

## **Les implications stratégiques de l'antiétatisme au sein du mouvement international de justice**

Stephanie Ross

### *Résumé*

*Malgré le caractère diffus et varié du mouvement international de justice, les essais de formes démocratiques « nouvelles » ou récupérées en sont un élément commun important. Puisque les états néolibéraux, limités par les prérogatives du capital mondial, n'offrent qu'une version atrophiée de la démocratie, les tentatives de réinventer des pratiques démocratiques radicalement égalitaires, décentralisées et participatives ne peuvent surprendre. Toutefois, des hypothèses anarchistes et post-modernes omniprésentes ont également donné naissance à un « antiétatisme », c.-à-d. au rejet de la possibilité que le pouvoir de l'État puisse servir aux forces progressives pour créer d'autres options que le capitalisme. Dans cet article, j'explore les racines théoriques de l'antiétatisme, et j'identifie ce mouvement à une compréhension appauvrie et monolithique de l'État, doublée d'une vision romantique de la société civile en tant que zone de liberté et d'autonomie, et menant à l'adoption de formes de résistance facilement marginalisées. Pour le démontrer j'examine quelques-unes des sources contemporaines les plus influentes de cette tendance : le mouvement du Forum social et les mouvements autonomistes post-2001 en Argentine. Pour conclure, à l'aide d'indications tirées des théories gramscienne et néo-marxiste, je soutiens qu'abandonner l'État comme terrain de lutte permet au capital de continuer à exploiter celui-ci sans entraves, renforce le mantra néolibéral que l'État ne devrait pas servir à assujettir le marché à des valeurs sociales, et élimine la possibilité de créer un projet politique anti-hégémonique unifié, soutenu et efficace.*

## The Strategic Implications of Anti-Statism in the Global Justice Movement

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### *Abstract*

*Despite the global justice movement's diffuse and multifarious character, experimentation with 'new' and recovered democratic forms is an important common feature. Given the atrophied version of democracy offered by neoliberal states hemmed in by the prerogatives of global capital, attempts to reinvent radically egalitarian, decentralized and participatory democratic practices are unsurprising. However, pervasive anarchist and post-modern assumptions have led to an 'anti-statism': a rejection of the possibility that state power can be used by progressive forces to create alternatives to capitalism. In this paper I engage with the theoretical roots of anti-statism and argue it is rooted in an impoverished and monolithic understanding of the state, is accompanied by a romanticized view of civil society as a realm of freedom and autonomy, and results in the adoption of easily marginalized forms of resistance. To illustrate, I examine some of the most influential contemporary sources of such ideas, namely the Social Forum movement and the post-2001 autonomist movements of Argentina. Finally, using insights from Gramscian and neo-Marxist theory, I argue that an abandonment of the state as a terrain of struggle permits its continued and unhindered use by capital, reinforces the neoliberal mantra that the state should not be used to subject the market to social values, and abandons the possibility of creating a unified, sustained and effective counter-hegemonic political project.*

### **Introduction**

A key feature of influential sections of the global justice movement continues to be experimentation with 'new' and recovered democratic forms. In the diffuse and multifarious 'movement of movements', some argue that a common approach to democratic organization forms the main basis of unity. According to anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, "[t]his is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It

is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. These new forms of organization are its ideology” (Graeber, 2002: 70). Given the dramatically reduced scope for meaningful democratic deliberation in state legislatures claiming to be hemmed in by the prerogatives of global capital, it is no wonder that the democratic imaginary is a key motivation for many of today’s activists.

Given democracy’s long historical entanglement with the state, attempts to rethink democratic practice are always, if only implicitly, based on a theory of both the state and its power. When the state is deemed an inappropriate space for deliberating over, deciding upon and implementing the democratic will of the community, a particular understanding of its nature, capacities and limits is invoked. The anti-hierarchical organizational commitments of a substantial segment of the global justice movement guide not only their internal practices but also their philosophical and strategic attitude towards the state.

It is right to reject the atrophied version of democracy offered up by the contemporary neoliberal state and to insist upon a deeper and more thorough democratization of both institutions and social relations. However, does the global justice movement provide the intellectual, political and strategic resources to counter power in its neoliberal, capitalist or imperialist guises? In this paper I will argue that pervasive anarchist and post-modern assumptions have led not only to a critique of the contemporary state, but also to a more general “anti-statism”: a rejection of the possibility that state power can be used by progressive forces to create alternatives to capitalism. Using insights from Gramscian and neo-Marxist theory, I argue that such anti-statism is rooted in an impoverished and monolithic understanding of the state, is accompanied by a romanticized view of civil society as a realm of freedom and autonomy, and results in the adoption of easily marginalized forms of resistance. To illustrate, I will examine two of the most influential contemporary sources of such ideas: the Social Forum Movement and the autonomist movements of Argentina. Finally, I will argue that an abandonment of the state as a terrain of struggle permits its continued and unhindered use by capital, reinforces the neoliberal mantra that the state should not be used to subject the market to social values, and abandons the possibility of creating a unified, sustained and effective counter-hegemonic political project.

## **Theories of the State, Power and Democracy in the Global Justice Movement**

As Graeber notes, there is a pole of unity in the global justice movement around organizational questions (2002: 70-72). Although by no means universal, major sections of the global justice movement are committed to the following political and organizational practices: decentralized decision-making structures in which small groups are autonomous from the decisions of superordinate bodies; participatory (rather than representative) forms of democratic deliberation, in which consensus rather than majority rule is preferred; rejection of internal hierarchies and, in particular, of leaders; and commitment to a diversity of tactics rather than a single, common strategy (Ross, 2003: 283-89). While most visible in the dynamics of protest since the late 1990s, these commitments also guide the less dramatic activities of many groups, such as day-to-day decision-making and strategic analysis.

