

Cultural activism in the alter-globalization movement

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Fifteen hours into the gathering in the remote Zapatista village of Juan Diego, which played host to the “meeting between rebel *commandantes*, youth and NGOs” in August 2005, speakers continued, one after the other, to take their turn at the stand and exchange local experiences. At three in the morning, it is Tito’s turn, a youth from a suburb of Mexico City suburbs, “I don’t know how to speak well in public. Actually, there are only two things that I know how to do well: graffiti and hip hop. So I am going to sing one of my songs; a rebel, a Zapatista song.” The atmosphere rose a notch and soon people were on their feet. The young singer took the opportunity to launch into a second song, “dedicated to Subcommandante Marcos”. Despite the lateness of the hour, the dozen Zapatista *commandantes* all remained to listen to this teenager, who expressed in his own way the difficulty of life in the poor suburbs, his disappointed hopes and his desire for a better world. As Tito broke into his third song, a Trotskyite activist, a long-time supporter of the Zapatista cause, came to see me and began to fidget, “This is all very well, but what use is it? What points can be drawn from these successive speeches? What text will come out of them?”

From the point of view of institutional politics, such meetings and actions appear indeed quite limited in their outcome. The multiple Zapatista mobilizations for constitutional reform in Mexico clearly failed at the politico-legal level. So how should these songs at the middle of the night in the remote mountains of Chiapas have any influence and help to improve the rebel indigenous situation? Similar questions arise from activists actions around the world. What is the political impact of tagging advertising in Mexico City, London or New York subways? It would be considered useless - or even counter-productive, in that it impairs the functioning of a public service. In which way could the very convivial “critical wines” meeting organized by Italian social centers (Toscano, 2010) have any political or economical impact? At worst, they see symptoms of declining participation in the mechanisms of political life or attitudes leading to a “dissipation of social movements” (Phelps-Brown, 1990). At best, they regard the characteristics of these movements as indicative of an early phase of the *cycle* or *development* of social movements, in which innovations multiply, creating “relatively open spaces for new collective experiments” (Tilly, 2003: 105).

Ethnographic-based research challenges this traditional approach. Ethnographic field research have indeed led social scientists to emphasize the energy and creativity of these activists, suggesting the emergence of a distinct culture of activism than the lack of maturity or strength of a social movement (e.g. McDonald, 2006; Juris, 2008; Osterweil, 2004; Ponniah, 2006; Pleyers, 2005). These actors actually don’t want to take their place as “challengers” in the political arena but, on the contrary, to escape the political sphere and to develop a resistance to corporate globalization centered on subjectivity, lived experience and concrete alternative practices. The ethnographic approach allow indeed to emphasize emerging elements that have been largely ignored by other methods. It is particularly true for feature concerning subjectivity and local practices. Through its lengthy time commitment, it allows “adjustment between hypothesis and evidence, especially in the form of interrogating activists about what they think they are doing” (Jasper, 2007: 97).

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After a brief presentation of the main case studies we rely on, this paper explores the way experience and experimentation shape this activist culture. Sections 2 to 5 successively focus on four of its components: the centrality of experience and subjectivity, the conception of concrete alternatives emerging, through concrete experimentation processes, the idea of “spaces of experience” and similar conceptions of learning and knowledge. The last section opens a discussion on some limits and drifts these movements have been confronted to.

A. Local actors

To grasp some key elements of this activist culture², the text draws on data collected through ethnographic research and interviews with activists belonging to four movements: the Zapatistas, an activist cultural center in a Belgian town, young alter-activists networks and some Argentinian autonomous unemployed workers “*piqueteros*” movements. While echoes at the international level are one of its successes (Khasnabish, 2008), the *Zapatista* movement’s strength, its “essence” (EZLN, 1994: 133), lies in local indigenous communities. Outside the system of political parties and Mexican institutions, autonomous municipalities organize the life of dozens of villages, implementing local autonomy in various sectors, including government, justice, education and health. Zapatista activists define autonomy as a process which “allows people to decide how to live and how to organize themselves politically and economically”; “Autonomy – it’s about governing ourselves as indigenous people, saying how we want our political authorities to work, no longer being subordinate to policies coming from above.”³

