

On the Self-Understanding of the “Anti-Globalization” Movement: A View from Genoa

By Costas Panayotakis

To the casual observer of the Genoa protests against the meeting of the G8 two facts stand out: the unprecedented support for what is often referred to as the “anti-globalization” movement, and the growing level of repression that the governmental representatives of global capital are prepared to unleash on all those who would dare express their opposition to the current economic orthodoxy and its devastating consequences for humanity and the planet. However, what I, as a participant in the Genoa protests, found especially striking, was the degree to which these protests both reflected the contradictions traversing the “anti-globalization” movement and pointed towards the resolution of these contradictions.

This essay will focus on the movement’s self-understanding. I will argue that the “anti-globalization” movement is still struggling to emancipate itself from the hegemony of the dominant capitalist ideology. The continuity between the corporate media’s description of the movement and the definition, by many of the Genoa protesters, of the movement they are part of is, in my view, a sure sign that the movement’s struggle for autonomous self-understanding is an ongoing one. It is clear that the outcome of this struggle will help determine whether the “anti-globalization” movement gives rise to a conscious, coherent and radical challenge to global capitalism or becomes domesticated through rhetorical figures of speech and minor concessions on the part of global capital’s economic and political caretakers.

Before the movement wins the struggle for an autonomous self-understanding, however, *it has to acknowledge this struggle’s existence*. My use so far of quotation marks whenever I referred to the anti-globalization movement is meant to have a double significance. On the one hand, the quotation marks express my rejection of the idea that the opposition to globalization in general is, or should be, the defining characteristic of the movement. On the other hand, my use of the term, even in quotation marks, stems from a recognition that “anti-globalization movement” is routinely used, even by sympathizers and supporters of the movement, as the convenient, short-hand way of

referring to the continuing mobilizations against the various institutional pillars of the global capitalist order.

The use of the term “anti-globalization movement” as a convenient shorthand is however hardly innocuous. In my view, the more this term establishes itself as the way to describe the movement, the more uphill the movement’s struggle for a radical and autonomous self-understanding will become. Before I lay out my objections to the term I would like to emphasize that my goal will not be to evaluate the movement on the basis of externally imposed criteria. My description of the movement as contradictory stems partly from the fact that the term “anti-globalization movement” does not do justice even to the movement’s existing political practice.

“Anti-globalization” conceptualizes the movement as a defensive one. Indeed, this term implies that the purpose of the movement is to resist and to try to stop the ongoing process of globalization. By default the movement assumes a nostalgic character as the present can only be criticized in the name of a “pre-globalization” past. Marx, who theorized globalization 150 years ago, was aware of the orientation towards the past that often characterizes emancipatory struggles that are still in their initial stages. Thus, in the overview of the stages of development of the proletariat that he provides in the *Communist Manifesto*, he associates this orientation towards the past with an initial inability, on the part of the proletariat, to distinguish between the true underlying causes of its condition and the mere symptoms of these causes. In these initial stages, Marx tells us, proletarians “direct their attacks not against the bourgeois conditions of production, but against the instruments of production themselves; they destroy imported wares that compete with their labor, they smash to pieces machinery, they set factories ablaze, they seek to restore by force the vanished status of the workman of the Middle Ages.”¹ To the extent that the workers at this stage do not “go to the root of the matter,” it is clear that their struggle is not as yet radical enough.

Marx’s work is as valuable today as it was a century and a half ago because it provides us with the tools we need to go to the root of the matter. In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx emphasizes that “[f]or man...the root is...man himself.” This appeal to “man,” however, is not a purely moralistic plea incapable of going beyond a general condemnation of the sufferings that capitalism imposes on workers. Man, for Marx, is historically grounded man or

¹“Manifesto of the Communist Party,” Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York and London: Norton 1978), p. 480.

