

# Feminism and New Forms of Practice on the Left

BY DIANA HUET DE GUERVILLE

*La logique envahissante du capitalisme mondial semble avoir miné notre capacité de « rêver l'impossible » alors on ne tente que rarement de développer ou d'articuler des alternatives. Dans cet article l'auteure nous dit qu'il nous faut créer des espaces non-contraignants, féministes et démocratiques où on peut se retrouver pour construire collectivement une vision ouverte sur une action politique pour la création d'un monde meilleur*

We must not be afraid of dreaming the seemingly impossible – if we want the seemingly impossible to become a reality.

—Vaclav Havel

In the context of a world seemingly devoid of alternatives, even those of us who actively challenge the massive enemy we name globalization are often unable to imagine a future beyond it. The pervasive logic of global capitalism appears to have undermined our capacity for “dreaming the impossible,” so that we rarely attempt to develop or articulate alternatives. Yet such visionary thinking is absolutely essential if we hope to challenge the supposed inevitability of globalization. We must therefore create non-oppressive, feminist, democratic spaces where we can come together to collectively construct visions that will inspire sustained political action towards the creation of a better world.

## **Feminist Visions and Globalization**

Feminists, who have long dreamed the impossible (and at times achieved it), have great contributions to make

towards the construction of inspiring social visions, for feminist struggles are often quite visionary. At its best,<sup>1</sup> feminism claims to challenge all forms of oppression in order to free all women, since social problems are considered interconnected and indivisible. Capitalism, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, and patriarchy are approached as intertwining systems which work in concert to exploit women, the environment, and the people and resources of the “Third World.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, feminism envisions nothing less than radical transformation in the relations of power and domination so that a peaceful, just, and egalitarian social order may be created.

As a feminist, I carry this holistic, transformative, even revolutionary perspective into my academic research on and against struggles against globalization. Accordingly, during my research on globalization I have sought out feminist analyses which challenge the supposed neutrality of economic processes and make visible the relations of power that ensure that women, the poor, and people of colour the world over are most heavily exploited by global capitalism. Feminists in the fields of political economy, economics, ecological economics, and even ecofeminism (to name just a few) have all offered some brilliant critiques of the hierarchical, dualistic, oppressive ideology that drives globalization, and have thus exposed the inherently exploitative nature of the neoliberal economic project. Those critiques are absolutely vital, and contribute a great deal to a much deeper understanding of the process of globalization.

Occasionally, these feminist analy-

ses also offer strategies for resisting global economic expansion, and suggest ways to reorganize the economy so as not to perpetuate patterns of oppression and domination. Nevertheless, I must admit that I am frequently surprised and disappointed by the lack of vision that pervades a great deal of feminist research on globalization. Most analyses are devoted almost entirely to their critiques, with little attention to the search for solutions. When there are suggestions for change, they tend to focus on concrete ways of mitigating the negative impacts globalization has on women. While reform is absolutely necessary and can make a very real difference in women's lives, this strategy, by itself, offers only the vaguest sense of a future beyond capitalism. Bolder, transformative visions definitely exist, but they are much harder to find and seem greatly outnumbered by reformist approaches. What happened to dreaming the impossible?

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## Confronting Globalization and Pessimism

Lack of vision is certainly not unique to feminist research; visionary thinking in general tends to be marginalized in the struggle against globalization. Moreover, analyses of the gendered dimension of globalization

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continue to receive scant attention beyond feminist circles, so that the interrelation between sexism, racism, and colonialism remains secondary to broad (and supposedly unifying) critiques of economic exploitation. In the academic and activist spaces I inhabit in Toronto (and more widely in North America), the oppositional strategy so far has largely been to highlight the devastating economic effects of global economic restructuring, such as increasing inequality and poverty (with only passing references to impacts on women). The implicit assumption seems to be that just showing the "powers that be" the error of their ways will prompt them to seek solutions to make the economic system work for everybody, which does absolutely nothing to challenge existing power relations, and depends on the willingness of the global elite to help those who suffer.

This approach has certainly been successful in mobilizing large num-

bers of people to protest various meetings of the global elite. However, I would contend that continued emphasis on naming and analyzing the problems with globalization is inadequate, no matter how insightful the analysis or how thorough the research. Drawing attention to the evils of globalization goes only so far in recruiting new activists, for social movement theory suggests that most people will only engage in sustained social struggle if they have some hope of success and a sense that they can make a difference. And the global corporate spin machine is particularly effective at making us believe Margaret Thatcher's infamous exhortation that "there is no alternative" to neoliberalism (the so-called TINA syndrome), thus rendering resistance futile.