“*Barricade*”⁴ is an alternative social and cultural center which has been active since 1996 in a working class neighborhood in the center of Liege, a Belgian town. It hosts diverse activities, all of which create new sociability and implement alternatives to consumer society and to passive leisure activities: an activists bookshop, a convivial bar, a “cyber-center” that promotes open software and offers introductory computer courses to unemployed workers, a theater company, a choir, and a collective purchasing group. As a cultural center, it sees itself primarily as a “convivial space”, where it is possible to read or have a discussion over one of the many special beers available at the collective’s bar. The multi-faceted project seeks to transcribe political demands and a very general questioning of neoliberal policies into concrete activities inscribed in every day life (“to act from our daily life”). In this way, around twenty people meet each Monday to address agricultural and food problems through a “collective purchasing group”, ordering their food directly from engaged, local producers. The project aims to demonstrate the possibility of “alternatives to the supermarket and to a productivist agricultural policy.”

“*Alter-activists*” is a particular category of young global social justice movement activists, which put creativity and the autonomy of activists at the center of their engagement (see Juris & Pleyers, 2009; Pleyers, 2005). Alter-activists participate in larger global justice events, including regional and world social forums, but they do so by keeping “one foot in, and one foot out,” maintaining a critical attitude toward internal hierarchies and non-democratic practices. They stress horizontal coordination, direct democracy, and contingent, flexible forms of commitment. Alter-activist culture is characterized by creative forms of action and an emphasis on process and experimentation. It is associated with self-managed protest camps and non-conventional forms of direct action protest, involving creative and expressive repertoires which often capture mass media attention (Juris, 2008).

² It may be defined as as a coherent logic of action, a set of normative orientations, practices and ways of organizing the movement (Dubet, 1995) as well as ways of relating to an adversary and approaches to social change.

³ Zapatista activists during the first “Meeting of the Zapatista peoples with the peoples of the world”, January 2007. See also Ornelas, 2004

⁴ Quoted text without other reference is drawn from comments made by members of Barricade during meetings and interviews between February 2003 and February 2004.

The Argentinian *piqueteros* are part of the unemployed movements which emerged following the Argentinian government's adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1990's. They were frontline actors in the mobilizations of 2001 and 2002, which led to the resignation of several Argentinean presidents in succession. During our visit to Buenos Aires in February 2003, our research focused on the "autonomous" fringe of the piqueteros movements which were characterized by a very critical attitude towards government and efforts geared towards reorganizing neighborhood life. The social policies of N. Kirchner and the decision of many piqueteros leaders to join the "officialist" camp marginalized this autonomous tendency in the following years.

Beyond their differences, these four movements share a similar culture of activism, based on subjectivity, experience and experimentation. The next four parts of this text analyzes four of its main elements: the centrality of experience and subjectivity in their resistance, the conception of change based on concrete experimentation processes, the building up of "spaces of experience" which aim notably to escape power and hierarchies, and similar conceptions and practices concerning learning and knowledge.

B. Resisting through experience and subjectivity

Following the political process perspective or utilitarian paradigms, many actions led by these activists seems irrational and counterproductive. Tagging advertising in the subway diminishes resources available for public transport; breaking banks' windows strengthens the negative image of the global social justice movement in the press and helps the movements' opponents to sharpen the division between "good" and "bad" activists (Daro, 2008 & 2009). Such actions however appear as coherent and rational when considered in the frame of their specific culture of politics. These activists seek to construct themselves as actors not through political advocacy but through the assertion of their *subjectivity*, understood as the *will to think and to act by oneself, to develop and express one's own creativity, to construct one's own existence without allowing tradition or the rules of collective life to be imposed on one* (Wieviorka, 2004: 65). Subjectivity and creativity are thus expressed through the many actions taken, from the subversion of advertising ("ad-busting") to songs, festive parades and clowns companies performances during blockades of global summits. Everywhere, it is a matter of "posing against the misery of power, the joy of being" (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 496).