“the ensemble of the social relations.”² Taking historically grounded analysis to its logical conclusion, Marx provides us, moreover, with an immanent critique of capitalism. In other words, Marx does not only analyze any given development in terms of the socio-economic totality that provides this development’s context. He also derives the criteria of evaluating “what is” from this totality with its dynamic tendencies and potential. Rather than criticizing the injustices of the present through nostalgic appeals to a past that has been irreversibly surpassed, Marx uses his historically grounded analysis of capitalism to create a link between past, present and future. This historically grounded analysis does not only allow an understanding of the present in terms of the struggles and contradictions of the past. It also uncovers the potentialities created in the present and turns capitalism’s inevitable frustration of these potentialities into a starting-point for the articulation of an alternative vision of the future.

It is my view that the term “anti-globalization movement” is not conducive to the kind of radical immanent analysis that, as Marx clearly recognized, is the *sine qua non* of effective emancipatory struggles. It is not an accident, for example, that the *Communist Manifesto* is better understood as a *celebration* of globalization than as an “anti-globalization” document. Marx celebrates globalization because he treats it as a historically grounded development rather than as an isolated phenomenon. More specifically, he recognizes globalization as a symptom of the compulsive dynamism and expansionism that form part of capitalism’s essence. Marx also recognizes that it is precisely capitalism’s unprecedented economic dynamism that creates the possibility of a radically different, more rational society that would modify and re-appropriate capitalism’s technological achievements to reduce human suffering and enrich the life of every human being. It is clear, then, that Marx’s historically grounded analysis points to a dialectical conception of globalization. This dialectical conception does not talk about globalization in the abstract but explores the connection between globalization and capitalism’s contradictory logic.

The undialectical implications of the term “anti-globalization movement” have an ideological function which is adverse for the movement. Because of its lack of specificity, this term makes it possible to cast the movement that emerged in Chiapas and Seattle as utopian, parochial and incapable of recognizing present-day “realities.” When even radical sympathizers of the movement recognize the irreversibility of capitalism’s globalizing thrust, the self-definition of

²“Theses on Feuerbach,” *ibid.*, p. 145.

the movement in terms of its opposition to globalization in general allows its supporters to be dismissed as yearning for a past that is gone forever.³ In the words of a reliable apologist of global capital, Thomas Friedman, only “flat-earth advocates” would take it upon themselves to struggle against globalization.⁴

Friedman’s “critique” does not just stem from the impoverished interpretation of the developing anti-capitalist movement as a movement against globalization in the abstract. It also represents an impoverished, undialectical response to this interpretation. On the one hand, globalization must be recognized as immanent in the compulsively expansionist structural logic of capital. On the other hand, the recognition of this compulsive structural logic must not lead to the fetishization of social relations or the view that social relations are merely things. The false analogy, set up by Friedman’s reference to “flat-earth advocates,” between nature and social processes is a textbook example of fetishism. As always, the ideological function of such fetishism is to elevate capitalism and the devastation it inflicts on humanity and the planet into a natural and inevitable fact of life.

I pointed out above that the term “anti-globalization movement” does not do justice to the movement’s political practice. Not only have the protests against the institutional pillars of the global capitalist order taken place in a number of countries but in each of these protests a variety of countries were represented. This is a movement that from the outset not only transcends national boundaries but also cannot be conceived as the aggregation of separate national movements. The Greek representation in Genoa illustrates this point. Probably for the first time in Greek history, two to three thousand Greeks decided to go to a protest held in a foreign country. For many of them this was not even the first international protest experience; many had also traveled to Prague for the protests against the IMF in late September 2000. When we arrived in Italy, moreover, I found out, to my surprise, that the

³Antonio Negri has grounded his ambivalence for the movement in the idea that capitalist globalization is irreversible. (Interview July 22, 2001 in *Eleftherotypia*, one of the leading daily newspapers in Greece.) Interestingly, Negri seems to have overcome some of his ambivalence in the immediate aftermath of the Genoa protests. In “What the Protestors in Genoa Want,” an op-ed piece in the July 20, 2001, *New York Times*, Negri and Hardt do not distance themselves from the “anti-globalization” movement but reinterpret it as a movement seeking to democratize globalization.