Furthermore, in the wake of the popular revolts of 1989 against totalitarian socialist states, the hegemony of global capitalism has become even more firmly cemented, especially in its self-proclaimed equation with democracy. With the dissolution of the socialist project which served as the historic challenge to capitalism, radical alternatives to globalization no longer seem possible, so that many of those on the "left" largely shy away from truly transformative ideals. For example, the loudest (or most powerful) voices in the anti-globalization movement<sup>3</sup> merely ask for a "seat at the table," or democratization of the World Trade Organization (WTO), or social and environmental clauses in trade agreements. These demands assume that global capitalism is so powerful that we can only hope to impose a little discipline upon it; and they do nothing to seriously challenge the global power structure or neo-colonial economic relations between North and South.

Without any sense that there are viable alternatives worth fighting for, many of the struggles against globalization have consequently become trapped in pessimistic, unimaginative thinking, often resulting in timid,

reformist calls for change. Yet many activists have explicitly refused to consider constructing a unified vision on the grounds that it is an inherently futile process that could actually fragment already fragile coalitions. After all, the movement is incredibly diverse, as the goals of anti-globalization activists range from a desire for extreme protectionism and nationalism, to mild reformism, to revolutionary calls for radical social and economic transformation. Such different ideas would probably never mesh comfortably into one vision, and no one ideology could be forcibly imposed on a broad and tenuous alliance of autonomous activist groups who are notoriously anti-hierarchical.

It thus appears that those who oppose globalization could only unite on the basis of a shared enemy, especially in the context of an often well-founded postmodern suspicion of totalizing narratives. Deconstruction is made to represent the only "pure" position, such that focus on critiques of a seemingly common problem seems safer than trying to articulate a vision that could never include all perspectives. Hence I've found that in both academic and activist circles, visionary thinking is often dismissed as idealistic, naïve, and necessarily partial, with the result that many progressives seem hesitant to contemplate or articulate alternatives. The spirit of utopia is then stifled, so that the creative ideas that are nonetheless generated all over the world are given very little space in left discourse.

The suppression of this visionary thinking has dangerous consequences; not least of which is that we're censoring/silencing ourselves before the neoliberal right even has a chance. And as Joanna Brenner warns,

to defensively turn away from dreaming because we are so afraid of being disappointed, to wish for less because we fear we cannot win more, will impover-

ish and undermine our efforts to build more radical political struggles. (142)

Thus I fear that the inability of the anti-globalization movement to even suggest creative alternatives to global capitalism will ensure that its disruptive potential remains limited. For the success of the movement will likely depend on its ability to mobilize far greater numbers than it has so far, with not only a critique of the problems, but some sense of what can be done about them. Otherwise, it's too easy for our detractors, as well as potential supporters, to dismiss our critiques entirely because we offer no hope of anything better.

### Creating Visions/Creating Space

My experiences in both academic and activist spaces on the left have led me to believe that we can't just voice our opposition, we actually have to create a sense that a better world is not only necessary, but possible. We must offer not only our bodies as evidence of our resistance, but also our creativity, to engage more effectively in the Gramscian "war of ideas" that neoliberalism has been winning until now. If we hope to challenge the pessimism engendered by the TINA-syndrome, we will need to show that there is life beyond global capitalism, and we should have a sense of what that life could look like. We must inspire each other with visions worth fighting for, because

without the hope that the world can be changed and without being able to place oneself in a movement for change, it is difficult to live; at most it is merely possible to survive. The continuous present, a life without future expectations, becomes stifling apathy. (Haug 55)

But how do we even begin to challenge such apathy and nurture hope?

A good place to start would be to recognize that globalization is not an immutable force beyond human control. Rather, the economy is a social construction that is carefully orchestrated by a small elite who are acting in their narrow own self-interest, even as they assert that global capitalism is both inevitable *and* good for us. However, if we refute the claims of neoliberalism and recognize it as only one possible way to organize the economy, then we can begin to search for different ways of meeting human needs. When we understand that humans control the economy and not vice versa, we can challenge the inhumane theories that economists put forward as truth and devise economic systems that place the provision of human needs and preservation of our natural resource base above the necessarily exploitative and destructive search for profit.

