

Geoffrey Pleyers. 2010. *Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age*. Cambridge, UK, and Malden, MA, USA: Polity Press. 317 pp.

For all sorts of reasons that need not be reprised here, “alter-globalization” has yet to capture the imagination of its intended audience: the globalized world. The fact is that, a decade or so after its coining, the term, not to mention the concept undergirding it, still does not fly. Globalization-sans-prefix remains the abiding ideal if not the lesser evil even among the alter-globalists.

At least the *anti*-globalization people are clear about what they are railing against. But the alter-globalists make it hard on themselves: it seems that they are not really against globalization per se; it’s just that they cannot condone how it is being accomplished, which is through neoliberalism or what supposedly amounts to the same thing, the “Washington Consensus.” But the question “How will this non-neoliberal globalization be achieved?” remains posed, without a satisfactory answer. The whole business is reminiscent of the initiative of some Gramscians to conjure into existence a “counter-hegemony” through the simple method of resurrecting a plausible counter-concept (e.g., proletarian internationalism in the Philippine Left) and counterpoising it to *the* hegemony of the moment. In effect, “counter-hegemony” in the heyday of *a* hegemony is an oxymoron, and will remain so until Gramsci’s own theory on the matter is revised.

The intention to construct an alternative to globalization without being globalization-as-this-is-commonly-understood deserves our praise, but Geoffrey Pleyers’s *Alter-Globalization* poses more problems rather than provides answers. And understandably so, given the ontological difficulty hovering over the “movement.” Moreover, Pleyers probably sends a misleading signal by subtitling his book “Becoming Actors in the Global Age,” insinuating that the alter-globalization movement holds the key to the emancipation of individuals from a dehumanizing economic system, and that once empowered, they become active agents of real change. Admittedly, the movement now comprises countless “actors” across the globe dynamized by the universal slogan of “another world is possible,” all pursuing one major agenda or another: human rights, sustainable development, Third World debt, fair trade, environment, feminism, peasants, trade unions, ethnic minorities, etc.—the list is practically endless. Their translators and interpreters must be the most overworked in the world. Whether the

movement can stamp out the plague of neoliberalism, however, rather than simply addressing it, is a question eluded by the author, who seems content to declare at the book's conclusion that "alter-globalization contributed to a major historical shift: the end of thirty years dominated by the Washington Consensus," and likewise helped in "fostering global democracy and citizenship" notably through its "opening up of debates hitherto restricted to international experts" (258–59).

But never mind the discourse, which by necessity remains vague and not all that different from twentieth-century social-democratic formulae. What exactly are alter-globalism's discursive practices, its methods and techniques, which stand to empower and enable the presumably powerless nonactors of the world in an age of deepening globalization? This book breaks no new ground either on that point: it is through networking, meetings, rallies, conscientization, and pedagogical sessions, street theater, debates, and discussions that feature "sharing of experiences" on a North–global South, global South–global South basis, etc. Any web surfer knows that they also communicate and bond through the Internet (individual militants post their blogs and tweet, and they may even have Facebook pages). But the most prominent manifestations of alter-globalist power are effected through the World Social Forum (WSF) summits. Pleyers does not say so, but if these yearly gatherings attract the attention of the media at all, it is because they ride piggyback on the earlier-founded World Economic Forum of the hegemonic capitalist camp held in Davos (Switzerland).

No alter-globalist narrative is complete without playing up the violent "Battle of Seattle" (1999), which resulted in the utter breakdown of World Trade Organization negotiations in that city. Accessorily, it helped to project alter-globalization as a major challenger of the neoliberal world order: it notably inspired the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos to declare that "after the Cold War, the Fourth World War has begun." Since then the movement has settled down to more mundane matters, and the media's attention (not to mention militants' attendance at the WSF summits) has considerably waned. This disappointing development is a function of the mainstream standard of what is newsworthy and what is not, and it so happens that in the real world, practice trumps mere theory most of the time.

The main attraction of Pleyers's book is his comparative analysis of a pair of contrasting/complementary currents in the movement: what

he calls the “way of subjectivity” on the one hand and the “way of reason” on the other (henceforth referred to as WoS and WoR, respectively). As he sees it, the WoS groups—those who prefer direct, nontraditional forms of action—provides the performative, festive, spontaneous ingredient in the movement. But it also harbors groups prone to violence and physical destruction. On the other hand, the WoR is the preserve of the intelligentsia (various theoreticians, professors, journalists, and academic researchers) who would like their WoS comrades to possess a minimum of technical expertise in their respective domains, and not just be warm bodies in mass actions or mouthers of slogans. This *de facto* division of labor is predictable in an ordinary mass movement, but how can it fail to sound a discordant note in a united front committed to the making of “another possible world” where egalitarianism and democratic governance reign? There is more than just presumptuousness in the anthropomorphic metaphor for the alter-globalist movement, supplied by an anonymous “activist-researcher”: it is “like a human body. Committed researchers are the head of the movement and the masses that mobilize for events like Seattle are the legs” (144).

