



## PERSPECTIVES

### **Do social movements offer viable alternatives?**

**Jeffrey M. Ayres**

*Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science  
Saint Michael's College, Vermont, USA  
jayres@smcvt.edu*

One of the most important functions that social movements perform is the mobilization of new, often radical, ideas that challenge the status quo. In the ongoing debates over the purported benefits of globalization, social movements have aggressively challenged the notion that market liberalization promotes mutual benefit for both states and citizens. Moreover, various protest campaigns around the world have sought to open discussions beyond largely closed-door, hierarchical, elite gatherings and make such previously arcane topics as trade liberalization, intellectual property rights, and national treatment more understandable to the general public. Most dramatically, popular movements have put forth alternative perspectives to the intellectual hold that the ideology of neoliberalism has had on the public's imagination for the past fifteen years. Consider a few recent examples in which protests have reflected a popular determination to challenge existing meanings surrounding the supposed gains and trajectory of globalization:

1. In 2003 and again in 2005 activists battled police in the streets of Cancun, Mexico, and Hong Kong, China reawakening the ghosts of the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests and the failure of the Seattle WTO Ministerial.

2. After years of being ignored, demonstrators promoting multilateral debt relief saw their concerns addressed at the Group of Eight (G8) summit in Scotland in June 2005, when gathered political elites agreed to the cancellation of nearly USD 40 billion in debt.
3. In November 2005, tens of thousands of people rallied and many rioted in Mar del Plata, Argentina, to protest the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and the two-day summit of gathered political leaders, which ended with no agreement on moving forward on the ambitious hemispheric trade and investment accord.
4. In 2006, thousands of people marched in protest against water privatization in Mexico City during the International Forum in Defense of Water, a counter-gathering to the private-sector's World Water Forum.
5. Also, by 2006, a large international mobilization of civil-society groups had monitored, protested, and ultimately embarrassed governments into recognizing that the treatment of millions of people infected worldwide with HIV/AIDS should be one of the top concerns for the international community.

Whether at the transnational, national, or even local level, social movements have mobilized against a host of these and related neoliberal international initiatives that have sought to liberalize trade and investment and privilege markets over a state's capacity to pursue autonomous economic development. That globalization has been exposed as a contested political process, with current global and hemispheric trade initiatives faltering badly, is indicative of the effectiveness and tenacity of the different manifestations of the so-called global justice movement. While scenes of the more massive street protests may have faded, the mobilization of ideas through persistent protests critical of neoliberalism has continued and represents one of the most significant achievements of global justice activism. This "meaning work" (Benford and Snow 2000) has resulted in the difficult and contentious construction of collective action frames suggestive of alternative reformist or rejectionist interpretations if not futures of a globalized world (Ayres 2003).

Global-justice activism has succeeded in broadening the terms of the globalization debate by challenging the TINA (There Is No Alternative) market orthodoxy that had narrowly reduced discussions

on the global economy throughout much of the 1990s to a stale free trade-versus-protectionism posturing. Instead, many different visions of a post-neoliberal world have been put forth—from a global “New Deal” to reformed global economic governance through a Bretton Woods II, toward a post-corporate world, a fair-trade agenda or even a deglobalized world of re-localization. At the same time, social movements have had an important and growing impact on national politics, as the state has become at least as useful a target for activism as have been institutions of global economic governance. National elections, especially across Latin America, have become near-referendums on globalization, with spirited public debates shaping national political trends ensuing as well in such states as varied as Canada, India, South Korea, and South Africa. What we are witnessing is a nascent democratization of both public debate over globalization and of the political process surrounding global economic discussions, in which developing states long institutionally marginalized are demanding a more direct role in policymaking.

There is every reason to believe that social movements have served as critical alternatives to the lethargy and lack of inventiveness of national politics. With the end of the Cold War and the ensuing globalization of capital, wide swaths of national publics and national political parties came under the thrall of neoliberal policy prescriptions. Thomas Friedman’s pop analysis aside, his “golden straightjacket” metaphor captured the sense that national political choices in the 1990s had become squeezed and narrowed into an ideological commitment to a one-size-fits-all economic package heavy on trade and investment liberalization, required cuts to government spending, deregulation, privatization, and tax cuts (Friedman 2000). Moreover, the first half of the 1990s witnessed a series of successes for the neoliberal paradigm: the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the emergence of the WTO in 1995, and the ever-growing and powerful role played by the IMF in enforcing strict adherence to socially and economically wrenching structural adjustment policies for indebted states throughout the developing world.

Therefore, the interventions by social movements into policy discussions of global economic governance in the latter half of the 1990s represented a dramatic change from what many constituencies increasingly felt were ineffective national responses to neoliberal globalization’s upheaval. Obviously, there were numerous examples of popular groups across both the developing and developed world

contesting neoliberal initiatives years prior to the landmark WTO protests in Seattle in 1999. Resistance to structural adjustment policies across the developing world, combined with growing labor unrest in developed societies, had sparked numerous local- and national-level protest actions against neoliberalism (Kingsnorth 2005). Yet, consider the track record of global justice activism since the contentious protests played a partial albeit contributing role in derailing the Seattle WTO Millennium Round and initiating what would become a much more public debate over the supposed benefits of globalization for years to come.

