



IN BRIEF

Although it appears to be growing in strength and numbers, the anti-globalization protest movement is now at a crossroads. The core of the anti-globalization movement, which is rooted in social justice and human rights, has been unable to control violent fringe groups. Furthermore, international economic agencies such as the World Bank and the IMF have been surprisingly responsive, expanding and accelerating their policies on debt relief and strengthening their focus on the mitigation of poverty. The protest movement thus faces the challenge of developing new instrumental goals for the next phase.



POLICY BRIEF

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Anti-Globalization Movements at the Crossroads

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The current wave of anti-globalization protests began in Seattle and has advanced to Prague, by way of Davos, Washington, D.C., Windsor, Bangkok, and Melbourne. These large-scale public opposition demonstrations against the policies of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Economic Forum are at least a decade old. Although in the past year they appear to be growing in strength and numbers, the protest movements are now at a crossroads. The main reasons for this development are the inability of the core of the anti-globalization movement to control violent fringe groups during their protests and the adaptive responses made by the targets of the protest: the international economic agencies.

The anti-globalization protest is not a single transnational movement but consists of multiple and variable, even contradictory, trends folded into one. Nearly 100,000 people have taken part in the demonstrations, among them professional protestors who travel from one event to another. The appearance of continuity in the transnational protest movement is somewhat deceptive. In fact, it may be better viewed as a series of episodes—a chain of separate but linked events.

The contemporaneous nature of protests is reinforced by media attention that frames them for international consumption. As Alberto Melucci observes: “Power operates through the languages and codes which organize the flow of information.” The impact of demonstrations seems to have been twofold; they push the officials, locked in the conference centers, to respond to and even emulate the critics. In addition, they create a transnational imagery in which there are villains, heroes, and martyrs battling the beast of globalization. In fact, most people form their opinion on the anti-globalization movement, and of globalization itself, on the basis of this imagery.

As a diffuse movement arising from and giving form to multiple political and cultural meanings, the anti-globalization protest has become an alternative to established party politics and traditional social movements, which both are more instrumental in nature. The “transnational advocacy networks,” studied by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, pursue concrete aims in specific contexts opposing, among other things, human rights violations in Argentina, dam construction in India, and the marketing of infant formula to poor women in Africa. These networks have not specialized, however, in expressive politics, but have aimed to produce specific results.

The present anti-globalization movement has a different flavor. In addition to pursuing concrete aims, such as debt relief and the reform of the WTO, it has developed a distinct political culture among those of “generation X” interested in a process

that helps to define and express their identities. This is due, in part, to globalization's being such a broad phenomenon that it evades the development of an instrumental political opposition to it.

In fact, globalization is a magnet that draws loose political particles to itself. In the cultural sense, the protest movement is informed by moral values, such as social and environmental justice, democratic participation, and human rights. In that way, it expresses the *Zeitgeist* criticism against the excessive materialism and concentration of power and wealth in the North which leads to the poverty of the South.

The transnational protests are a visible and loud way of making "noise" in such public debates. In this respect, Zygmunt Bauman captures an important aspect in the motives for protests in noting: "The price of silence is paid in the hard currency of human suffering. Asking the right questions makes all the difference between fate and destination, drifting and traveling."

Much of the anti-globalization criticism is directed against big corporations, which are perceived to be greedy and indifferent to consumer interests. The protest also is against the world that is ruled by corporations operating outside democratic control. In developing countries, this leads to the exploitation of labor and the despoliation of the environment. Technology is also out of control, a perception that fosters actions against companies producing and marketing genetically modified food.

The anti-globalization movement also has specific targets. For instance, the anti-sweatshop movement makes very concrete and strong demands to companies, their contract producers, and retail firms in the apparel business. On a more general level, the protesters

demand extensive debt relief (Jubilee 2000) and the alleviation and ultimate eradication of poverty in the world. The moral criticism against globalization grows out of the sense of powerlessness. There is a feeling that we are living, as Anthony Giddens puts it, in a "runaway world."

The centrality of these demands provides evidence of the importance of social justice as a value guiding the protest movement. Social justice and human rights are taken seriously and provide a basis for an alternative form of politics. This is reflected also in the corporate world, where ethics codes, such as the global Sullivan principles,

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are spreading like a prairie fire. These principles have become popular, in part, because they do not call for any independent monitoring and enforcement of labor standards and other norms.

