

Holding a Looking-Glass to the ‘Movement’: A Response to Worth and Abbott

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Owen Worth and Jason Abbott raise a number of useful points about the lack of clarity and direction of the anti-globalization movement and also highlight what they see as the danger of a progressive left-wing anti-capitalist agenda being hijacked by the radical right. The problem with the article is that in many respects the opposite has occurred, the political collapse of the left has meant that those searching for a radical critical framework today have plundered the politics of romantic reaction with its attention to difference, cultural diversity, natural limits, ecology and sustainability and its hostility to commodification and mass consumerism.

I do not want to sound like an old Marxist, but why, today, even start from the assumption that being ‘anti-capitalism’ or opposed to ‘neoliberalism’ is necessarily indicative of a forward-looking agenda? Even more obviously, why should there be any assumed connection between being ‘anti-globalization’ (whatever that means) and having progressive rather than reactionary aspirations? The Communist Manifesto from 1848 provides more than adequate warnings against popular anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements which were ‘both reactionary and Utopian’ (Marx and Engels, 1848).

The irony of radical critics’ fixation with ‘globalization’ today is that it is not, in fact, a response to, or a reflection of, any dynamic transformation of economic and social relations. The campaign against ‘globalization’ would seem to reflect more the collapse of the left, with the end of the Cold War, than any development of new technologies with the effect of transforming relations of production and freeing people from ideological and social constraints. It has been the implosion or attenuation of social ties, rather than their extension, which has created a sense of ‘everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ as the collapse of traditional mechanisms of social and political engagement has left individuals atomized and with a much weakened conception of the potential of social agency.

The politics of the ‘anti-globalization’ movement reflects this social atomization and, in this context, it is not surprising that it expresses an inchoate, highly individualized, and inevitably

backward-looking critique of the present. Today, to talk about the politics of left and right, as Worth and Abbott do, makes little sense. In their article they critique current neo-Gramscian extensions of Cox's work, for their romanticization of the 'anti-globalization' protests, but they tend to fall into exactly the same trap: reproducing 'critical' analysis as a hollow framework without analytical content. It is this uncritical application of 'critical theory' which facilitates their conflation of empirical analysis with the normative assertion that a progressive left can be salvaged from the 'counter-hegemonic internationalist' and 'situationist-localist' strands of the anti-globalization movement.

Rather than recognize the collapse of the left as the precondition for the politics of 'anti-globalization', Worth and Abbott, seek to preserve an 'anti-globalization' left from the dangers of political alliances and compromise with the radical right. In order to do this, 'the left' is in effect reinvented as the world of international NGOs:

if the traditional left wish to maintain a serious counter-hegemonic project it would require a substantial alliance that would converge alternative policy and ideology and attempt to force coalitions with international NGOs . . . These 'progressive' NGOs, International Union groups, ecological groups and human and civil rights organizations have often become seen as the sophisticated 'internationalist' critique of globalization and have been quick to distance themselves from Trotskyist radicalism.

They do not tell us what is so 'sophisticated', let alone what is 'progressive' about these NGO advocacy groups. Let us ignore (through lack of space) the elitist nature of NGO campaigning and the disempowering effects of advocacy. It nevertheless seems ironic to be reading their piece at a time when, in the wake of the Gleneagles summit—where the G8, and the UK government in particular, made much of their attempts to 'converge alternative policy and ideology' with international NGO campaigners for ecology, international 'justice' and the 'Third World First'—even the staunchest advocates of the 'anti-globalization' movement are expressing second thoughts as to its potential (Kingsnorth, 2005).

Rather than 'left' ideas being hijacked by the very international institutions that many radical campaigners believe to be part of the problem, it might be worth considering whether the advocacy politics of NGO campaigners could ever constitute the basis for the revival of progressive politics. The fundamental flaw of Worth and Abbott's article is that in their concern about the 'appropriation of leftist discourses by the "new" right' they unwittingly invert the political relationships at play. This inversion runs through the piece and gives an Alice in Wonderland 'looking-glass' feel to the article. For the authors, 'anti-globalization' is progressive and the problem is that a lot of the demands appeal to those on the right. Paying more attention to the 'critical' analytical framework they assert that they seek to develop, would reveal that these conservative demands appear radical today only in the absence of any progressive alternatives. For example, the authors, in particular, highlight ecology and environmentalism as an issue area where they are concerned about the dangers of giving succour to the right. For my money, there are just too many unexamined assumptions here. The politics of ecology and environmentalism have traditionally been the preserve of conservative and anti-progressive political currents. It is only recently that ideas of restricting modernization, development and consumption have acquired a radical gloss. If anything, it is the left which has become parasitical on the backward romanticism of the right: 'anti-globalization' has given the radical 'left' gloss of 'anti-capitalism' to calls for authoritarian regulation and constraint.

References

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Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1848) *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, available at <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/classics/manifesto.html>.

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