The time period from the breakout in Seattle in November 1999 through July 2001 at the G8 meeting in Genoa, Italy, arguably represented the heyday of high expectations of transnational activism. These were the months wracked by repeated tens-of-thousands-strong contentious protests against most institutions and policies of the global neoliberal architecture—from the World Bank and IMF meetings in Washington DC in spring 2000, to the September meeting of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, Australia, and the September IMF and World Bank in Prague, Czech Republic, to the Summit of the Americas FTAA protests in Quebec City, Canada, in April 2001. In addition, the birth of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in January 2001, heralded a new international opportunity and physical space for civil-society groups from around the world to collaboratively develop alternatives to neoliberalism.

Yet, the events of September 11, 2001, and their aftermath had a chilling effect on the large-scale protests that had become so commonplace after Seattle. Escalating repression, resurgent statism, and a reassertive neoliberal project forced a reassessment of the efficacy of especially transnational contentious civic activity (Ayres and Tarrow 2002). Large-scale popular mobilizations, especially across Europe and North America, became less common, while business and economic elites began to hold summits in geographically remote settings or in regimes unfriendly to the exercise of constitutional civil liberties. However, what has ultimately transpired since September 2001 has been a healthy reorientation of global-justice activism: while many activists have continued to assert a transnationally oriented civic project, popular campaigns have increasingly sought to affect national public debate, political parties, and the wider political system. The result at times has been increased contention at the state level channeling popular unease with neoliberalism, inviting public discussion over alternative trajectories for globalization, and contributing to more

direct state disruptions of current multilateral trade and investment negotiations (Blustein 2006; James 2005).

Thus we see evidence of the crisis of the neoliberal model on display at multiple levels but with the increased backing of states, political parties, and other actors across national political systems. In Bolivia, for example, massive public unrest over continued privatization of water and natural gas reserves paved the way for the election of Evo Morales, a strong critic of neoliberalism (Rohter 2003). In fact, Bolivia's unrest only fit the broader pattern that has unfolded across Latin America—as antineoliberal sentiment has brought to power a string of leaders in Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina—and fed the democratic crisis that has emerged out of Mexico's recent hotly contested presidential election. India's coalition government led by the Congress Party also came to power on an antineoliberal platform, while workers, farmers, environmentalists, human rights groups and other social-activist groups from the Philippines, South Korea, Canada, the United States, and South Africa, for example, have engaged in national protest and educational campaigns to mobilize alternative ideas to neoliberal policy prescriptions.

Moreover, it is at the oft-overlooked local level that smaller acts of what has been called “micro-resistance” (Mittleman 2004) continue to reflect a popular sea-change against unbridled markets, deregulation, and privatization. In Vermont, one of the smallest and least populous states in the United States, one finds on display an array of initiatives that engage the public in discussions critical of neoliberalism. Citizen campaigns against the proposed building of Wal-Mart superstores, civic protests against bottled water and genetically modified foods, the growing popularity of small farms (through the so-called Community Support Agriculture movement), and the ubiquitous presence of organic-food cooperatives provide a decidedly anticorporate flavor to much public discourse across the state (Ketchel 2006). What ties these Vermont campaigns together with similar campaigns by farmers in India, workers in South Korea, teachers in Mexico, and environmentalists in Canada is a struggle for a greater degree of national and local autonomy against the forces of homogenization, monopolization, and centralization often supported by neoliberal regulations embedded in WTO or NAFTA regimes.

Social movements, particularly their recent transnational manifestations, do not represent the new countervailing power to the excesses of capital, a position once served by the state. While we have witnessed great leaps in forms of transnational relations, national

identities remain strong and persistent. Moreover, we must recognize the persistent divisions in global justice activism, as many different groups from both the developed and developing world have organized into different camps variously seeking to reform or outright reject the capitalist foundations of the global economy. It remains far more difficult to articulate what might become a widely shared strategy for replacing neoliberal policy prescriptions with new public policies as opposed to diagnosing the ills spread globally by neoliberalism in the first place.

Thus, one finds social movements continuing to encourage vibrant debate over different meanings and possible trajectories of globalization, even if alternative policy prescriptions and possible reforms have been slow to materialize. Today in comparison to where national publics were fifteen years ago, discussions and debates over corporate corruption and exorbitant executive compensation, income disparities, and power relations between and within states, and between capital and labor are commonplace. As we emerge further from the shadow of the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the United States invasion of Iraq, popular movements will arguably continue to play an important role in putting questions of political economy back on the front burner of many national political debates (Pearlstein 2005). What remains to be seen is whether protests against neoliberalism can gain even wider significance politically and reshape the platforms and campaigns of more national political parties and organizations. If this occurs, and states become increasingly vulnerable targets of global justice activism, a much more fundamental reorientation of power relations at national and international levels is conceivable. Where globalization has largely been a product of the neoliberal predilections of business and economic elites over the past fifteen years, we may be entering a much more rambunctious and democratic phase where national debates draw more heavily from the contentious meaning work of global-justice activism.