Each of these principles is grounded in a suspicion, if not a complete rejection, of centralized forms of power in general and of the state as a particular type of centralized institution. Three major reasons are generally forwarded to reject the state as a terrain of struggle. First, the state is inherently a concentration of coercive 'power-over',<sup>2</sup> used to dominate others, and power itself is a corrupting force which inevitably produces hierarchy. To use the state as an instrument is to become infected with the very thing that should be resisted, namely power relations themselves. Second, as an institution, the state is inherently capitalist, thoroughly penetrated by and biased towards the capitalist class, and therefore cannot be turned towards non- or anti-capitalist ends. Third, even if it has fostered greater equality and democracy in the past, the state is now strategically impotent in the face of contemporary global capitalism and the hegemony of neoliberal practices and ideas. Anyone attempting to use the state today gets entangled in the reproduction of global capitalist dynamics, at best mitigating their negative effects but never mounting a radical challenge to its power. All these variants lead to the same conclusion: the state is useless in the struggle for progressive social change. This anti-statist orientation can be traced to at least one of three political-ideological roots: historical and contemporary forms of anarchism, the New Left social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and post-modern/post-Marxist theorizing of the 1980s and 1990s.

### *Anarchism*

In the anarchist tradition, authority outside of the individual is rejected as an unacceptable limit on individual freedom and creativity. As a major source of such external control, the state is deemed illegitimate in both form and content. Major historical proponents of this view include Pierre Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Emma Goldman. Bakunin is the most useful here: in a vigorous debate with Karl Marx within the First International, he expressed most clearly the classical anarchist position on the political action of the working class and its relationship to the question of state power.

Both Bakunin and Marx shared an understanding of the state as capitalist and as implicated in the reproduction of inequality, and therefore believed it must ultimately be overthrown. However, where Marx held that the proletariat would need to use the state to dismantle capitalist social and economic conditions and create socialist ones, Bakunin insisted that, “while it must overthrow the existing state apparatus in order to liberate itself, [the proletariat] must not set up in its place its own political power, as by doing so it necessarily substitutes a new authoritarian apparatus which will perpetuate its oppression” (Fernbach, 1975: 45). For Bakunin, “[e]very state power, every government, by its very nature places itself outside and over the people and inevitably subordinates them to an organization and to aims which are foreign to and opposed to the real needs and aspirations of the people” (Bakunin, 1873). The state’s “nature” is more than its relation to economic domination; it is a specific institution which “enshrine[s] a hierarchical mode of organization, ... use[s] repressive measures to control [its] subjects, and ... engage [s] in aggressive acts against other states” (Miller, 1984: 82). As such, governmental power would “deprave ... those who wear its mantle” and transform the class position of its holders: “workers ... as soon as they become the rulers of the representatives of the people, will cease to be workers and will look down at the plain working masses from the governing heights of the State; they will no longer represent the people, but only themselves and their claims to rulership over the people” (Bakunin, 1873).

In concrete strategic terms, rather than organizing a working class political party in order to win state power (political revolution, whether through electoral or insurrectionary means),

Bakunin advocated the “build[ing] of the new society within the old”, namely through self-organization “from the bottom up, created by the people themselves, without governments and parliaments. This would be achieved by the free participation of associations, of the agricultural and industrial workers, of the communes and the provinces”, which themselves would form the basis of post-revolutionary societies (Bakunin, 1873). As Richard Day points out, Bakunin distinguished this as *social* revolution, whose aim is “*breaking* rather than *taking* state power” (Day, 2005: 113, emphasis in original).

A contemporary version of anarchist-inspired anti-statism is found in the work of John Holloway, whose work *Change the World Without Taking Power* (2005) generated a political-strategic debate on the left which mirrored that between Marx and Bakunin. Holloway self-categorizes as an “open” Marxist, but embraces the central anarchist theme of rejecting the state as an emancipatory tool. Holloway’s thinking is inspired by the Zapatistas’ dramatic rejection of the state, in both its neoliberal guise and as a potential source of liberation. Holloway argues that the Zapatistas’ revolutionary contribution is precisely in their insistence on “changing the world without taking power” and detaching the revolutionary process from the project of seeking to control the state (Holloway, 2005: 20-1). For him, the “state paradigm” of social transformation is the “assassin” of hope: given the close association of revolution and the state, the failures of both social democracy and communism have reinforced a general disillusionment and pessimism about the possibility of revolution itself (Holloway, 2005: 12, 19). However, this effect was inevitable, given the left’s “misunderstand[ing of] the degree of integration of the state into the network of capitalist social relations” (Holloway, 2005: 14). Struggles premised on winning state power involve a false sense of what it can accomplish as a tool in the ‘right’ hands, and pervert progressive movements themselves. Like Bakunin, Holloway asserts that once the state becomes central to social change,

[t]he struggle is lost from the beginning, long before the victorious party or army conquers state power and ‘betrays’ its promises. It is lost once power itself seeps into the struggle, once the logic of power itself becomes the logic of the revolutionary process, once

the negative of refusal is converted into the positive of power-building ... You cannot build a society of non-power relations by conquering power. Once the logic of power is adopted, the struggle against power is already lost (Holloway, 2005: 17).

