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## New Protest Formations and Radical Democracy

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Since the so-called "Battle of Seattle" of 1999, a new political actor has entered the scene of global politics. Alternately, this actor was called the "anti-globalization movement," "global protest movement," "global justice movement," or simply "movement of movements." If there is any place today where, on a large scale, an active articulation between youth movements and political protest has become visible publicly, it is within this anti-globalization movement. In some respects, the anti-globalization movement seems to have developed a global "subculture" of its own; or to be more precise, a *pastiche* of global subcultures sometimes united by a certain visual style, a symbolic "tribalism" with an aesthetic of its own, a music of its own, a certain hairstyle and dress code.

In the following, however, I will not be concerned so much with the protesters' style—which anyway is more divergent than it may seem at first sight (after all, the "anti-globalization movement" consists of many other groups too such as labor unions). Rather, I will try to shed some light on the political aspect of protest. While the cultural side of the identity of certain youth cultures and subcultures might be sustained by their styles and rituals, I claim that despite their colorful appearance the very essence, if there is an essence, of these subcultures is precisely not cultural but political—if only because they are part of a much larger coalition of movements. If we want to analyze these subcultures we will therefore have to take them seriously as political formations or, as I will propose to call them, "new protest formations." This entails locating them within the larger context within which these protest formations articulate themselves politically.

Such an approach, in turn, will force us to put on the agenda a renewed reflection on the political relevance of subcultural and youth-cultural movements—which for reasons of space I can undertake here in the most preliminary fashion only. So, if today subcultural groups and youth movements, where they actually turn political, in fact present themselves in the form of "new protest formations," then one question will have to be addressed: How are we to understand "protest"? The problem is that subcultural studies, especially in the classical version as developed by the early Birmingham school, does not provide us with the adequate tools for answering this question.

In what came to be called the "resistance through style" paradigm of early subcultural studies, subcultures were considered to be political *eo ipso*. From the point of view of these early theorists, subcultures were always already political, and what made them political was their style. Subcultures, according to this

classical approach, do not challenge hegemony directly and openly but rather obliquely, through style. Rather than resorting to direct action, they concentrate on a subversive form of "indirect" action. For Dick Hebdige, for instance, punk was the classical example of "resistance through style" rather than resistance through political action.

Such a form of articulation cannot reasonably be called political "protest." Hebdige in his early formulation had to rely on a hidden preference for subculture over counter-culture. Since the latter, for Hebdige, was not a working-class phenomenon, he explicitly decried political movements such as the Yippies as "middle-class." Political protest, however, cannot be reduced to a question of class position; in many cases it cuts across class lines. So what escaped traditional subcultural theorists because of these reductionist tendencies was precisely the question of the political, that is to say, the very logic by which forms of oblique resistance-through-style would turn into manifestly political forms of protest; or, to put it differently again, how merely subversive forms of subcultural activity would become part of oppositional action.

The blindness on the part of subcultural theorists regarding macro-politics was simply due to the fact that they were not interested in how the subcultural could be transformed into the counter-cultural. This is understandable to the extent that in these early days their aim was to direct our attention to and rehabilitate micro-political forms of resistance previously considered "apolitical, but what consequently escaped their attention was the way in which those micro-political forms of resistance would re-aggregate into macro-political formations. As we will see in a moment, in order to account for such political re-aggregation we need to employ a strong notion of *antagonism* entirely absent from the early subcultural studies paradigm.

As I said in the beginning, approaching the new protest formations with respect to their political potential requires taking into account the macro-political context in which they emerge. Two aspects are of capital importance if we want to understand the role and function of these new protest formations. The first aspect is what I describe as "antagonization" and to which I will return later; the second is the very political or hegemonic "horizon" in front of which political protest occurs and is formulated. Let us for a moment dwell on this second aspect because it will allow us to gain some insight into the emancipatory nature of these new protest formations in relation to more traditional movements on the left.

It has been observed by some political theorists, including Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, that "democracy" has assumed the status of a horizon of intelligibility for all forms of political articulation today. But what are we to understand by "horizon"? In Laclau's definition a horizon is something by which the limits and the terrain of constitution of any possible object is established. For instance, the category of reason functioned within the Enlightenment not as a particular object but as a name for the very horizon of enlightenment itself so that every object would have to be constituted on the background of the horizon of enlightened rationality.