## REFERENCES

- Ayres, Jeffrey. 2003. Global governance and civil society collective action: The challenge of complex transnationalism. *International Journal of Political Economy* 33 (4): 84-100.
- Ayres, Jeffrey, and Sidney Tarrow. 2002. This shifting grounds for transnational civic activity. *Social Science Research Council*. <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/ayres.htm>.

- Benford, Robert, and David Snow. 2000. Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611-49.
- Blustein, Paul. 2006. Failed trade talks usher in uncertainty: WTO system could weaken after breakdown puts globalization on unclear path. *Washington Post*, July 26, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/25/AR2006072501621.html>.
- Friedman, Thomas. 2000. *The lexus and the olive tree: Understanding globalization*. New York: Anchor Books.
- James, Deborah. 2005. Summit of the Americas, Argentina: Tomb of the FTAA. *Common Dreams News Center*, November 23, 2005. <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/1123-22.htm>.
- Ketchel, Lindsey. 2006. My turn: Time for Vermont to protect its organic farms. *Burlington Free Press*, May 17.
- Kingsnorth, Paul. 2005. So where did global resistance go? *New Statesman*, 11 July, 19-20.
- Mittleman, James. 2004. Globalization debates: Bringing in microencounters. *Globalizations* 1 (1): 24-37.
- Pearlstein, Steven. 2005. World puts the brakes on the rush to globalization. *Washington Post*, July 5, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/07/04/AR2006070401109.html>.
- Roher, Larry. 2003. Bolivia's poor proclaim abiding distrust of globalization. *New York Times*, October 17.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Vincent Boudreau

*Associate Professor and Chair, Department of Political Science  
The City College of New York, New York, USA  
vboudreau@ccny.cuny.edu*

When I was growing up in the 1970s, my older brother had a T-shirt, on the front of which it said, "Love Is the Answer." On the back, it said, "What Was the Question?"

I've been asked to write about whether social movements are the answer, and part of me feels like reproducing the wise-guy answer from that shirt. Here's why: social movements are political phenomena that create a range of simultaneous effects. They can produce rare and risky mobilization that directly challenges authority and that may bring great costs down on movement participants. That sort of movement may be the answers to one set of questions—for instance, what does one do when reasonable participatory avenues are blocked, or when things seem so screwed up that citizens feel it necessary entirely to remake government? Other kinds of movements may serve other interests. In

a robust participatory environment, movements may help institutionalize the input of groups that for some reason are weakly represented by political parties, and so may provide stable platforms for what would otherwise be underrepresented social interests. They may also, however, serve to draw in and domesticate those underrepresented interests, in the process limiting the scope of demands on the political system. So, “are social movements the answer?” To develop any kind of considered response, we need to think about how movements’ changing internal and environmental parameters influence what they are likely or able to accomplish. Then, of course, we need to think about whether those accomplishments answer our most pressing political questions.

David Meyer and Sidney Tarrow (1998), writing about the development of social movements in the industrialized West, observe that protest and movements have become more frequent, more institutionalized parts of contemporary political life. That would seem to suggest stronger and more powerful voices for members of society with complaints and claims: more movements should equal greater voice and growing power. But the rise in social movement *frequency* was also accompanied by a shift in social movement *character*. More commonplace social movements also became more routine and manageable political phenomena. The institutions of politics increasingly easily fit themselves around protests and demonstrations, and so a key intermediate movement goal (to raise the costs authorities must bear if they ignore movement demands) became more elusive. Considering the rise in what they called “movement society,” Tarrow and Meyer asked whether the expansion they observed meant that social movements were invading the realm of normal politics, or whether those normal politics were working to defang the power of protest.

One could look at this evolution and regard it as a good sign for social movements: organizationally they have been becoming stronger, better funded, more politically sophisticated. That surely seems like good news for activists. At the same time, they seem less capable or willing of pushing established politics in new directions. In part, this surely has to do with an observation that Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward made over three decades ago (1978): as movements institutionalize and devote more of their energies to organizational maintenance, those tasks undermine the radical outward thrust of mass politics. But in part, it also calls attention to the adaptability of institutions surrounding social-movement organizations: activities that fundamentally upset the order of things, such as mass demonstrations



or strikes, over time become less and less disruptive as everybody gets used to them, and figures out ways around them.

When the Iraq war began several years ago, I joined a protest march in New York City that began around Forty-second Street, and ended in Washington Square Park—in the heart of Greenwich Village. As the march approached the park, we passed a series of large police vans, parked on both sides of the street. From the vans, loudspeakers announced the following message: “You have now reached the end of the protest march. Please pass through the park and exit the other side, so that other protesters will have the opportunity to complete their march.” As I watched, everyone in the demonstration did exactly as the police had asked, and I thought two things. First, it was smart for the police to pitch their message as if they were helping us organize a more effective march. After all, they were merely asking us to show courtesy to other members of the demonstration. But second, they had turned what could have been the most disruptive part of the march—when we all gathered together in one place, and expressed our grievances en masse—into its least disruptive moment, orderly dispersal. Moreover, I heard many march participants, both before and after, express satisfaction at this conclusion. It showed, many said, that the protesters were reasonable people, making reasonable demands. We weren’t the “bad protesters” from the “battle of Seattle” who broke the windows at Starbucks, and fought police.