For Holloway, then, statism is the left's "original sin" (Bensaïd, 2005: 172), and human emancipation requires the emancipation of revolutionary theory from the mirage of state power.

*New Left Social Movements of the 1960s and 1970s*

New Left social movements, and in particular the feminist, student, environmental and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s, also took up anti-authoritarian themes and practices which continue to inform the anti-statism of contemporary activism. As Hilary Wainwright argues, "wherever [rebellions] emerged they were a challenge to arbitrary and unaccountable forms of authority" (Wainwright, 1994: 68). These movements' orientation against centralized institutions is often discussed in terms of their revival of anarchist- and libertarian-inspired internal organizational practices, such as: the valuation of tacit and experiential (rather than expert) knowledge; an emphasis on the prefigurative over instrumental aspects of activism (or at least an insistence that means and ends are organically connected); and the use of consensus-based, dialogical, direct and participatory decision-making processes, rotation of leadership, and horizontal networks of autonomous groups (Polletta, 2002; Wainwright, 1994: 76-84; Buechler, 2000: 48; Offe, 1987: 63-5; Berger, 1979: 37). However, equally important were the strategic conclusions many of these so-called "new" social movements came to about how and whether to engage with the state.

A common explanation for New Left anti-institutional politics is rooted in Jurgen Habermas' observation that "large, anonymous social institutions have become especially intrusive and invasive in the late twentieth century" (Buechler, 2000:46), penetrating the "lifeworld" with the values of instrumental rationality. Fordist regulation of capital accumulation and class conflict via bureaucratic collective bargaining both deepened Taylorist production methods with ongoing centralization, rationalization and reorganization of the production process and encouraged workers to trade quality of work life for expanded consumption.

Young workers and activists chafed against the constraints of centralized unions and social democratic parties, which in many places used corporatist institutions to regulate national industrial sectors via the restraint of wage militancy, with corrosive effects on left political institutions and legitimacy (Panitch, 1986).

While capital and the trade unions drew much fire in this period, so too did the increasingly centralized and interventionist state. The post-war state's expansion into more areas of economic and social life, whether to "smooth out the accumulation process and contain the system's disruptive tendencies" (Boggs, 1986: 24), to redistribute wealth and opportunity and to regulate the more negative effects of capitalism via the welfare state (Berger, 1979: 29), or to engage in corporatist industrial and economic planning, also meant bureaucratization, rationalization, greater social and ideological control and the dominance of technocrats and instrumental reason (Wainwright, 1994: 68-69). All this made for a world "claustrophobically coded, administered, shot through with signs and conventions from end to end", generating dissatisfaction and "anxieties about packaged learning, advertising and the despotic power of the commodity" (Eagleton, 2003: 38). Whether entirely responsible for these processes or not, the greater visibility and "transparency of the state's impact on daily life", which politicized "matters that previously were perceived as outside the reach of political solutions", combined with the contradictory results of those interventions to foster "antiparty and anti-state values ... [in] virtually all new political movements of both the Right and the Left in Europe" in the 1970s (Berger, 1979: 30-31). As it became clear that the state was no panacea for the problems of social inequality, and that both social democratic and Leninist party organizations continued to be attached to this notion, many – if not all – New Left movements turned to other strategic terrains.

Reviving Bakunin's notion of social revolution, many new left movements focussed on strategies of personal or cultural transformation in the realm of civil society and outside established political institutions. While not always eschewing power as such, these movements engaged in struggles that were more local, challenged the habits and meanings of everyday life, built new institutions and ways of living, and destabilized and subverted accepted meanings and norms (Buechler, 2000: 47; Boggs, 1986: 47-52). These practices were subsequently theorized and valor-



ized by the post-Marxists and postmodernists of the 1980s and 1990s.

*The Influence of Post-Marxism and Postmodernism*

More recently, post-Marxism and postmodernism have reiterated and extended the rejection of the state as a potentially democratic and progressive space. In attempts to explain the significance of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, many post-Marxists argued that radical transformations in the structure of advanced capitalism (discussed above) had destabilized old class-based political identities, brought forth new ones based on diversified, complex and contradictory experiences, and made necessary multiple forms of resistance and emancipatory strategy (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 81-5). Others emphasized the way in which power, rather than concentrated in the hands of the state or capital, was diffuse and present in social relations of all types (Foucault, 1980). Given the diffuse nature of power, a focus on the state as the vehicle of emancipation was both incorrect and futile (Magnussen and Walker, 1988).

These perspectives tended to produce either a dilution of the Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony – the strategy by which the working class exercises moral and intellectual leadership to construct a progressive alternative via alliances with other social groups – or its rejection in favour of anti-hegemony. For some, counter-hegemony remains a goal, but is primarily a discursive rather than organizational accomplishment in which various democratic – and not necessarily class-based – struggles are brought together through a “chain of equivalence” linking their (contingent and indeterminate) meanings (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 113, 153). However, postmodernists tend to reject counter-hegemonic projects altogether. For them, attempts to construct unity and generalize progressive alternatives are forms of power-over, reproducing a “totalizing logic” that destroys diversity and autonomy (Carroll and Ratner, 1994:13). Counter-hegemony thus reflects “the assumption that effective social change can only be achieved simultaneously and en masse, across an entire national or supranational space” and hence remains within the logic of neoliberalism (Day, 2005: 8). Postmodernists thus tend to advocate anti-hegemonic oppositional practices which are at most micro-disruptions of dominant discourses, challenging normativity and disorganizing consent.