⁴See Thomas Friedman’s “Senseless in Seattle,” in the December 1, 1999 *New York Times*.

group could chant not only in Greek but also in English, French, Italian and Spanish and even sing *Pandierra Rossa*, the legendary anthem of Italian communism. As for the slogans chanted, they explicitly thematized the connection of struggles around the world and the necessity for international solidarity. In short, the political practice of this movement is not characterized by a parochial opposition to globalization but by an incipient insight that capitalist globalization requires a corresponding globalization of emancipatory struggles.

Having noted the problematic ideological function of the term “anti-globalization movement,” we should also briefly discuss the equally problematic fact that the movement’s self-definition has not been adequately thematized but tends to be upstaged by issues of tactics, such as the debate between supporters of nonviolent protest and those advocating direct confrontation with the state’s repressive apparatus, in general, and the riot police, in particular. This issue was paramount among protesters in Genoa, especially after the murder of the Italian protestor by the police. The debate concerning tactics monopolized the discussions after the murder and brought to the fore bitter divisions and arguments within, for example, the Greek committee I went to Genoa with. The anarchists of the committee argued that direct confrontations with the police were an elementary form of self-defense against a state apparatus willing to resort to the most brutal forms of repression. For the anarchists the stance of the rest of the committee, composed of groups of the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary left, demonstrated a lack of radicalism. This latter argument was at times based on a conflation of goals and tactics, with one anarchist equating the question of confronting or not the police with that of revolution versus reform. As this example shows, the almost exclusive preoccupation with the question of violent tactics inevitably produces confusion in the movement. By conflating the goals of the movement with the tactical means to achieve these goals, this preoccupation did not only divert attention from the goals of the movement but also ended up fetishizing the means. Indeed, if tactical means derive their meaning from the contribution they make to the attainment of a movement’s goals, then it is clear that, in the absence of an explicit and adequately developed debate on the movement’s goals, the never-ending debates on tactics are nothing but an exercise in futility.

The movement’s disproportionate attention to issues of tactics is itself a symptom of its failure to achieve an autonomous self-understanding. Indeed, the assumption that the dilemma concerning violent tactics is the fundamental question confronting the movement

mirrors the way the mainstream media have (mis)represented the movement all along.

Newsweek's coverage of the Genoa protests is an interesting case in point.⁵ Its predictable conservative bias notwithstanding, *Newsweek's* article is interesting for the peculiar logic structuring its argument. While the article's main argument is that the anti-globalization movement is suffering from a division between hooligans and peaceful demonstrators, its assertion that "so-called anti-globalization protesters have descended on every major economic meeting since 1999" seems to imply that none of these protesters is really concerned about the ostensible issues of the demonstrations. In any case, *Newsweek's* contrast between the presumably apolitical hooligans and the more authentically political peaceful demonstrators is described in eminently political terms. Hooligans are described as "radical" while peaceful demonstrators are "moderate." The virulently ideological upshot of *Newsweek's* syllogism of non-sequiturs is the hardly original criminalization of radicalism.

It is hard not to notice here the perfect symmetry between the above-mentioned anarchist's reinterpretation of the reform-revolution debate in terms of the question of violent tactics and the interpretation of the events advanced by the mainstream media. The movement's still incomplete struggle to emancipate itself from the hegemony of capitalist ideology finds expression in the fact that what at first appears as a run-of-the-mill lapse in a comrade's line of reasoning is revealed, at closer examination, to coincide with the way the discussion of the movement is framed by the public relations agents of the status quo posing as journalists.

When the protesters in Genoa and the movement as a whole tried to go beyond a critique of globalization in the abstract and to specify the kind of globalization they were opposing, they usually employed the qualifier "neoliberal." Given the plural character of the movement, the condemnation of neoliberal, rather than capitalist, globalization presumably has the advantage of not alienating the less radical anti-capitalist sectors of the movement.