But the government response to these actions—actions that mobilized hundreds of thousands of people across the country—was to simply ignore them, and the coverage concentrated on how orderly the protests had been (good protesters!) rather than the outrage that marchers expressed at an illegal and ill-advised war. Government went on, and there was really no outward sign that anyone in power felt very pressured by the people walking in the streets, passing to the park, and going home. It could have been a parade or a big crowd heading toward a particularly good department store sale.

Is there another way, or do democracies necessarily work to reduce the disruptive power of protest? I think the answer, typically, maddeningly, is yes and no. On the one hand, we are dealing with the systematic influences of large-scale processes that work predictable effects on protest. In the 1970s, in the classic book *From Mobilization to Revolution*, Charles Tilly described what he called the curvilinear relationship between access and mobilization (1978): where social groups are entirely excluded and disempowered, they will not be able

to protest. As they gain some resources, they will have greater capacities to mobilize, but will still be mainly “outsiders” and will use those resources to attack the system. As they acquire still greater resources, their demands and assertions will be moderated—in part because more of their demands are satisfied by routine politics. So they may have a greater presence in routine political life, but make less of an impression on those routines.

On the other hand, nobody said that activists have to follow routines. In the wake of the Rodney King verdict in the early 1990s, the street riots that followed touched off a great deal of soul-searching, particularly on issues of urban race relations, and techniques to curb and punish police brutality. During the civil rights movement in the US, activists worked long and hard to invent new forms of protest, for which authorities did not (yet) have an answer: the sit in, the bus boycott, the freedom rides. Activists always, everywhere, both respond to and help create the conditions of their activism. Across history, one of the ways in which new protest forms are “invented” is when the power drains away from old established forms, and people try to develop something new, something more effective.

The domestication of social movements, of course, is not a purely American phenomenon, and since I’ve been mainly making reference to American movements, it makes sense to shift the focus of this discussion a bit, and home in on Philippine dynamics. The Philippine context, in fact, illustrates the general points I’ve been making, but in their particular manifestation they bring us to some particular considerations. In the years immediately following the transition from Ferdinand Marcos to Corazon Aquino, demonstrations in Manila became almost commonplace. People demonstrated to advocate policy positions, when an activist was assassinated or had disappeared, in support of government position (like the constitutional plebiscite), and, sometimes, in response to government requests for demonstrations of popular support. As I observed those demonstrations—and as I wrote in an article in the early 1990s—protests over that period often blurred into commemoration and holiday.

But two other things have happened in Philippine politics since then. The first I originally associated with a rise of a newly independent nongovernment organization (NGO) politics within the broad antidictatorship movement following the transition from Marcos (Boudreau 1996). NGOs, particularly those that organized specific communities, had a tighter and more exclusive relationship with particular constituencies. By the early 1990s, one could clearly observe

that advocacy on behalf of specific groups of people (say, tenants on a specific plot of land) was starting to displace advocacy for national policies that would benefit all members of a class or sector. But I now think that if this development was originally an offshoot of NGO politics, it has become more generalized since the early 1990s. While still advocating general policy reform and political transformation, an increasing number of social-movement organizations are advocating for improvements in the lives of their members, first and foremost. To be sure, many groups continue to put demands for broad policy reform on the table; in the political give-and-take that follows, however, many settle for something more limited and concrete that provides some hope of direct benefit to movement members.

In part, I think this is a sign of some growing pains, both within the complex of movements, and for Philippine electoral politics more generally. In the movement, activists have had not only to grapple with the advent of parliamentary democracy (something many have written about) but also with the reality (less directly addressed) that few really anticipate seizing state power, at least not as they once imagined they might. Many probably expect to work within the general parameters of electoral politics, and anticipate those politics being dominated by people with money. So what sorts of demands could one reasonably expect to address by engaging that system? Here's where the other set of growing pains comes in (although by suggesting growth, I may be too optimistic here): Philippine democracy has provided remarkably few incentives to elected officials to enact any policies at all, much less policies that would fulfill promises made in the course of electoral campaigns. It is not merely a matter of officials turning their backs on their campaign promises, or that recurrent political instability provides strong disincentives for legislators to devote energy to policy formation. It is also that the legislature has become less a source of governance than the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy works most effectively to provide limited solutions to individual petitioners. On this bureaucratic level, key decisions are taken to ignore or implement a law, to undertake a development program, or extend protection to a specific constituency. For this kind of government influence, one does not need to advocate for policy reform: one needs to find a way to secure influence, and then use that influence to service a constituency. All of this pushes social movements in the direction of "constituent interest groups": organizations that primarily provide selective incentives to members.

The second major development was that all politicians have had to come to terms with the founding myth of the post-Marcos dispensation:

that Philippine democracy is built on popular mobilization and a genuinely participatory democratic system. Consequently, every political campaign must at least pay lip service to the candidate's relationship with popular forces, and movement support of some kind has become an almost indispensable political accessory. But the process of forging links to particular movement organizations and delivering government positions to members of those movements reinforces a trend I have just identified, in which politicians can largely avoid the necessity of undertaking, or even attempting, real legislative and policy reform. Each can pick up the endorsement of some social movement and represent that endorsement as a sign of more general commitments to a broader class of people or to an overarching reform agenda.