To take a more openly political example: for Marxism, as Laclau reminds us, the eventual establishment of a “communist society” did not simply constitute one of many Marxist “policies;” rather, it was the very name for the horizon toward which all Marxist politics was directed. Obviously, this horizon has vanished. It has simply lost its intelligibility. We do not know what “communism,” or “revolution” for that matter, is supposed to mean, since it no longer constitutes a horizon in front of which practical emancipatory politics could position itself (apart from empty rhetorics). Even the meaning of “socialism” has become increasingly uncertain, particularly after the victory of Blairite neoliberal “third way” social democracy in Europe. In other words, the traditional horizon of large sectors of the left and of emancipatory struggle has experienced a deadly blow.

On the other hand, the disintegration of the traditional horizons of the left has led to ambiguous and contradictory results. A struggle occurred of highly diverse political forces to fill the vacuum that the bygone age of traditional emancipatory politics had left behind. On the national level, particularly in Europe, we witness today a series of racist and populist parties of the far right having assumed the monopoly for oppositional politics. They turned out to be successful to such an extent that in many European countries, starting with Austria in 2000, they eventually entered the government, in most cases in coalition with conservative parties. This did not happen out of nothing but was the result of a long process of erosion of previous social-democratic hegemony—a consequence of a social-democratic politics of *self-defeat*. While there were certainly no communist or socialist societies in Western Europe during the second half of the twentieth century, there was something like an “overlapping” consensus centered around the idea of the welfare state.

While this consensus was hegemonic primarily by involving conservatives, it was also the result of social struggles, union struggles, and social-democratic reforms in all areas of society. (The historical foundation of that consensus reached back to the immediate post-war years and peaked in the 1970s.) When after the “red seventies” and the conservative interlude of the 1980s, social-democrats assumed power again in most countries of the European Union in the 1990s, they had already lost their hegemony. In other words, when they appeared at the peak of their power, they had in fact already lost it by giving in to neoliberal ideas of the right, undermining their own stance. Hence, to a large degree the destruction of the European welfare state was carried out by social-democrats and is still carried out, for instance, by the Schröder government in Germany with its so-called “reforms.” And where the United States is concerned, the middle-of-the-road strategy of the Clinton years prepared the terrain for the subsequent extremism of the Bush administration.

Of course, the destruction of the welfare state has disturbing effects for the life of most people, but at the very moment in which their discontent needs to be articulated they are confronted with a vacuum on the left. The only choice

they have is between social-democratic neoliberals and conservative neoliberals marching in line with right-wing populists. In this desperate situation emancipatory politics is profoundly reformulated outside the realm of traditional party politics. What we are witnessing today is the articulation—the linking up—of many diverse social actors and the emergence of a new institutional form of deliberation among them: social fora. Many of the “new protest formations” take part in these emerging institutions—joining with less subculturally inclined actors such as ATTAC (activist promoters of the Tobin tax) or labor unions. By way of this articulation a public space for debate opens, and political action is no longer confined to fanciful (or sometimes violent) street demonstrations only.

I do not intend, however, to downplay the importance of the latter, producing as it does what might be called “chains of equivalence” between different movements. Instead, I would like to direct attention to the double-faced nature of this movement: On the one hand, an agonal space of deliberation is erected among the different formations of the movement. This we might call the internal public sphere of these movements—the “social forum.” On the other hand, and to the extent that there is such a thing as a “movement of movements,” some sort of equivalence between these movements has to be established. While in the case of the social forum what counts is the difference between the movements, in the case of what one may call the external public sphere it is their equivalence or unity. Such unity can be established only if an antagonism is erected vis-à-vis an external enemy. Both aspects, the “Arendtian” aspect of an agonal public sphere (internal) and the “Schmittian” aspect of an antagonistic public sphere (external), are indispensable if the movement is expected to be both emancipatory in a pluralistic way and politically effective.

The antagonistic nature of the movement of movements can be observed most clearly on the global level. The traditional horizons of emancipation have crumbled: socialist or communist internationalism is hardly an option today, and the non-aligned movement (the original “third way” before it was coopted by Blairism) belongs to a glorious past. Yet what emerged within the fissures of the old horizon of “international solidarity” is the anti-globalization movement as the first international movement that consists not of parties or nation states but of “protest formations” acting from within an international public sphere. This public sphere is constructed not only by way of the new electronic means of communication used by these forces but first and foremost by the display of dissent and the erection of an antagonism.