### *Contemporary Anti-Statism and the Neoliberal Conjuncture*

Contemporary anti-statism is informed by both the political and theoretical commitments of these movement traditions, and by the specific conjunctural effects of neoliberal globalization on the role of the state and its relationship to citizens. As Alfredo Saad Filho has argued, “[t]he most basic feature of neoliberalism is the systematic use of state power to protect capital and disarticulate the working class through the imposition of financial market imperatives and under the ideological veil of non-intervention” (Saad Filho, 2006: 1). The nation-state’s growing lack of autonomy from the imperatives of capital or international financial institutions has meant a “hollowing out” of even the most limited forms of representative democracy (Saad Filho, 2006: 2). In that context, as the state’s relationship with global and local capital has deepened and become more evident, growing numbers of leftists have abandoned it as a tool of social transformation.

The anti-statist response to neoliberalism is prominent in the Social Forum movement, having been written into several foundational documents and celebrated by some as one of its most innovative aspects. The World Social Forum’s Charter of Principles explicitly places itself on the terrain outside of states, a “non-governmental and non-party context” bringing together “only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries in the world”. The World Social Forum does not permit official representation by states or political parties and allows participation from government officials only “in a personal capacity” (World Social Forum Organizing Committee, 2001).

These criteria reflect the desire of many for Social Fora to be something other than representative or decision-making bodies. These roles are explicitly rejected in the WSF Charter of Principles: no binding decisions are to be made, no meetings are to be treated as a “locus of power to be disputed by the participants”, and “[n]o-one ... will be authorized, on behalf of any of the editions of the Forum, to express positions claiming to be those of all its participants” (World Social Forum Organizing Committee, 2001).

Instead, many commentators emphasize the social forum’s status as a *space* of encounter and learning “outside the immediate spheres of capital and state”, not an *agent* or *movement* as such (Becker, 2007; Waterman, 2003: 2; Sen, 2006: 7).

Its non-deliberative character is central to building a new, open and heterogenous political culture on the left which emphasizes “open debate” and “horizontal social relations and politics” rather than a “single, deliberative and, by definition, unitary political process”, and prefigures future relations (Sen 2003: 5; Conway, 2005: 427). The open-endedness of the Social Forum process is also “alchemical” and creative, producing outcomes that cannot – and could not – be planned, pre-determined or assessed in the short-term (Sherman, 2007).

For some, these characteristics constitute the Social Fora’s radical departure from state-oriented forms of political organization and must be defended as debates emerge over its future. The major tensions emerging over the question of “Forum-as-space” versus “Forum-as-movement” (Whitaker, 2004: 111) have led proponents like Waterman to highlight the “danger that the Forum will be overwhelmed by the past of social movements and internationalism ... [in which] movements were dominated by the institutions they spawned, by political parties that instrumentalized them, ... [and] were state-oriented and/or state-identified (Waterman, 2003: 7). Calls for the Social Fora to engage in movement-building processes are characterized as typical of the “old”, “traditional”, “conventional,” and “vertical” politics of the left, in which “some lead and others follow” (Sen, 2006: 7). The desire for strategies or unifying projects is symptomatic of the “old kind of power politics ... that seeks to control, that distrusts plurality, and that effectively shuts down space for diversity and for debate” (Whitaker, in Conway, 2005: 425; also Sen, 2006: 9). Those who insist that the state power is an important tool in fighting capital or making progressive social change are “haunted by the political imaginary of an old left, in which all social struggles can be understood in terms of a unified and linear counter-narrative to the development of capitalism, in which ‘basic social transformation’ is implicitly or explicitly understood as a once-and-for-all revolutionary transformation of ‘the system’, in which the state and the national scale remains at the centre of political vision and strategy” (Conway, 2005: 426).

Anti-statist politics are also visible in anti-neoliberal movements at the national level. Like the Zapatistas in 1994, Argentina’s most recent round of social mobilization emerged in response to the contradictions of the neoliberal economic model. The pressures of “el modelo” introduced by Carlos Menem had

long been felt in various social sectors, and multiple forms of resistance had been building through the 1990s. As these policies predictably resulted in higher rates of unemployment (due to a contraction of the public sector and the closure of many domestic small- and medium-sized enterprises unable to compete with transnational corporations), workers, their families and communities initially sought relief from the state within the boundaries and conventions of the formal democratic process. However, unemployed workers soon turned to more radical forms of extra-parliamentary action, such as occupations of government offices, mass pickets and, most notably, blockades of strategic roadways, as their petitions and peaceful protests were ignored (Petras, 2002). The *piqueteros*' evolution from engagement with the state to direct action against it was mirrored by other movements, whose claims were also repeatedly ignored. By late 2001, an explosion of protest emerged in the wake of a political crisis within the governing coalition led by Fernando de la Rúa, elected in 1999 on an anti-neoliberal platform but who continued Menem's policies (Dinerstein, 2002: 19).