A movement that wakes up one day to find itself with a head but no legs is an organism incapable of significant movement, precisely. Pleyers himself seems to downplay the WoS’s importance by withholding the names of the rank-and-file militants that he quotes (e.g., “an activist from Liege,” or “a young Brazilian”), as if their opinions did not merit verification—either that, or the new generation really prefers egalitarian anonymity; whereas the intellectual experts have the privilege of being identified by their full name—even those, like Francois Houtart, who warn against the growing influence of, *inter alia*, technocratism and “hyper-mobile leaders disconnected from social bases” (128). Pleyers himself is not unaware that between the “citizens” and “intellectual leaders,” presumably all from the WoR because of their identifying tags, there exists a “distance”—not (yet) a chasm—that is “reinforced by the rapid professionalization of brilliant new experts and by the multiplication of international meetings which cultivate the formation of an international alter-globalization elite” (145).

Since alter-globalization remains a work in progress and the neoliberal dynamic is still fecund in the belly of the beast, the potential for an ideological split like that of the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks cannot be ruled out. It will be interesting to observe which “way” will

lead toward which direction: who knows, the dialectic may even take a North-vs.-global South configuration.

An objective outsider is likely to appreciate Pleyers's realistic portrayal of a less-than-monolithic movement. But his intentions to be evenhanded would elicit more sympathy if he expressed them in a language more accessible to the reader. This does not mean that *Alter-Globalization* is written in the ponderous for-graduate-school mode, but that his own jargon is quirky enough as to test the reader's patience. While the categories "WoS" and "WoR" are presumably reflective of the situation at ground level, their appellation is extremely clumsy, at least in English; and they needlessly resonate with Taoism every time they come up in the text, which is very often. Moreover, the choice of the terms WoS and WoR generates a further terminological problem: what do you call their respective adherents? "Subjectivists" and "rationalists" do not quite cut the mustard, for none of the adepts of either "way" would conceivably want to be caricatured as (a) nonrational hotheaded demonstrators (the WoS) or as (b) coldblooded intellectual elitists (the WoR). All of this trouble could be avoided if "red" and "expert" were simply adopted from the Chinese cultural revolution playbook, of course. But the younger generation of WoS alter-globalists are wary of Marxism, or so Pleyers tells us (137, 155). Pleyers does use "expert" for the WoR, but apparently the term is interchangeable with "citizen" in the same category, whereas he calls a WoS person a mere "activist." To compound the confusion, "activist" itself is not the monopoly of the WoS, for Pleyers often applies it also to the WoR. Lastly, it may be pointed out that Pleyers's "citizen" is redolent of French-style civism when rendered as "*citoyen*" (adjective as well as noun), but it retains very little of the same politico-ideological tonality in its Anglophone version, as is the case here. This linguistic (mis)appropriation may lead the bewildered reader to ask: "Why, aren't we *all* citizens, without exception, of one country or another?"

The authoritative history of alter-globalization still has to be written. Pleyers's study does not claim to be one; it might more properly be apprehended as a snapshot of the movement in its relative infancy; thus the latter's physiognomy at the time the picture was taken will obviously be different when viewed another decade hence. One might add that the book could stand a great deal of rewriting and editing, as it seems to have been hastily put together (it was apparently scheduled for launching during the Dakar summit in February 2011). But the author, an insider himself, has rightly avoided representing the

alter-globalist movement in the breathless and unproblematic manner that characterizes the overwhelming majority of its publicists. It certainly enunciates an interpellation, a challenge that studies of alter-globalization to come will have to take account of.—ARMANDO MALAY JR., PROFESSORIAL LECTURER, ASIAN CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES-DILIMAN.

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Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor, eds. 2010. *Learning from the Ground Up: Global Perspectives on Social Movements and Knowledge Production*. New York: Macmillan Palgrave. 256 pp.

In this book, Choudry and Kapoor have collected thirteen studies written by twenty authors and coauthors. All contributors—academics, media workers, movement activists and campaigners—have worked with social movements and, together, their essays make the point that knowledge about social movements is produced at different sites and in different spaces. The main argument of the collection is that knowledge production—conventionally associated with academic scholarship—does in fact take place in social movement mobilization, activism, and community work.

In their introductory chapter, Choudry and Kapoor review the literature that has observed the “inadequate attention to the significance of low-key, long-haul political education and community organizing work, which goes on underneath the radar” (citing McMichael 2010); that “caution[s] against uncritically applying and overextending theories and concepts developed in Western contexts to third world and indigenous communities” (citing Smith 1999); and literature that has proposed paying attention to the divide between academic theories of social movements and theorizing by movement activists and organizers, emphasizing reflexivity as the source of value of the latter.

The book argues that knowledge produced by social movement participants on the ground is legitimate knowledge and must be acknowledged and valued as such. Why is it important to make this point? Is it a different point from that made by anthropologists who recognize “emic” knowledge as different from “etic” knowledge? Is it a different point from that made by philosophers of social science and sociological theorists who have proposed the “social construction of