These larger developments, in the context of Philippine social-movement activity, provide the essential orientation points for the question of whether or not social movements are the answer. The current administration has made a career for itself by manipulating the forms of mass political support and democratic participation, but delivering little of substance. Moreover, it has demonstrated a consistent willingness to reward movements *selectively* for political support—and then use that support as evidence of more generally pro-people policies (remember the “PEACe [Poverty Eradication and Alleviation Certificate] Bonds?”). Movements can be the answer for people looking for a way into the power structure—for there will always be room in a contemporary administration for a farmers' organization, an urban poor group, or the self-appointed representatives of civil society, provided they are willing to attest to the popular, populist credentials of government officials. In this sense, social movements may provide an avenue for upward mobility, for entry into a political process that has been often closed to members of mass society.

But social movements acting in this way—as interest-group adjuncts to an administration or a party in power—will likely succeed at the expense of answers to other questions, in particular, the pressing questions of how Philippine democracy can be made to work for everyone, and how Philippine society can be made safer and more equitable for its poorest members. These are questions that perhaps only some kind of social movement can answer—a social movement that retains a place outside of political institutions, comfortably operates in ways that challenge rather than conform to political routines. It is unlikely, as social movements move closer and closer to the mainstream of Philippine politics, that they will produce real movements for reform. Such movements have always prospered at the

margins, and it is to those margins that people seeking fundamental answers should look.

## REFERENCES

- Boudreau, Vincent. 1996. Of motorcades and masses: Mobilization and innovation in Philippine protest. In *The revolution falters: The left in Philippine politics after 1986*, ed. Patricio N. Abinales, 60-82. Ithaca, New York: Southeast Asian Program Publications, Cornell University.
- Meyer, David, and Sidney Tarrow. 1998. *The social movement society: Contentious politics for a new century*. Lanham, Maryland. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard Cloward. 1978. *Poor people's movements: How the succeed, and why they fail*. New York. Vintage Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From mobilization to revolution*. New York: McGraw Hill Company.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Marco Giugni

*Maitre d'enseignement et de recherche, Department of Political Science  
University of Geneva, Geneva, Switzerland  
Marco.Giugni@politic.unige.ch*

Political parties and interest groups are the traditional vehicles for the representation of collective interests. Since the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, however, a third collective actor challenges them in this role: social movements. To be sure, these three forms of interest representation differ in many respects. While parties and interest groups act mainly, but not exclusively, within the institutional arenas (respectively, the parliamentary and administrative arenas), social movements are largely excluded from the latter. Furthermore, parties address a broader range of issues than both interest groups and social movements, which tend to focus on specific issues. Finally, they all have their own privileged forms of action: parties engage in elections, interest groups in lobbying activities, and social movement mainly in protest activities.

The question I have been asked to address in this brief essay is: Do social movements offer viable alternatives? This question can be interpreted as follows: To what extent are social movements an alternative to both political parties and interest groups for the representation of collective interests, rights, and identities? I propose to tackle it by addressing three different albeit interrelated issues. First,

the issue of participation: Do social movements allow ordinary people to participate in the political process? Second, the issue of visibility: Do social movements allow ordinary people to make their interests and identities visible in the public domain? Third, the issue of effectiveness: Do social movements allow ordinary people to be effective in reaching their political objectives? Let me briefly address each aspect in turn.

*Participation.* Social movements clearly present many advantages over the two other forms in terms of participation. Both political parties and interest groups follow the logic of representation rather than that of participation. In other words, they proceed through delegation, not through direct involvement. To be sure, parties—better: candidates—need to be elected, and therefore some degree of participation is required. In addition, party activities are open to citizens who wish to become rank-and-file activists or even party leaders. Similarly, interest groups are open to individual engagement if one wishes so and has the required skills. However, parties and interest groups work only at lower levels of involvement, be it participation in elections or campaign and lobbying activities. Social movements provide a much wider range of activities in which citizens can be involved, going from peaceful actions such as petitioning and mass demonstrations to more disruptive ones such as strikes, blockades, and other protest activities. (To be sure, most of these activities are available also to parties and interest groups. However, for various reasons, the latter does not often make use of them.) As such, movements are a privileged instrument of political socialization, and participation in social movements often is but a first step toward a more institutional political career within a party. Especially in the light of the often decried decline of electoral participation and the loss of trust in the political institutions (including parties), this surely suggests that movements are a viable alternative.

Given the conventional “habit” in modern democracies to restrict access to elections only to those people who are nationals of a given country, social movements present a further advantage with respect to parties insofar as they are available not only to citizens, but also to foreigners. (To be sure, in some countries foreigners can vote, at least at the local level, and this is becoming more and more common also in countries that have typically been quite restrictive in this sense. However, the granting of full voting rights to foreigners remains more a project than a reality.) They also are apparently more easily accessible than interest groups, as the latter generally requires a great investment of resources to pay permanent staff with specific skills to conduct day-

to-day lobbying toward governmental or other political and economic elites. On the other hand, all this should not make us forget that participation in social movements, apart from a few historically specific circumstances (e.g., revolutionary situations), is the prerogative of a minority of people. While a substantial share of a country's citizens participate regularly in elections, despite the decline witnessed in recent decades, only a few of them are involved in activities carried by social movements, and only sporadically.