Neoliberal hegemony was visibly challenged on a global scale when the movement, particularly in its formative phase, engaged an “enemy,” which at that time was, and to some extent still is, incarnated as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Similarly, the international peace movement of February 2003 against the impending U.S.-led war in Iraq managed to stage the largest global demonstrations in history. To deplore this sort of confrontation, most often enacted on the streets, as not particularly sophisticated is to entirely misunderstand the nature of political struggle. The charge risks mixing up the function of an agonistic (internal) public sphere of deliberation with an antagonistic (external) public sphere of dissent. Everybody who has ever taken part in both a social forum and a street demonstration knows the difference. In the latter case, antagonism is staged between two fronts, thus excluding any sophisticated

discussion about matters of “content,” while in the former case a space is formed where a plurality of positions can engage in a meaningful debate. Both aspects, as I said, are vital if the movement is to evolve in a both political and emancipatory direction.

Let us finally have a somewhat closer look at the emancipatory aspect of the new protest formations. The context in which they emerged confronts us with a contradictory situation. On the one hand, the old emancipatory horizons have disintegrated. On the other hand, it has been said, “democracy” has assumed the status of the undisputed hegemonic horizon. Wherever we turn, to put it bluntly, “democracy” is the only game on the globe. But what is understood by “democracy” is not necessarily something emancipatory. In most cases it is the (neo)liberal Western version of “democracy U.S.-style”—consisting of a minimal institutional framework and a free market economy. How do the new protest formations of the anti-globalization movement confront this dilemma: disappearance of the old emancipatory narratives on the one hand and undisputed victory of “democracy” as a Western instrument for global domination on the other?

Although I do not have the space to fully develop the argument, I would like to submit the hypothesis that the new movement acts entirely from within the democratic horizon yet seeks to expand the latter into more radical directions. We have to come to an understanding of the anti-globalization movement as democratization movement. By remaining within the democratic horizon, the movement abandons the old and defunct narratives of “revolution,” thereby not aiming any longer at overthrowing the system (or opposing all forms of “globalization”). Instead, the main goal becomes the democratization of the institutions of international economic (de)regulation and, in extenso, the democratization of “democracy.”

In this respect it is highly relevant that it was the Zapatista uprising in the Chiapas province in 1994 which in a sense inaugurated the worldwide “movement of movements”—and still serves today as a role model for many anti-globalization protesters. What is relevant for our discussion is that the Zapatista movement was in fact a democratization movement. It did not resort to the recipes of earlier “Third World” liberation struggles of the Maoist kind, for instance. The aim of the Zapatistas was not to overthrow the Mexican government and to establish a People’s Republic; it was to democratize the existing Mexican republic. Similarly, the aim of the anti-globalization movements, at least of the significant parts of it, does not consist of dismantling the dominant democratic horizon but of redefining democracy and thus, while acting within the democratic horizon, radicalizing the scope and depth of “democracy.” There is a striking resemblance here between the ideology of the new protest formations and the project of a “radical democracy,” as it has been envisaged by political theory.

It should be clear by now how the traditional approach of subcultural studies will not get us very far in describing the counter-cultural function of radical-democratic protest formations. First, it does not provide us with the appropriate

categories that would allow us to differentiate between emancipatory or democratic and regressive, undemocratic, or even neofascist forms of “resistance.” And second, on a more fundamental level, it lacks a coherent theory of macro-politics and antagonism. For this reason it cannot really account for the very phenomenon of politicization. Hence, to restrict the analysis to matters of “style” rather than political mobilization will necessarily lead to a depoliticized account of subcultures—even as those theorists started with the opposite intention of politicizing cultural theory. Yet not all roads lead to Rome, and not all paths lead to politics.

A notion of antagonism is indispensable if we wish to account for processes of politicization through which subcultures turn into counter-cultures and protest formations. The moment in which your identity becomes politicized is the moment in which you run up against something of the order of an antagonism. This moment has been framed most succinctly by Jerry Rubin’s famous definition of the Yippie: a Yippie was a Hippie, Rubin said, who had been hit on the head by a policeman. I’m tempted to think that this moment is precisely the moment of a political epiphany where the subject of culture converts to politics. Perhaps truly political demonstrations do not take place on the roads to Rome but on the road to Damascus.

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