After the final march against the WTO in Cancun, thousands of activists approached the fence dividing downtown from the resort area where the WTO meetings were being held. Young Mexican women and Korean trade unionists began attacking the fence, while others shouted slogans and sang. After an hour a hole finally appeared in the fence, leaving protesters directly facing the police guarding the "no-protest zone." Although police and journalists expected violent confrontation, protesters sat down and observed a moment of silence. It was followed by a few speeches by Latin American and Asian activists, protesters burned an effigy representing the WTO and laid flowers before the police. As the riot cops looked on, confused and impotent, hundreds of alter-activists began dancing to the beat of Korean, Latina and North American music to celebrate their symbolic victory. Such theatrics aim to make events attractive and media-worthy, to invite the public to reflect or simply to have fun and enjoy oneself while protesting.

Against the hold of the dominant ideology and markets, these activists seek to produce their own forms of cultural life, to self-transform, and to assert themselves through their creativity, without manipulation by hegemonic cultural industries. Their movements represent a call for personal or communitarian freedom against logics of power and mass production, consumption and media. Subjectivity is thus the core of this struggle. Activists claim that "the oppressed are not simply a specific group of people but specific aspects of the personality of each one of us: our confidence,

our sexuality, our creativity” (Holloway⁵, 2002: 228). As A. Touraine (2002: 391) explains, “We cannot oppose this invasion with universal principles but with the resistance of our unique experiences.” These activists want to defend the autonomy of their *lived experience* in the face of the influence of a globalized society and of economic powers over all aspects of life (Illich, 1973; Habermas, 1984). Moreover, the struggle does not only play out against an external adversary or system, it is also within the personality of each individual and in each movement, “The struggle is just as strong against oneself as against the enemy. We must be conscious of and recognize the tendencies to pride and opportunism that we all have, since we are all steeped in this system.” (young piquetero, 2003). It is consequently *also a matter of transforming the self*, one’s relations to others and to oneself; particularly since the goal is “escaping the spirit of competition and consumerism promoted by neoliberalism.” (an activist, “Beyond the ESF”, London, 2004).

C. Experimentation

Considering activism as a permanent experimentation process is another key element shared by the four movements. As Zapatista commandante Brus Li stressed, “there are no guidelines on how to become autonomous”. Hence, in Zapatista communities as in youth activists camps, the challenge is similar: “We are feeling our way, seeking out concrete and emancipatory paths toward the transformation of social relations.”⁶ Everything starts with concrete and limited projects, which, together, should lead to a different society. Experience being central, J. Holloway (2003), one of the prominent thinkers of this trend, states that “the revolt must be practical; it must involve the construction of another way of doing, another sociability, another form of life.” Activists seek to “build another world” from the starting point of concrete practices and experiences: other ways of consuming, horizontal and participative organization, convivial neighborhood relationships... In this perspective, change is not limited to the local, but it resolutely unfolds “bottom-up”: starting with practical solutions. Activism starts in daily life interactions. Building different social relations, convivial, non-competitive, assumes a great importance: “We can’t change the world if we don’t start with ourselves. Helping our neighbors, seeing how things are going in our neighborhood ...” (a young Mexican activist, Cancun 2003). Similarly, what the Zapatistas consider as their “first revolution” is not the January 1994 uprising but the promotion of egalitarian gender relations among their own communities (EZLN, 1994: 107-110).

Central to this process is the principle of consistency between practice and defended values: “We do not separate our practices and aims. We choose a horizontal, anti-sexist, self- and eco-managed way of operating”⁷; “Our manner of working has to reflect the values we are defending as part of our resistance” (an activist of Barricade, Liege). Activists thus consider the struggle as a *process of creative experimentation* in which the values of “another world” are put into practice within the movement organizations and meetings (Grubacic, 2003). The objective does not precede action, but is concomitant. This *performative* character of political engagement was advanced by Gandhi who believed that, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world”. The activists have seized upon and developed this idea, “It’s not tomorrow that there will be changes; they are visible today in the movement.”⁸ They consequently devote a lot of energy to organizing their networks in a “democratic, horizontal and participatory” manner (Wainwright, 2005) and represent an experiment of global democracy (Smith, 2008: ch 10; Teivainen, 2008).

There are neither over-arching models, nor “prefab” social projects, nor pre-established plans. Not even Zapatism presents a *model* to be followed as such (Khasnabish, 2008): “Zapatism seems to be a model which has had particular success and from which everyone seems to have a lot to learn.