*Visibility.* Social movements have been defined variously as groups of committed people, formal organizations, informal networks, challenges to the authorities, public displays of collective performances, and in still other ways. According to an authoritative definition, a social movement is “a sustained challenge to powerholders in the name of a population living under the jurisdiction of those powerholders by means of repeated public displays of that population's numbers, commitment, unity, and worthiness” (Tilly 1994, 7; emphasis in original). This focus on movements as publicly displayed challenges to the authorities reminds us that visibility is crucial in modern politics. Here again, social movements seem better off than both parties and interest groups in this regard. By their logic of representation and their institutional character, the latter is more oriented toward reaching their political goals. Movements, in contrast, are both instrumentally and identity oriented, although the literature has often depicted them as eminently identity driven. Therefore, the role of collective identities is crucial for their formation and sustained mobilization.

There is one way in which identity plays a specific role in social movements. This is the way in which the latter allows ordinary people to become protagonist of the political stage. As the definition reported above suggests, movements are what Tilly has called WUNC: public displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment. As such, they draw their power precisely from these sources. This means that movements need public visibility. To be sure, political parties, too, need to be visible in order to find electoral support. However, because of their situation as challengers acting mainly outside the institutional channels, movements rely on the existence of a public space—made available today largely through the media of mass communication—to be a viable alternative to more powerful collective actors. This implies the possibility to create a public discourse, to mount a credible challenge to the status quo, and to display public identities. Indeed, together with the making of public claims, the creation, assertion, and

political deployment of collective identities constitute the basis for the strength of social movements (Tilly 1999).

*Effectiveness.* The issue of effectiveness leads to a crucial yet still relatively understudied topic: the outcomes or consequences of social movements. No study, to my knowledge, has even tried to compare the effectiveness of political parties, interest groups, and social movements. Social movements clearly are poorly equipped as compared to political parties and interest groups in this respect. Movements lack the economic and political resources that parties and interest groups usually have. In particular, their position outside the institutionalized political system and their role as challengers make them dependent on external resources to obtain any substantial benefits from their activities. This does, by no means, imply that movements never can have an impact in the absence of external aid. Indeed, the power to disrupt the institutions and, more generally, the society is the principal resource that social movements have at their disposal to produce a political impact (Piven and Cloward 1979). However, as many studies have suggested, the policy impact of social movements is strongly facilitated by the presence of two crucial external resources: the availability of powerful allies within the institutionalized political system—mainly, a party—and the presence of a favorable public opinion that can push the powerholders to make concessions (see Giugni 1998 for a review).

Yet the consequences of social movements largely surpass their (usually poor) policy impact relating to their demands. We must acknowledge “the possibility that the major effects of social movements will have little or nothing to do with the public claims their leaders make” (Tilly 1999, 270). In other words, each movement activity leaves behind a variety of political, social, and cultural consequences that are independent from its stated goals, and it is with regard to this that we should assess the question whether social movements offer a viable alternative in terms of effectiveness. In this sense, the effects that social movement activities have on the personal life of participants and activists—the biographical impact of activism—is in itself a ground for arguing for a positive answer to the question that guides this brief essay (see Giugni 2004 for a review). Participation in social movements may have a profound impact on the feelings, values, and behaviors of those participating, and this attests to the importance of this kind of political engagement.

I argued that the answer to the question whether social movements offer a viable alternative must be assessed with regard to at least three aspects: their capacity to promote social and political participation,



their visibility in the public domain, and their effectiveness in bringing about social and political change as well as in producing other kinds of consequences such as at the personal or biographical level. In my view, social movements do offer viable alternatives to both political parties and interest groups, but only to the extent that we acknowledge their peculiarities as vehicles for the representation of collective interests, rights, and identities. Yet the question must be asked anew today in the light of certain developments. Specifically, two parallel processes threaten to rob movements of their potential to offer viable alternatives, at least in the ways they have done so far in their history. To conclude my essay, I would simply like to mention such processes as avenues for further reflection on these matters.

The first process is institutionalization. A few years ago, two leading students of social movements asked in the introductory essay of an edited collection about the possible advent of a "social movement society." They asked their authors "whether they [saw] a more or less linear increase in protest and in the acceptability of protest; whether unconventional politics [was] diffusing more rapidly and finding activists in once-quiescent sectors of the population; and whether this expansion of protest [was] producing an institutionalization so great that the social movement as we have known it in the history of the West is losing its power to surprise, to disrupt, and to provide a meaningful and effective alternative form of politics for those without access to more conventional means of influence" (Meyer and Tarrow 1998, 26). Institutionalization threatens the movements in particular to make them both less participatory and less visible, but it could also diminish their capacity to act effectively, at least if one thinks that their power comes from their potential for disruption.

The second, more recent, process is globalization. The increasing interconnectedness of the world poses further challenges not only to social movements but also to all forms of interest representation as we have known them in the past, which were mainly nationally based and nationally oriented. Movements, like other forms of interest representation, drew their power from their being confined within the national state: they promoted participation in national politics, they were visible within a national public space, and had an impact—if any—at the national or subnational level. With the alleged loss of strength of such national frame of reference under the pressure of economic and political globalization, we can wonder whether social movements, as well as political parties and interest groups alike, will be able to adapt

to the new context and find new ways to create participation, visibility, and effectiveness.