The slogan under which this broad social mobilization took place – “¡Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo!”<sup>3</sup> – contains within it multiple meanings. For some, as James Petras contends, this rejection was conjunctural, an indictment of the entrenched political class whose clientelist, paternalistic and corrupt practices required a thorough housecleaning (Petras, 2003). For others, however, the saying indicated a more profound disenchantment with politicians, political parties, and electoral representative processes as such, and a deep scepticism about the state as a tool for progressive social transformation. Monica Acosta, president of the Renacer washing machine factory cooperative in Ushuaia, expresses this blanket cynicism about the political class: “We know that no politician in this oligarchic and imperialist state is going to permit workers to own the means of production” (Trigona, 2006). For Ana Dinerstein, “Que se vayan todos” represents a “reinvention of politics as negative politics,” even a “collective action against power” in which the form, substance and representativeness of democratic institutions, the law and their relationship to capital are questioned and even rejected (Dinerstein, 2002: 8, 23, 25-6). In the place of the traditional left of trade unions and political parties, organized hierarchically and with a statist (and, in this case, collaborationist) orientation, there

has been a flowering of “non-identity, horizontal, democratic and anti-institution politics,” focussed on local and direct forms of democracy and self-determination (Dinerstein, 2002: 25-6). For instance, the weekly meetings of the *asambleas barriales*, which emerged as a means to discuss the political-economic crisis and organize mutual aid at the neighbourhood level, discuss the question of the state and power, but in a way that “question[s] the whole *system* of political representation” and aims “not to contest constituted power but rather to constitute power against it” (Dinerstein, 2003: 196-7). Their choice to address each other as *vecino* – neighbour – rather than citizen is interpreted as a discursive means of establishing direct, solidaristic relations between people without the mediation of the state (Dinerstein, 2003: 196). The anti-institutional politics of a new generation of Argentinian social movement activists is vividly depicted in Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein’s film, *The Take* (2004), which chronicles the progress of the recovered factories movement and its relationship to other “anti-political” movements in the country. Matty, an activist with the unemployed workers’ movement and worker at the Zanon Ceramics Factory, explains why she will not vote in the 2003 presidential election, even though the architect of neoliberalism, Carlos Menem, was in the running, and abstention from voting is illegal: “This graffiti says ‘Our dreams don’t fit on your ballots’. That’s how I feel. What I want, what I need, I’m not going to get by voting”. For her, the “election circus” is a distraction from “the real work of building an alternative economy”, a perspective prevalent amongst her generation of activists, who have only seen government as “a force that tears things down and sells them off” (Lewis, 2004).

In sum, anti-statist themes in the contemporary global justice movement are in part a product of several important strands of twentieth century political thought and practice. Underlying these positions is a deep suspicion of power as such, given its equation with power-over. Institutions which centralize power, like the state, are seen as antithetical to liberatory projects. Anti-statist groups often seek to create a society in which power relations are no longer present; the state is not to be used towards this end, but rather sidelined and perhaps destroyed. Instead of reengineering society from the top down, these groups emphasize prefigurative struggle, or what Gramsci called the “war of position”: struggles which create new ways of living, thinking, feeling

and relating that challenge the 'common sense' of the age (Sassoon, 1987: 193-204). Though alternatives to dominant social arrangements are sought, these projects tend to be local, autonomous, and anti-hegemonic, in that there is a reluctance to create generalized strategies which unite particular struggles. At best, horizontal networked relationships of mutual support are to be created rather than relations of collective discipline and obligation. Left political projects which continue to prioritize contesting state power and the strategies that accompany such a goal are not just "old hat" and "passé", but also obstacles to genuinely radical social transformation.

There is much to be valued in such an approach. The emphasis on the subjective moment of struggle, of transforming both individual and collective consciousness and capacity, and of creating strong and independent forms of political and social organization is crucial. This is a necessary response to errors in past left strategies which pursued political revolution without also attending sufficiently to social revolution, and which therefore had to impose forms of discipline in order to maintain revolutionary processes. As Saad Filho and Sam Gindin have argued, the fight against neoliberal capitalism requires a recomposition of the working classes, and in particular a revitalization of their capacity for struggle, for self-determination and democratic engagement. Similarly, Dinerstein argues that "the recovery of political power can only take place subjectively. This subjective process of reconciliation with politics is in no way individualistic and psychological, but social and political: the power of collective action and the recovery of dignity and solidarity are the bases for revolutionary politics" (Dinerstein, 2002: 32). While under-specifying the broader structural, organizational and ideological components of revolution, she is correct to say that, after the defeats of previous left projects and the disempowering effects of neoliberalism as a system of rule, people must reconnect with their capacity as agents, often in very local and immediate ways.

However, these insights also raise several important strategic questions. First, is the state really so pervaded with coercive power that it is hopeless to try to use it? Second, if we must abandon the terrain of the state, what kind of space is 'civil society' and is it necessarily freer than the state from power? Finally, is work within civil society rather than the state sufficient to the task of developing effective strategic responses to the contempo-

rary neoliberal state, not to mention building sustainable alternatives to capitalism?

### **The Monolithic State**

For many global justice activists today, the state is understood as a coercive and repressive force with little independence from the imperatives of global capital. While there is a *prima facie* truth to these observations, the idea that the state is seamless in its unity and therefore unrecuperable for left projects is based on a simplistic, monolithic view. Although debates over the capitalist state are complex and extensive, most Marxists agree its capitalist nature does not prevent it from being internally contradictory. Indeed, as a terrain on which class struggles are played out, the state expresses at different points in time the particular balance of power that exists within and between various classes and other social forces. As such, it is not always the case that capital can ‘get its way’ or that ‘getting its way’ is unproblematically clear or exactly the same in concrete time and place.

Contradiction is also a product of the multiple roles that states within capitalist societies play. The state’s involvement in establishing and maintaining the conditions for capital accumulation often conflict with other important goals, like securing legitimation and stability through active consent. One of Gramsci’s important insights into the dynamics of hegemony was to point to the material concessions that ruling groups make to subordinate classes, in order to win the latter’s consent to be governed (Sassoon, 1987: 116). However, that need to secure consent is always in tension with the pressures that competition imposes to continually intensify exploitation and extend the reach of capitalist social relations. It is in the fissures of these contradictory pressures that working classes, for instance, have been able to extract gains, like the welfare state, the decommodification of many essential services, and legal recognition for workers’ independent organizations. While not without their own internal contradictions and unforeseen consequences, the historical fact of these victories represent the possibility of using the state, albeit in conjunctural ways, to open up space for progressive alternatives.