⁵ J. Holloway is a scholar-activist, whose analyses of the Zapatista movement and activist philosophy had a significant echo among alter-activists.

⁶ Leaflet presenting an alter-activist youth space at the European Social Forum in Paris, 2003.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ A *piquetero* from the *Movimiento de Liberación Territorial*, 2003.

But it is in no sense a universally applicable model. Each place must find its model. The experiences of others can help, but importing a model wholesale can never work.” (a *piquetero*)“There is no social model which represents the implementation of the desire for liberty and emancipation. (...) The only thing that exists are multiple acts of liberation.” (Benasayag and Sztulwark, 2000: 29). Alter-globalization activists call on a multiplicity of alternatives in order to create, “a world in which there is a place for all worlds”. Activists consider them as an inspiration, which then needs to be adapted to local realities, actors' specificities and aims, “It is not a transportable, pre-built model but a source of inspiration to rethink our democratic practices” (activist from a London social center, 2007).

D. Spaces of experience and anti-power

Confronted with the invasion of life by the logic of the market, these movements all seek to build ***spaces of experience***: *places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society which permit actors to live according to their own principles⁹, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity*. Indigenous communities, social centers, movement gatherings, *piqueteros'* neighborhoods or protest camps become spaces where alternative practices are experimented and experienced. These spaces incarnate simultaneously places of struggle and the “ante-chambers of a new world” (Ornelas, 2004). They allow each individual and each collectivity to construct themselves as subjects, to become an actor in their own lives and to defend their right to be unique. Zapatista, Barricade and youth camp activists set particular emphasis on non-hierarchical relationships as they wish to create spaces of experience “*freed of power relations through the dissolution of power-over*” (Holloway, 2002: 37)¹⁰ and outside the domination of market ideology and communalism.

While the movements *spaces of experience* share similar aims and shared significances, their forms and duration vary greatly. Some are created to allow participants to entirely (re-)construct their lives, such as the Zapatista communities and their *caracoles* (good government councils), some suburban neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, “occupied” factories, neo-rural communities (Mésini, 2003), alternative squats¹⁰ and Brazilian peasants' *assentamentos*. The group of landless peasants we visited in 2002 in the south of Brazil had established small individual farms on the land they had appropriated but also collective organic fields, a school applying Frierian pedagogy and a health center which practiced natural, traditional and alternative methods. Similarly, the main challenge of Zapatism lies in the transformation of social relations within communities themselves, whether relations of production, political decision making process, gender relations, or the assertion of dignity as recovered self-esteem.

Other *spaces of experience* are more ephemeral. Many occupations last only a matter of days. During the one-week occupation of a school building in Liege, Belgium, activists set up a “School of Cybermandaïs”, with an independent radio, workshops, concerts, discussions and party spaces as well as a community life that sought to escape the principles and values of capitalism. Even more transient are the “occupations” and “reappropriations” of the streets which generally only last a couple of hours. This type of action was highly valued by the *Reclaim the Streets* network at the end of the 1990's: “Whether we were reclaiming the road from cars, reclaiming buildings for squatters, reclaiming surplus food for the homeless, reclaiming campuses as a place for protest and

⁹ Following the primary meaning of the term “autonomy”: establishing one's own norms.

¹⁰ In the early 1970s, feminist theorists had already very similar discourses: “We cannot wait for the revolution before we change our lives, for surely changing our lives now is part of the revolutionary process”. (Wortis & Rabinowitz, 1972: 129-30). In order to distinguish these practices from those aiming at countervailing power (Montesquieu's “counter-power”), we will use the term “*anti-power*” in this context. J. Holloway, M. Benasayag and the main theoreticians of this trend generally use the term *counter-power*. As they underline (Holloway, 2002 ; Benasayag & Sztulwark, 2000; Hardt & Negri, 2000: 489), it is power-over that must be fought and not the capacity to act.

theater, reclaiming our voices from the deep dark depths of corporate media, or reclaiming our visual environment from billboards, we were always reclaiming.¹¹”

