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Transnational Civil Society?

Brian Holmes / Boris Buden

[Boris Buden:] The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center seems to have made the events of Genoa irrelevant. Must we accept that? Is Genoa really not an issue anymore?

[Brian Holmes:] The demonstrations in Genoa raised the specter of an historical repetition, where fascistic elements in the Italian state again use manipulated violence to force a major social movement into extremism, just as they did in the 1970s. You could say that pales into insignificance before the outbreak of this new terrorism on a massive, unprecedented scale. In fact the situation is bizarrely similar, only the stakes have suddenly increased. It is obvious, to my eyes, that such an impardonable, inhuman act of terror - taking the form of a direct attack on military and financial centers - offers the perfect excuse for a crisis-ridden capitalism to install the far-reaching police controls required to maintain all its exclusionary borders, and to strike down every kind of opposition to the inequalities it generates. The failure of this police program could be a new world war. And its success could be the end of our democracies.

Everyone focuses on the violence. But what is the nature of this violence? What does it mean in Genoa, and in New York?

In Genoa, we saw the state producing the violence, to a certain extent, then turning a redoubled violence back on all of us, even the most peaceful. To a certain extent - and no one can say exactly how far - the US and the globalized capitalist system produce the violence coming from the Arab world. The US directly trained Bin Laden during the Afghan war against the Soviets; since then his network has profited from the deregulated, criminalized financial markets, while gaining support as an expression of spreading poverty and oppression. How can you expect peace in a borderless world, under conditions of systemic inequality? After Genoa, I wrote that the violent clashes were "the harbinger of a far wider conflict to come, if the destructively alienating tendencies of globalization are not reversed."

You also wrote that Genoa was a turning point, where the antiglobalization movement begins to walk a kind of tightrope - and not only in relation to violence.

The real "turning point" will come the resistance is massive enough to block specific lines of institutional development and open up new spaces for social experimentation. You can see the new ideas foreshadowed in Brazil with the participatory budget program in the city of Porto Alegre, an infranational initiative, or in France with the serious call for the institution of a Tobin tax, a supranational initiative. We are close to definitive blockage of the IMF's austerity programs and the WTO trade system, which would make far more audacious experiments possible. But at exactly this moment of increasing strength, the internal contradictions of the

critical movement can threaten to tear it apart. That's where we start walking a tightrope. And that's the point, in Genoa, where the Italian police stepped in, classically, cynically, to intensify the movement's ambivalent violence and use it as a pretext for naked repression.

You say "we." But who is the "we" of this movement? Why does it take the form of street protests?

Given the strength of the right-left consensus in the parliaments - and ultimately of the neoliberal "Washington consensus" - I think the movement as such had to begin with dramatic actions in streets around the world, actions generating their symbolic power from a roving mix of intellectual critique, civil disobedience, carnival, and destruction of corporate property. These protests have forced the media to admit the existence of a global resistance to neoliberal policies. At the same time, each action has upped the intensity of direct communication between those involved, by "alternative" media ranging from the human voice to Internet.
But the resistance to globalization is broader and more ambivalent than the protests in the streets. Behind them, at varying degrees of distance and disagreement, you find alienated youth, progressive social movements, splinter labor unions, all kinds of ecologists, disappointed nationalists, citizens' groups concerned about welfare-state and democratic institutions, left-leaning think tanks, humanitarian NGOs, arch-conservatives, religious groups of every confession - and untold numbers of people shocked by the suddenness of global economic integration, unwilling to just abandon their cultural patterns, their traditional forms of solidarity or their aspirations to greater freedom.

You once described the social substrate of the movement as a "transnational civil society." Do you still think that concept explains the chaotic and sometimes violent resistance to globalization?

No, I never did. I was trying to make two basic points in that paper on transnational civil society. First, that the emergence of a global civil society, suddenly imaginable because of the Internet, was directly linked to the rise of transnational corporations - TNCs, the agents of a global capitalism. Second, that the dominance of this corporate-driven civil society could be countered by an antagonistic political subject, which I called the "networker" - i.e. the global labor-force mobilized by the transnational corporations, via communications technology.
But the term "networker" is ambivalent: it suggests both the opportunistic manager, and the worker under electronic control. I used it as a provocation, to spark awareness of the subservient position occupied by most people hooked into Internet. This was in 1998, during the dot-com boom, when there was an absurd, self-interested faith in a worldwide electronic democracy. I wanted to deflate this naive vision of "civil society" that hid the reality of corporate governance; at the same time, I wanted to suggest the shift in mentalities and organizing efforts that would be required for the constitution of a collective political subject on a world scale. Beyond the Marxist figure of a unified industrial proletariat, we have to understand the diverging values and desires that motivate people to engage in some kind of coordinated resistance to neoliberalism. I described the process of convergence as a "transnational culture sharing" - in opposition to the "civil society" that supports transnational capitalism. But let's be clear: a worldwide movement can only be based on real political solidarity, where all those involved have something concrete to win or to lose.

This effective solidarity is necessary for everyone, to combat the mobility of the transnational corporations. I think the illegal side of the early demonstrations - the direct action, the symbolic destruction of corporate property - was the only way to distinguish the real solidarity movement from the continually unfulfilled promises of "civil society."

Where - in what institutional space - does this struggle against global capitalism take place? The only democratically legitimate political frame still appears to be the nation-state.

The "institutional environment" of the struggles lies in the space of tension between national and transnational bodies. The movement challenges the transnational institutions: the WTO, IMF, G8, EU, NAFTA, etc. All these emanate in theory from democratically elected national governments; but they regulate a transnational space for the exclusive benefit of industrial and financial interests, without offering citizens any say. So even by the poor standards of the contemporary democracies, they are illegitimate. Yet although national institutions still offer the only control mechanisms over capital, the movement itself is effectively transnational. It faces a transnational antagonist, and must claim the possibility of democratically governing the global space - even if only to set the guidelines of what Walden Bello calls "deglobalization," or in political science terms, subsidiarity, whereby collective decisions are taken at the smallest possible scales, to ensure the highest degree of democratic participation.

What can make us hope that resistance against globalization, without any serious political consequences, can lead anywhere else but to a new chapter of the old "Kulturkampf"?

Nothing, if you put it that way. But the most encouraging aspect of the past few years is the way that radicalized networkers have been able to carry out a kind of popular education effort within this ambivalent mass resistance, revealing common stakes in an overarching institutional environment. All that goes beyond what you call the "Kulturkampf," without denying the importance of cultural issues - just the way filmmakers had a vital role to play in the far wider campaign against the MAI treaty. Now the outbreak of terrorism proves how serious the problems with globalization really are. Is there any chance that a transnational, transcultural left can convince our societies to address the sources and not just the symptoms of this worldwide conflict? Is there any chance for a new extension of the radical education effort? I'm nobody, just an ordinary individual, but I think that's the question that opens the twenty-first century.