The struggle of Argentinian social movements illustrates well the fallacy of the monolithic conception of the state, as well as the possibility of using the state strategically. While many in the movements reject the state on principle, their projects are de-

pendent upon a sympathetic legal-institutional framework that only the state can create and protect. As depicted in *The Take*, workers' initial expropriations "bubbled up from below", having been achieved through direct action rather than imposition "from on high by a socialist state or bureaucrats". Workers physically occupied their workplaces and organized around-the-clock defence brigades armed with slingshots, fighting off eviction orders by "putting their bodies between the machines and the police". While some asserted that such direct action was sufficient and in fact superior to legal sanction or electoral struggle, other activists recognized the state's centrality in determining their fate and took advantage of other avenues. With the judiciary and police often uncritically protecting employers' private property rights, the municipal, provincial and national legislatures were seen as more open to popular pressure and therefore became key sites for winning (at least temporary) legal backing for workers' expropriations. Even some judges were willing to interpret the law in ways that legitimate worker ownership. Although divisions within the judiciary were strategically important, this was also recognized by some as insufficient: one of the Zanon activists makes an impassioned plea for the need to "go to the legislature and say 'approve our [expropriation] bill now'", and the workers from Forja San Martin concentrate much energy on getting legislative backing for their cooperative (Lewis, 2004). This example indicates a tacit knowledge of not only the state's importance in creating space for alternative economic relationships but also of its fragmented and internally contradictory nature, making it possible for workers' cooperatives to fight on numerous fronts for a national expropriation law.

Taking advantage of internal divisions within the state of course raises the issue of electoral engagement as a strategy, for if legal sanction for worker-owned enterprises is to be won, there must be at least some sympathetic elected representatives open to these arguments and pressures. Although the recovered factories movement remained insecure and even under siege under Nestor Kirchner's presidency, one must ask what would have happened had Menem, with his close ties to internationalized Argentine capital and his "order and security" platform, won the 2003 presidential elections? As an organizer with the recovered factories movement told Klein and Lewis: "If Menem wins, there's no way we'll get to run this factory ourselves" (Lewis, 2004). Despite



horizontal networks of mutual support between cooperatives, the struggle of the recovered factories movement reveals the impossibility of completely rejecting formal political processes and institutions, even for anarcho-syndicalist strategies based on direct action and workers' control. Anti-statism is thus strategically debilitating because it prevents the identification of divisions or contradictions within the state that may offer important avenues to use institutional power, not to substitute for movements but rather to further empower them by sustaining and extending their achievements.

### **Romanticizing Civil Society**

The example of the recovered factories movement also raises the question of civil society, and whether social change can be made wholly within this realm. In important ways, the rejection of the state is based upon a dichotomization of 'inside' versus 'outside' the system of power, which has historically specific contours. As Ellen Wood points out, the delineation of "a terrain of human association, some notion of 'society', distinct from the body politic and with moral claims independent of, and sometimes opposed to, the state's authority" has long been part of the Western intellectual tradition. However, with the rise of capitalism and the *formal* (if not real) separation of capitalist accumulation from the mechanisms of political rule, the state-civil society opposition takes its modern form, the latter often synonymous with "the community of private-property holders" who seek to maintain their autonomy from the absolutist state (Wood, 1990: 61). More contemporary conceptions of civil society have expanded it to include the full range of voluntary human association and activity, "distinct from both the state and capitalist production", where both interests and identities are formed, organized around and contested (Carroll and Ratner, 1994: 6).

However, the 'distinctive' status of civil society is often conceptualized quite rigidly, such that an unproblematically capitalist and coercive state is contrasted with civil society as a realm of freedom and autonomous action (Wood, 1990: 64). Not only does this ignore the contradictions within the state's multiple institutions (as argued above), it also hides the way that civil society is *also* capitalist and rife with hegemonic practices. Gramsci's notion of the "integral state" highlights the way that civil society is not independent of the power of capital; instead, the state is that

terrain on which capital organizes its material, ideological and cultural hegemony, which is mediated through civil society institutions like the church, schools, the family and non-governmental organizations as much as through coercion (Carroll and Ratner, 1994: 11). Emir Sader argues that to invoke civil society as a pure space of action unhindered by power differentials and in opposition to the state is “to mask ... the class nature of its components – multinational corporations, banks and mafia, set next to social movements, trade unions, civil bodies” (Sader, 2002: 93), as though these are all equally powerful. Instead, both the state and civil society are profoundly (if not exclusively) shaped by capitalist social relations, and it is neither accurate nor strategically useful to privilege one site of struggle over the other in some transhistorical way.

Some may – and do – argue that such an analysis inevitably leads to pessimistic conclusions: if both the state and civil society are thoroughly penetrated with capitalist logic, there are no possibilities for collective resistance and thus all that remains is critique or perhaps individual hedonism. However, like the state, civil society is not an unproblematically unified whole either. For Carroll and Ratner, “[p]eople’s everyday lives are permeated not only by hegemonic practices that legitimate ... inequities, but also by acts of subversion and adaptation” which provide the materials out of which alternatives can be fashioned (Carroll and Ratner, 1994: 6). Moreover, the balance of social forces, and therefore of relations inside and between state and civil society, are historically contingent and therefore variable. In certain periods or contexts, the avenues for state-based action may be closed or so risky that civil society organizing is to be preferred. However, just as Leninists were mistaken to generalize a form of party organization and revolutionary change based on the specific circumstances of Tsarist Russia, so too is it wrong to claim that only non- or anti-state means can produce progressive social change.