Alter-activists protest camps and, more recently, climate camps are of particular interest. They constitute *spaces of experience* in which alter-activist youth discuss, prepare actions and experiment with concrete alternatives in the areas as various as management of speaking, cleaning and gender equality. The 2002 No Border camp and its reflexive self-organizing process have become references across Western Europe (cf. Juris, 2008). Youth camps at the World Social Forums have gathered 2300 activists in 2002, 15,000 in 2003 and 30,000 in 2005. In June 2003, the “Intergalactic village” during the mobilization against the G8 summit in Evian (France) involved over 4,000 activists and had a deep impact on young French activists. In Mexico, in 2005 alone, national and international autonomous youth camps were organized in Oaxaca, along the U.S.-Mexico border and near Mexico City. Drawing on the experience of previous alter-activist protest camps as well as the long tradition of self-organization by German activists, the 2007 anti-G8 autonomous protest camps near Heiligendamm hosted over 10,000 activists. Their organization was both participative and efficient, being at the same time experimental and functional in most aspects of camp life - organic vegan foods, camp security, workshops, cleaning, training for blockade actions...

Centered on both experience and experimentation, alter-activist camps provide spaces for socializing, sharing ideas and experiences, celebrating, mixing private and public, making friends and developing new commitments, and generating powerful emotions in the struggle for a better world. They are also opportunities for experimenting with different forms of participation and social interaction. In this sense, youth camps are organized along directly democratic lines: there are no formal leaders, decisions are made collectively, and all residents are encouraged to take part in the construction, organization, and daily administration of the camps. While celebration and the pleasure of living an alternative experience are at the heart of these activist spaces, the will to encourage more participative forms of organization demands considerable investment. Strolling around the 2005 WSF youth camp in the evening, journalists and participants would doubtlessly retain party images and sounds of samba. However, just a few steps away, and while the majority of activists were unwinding in downtown terraces, youth from the alter-activist space “Intergalactic caracol” met well into the night to organize the following day together. Online meetings in the previous weeks enabled a group of around ten activists from Europe and the Americas to establish certain parameters. However, in order to allow everyone to participate, decisions had to be made on site: each person spoke and each idea was discussed until 2 or 3 am. At the same time, despite their utopian thrust, alter-activist camps also present complex, often intractable challenges, including the rise of informal hierarchies, the necessity to delegate despite the emphasis on participation, differing levels of involvement of residents, and the emergence of political divisions.

E. To learn by experience and experimentation: share knowledge and acknowledge one’s not-knowing

The idea of learning by experience and trial and error in a process of experimentation is well captured by the Zapatista expression “to learn by walking” (“*aprender caminando*”), which numerous interviewees of the four movements have indeed taken up in diverse forms: “We are learning with each step we take” (a *piquetero*). In “Barricade”, learning by trial and error is a central aspect of all the projects, which are constructed “by feeling around”. To these movements, which were constructed in opposition to proclamations of the end of history – both neoliberals and Soviet, permanent questioning and a consciousness of the limits of their knowledge and transformation processes are fundamental: “Our not-knowing is also the not-knowing of those who understand that not-knowing is part of the revolutionary process. We have lost all certainty, but the

¹¹ Email from the Toronto chapter of *Reclaim the street*, quoted by Klein, 2002: 486

openness of certainty is central to revolution. We ask not only because we do not know the way (we do not), but also because asking the way is part of the revolutionary process itself.” (Holloway, 2002: 215; see also Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007).

Aside of learning by ones own experience, learning from other movements experience, successes and failures is also of great value. This is notably the purpose of international meetings, caravans and most alter-globalization trips. Social Forums are moved by an "explicite attention to learning across the times and places", encouraging activists to take ideas both from the global event and from other local activists they met back to their local settings (Smith and Reese, 2008: 350). Workshops in WSF alter-activist spaces are often about “talking through experiences of struggle” (Spanish activist, WSF 2002): “In Seattle, we succeeded in taking care of this and that; on the other hand, we had these problems that we were able to resolve in Quebec by using this tactic ...”. Similarly, before beginning the march on Mexico City in 2001, *commandantes* Susana and Yolanda emphasized the importance of meeting with women from other regions of the country, “We will learn something from you and you from us. In this way, we can help each other to struggle together.” (*La Jornada*, 19/02/2001). For Barricade activists, a visit to the producers tells much more about the challenges of alternative agriculture than many books.