While the face of the anti-globalization movement is mostly benign, it also has uglier manifestations. Increasingly anarchist groups, whose only idea of politics is to create mayhem and destabilize society, have hijacked the protests. At the same time, the majority of protestors behave peacefully, trying to close down the meetings of the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. This is an effort to prevent these organizations from establishing behind closed doors rules of global governance that are perceived to favor corporations and sustain social injustices.

This tactic succeeded well in Seattle, where the police were unpre-

pared, and it had some limited success in Melbourne and Prague as well. The anarchist groups, which are not interested in nonviolent protest, aimed Molotov cocktails at corporate property and tried to provoke the police into violent reactions. This now stands in stark contrast to the peaceful protest of 300,000 people in Belgrade that recently brought down the Milosevic regime.

The police reaction to demonstrations has been growing stronger and more systematic. U.S. experts in crowd control trained the Prague police, and they came out in numbers. The "balance of power" in Prague was that 8,000 demonstrators faced 14,000 delegates in the IMF and World Bank meeting and were matched by some 11,000 police, with 5,000 military troops in reserve.

The police used tear gas, truncheons, water cannons, and other nonlethal means to keep the protestors under control. No one has died in demonstrations against globalization, but in Prague, some 100 people, 60 of them policemen, were injured in the clashes. More than 900 demonstrators, among them 330 foreigners, were detained.

As a result of the globalization of the protests, the police and immigration authorities are involved in ever-closer transnational cooperation. The Czech border police had names and photos of foreigners who had participated in earlier anti-globalization protests. In all, close to 600 foreigners, many of them Germans, were turned back from the border by the Czech authorities in the two-week period preceding the Prague meeting.

The growing national and transnational repression of the demonstrations adds to the recent assessment of many in the political left that the

protests are being used for purposes alien to social justice and raises a larger question of whether the protest is running out of momentum. In Prague only about half of the demonstrators who were expected to attend actually appeared.

Many core actors in the movement fear that violent elements in demonstrations are catching too much media attention and divert public interest away from its key goals, such as debt relief, labor standards, and poverty alleviation. In the worst case, the demonstrations could become counterproductive and turn against the original goals of the movement.

A critical question is whether there is an alternative course of action that would meet the cultural and expressive aspects of the movement without leading to violence and chaos. In the instrumental sense, the anti-globalization movement has already produced some results. The WTO, for example, has been paralyzed since Seattle, and the efforts to find a way to start the new round of trade negotiations have been stalled. This is, however, more due to the disagreements between industrialized and developing countries than the impact of the protest movement.

The IMF and especially the World Bank have responded surprisingly constructively to the demands of the popular opposition. The goals of debt relief have been augmented, and the schedule of its implementation has been accelerated. The World Bank has strengthened its focus on the mitigation of poverty, and the IMF has followed in its example.

A year ago it would have been difficult to imagine that the leaders of the international financial institutions would pursue, even rhetorically, policies they do today. But a page was turned

when the president of the World Bank said of the protestors that “many of them are asking legitimate questions, and I embrace the commitment of a new generation to fight poverty.” This is, of course, partly a tactical move, but there is both seriousness and substance behind the statement.

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The criticism of the Bank and the Fund has also been legitimized as never before. This is in no small measure due to the contributions of well-known economists, especially Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz, who have freely expressed their critical views of the IMF in *Financial Times*, the *Economist*, and other mainstream publications. Their criticism does not question the need for global financial institutions. Yet it does challenge the current policies of the IMF, which is seen as debt collector of private banks at the expense of the economic recovery of the crisis-ridden countries.

The anti-globalization protest alone has not caused the changes taking place in the institutions and norms of global economic and financial governance. Governments critical of the current policies should also get their due. In fact, their influence on the course of events, such as the stopping of the Multilateral Agreement on Investments (MAI) in 1998, has been critical to

institutional reform.

Clearly, these global institutions have made only partial concessions. Thus, many in the opposition would not be satisfied before “the Fund has been defunded” and “the Bank has been broken.” If, however, partial victories are accepted, then the protestors can declare such a victory and go home. Perhaps the next phase of action will be instrumental again. It would emphasize a deeper analysis of global injustices, the need for education, legislative action against money politics, and the organization of those who find themselves down-trodden within the global economy.

In the end, however, there continue to be reasons to keep the protests alive. In effect, many of the movement’s intellectuals (including Walden Bello, Bono of U2, José Bové, Susan George, Ann Pettifor, Vandana Shiva, and Lori Wallach) are mapping the next phase of action. The criticism of transnational corporations, inhumane labor conditions, risky technologies, the deterioration of the environment, violations of human rights, and abject poverty will rightly remain on the global political agenda.

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