Indeed, many ‘civil society struggles’ are strengthened precisely by the actions of state-based agents who use their strategic location to further open up and protect spaces for the exploration and development of alternatives. In Argentina, even temporary legalization of cooperative status released workers in the recovered factories from the constant threat of police violence and the requirement of armed defence, and allowed attention to be put towards strengthening both internal organization and external

relationships of support. For instance, having won three years of legal status in October 2005, the FASINPAT cooperative that runs the Zanon Ceramics factory “can concentrate on production planning, improve working conditions and community projects” (Trigona, 2006). Similarly, the Social Forum movement, though explicitly identified with “civil society”, emerged in the particular context of Brazil, for a reason: “[i]t was the success of specific political measures, implemented by a left party through a process of democratic [municipal] state reforms involving a strengthening of the public domain” that not only attracted global justice activists to Porto Alegre but also made the initial organization of the World Social Forum possible (Sader, 2002: 91).

The fact that state action can open up space in civil society for radical organizing is not new. In her discussion of the New Left social movements of the 1960s, Wainwright reveals that self-organization and the creation of autonomous, participatory institutions relied upon a permissive institutional-political context. The “sustainability” of local institutions “has depended, ironically, on social democracy – the very political strategy they were often initiated against. These institutions (women’s centres of various kinds, innovations in health care, extensions of adult education, radical cultural centres and more) depend, in good part, on the availability of public resources, even if they radically transform how those resources are managed” (Wainwright, 1994: 76). Wainwright’s insight into the conditions of possibility for autonomist movements implies that the choice facing activists is not between either civil society or formal political institutions of the state, but rather how to engage the state in ways that both preserve and protect independent spaces for self-organization and participatory democracy as well as challenge the state itself to become more thoroughly democratized.

Of course, as Gramsci pointed out, the state can act on civil society in ways that close down the possibilities for radical and democratizing alternatives and promote those which reinforce the status quo. Hence, as Emir Sader has put it, the consequences of accepting the civil society/state dichotomy are

serious, not only because it means rejecting a potential weapon in a radically unequal contest but also, and more importantly, because the movement distances itself from the themes of power, the state, public sphere, political leadership, and even, in a

sense, from ideological struggle ... The result of this exclusion of parties and the state ... severely limit[s] the formulation of any alternatives to neoliberalism, confining such aspirations to a local or sectoral context—the NGOs’ mantra, ‘Think global, act local’; proposals for fair trade; ‘ecologically sustainable development’—while giving up on any attempt to build an alternative hegemony, or any global proposals to counter and defeat world capitalism’s current neoliberal project (Sader, 2002: 92).

As such, a negative case for contesting state power can also be made: not only does some control over the state imply the power to do, but also the power *to prevent others*, namely capital, from using the state unhindered.

### **Abandoning the State to Neoliberal Capitalism**

A fundamentalist anti-statism, rooted in misconceptions about the state, civil society, and their relationship, impedes the movement’s capacity to confront the contemporary state, whether in its neoliberal or imperialist guise. The wholesale rejection of political projects which involve capturing state power – particularly via elections – accounts in part for the left’s current inability to roll back or contain neoliberal state policy both domestically and internationally. However, it is insufficient to merely say that the left needs a strategy to win state power. A case must be made for why such power is *necessary*, both to block capital and to create more space for social movement organizing, and *usable* in a way that does not fundamentally pervert the democratic commitments and practices of the left.

When we accept the argument that the state as a representation of the democratic will of the community, however constituted, is powerless in the face of global capitalist interests, we accept the core of the neoliberal message. The powerless state is the ideology of neoliberal capital, which disarms and disempowers popular forces. Interestingly, Suzanne Berger noted a convergence of right-wing and left-wing anti-statism in the late 1970s, both of which involved a profound loss of confidence about the possibility of using the state to “good ends” (Berger, 1979: 33). However, despite its claims, the right has since regained its “faith” in the state, and has been using it effectively to remake the

world in its own image. Rather than being “decentred” or less important, as many post-moderns have claimed, the state has become even *more* central to the process of capitalist restructuring. As Leo Panitch points out, “the process of globalization, far from dwarfing states, has been constituted through and even by them. The removal of capital controls, the ‘Big Bang’ which broke down internal barriers within financial markets, massive privatization of public assets and deregulation in other spheres – all this was accomplished through state action, requiring a legalization and juridification of new relations among economic agents” (Panitch, 2000: 14-5). The state remains a fundamental weapon for capital, which it uses to organize and reinforce its own power and to disorganize and fragment the power of its opponents. Why else would capital be willing to spend so much of its resources on financing electoral campaigns and lobbying efforts to secure favourable legislation? As Boron argues, we must learn to distinguish between the right’s “anti-state rhetoric” and the reality of “the ever-increasing strategic nature that the state has assumed in order to guarantee the continuity of capitalist domination” (Boron, 2005: 36).