Without always avoiding them, activists call into question traditional structures of learning, particularly lectures in which speakers are placed on a pedestal in front of a passive audience. They prefer meetings based on an exchange of lived experience. The ephemeral “School of the Cybermandais” set itself up against the concept of “a school where people think they know and don’t want to learn any more” (as one of the organizers put it). Activists organized meetings and workshops centered on sharing experiences of life and struggle.

The wish to learn from other movements' experience has also contributed to waves of activist alternative “tourism”. Trips to Porto Alegre, for example, have allowed many activists to take part in neighborhood participatory budget meetings. A dozen foreigners were present during two of the three participatory budget meetings we observed in 2002 and the subject had quickly spawned many books and writings. Similarly, foreign volunteers have been present as “observers” in the Zapatista villages since 1995, intending on learning from the experience at the same time as contributing to it. In 2002 and 2003, it was Argentina’s turn to receive waves of international activists coming to encounter the *piqueteros*, the neighborhood assemblies, and workers at occupied factories. Each *piqueteros* organization had its few successful models in the suburbs of Buenos Aires which, on some days, welcomed several groups of foreign sympathizers and intellectuals. Later Venezuela and Bolivia, played host to western activists¹². The exchange is not one way. In return, several groups asked their foreign visitors to share experiences lived in their home countries or at recent global events. The presence of *alter-tourists* also testifies to international support for a local experiment; representing not only a source of pride for local activists but protection against repression, the latter aspect being particularly important for Zapatista villages. In Buenos Aires, links established with international visitors, foreign media and other Argentine movements greatly contributed to the re-opening of the worker-run Bruckman factory. Sometimes the contacts established lead to actors from the global south being invited to Europe or North America to speak about their experiences. For example, in the anti-capitalist village opposing the G8 summit at Evian (2003), a Mexican peasant recounted, with much emotion, her struggle against an airport planned on her village’s lands. Returning home, the *alter-tourists* share their experiences with activists in their local networks, thus contributing to the “globalization of the grammar of experience” (McDonald, 2006).

¹² Naomi Klein second book « Fences and windows » provides a good example of this « activist tourism » that seek to learn from other movements' experience.

F. Limits and illusions of the experience as activism

As they share major elements of this activist culture, Zapatists, piqueteros, social centers and youth alter-activists also face some similar challenges and limits inherent to it. The focus on the movement's own organization may for example lead some actors to focus all its energy on internal logic and aims or to the emergence of a closed identity. While often effective, "spaces of experience" are also fraught with illusions such as the existence of groups freed of power relations and the utopia of a space outside society and politics. Individualized feature of this activism culture may also lead to hedonist actions lacking in general significance or in dissipating in sporadic activism. With the ascendancy of a logic of pure experience, the hedonism of experience as a goal in itself may overrides the social and political stakes of the movement. Finally, for most of these movements, the spread from social change in a limited group to larger scale transformation remains a blind-spot.

1. Organization at the heart of the movement

As pointed in the previous sections of this text, Zapatists, social centers activists, autonomous piqueteros and young alter-activists are highly attentive to the internal dynamic of their movement's organizations. However, in some cases, activists come to devote the best part of their energy to efforts on this level, be it organizing their spaces or leveling - sometimes ferocious - criticisms at groups more oriented towards efficiency than internal democracy. In such cases, opposition to neoliberalism and social issues take second place. A. Roy, a figurehead of the alter-globalization movement in India, warns as follows, "The Forum needs to flee from this great risk. It absorbs our best energies, mobilizes the most generous minds only for us to start thinking, after four days, about the next meeting. In that case, it won't bother our enemies. It will keep being our own music, but it will never reach to be our struggle".¹³ Paradoxically, spaces of experience can in this way come to constitute a means of containing the zeal of protest actors; concentrating energies, for example, on the organization of life in an alternative camp rather than opposition to the G8.

