neither the repression conducted on behalf of the authorities nor the provocation of the violent fringe — nor the apparent de facto co-operation of the two — has anything to offer to the great majority of the world’s people who want solutions to problems like global warming and global poverty. The key to addressing such problems lies precisely in grassroots, internationally linked action that goes beyond periodic meeting stalking.

Some have called the Genoa protests a failure because of the chaotic violence that accompanied them. But that is not so clear. There was also massive violence by police in Seattle, as well as by a fringe there also operating synergistically with the police. But the overall effect was still to establish that a huge international movement rejected actually existing globalisation and proposed an alternative based on global justice and common global interests. And that this movement for ‘globalisation from below’, far from being a one-protest wonder, is continuing to grow.

The fact that nearly all the world’s countries other than the US decided to go ahead with a version of the Kyoto protocol is in part a tribute to the power of that movement. So is the decision to end G8 meetings, as we have known them and to hold only diminutive ones in remote hideaways far from the public eye. And so is the firestorm of criticism in Italy,

Europe, and worldwide (though almost unreported in the US) that has met Italy's brutalisation of the G8 protestors. There is little doubt that the lion's share of the violence in Genoa and other recent globalisation protests was the responsibility of the police and those who instruct them. But that doesn't mean that throwing rocks (or perhaps next time shooting) at the police is a good or wise response.

Indeed, there is a danger in the rise of violent and sectarian action within or alongside of what is an overwhelmingly non-violent movement. Movements that start with good intentions can indeed become deformed. A leader of the violent and sectarian Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) 'Weatherman' faction [in the sixties in the US] recollected a quarter century later that, at a certain point, she lost touch with the very values that had led her to become involved in social action in the first place. The key to countering sectarianism and violence is not, however, to be "violently against violence" or to form "anti-sectarian sects", but to keep our focus on the movement's basic goal : empowering ordinary people to address the problems of our species and our environment.

There is a reason to eschew violence that should be considered even by those who do not reject it in principle. Violence and provocation have the effect of excluding ordinary people from participation in movement actions. (One might cite the example of the Palestinian Intifada, which initially was a mass non-violent movement involving whole communities including families and children. But as it moved to stone throwing and other forms of violence, it not only provided a pretext for disproportionate Israeli retaliation, but also made the movement the exclusive province of young men). Militant but non-violent action maximises the primary power of social movements : the threat they imply that the masses will withdraw their consent from the ruling authorities.

Notwithstanding some division over tactics, Genoa retained the two crucial dimensions of unity that made Seattle a global turning point. Far from pursuing a selfish or backward 'national interest', people from different countries and regions around the world stood together for common objectives in a common internationalism. And the alliance of environmentalists and workers, those involved in First World issues and those pursuing Third World concerns, human rights and consumer movements, and the many other elements that compose globalisation from below continued the co-operation that so astonished the world at the Battle of Seattle.

We have now entered a new and as-yet little analysed phase in the development of globalisation. Its initial phase of manic expansion seems to be subsiding into economic stagnation or worse. At the same time, the US Government seems to be withdrawing from a role of 'first among equals' in establishing a global system on behalf of corporations and the rich. Instead, it is utilising its muscle as the world's only superpower to impose an old-fashioned version of 'national interest' (aka imperialism).

Whether this is an aberration or a long-term trend remains to be seen. The US government's rejection of international co-operation on such matters as global warming, star wars, small arms trade, control of biological warfare, and economic co-ordination is creating a problem — and opening an opportunity for the movement for globalisation from below.

The interest of ordinary people in the US and in the rest of the world is clearly in alignment — and in opposition to the destructive policies of the Bush administration. It provides one more opportunity (for example, the international campaigns against AIDS and the death penalty) for a global grassroots movement to outflank national policies.

Let's take the question of global warming. Immediately after the other 178 countries accepted and the US rejected the modified version of the Kyoto climate accord, the city of Seattle announced that it would unilaterally abide by the accord and cut its carbon emissions by more than the required percentage. No doubt other US cities will follow suit. This is a powerful example of the local dimension of globalisation from below. At a national level, environmentalists in Congress are proposing legislation to abide by the Kyoto accord.

In this situation, grassroots transnational people-to-people co-operation could transform global (as well as local and national) politics. Indeed, even very moderate action could have a big impact. If every person in the 178 countries that supported the Kyoto Protocol who is concerned about global warming would contact any Americans they know, express their concern, and ask them to act. If every trade union, religious group, sister city organisation, and similar citizen groups would do the same, it could have a significant impact in isolating Bush's already unpopular position. (Appeals to US trade unionists could be particularly important here, since the American Federation of Labour-Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) has opposed the Kyoto Protocol and supported greenhouse-gas-promoting Bush administration initiatives.)

We've recently seen how the expression of concern about the death penalty expressed by Europeans and others have a big impact on capital punishment in the United States. The many people in the US involved in Central American solidarity movements in the 1980s put significant limits on the Reagan administration's escalation of its interventions there. Global warming provides a brilliant opportunity for people inside and outside the US to outflank national leaders who defy common human norms and interests.

The road from Seattle to Genoa has shown — and the road beyond Genoa will show even more clearly — that international cooperation at a grassroots level holds the key to effectively challenging 'globalisation from above'.

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