## REFERENCES

- Giugni, Marco. 1998. Was it worth the effort? The outcomes and consequences of social movements. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 371-93.
- . 2004. Personal and biographical consequences. In *Blackwell companion to social movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, 489-507. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Meyer, David S., and Sidney Tarrow. 1998. A movement society: Contentious politics for a century. In *The social movement society: Contentious politics for a new century*, ed. David S. Meyer and Sidney Tarrow, 1-28. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. 1979. *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they failed*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Tilly, Charles. 1994. Social movements as historically specific clusters of political performances. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 38: 1-30.
- . 1999. From interactions to outcomes in social movements. In *How social movements matter*, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly, 253-70. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Jackie Smith

*Associate Professor, Department of Sociology  
University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA  
jsmith40@nd.edu*

Contemporary social movements have helped to offer alternative visions of how the world might be organized. In doing so, they challenge global elites who prefer to argue that there is no alternative to the globalized market economy. Analyses of the transnational networks and actions of social movements show that many are working to articulate visions of world order that prioritize human security over profits. I believe that social movements' major contribution to the search for alternative ways of organizing our world lies in their work to develop new, locally accessible spaces in which people can enact new ways of participating in what are increasingly global political and economic processes. The World Social Forum (WSF) process nurtures both political and economic democracy by providing a routinized arena in which people can gather at many levels to share ideas,

coordinate actions, and develop shared visions and identities. I explore some of the implications of the WSF process for expanding the search for alternative global policies.

The WSF process comprises an annual global meeting complemented by dozens of regional and hundreds of national and local social forums around the world. It began in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, when around fifteen thousand activists gathered under the slogan “Another World Is Possible.” It is both a protest against the annual World Economic Forum gathering of political and economic elites and a response to critics’ arguments: “We know what you’re against, but what are you *for*?” Since 2001, the WSF has met annually in Porto Alegre, Brazil (2002, 2003, 2005); Mumbai, India (2004); Bamako, Mali (2006); Caracas, Venezuela (2006); and Karachi, Pakistan (2006). The resonance of the Forum’s message is apparent in the fact that the global meeting now draws over 150,000 participants, and the proliferation of local and regional meetings continues. Organizers see the WSF process as creating “open space” for citizens to explore the impacts of global changes on their local and national experiences at the same time as they cultivate transnational dialogues and networks of social movements to address shared problems.

In a global system in which opportunities for citizen participation are conspicuously absent, the WSF helps address the “democratic deficit” in global institutions. By providing spaces for deliberation and discussions about power and representation, the WSF serves as a laboratory for global democracy. Activists are testing out new forms of participation and representation that can inform official efforts to democratize global institutions.

In its first five years, the WSF process has demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation, and I believe this is due to the pervasive culture of democracy that encourages dialogue and respectful efforts to confront and address conflicts, and that is constantly mindful of the ways power operates to exclude or marginalize some voices over others. The WSF has moved consistently toward greater decentralization, expanding opportunities for people at local levels to be actively involved in global politics. It has also fostered new forms of networking among activists working on different issues, in different countries, and at different levels of action. Most important, the WSF creates opportunities *that otherwise would not exist* for people to learn and practice skills relevant to global advocacy work.

Those participating in social forums at any level have unprecedented opportunities to network with other organizations working on diverse issues and with widely varying constituencies. Few structures of modern life provide such opportunities for people from different class, racial, and professional backgrounds to come together to talk politics. But democracy needs such spaces in order to flourish, and so the WSF is helping to meet this vital need.

The WSF process also enables activists to make better use of technologies that facilitate regular communication across vast differences. The WSF has certainly succeeded because of its use of the Internet and electronic communications, and it has inspired new ways of using these media for transnational political action. But activists note that “the revolution will not be e-mailed,” and technology alone cannot generate the robust social ties required for sustained political work. The WSF provides the routine and predictable *physical* meeting spaces in which activists can come together, generating the mutual understanding and trust required for global democracy.

As an ongoing, expanding, and inclusive political space, the WSF creates opportunities for individuals to cultivate the skills that are necessary for global citizenship. We have no elections for global officials, and few international policies are subjected to public debate. National governments rarely consult with their constituents about important international policies. The WSF fills this vacuum by providing a politicized arena where people can learn about and articulate positions on global issues. And they do so as part of a process of dialogue with diverse collections of people, thereby fostering appreciation for the needs and perspectives of others while cultivating skills at political negotiation and compromise. If we are ever to have a more democratic world, we will need far more people with these sorts of skills.

The WSFs are inspired by the Zapatista slogan that calls for creating “one world with room for many worlds.” And while the WSF process itself nurtures political practices and skills that enhance global democracy, the *content* of much of the discussion among activists focuses on specific ways to strengthen local control over the *economic* decisions that affect people’s lives. Those protesting against the predominant form of economic globalization are creating new spaces in which “many worlds” might flourish. I outline just a few examples of these alternatives.