Moreover, the idea of social spaces purified of all power relations, "without leaders and fundamentally horizontal" (Antentas et al, 2003: 31), "spaces without structure, without power and without exclusion" is clearly an utopia (Pleyers, 2004; Polletta, 2005; Teivainen, 2007; Smith, Juris et al. 2008: 380-3). As in all social spaces, structures and power are very much present in activists' spaces of experience and networks (Routledge et al., 2007), although in less formal ways than in more hierarchical organizations. M. Crozier and E. Frieberg (1980: 254) indeed concluded their studies with the following comment "Power is impossible to eradicate, and relations of power are essential components of cooperation and human relations in general. As long as self-management's partisans refuse to admit this, any action they undertake will run the risk of producing an effect opposite to what they wish to achieve. Power can be regulated and moralized only by flushing it out into the open, in order to prevent the consolidation of positions of strength and the crystallization of dependency relationships around these positions". The lack of formal hierarchy should not be confused with a total absence of hierarchy. In the absence of explicit rules about decision-making and formalized power, prominent people may actually acquire considerable influence. Additionally, activists are confronted with very immediate problems related to the highly variable level of involvement of participants or the many challenges posed by cultural and political diversity.

2. Fragmentation and dissolution into hedonism

The second set of limits and challenges concerns more specifically young alter-activists and social centers' activists. The celebration of experience and the festive character play an integral part in their political engagement. However, does lived experience constitute a form of resistance in

¹³ Quoted by A. Martins in "A trip to Planet Mumbai", www.forumsocialmundial.org.br.

itself? Do experience and celebration constitute, in themselves, political protest against corporate globalization? Two evolutions may undermine the protest dimension of these actors: a purely hedonist conception of actions and the dissipation into a multiplication of activist experiences without continuity.

Firstly, when it is disconnected from a more global project or meaning, the experience of an activist happening or an alternative party can have no greater significance than the search for pleasure. In 1997, a street party organized by Reclaim the Streets brought together 20,000 people in Trafalgar Square. The organizers conceived the party as a political action, but this perception was not shared by most participants, some of whom engaged in acts of hooliganism. Leaders of the movement were subsequently worried that, “the subtle theory of ‘applying radical poetry to radical politics’ is getting drowned out by the pounding beat and mob mentality” of parties (Klein, 2002 : 478). Similarly, after the 2002 commemoration of the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico, committed alter-activists regretted younger demonstrators' action they considered as meaningless: “They passed a glazier’s and broke all the panes of glass. Just as they did in Genoa at the banks, but in this case it was simply because they were window panes. It makes no sense!”. The celebration of lived experience, hedonism and some festive aspect are constitutive dimensions of this activist culture, but it is connected to symbols and a global movement toward social transformations. The active involvement of each person in the alter-globalization project, minimizing the distance between “project organizers” and “ordinary participants”, appears to be an efficient means of avoiding these diversions. Active involvement reinforces an actor’s consciousness of the significance and meaning of actions taken, maintaining the link between the concrete experience and social or symbolic significances attributed to it.

Secondly, political engagement based solely on experience can lead to a dissipation which prevents all construction of the unity and continuity of activism. From a happening to a Social Forum, the individual activist risks dispersal without constructing a unity beyond the diversity of her experiences; living each experience as isolated adventures, responding to a deep thirst for lived experience, collective emotions and the cult of the instantaneous. One of the founders of Reclaim the Street UK explained, “If people think that turning up to a street party once a year, getting out of your head and dancing your heart out on a recaptured piece of public land is enough, then we are failing to reach our potential.” (quoted by Klein, 2002: 479). The risk is all the greater because activists of the way of subjectivity are not guided by any pre-established program and are usually only temporarily associated with any particular network. Asserting the continuity of the movement consequently becomes a crucial challenge. In this context, reflexivity and a constant interrogation of one’s own political engagement are fundamental parameters by which the actor “strives to construct her experience and give it meaning” (Dubet, 1995: 120). It is in this subjective and reflexive work by the activist on herself that a unity and coherence is forged beyond consecutive events and the shuttling from meetings to actions, networks to social forums.

3. A space outside society? Which path from personal to global change

When transformation of the actors themselves and the improvement in their conditions of every day life become the alpha and omega of the movement, activist groups often become self-centered. Withdrawal into closed-community and the reduction of a movement to a self-help network represent classical paths of social movement evolutions (Kriesi, 1996). Moreover, while cultural movements can contribute to profound social change, they may also lead actors to adopting Hirschman’s “exit option” (1970) and retreating to the margins of society rather than challenging the way in which it is organized from the inside. Even in a urban setting, desire for strong social ties can sometimes translate into an attraction for closed communities. In 2002, fifteen Parisian radical activists retreated in a manor, where they live in community, growing a huge garden.¹⁴ But

¹⁴Similar projects have notably taken place in the UK and in Mexico.

does withdrawal from society suffice to achieve the social transformations to which activists aspire? In some situations, it can, on the contrary, help to reproduce the system. If the actors of this path withdraw from conflictive engagement in the arena of politics and civil society, turning their backs on state institutions and power, don't they effectively abandon the field to their adversaries?