In some ways, then, the commitment to “anti-hegemony” and the abandonment of counter-hegemonic struggle signals a victory for capital. Convincing the working class (or popular forces more generally) to abandon a broader and large-scale transformative vision is central to the capitalist strategy of passive revolution, in which the bourgeoisie decapitates and tames its opponents by keeping them focussed on the defensive protection of corporate or particularistic interests (Carroll and Ratner, 1994: 23 fn 8; Sassoon, 1982: 136). In some ways, localism is a symptom of how the left, demoralized by past mistakes and the difficulties of anti-capitalist struggle, now thinks small rather than big, and does not present a real systemic challenge to capitalism, neoliberal or otherwise. Indeed, anti-hegemony favours not only the local scale as the terrain of action, but also the present over the future. In that sense, anti-hegemony is also increasingly anti-utopian: some argue that the future no longer figures prominently in the practice of anarchist-inspired groups and has been replaced by a focus on carving out space in the present to live in radical or revolutionary ways (Gordon, 2005).

As elements of the left retreat from contesting state power, thinking through how to constrain capital, and generaliz-

ing local experiments and ways of living, capital retains unchallenged access to a crucial and potent weapon and, via its own parties and politicians, continues to act on civil society relatively unhindered. The case of Argentina is again illustrative: in the 2003 presidential election, “[t]he anti-political slogan “que se vayan todos” (all politicians get out) intimidated any promising left candidates and ultimately led to the total domination of electoral politics by the traditional right parties” (Petras, 2003: 18). In the context of struggles by cooperatives to extract both resources and legitimacy from the state, the lack of progressive voices within legislatures is a weakness. In that sense, anti-statism can reproduce and strengthen the power of those they seek to resist, entrenching the power of capital and fortifying the bureaucratic state (Boggs, 1986: 19).

Anti-statist presumptions are thus clearly underwritten by a deeply spontaneist understanding of social transformation. In the absence of any specified ideas about the processes and practices involved in making large-scale social change, it appears that building alternative ways of thinking and living, in the cracks of the system, eventually destabilizes and overwhelms that system in some way. This both underestimates the power and solidity of systemic processes and overestimates the impact that civil society struggles can have on their own. On the first, while neoliberal capitalism produces deeply destructive contradictions, this does not guarantee that the system will collapse in on itself. Indeed, as Saad Filho sagely points out, neoliberalism is a fairly stable system of accumulation, not only because it “fosters modes of behaviour that contribute to its reproduction over time”, but also because it does so *through the very crises it produces*, imposing further discipline and austerity on both capital and workers (Saad Filho, 2006: 3). On the second, the key difference between change enacted at the levels of the state and civil society is that the latter, while “extremely important, lacks imperative effects”. The state is crucial precisely because it is where the “correlation of social forces” which dominate society concentrate their power, “transform their interests into laws” and “create a normative and institutional framework that guarantees the stability of their conquests” (Boron, 2005: 37).

In his reflections on the rise of new social movements and their strategic challenge to the old left, Carl Boggs argued that the “ongoing conflict between prefigurative (value-oriented)

and instrumental (power-oriented) dimensions of popular movements has all too often been resolved in favour of the prefigurative, with typically fatal results” (Boggs, 1986: 19). Overemphasis of the instrumental element no doubt led to the problems of Leninist and social democratic forms of political struggle. However, solutions to these problems are not to be found in abandonment of the state in favour of “subjective transformations” or merely “being the change you want to see”. While convincing people that “another world is possible” is key, how much more demoralizing is it to see that belief unsupported by material changes in relations of power and wealth? Rather than favouring the prefigurative over the instrumental, political and theoretical work must focus on the dialectic relationship between the subjective and objective/structural bases for change. In other words, social transformation is the product of interactions between changes in people’s beliefs, relationships and organizational practices, *and* the arrangement of other social forces and structures, which can be used to open up and reinforce certain kinds of subjective capacities and diminish others.

### **Reclaiming the State for Social Justice**

To argue that the state must figure importantly in left political strategy is not to be uncritical or naive about the dangers of using the state to make radical change. Indeed, the potential for internalization of the neoliberal logic into the policies and practices of governments who swept to power on the wave of social movement activity is serious and real. Moreover, such defeats dangerously reinforce the conclusion that, despite what we do, the state will always assimilate and transform those who occupy it. Despite this, the call to develop different relationships between parties and strong social movements should be heeded. The state continues to be an important terrain of struggle because it holds out important resources for progressive movements, resources that the right will use to our detriment if permitted to do so. In other words, abandoning the state to the right only reinforces neoliberal hegemony.

In order to move forward, the global justice movement must chart a strategic direction between the positions of state-as-panacea and state-as-useless. The difficult work lies in constructing “a ‘new politics’ ... [which] integrates both state and civil society in a manner that allows for a dynamic relationship between

the two, between the ‘political’ and ‘social’ realms, parties and movements, institutional activity and grassroots mobilization” (Boggs, 1986: 19). This also means developing an analysis of the political-economic and organizational conditions under which social movements can use states to open up more space while also transforming states themselves (Carroll and Ratner, 1994: 21). The means for developing such conditions cannot be determined through theoretical-intellectual work alone: the proper marriage of strategies within and outside the state must be worked out in the context of struggle. However, practical insights can be drawn from revisiting theoretical debates over the state and civil society as well as a careful reading of past political experiences. At a minimum, we urgently need a critical examination of contemporary anti-statist political projects, and whether they are condemning the left to guerrilla warfare at the margins of an ever more powerful capitalism.

#### **Endnotes**

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2. ‘Power-over’ is a term used primarily by feminists to distinguish between power understood as domination and ‘power-to’, which refers to the capacity to act, whether individually or collectively. See Allen, 2005.
3. “All of them out, not a single one must remain!”

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