The choice of the term neoliberal has an even greater disadvantage, however. Although its intention is to emphasize the movement towards a more deregulated capitalist economy ever since the exhaustion, in the 1970s, of the post-war "Fordist" model of development, this term

⁵Christopher Dickey, Rod Nordland, Martha Brant and Barbie Nadeau "First Blood," *Newsweek*, July 30, 2001.

obscures the rising political repression that this liberalization of the economy presupposes. In other words, the term neoliberalism simplifies the contradictory process of capitalist globalization and does so in a way that unwittingly reinscribes the dominant ideology on which the further development of this process depends. This term conceals the fact that the current stage of capitalist globalization involves as much the weakening and blatant violation of the most basic liberal democratic rights and freedoms as it does the return to liberal economic principles. In this sense, the condemnation of “neoliberal globalization” rests on an economistic and ideological understanding of the present conjuncture that can only be avoided by the more dialectical understanding that only the analysis of *capitalist* globalization would make possible.

Since the rise of “neoliberalism” the dominant tendency within the Left has been to focus its attention on the question of economic deregulation. In so doing, the Left has in effect allowed the Right to frame the debate. If the Right-Left divide is ideologically constructed around the debate between free markets and economic regulation, the Right assumes the role of the defender of freedom while the Left feels compelled to argue that freedom doesn’t work! Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the Right was able to capture ideological hegemony.

The recognition that globalization is not so much neoliberal as it is capitalist opens the road to an immanent critique of the dominant right-wing ideology. On the one hand, the capitalist relations of production are incompatible with perfect competition between individuals in the market since they presuppose the monopolization of the means of production in the hands of a relatively small group of people. To the extent, moreover, that it has led in recent years to growing inequalities both internationally and within individual countries, capitalist globalization moves us away from rather than closer to a state of perfect competition between individuals.

On the other hand, the claim by “neoliberal” ideologues that they are the true defenders of freedom collapses once we examine the undemocratic and illiberal measures that the repressive state apparatuses routinely use whenever they are challenged by the globalization of anti-capitalist protest. In *Five Days that Shook the World*, Cockburn, St. Clair and Sekula have provided a chronicle of such abuses on the part of the authorities in the protests of Seattle.⁶ The murder of one protester

⁶Alexander Cockburn, Jeffrey St. Clair, and Allan Sekula, *Five Days that Shook the World: Seattle and Beyond* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

by the police and the brutal repression and abuse of many others in Genoa are in this sense not isolated incidents but represent a dramatic crystallization of an already existing trend.

The murder of one protester by the police and the brutal repression and abuse of many others in Genoa are in this sense not isolated incidents but a dramatic crystallization of an already existing trend. This trend may accelerate now that the September 11 attacks have provided the authorities with the excuse they needed to erode civil liberties, escalate repression and further the project of criminalizing dissent.

At this potentially fateful moment, when the unity of the movement appears to be under threat, the use of immanent critique to expose capitalist mystification becomes more crucial than ever. It is immanent critique that can turn right side up the reality that capitalist ideology turns upside down. The capitalist ideological hegemony implicit in the term “anti-globalization” movement gives rise to a false universalism, which is supposed to be embodied in the globalization of capital. This article’s application of immanent critique, on the other hand, has shown that in the same way that the actual political practice of the “anti-globalization” movement points beyond the movement’s narrow self-understanding to a more authentically universalistic vision, the repressive practices of the political caretakers of global capital make a mockery of capitalist ideology’s presentation of globalization as a glorious new era of freedom, democracy and human rights. The September 11 attacks and their aftermath remind us that global capitalism’s contradictions can at any moment explode into war and barbarism. By the same token, these events bear witness to the fact that banishing the specter of war, hate and terror from the face of the earth will remain impossible as long as the “anti-globalization” movement fails to fulfill its potential and transform itself into a conscious movement against global capital. The sooner the “anti-globalization” movement recognizes this symmetry and turns this recognition into the starting-point for a more adequate, autonomous self-understanding, the sooner it will become what it really is (or should be), namely a movement against global capitalism.