The logic of subtraction from political and economic power seems far less sound to the extent that the transition from these limited spaces to the global level remains extremely vague. The question of how to move from change at the individual or local level to global transformations often remains a blind spot for these movements' activists and or theorists of anti-power. How to move from the alternative organization of a few indigenous communities to global transformation that would guarantee indigenous rights? To what extent can small collective purchasing groups really offer a global alternative to large-scale distribution? How strong may experiments with horizontal organization and alternative social relations in ephemeral camps or interstitial spaces of society impact future society?

Conclusion

While industrial society movements believed that change would come from the fields of production and political power, the actors discussed in this paper look towards personal subjectivity, every day activities, and the local level – areas largely ignored by their predecessors. More than a struggle against globalization, Zapatistas, piqueteros, social and cultural centers and alter-activist youth are first and foremost a call for the freedom to build one's existence, at the individual and collective levels. They assert their own subjectivity, experience and creativity against the logics of power and mass consumption. They create “spaces of experience” allowing each person to play an active role in the course of their lives, whether in consumption or in building an autonomous and alternative community. While only a limited number of actors are involved, these spaces deeply transform lives and respond to a qualitative logic of social change. Innovative as it is, these movements of experience however have their limits and illusions.

Although deeply rooted in very distinct local contexts (urban and rural, in the North and in the South, in local and global events...), these movements' connection goes far beyond “a series of overlapping, interacting, and differentially placed and resourced networks” (Routledge, Cumbers and Nativel, 2007: 2575). They share a specific culture of activism shaped by subjective resistance, concrete alternatives experimentation and spaces of experience. On this base, we may consider they belong to a global movement. The unity of such a movement should not to be confused with the existence of global gatherings, networks or an organization encompassing its various components. It relies rather on shared values, imaginaries, logics of action and societal significances (Touraine, 1981; Melucci, 1996; McDonald, 2006). It is thus central to appreciate what is at stake and what the potential of these movements are. Culture of politics, networks, resonance as well as movements' meaning and significance are useful conceptual tools to understand the global nature of such movements.

Furthermore, this approach conciliates “the radical diversity of subjectivities in struggle and the explicit recognition of the irreducible significance of a multitude of struggles” (Khasnabish, 2007: 520) and the analysis of global movement (McDonald, 2006). The unity of a movement is indeed not in the least incompatible with a heterogeneity of its actors. A. Touraine (1981: 124) actually reminds us that, “we sometimes forget, in speaking about *the* workers' movement, that it is embodied by unions, parties, cooperatives and mutual aid organizations”. Similarly, this global movement is embodied by diverse and autonomous actors, from indigenous communities to hyper-individualized young alter-activists. Each actor remains autonomous. He may get some inspirations from other movements' actions when it “resonates” with its own local struggle.

We thus share an argument raised by a wide range of recent writings in social movements studies: cultural dimensions of social movements should be more taken into account (Alvarez, Dagnino, Escobar, 1997; Goodwin & Jasper, 2001; Jasper, 2007). Ethnographic case studies have notably led to pay more attention to several subjective and cultural dimensions of global social justice movements, including significances, meanings (Holland, Fox and Daro, 2008), imaginaries (Khasnabish, 2008) and lived experience (McDonald, 2006; Juris, 2008)¹⁵. Through its lengthy time commitment, ethnography figure among the most appropriate methodology to grasp this cultural and subjective dimension of activism. The multiplication of field research rooted in different localities and “globally conscious ethnographic research” (Albrow, 2007) are thus essential tools to go beyond “local vs. global” and “irreducible experience vs. global movement” dichotomies.

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¹⁵ However, activists discourses shouldn't be taken as granted. Their limits, tensions, contradictions and illusions need to be clearly asserted.

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