*Community Supported Agriculture (CSA).* Modern agriculture has made farming more fossil-fuel intensive, more mechanized, more large-scale, and less profitable for farmers. Much of the money spent on food today goes not to the farmer, but to retailers, shippers, manufacturers, and marketing firms. CSA takes economics to the base of the food chain. It does so by reorganizing the food economy to shorten the distance between producer and consumer. CSA members pay the farmer an annual membership fee to cover the production costs of the farm, and in return they receive a weekly share of the harvest during the local growing season. CSAs help spread the risks and costs of farming by providing farmers with financing at the beginning of the season, thereby reducing or eliminating the need for costly loans while insuring a minimum income for their harvest. By creating direct relationships between local farmers and community members, CSAs enable small-scale producers to thrive while enhancing local food security, and sovereignty. To the extent that communities (and nations) are self-reliant on food, they are less vulnerable to economic instability as well as to outside political and economic pressure.

*Community Currencies and Barter Systems.* Community currency and barter systems build on the notion that “money” is a creation of our political institutions and that it must be distinguished from real “wealth.” National and international monetary systems, they argue, often devalue things that local communities see as important. For instance, unemployed or underemployed workers may not be able to gain dollars or pesos or yen for their work, but these people’s skills can enhance the local community in various ways. What is lacking is a means for communities to reward work that is necessary and beneficial for the community itself. And fresh produce or locally produced artwork may not be valued by consumers outside a local area, but residents of an area may be willing to pay more for such goods. Local currencies allow local communities themselves to determine what goods and services they value. Often, these initiatives grow from communities where a large corporate employer suddenly moves out of the town, causing widespread unemployment and encouraging job seekers to leave their communities in search of work. Or they emerge in places where rapid inflation undermines people’s economic security, as happened in the late 1990s and early 2000s in Asia and Latin America. The “Ithaca Hours” currency in Ithaca, New York, has been operating since the early 1990s, and it has inspired many other

communities to print their own money in order to gain more control over local economic choices.

*Cooperative Ownership.* Social movements have helped advance cooperative ownership models for economic production by organizing such initiatives and encouraging the public to support cooperative production. Many local examples of such cooperatives exist in virtually every part of the world. Perhaps the most important large-scale example of this kind of initiative is in Argentina, where workers arranged to take ownership of enterprises that failed in the wake of that country's economic collapse. They collectively assumed the risks of ownership of the production facilities, and most of the surviving cooperatives have generated workers' wages that equal or exceed those they get before the economic crisis.

*Fair Trade Programs.* The global economy is organized around the assumption that if governments create policies that encourage the investment of capital to produce profits, the whole of society will benefit (eventually, at least) as wealth "trickles down." Thus, tax policies, government subsidies and spending programs, investments in infrastructures like roadways, energy systems, education, etc. are organized with the aim of helping promote economic growth and profits for wealthy investors and major corporations. Many have argued that these policies do not work and that social programs and policies need to promote more than profit-seeking and economic growth. They must also aim to promote other social goals such as quality education and health care, equitable access to essential resources such as clean water, environmental sustainability, preservation of leisure time, promotion of local economic democracy and choice (so sometimes workers actually own and profit from the land and factories where they work), protection of workers, and wages that support a decent living for workers and families. These values are not factored into the prices of most goods. Fair trade programs are arrangements between consumers and producers that promote these other social values in more limited "markets." In doing so, they contribute to economic empowerment of local producers and their communities, strengthening the possibilities for grassroots, bottom-up alternatives to a globalized economy to thrive.

Most of the world's poor are excluded from the world economy simply because they lack the incomes to participate in markets. As governments cut back their spending on social services and turn these over to private, market-driven forces, these people's livelihoods are

even more at risk. It is becoming increasingly clear that human security requires more democratic global institutions. That means that instead of allowing global markets and actors determine what kinds of economic development will take place in a region or locale, citizens combine their efforts to help define their own preferences for structuring their local economies. Social movements have been successful at shattering the myth that there is no alternative to a globalized economy. But more important, they have developed new structures and spaces that expand the possibilities for more and more people to be actively involved in discussions about what sort of world we want to build. And by developing methods to enhance the choices people have about how they make their living, social movements enhance the autonomy and self-sufficiency of local communities. Without such economic choice, there can be no political democracy.

Despite the importance of what social movements are able to do, more groups should confront the fact that existing global economic and political structures severely limit the possibilities for democracy in national and local communities. Very few groups at the WSF, for instance, have focused on ways to strengthen the United Nations (UN) so that it can play a stronger role to protect human rights in the face of new threats from globalized capitalism and from George W. Bush's "long war" on terrorism. In practice, the strongest global institutions—i.e., those with real enforcement capabilities—are the financial institutions of the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Trade Organization. But these international agencies only have mandates to encourage international trade and investment—not to promote and preserve peace, human rights, and environmental sustainability. They must be brought under a broader framework for global governance such as that reflected in the UN Charter. If any alternative to globalized capitalism is to thrive, we need a global institutional framework that can hold global financial actors accountable to international law. The UN must therefore be empowered to carry out its mission, which includes controlling the actions of global financial institutions and transnational corporations. It needs allies from civil society to promote the cause of a stronger UN. And, in turn, a stronger UN can help advance the alternative visions being articulated by global social movements.