If we dispute the notion that global capitalism is all-powerful, we also challenge the idea that only massive, revolutionary struggle could bring it down, thereby opening up space for broad-based, multifaceted opposition. Accordingly, feminist political economist J. K. Gibson-Graham asserts that we should not regard capitalism as a unified, singular, totalizing construct, but rather "one form of exploitation among many ..." then "socialist or noncapitalist construction becomes a 'realistic' present activity rather than a ludicrous or utopian future goal" (Gibson-Graham 263). We can then uncover the varied forms of production that exist outside of capitalism (such as women's unpaid labour), and find space all around us to try out creative solutions that we can point to as viable alternatives to globalization.

Discovering the gaps in the seeming hegemony of global capitalism is absolutely vital, for it then becomes easier to imagine alternatives and resistance no longer seems futile. The search for solutions takes on new vitality and hope in the dream of social transformation is rekindled. However, this renewed optimism

must also be tempered by questions of power that feminists cannot ignore, such as: Whose alternatives? Whose vision? Who decides? Given the divergent interests of those who oppose globalization, it is clear that no unified voice on the left exists which could articulate any one vision agreeable to all.

For example, though the World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil gathered 10,000 activists in 2001, and over 50,000 in 2002, under the slogan "Another World Is Possible," critiques of the forum suggest that simply providing a space for the articulation of alternatives is not sufficient for ensuring that a common agenda will emerge. Many of the forms of oppression that pervade society (such as hetero/sexism, racism, classism, etc.), were still present even among progressives at the WSF, presenting very real barriers to understanding and cooperation. Furthermore, even if consensus were to be reached on any particular issue, Naomi Klein points out, "there is no truly representative process in place to make ... decisions" (10) within the WSF and the movement in general. Consequently, she suggests,

democracy and accountability need to be worked out first on more manageable scales—within local communities and

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coalitions and inside individual organizations, then broadened out. (11)

### (Re)Creating Democracy

The problem facing the left in the fight against neoliberalism is not simply one of confronting pessimism and embracing alternatives, though visionary, even utopian thinking is crucial in an era of neoliberal triumphalism. Rather, the larger issue may be that globalization is undermining already weak democratic institutions, and thus further eroding the capacity of individuals and communities to have a voice in the decisions that affect their lives. As such, Naomi Klein contends that if there is any consensus about alternatives to neoliberalism, it seems to be "that participatory democracy at the local level ... is where to start" (4).

In a world in which men hold 90 per cent of all elected positions, and most of those men are likely privileged by means of race and/or class, questions of real democratic political participation are vital if any meaningful social transformation is to occur. Accordingly, Judy Rebick asserts that "[w]e need a movement that unites everyone in fighting for an expansion of democracy" (230), since "fuller participation of citizens in public life is the key to countering the effects of globalization" (8). Though there may be few points of commonality among all the different opponents of neoliberal globalization, a focus on radical and participatory democracy could certainly provide a rallying point around which diverse struggles could link. Democratic transformation on various levels (local, national, international) may also provide a point of entry into the struggle for those who might be unwilling or unable to join the mass demonstrations that the anti-globalization movement is known for.

Furthermore, envisioning new forms of democratic participation

would be more proactive than simply attacking neoliberalism, and could go a long way towards ensuring that the goals of social transformation are more broadly representative than any top-down revolution could be, even one that purports to be progressive. For feminist analysis argues that in order to bring about truly radical, holistic, and empowering social change, the perspectives of those who have been most marginalized and disempowered under the exploitative force of neo-colonial patriarchal capitalism must be central to an articulation of alternatives to globalization. A powerful way to challenge the domination of globalization would thus be to develop feminist, anti-racist, democratic, and generally non-oppressive models amongst ourselves to show that other ways of living are possible. As Barbara Epstein asserts,

protest politics must be utopian, in the sense that it must hold out a vision of a non-violent and egalitarian society, and that it must build the new society within the shell of the old by creating a space within which these values can be realized as far as possible. (cited in Ackelsberg 169)

Anarchist thought about the consistency of means and ends has much to contribute in this regard, for it claims that "the way to create a new society is to *create* a new reality" (Ackelsberg 160). In order to bring about a non-dominating, egalitarian society, anarchists believe that we have to first change ourselves so that we can engage with each other in non-oppressive ways. As such, anarchists insist that

change cannot be achieved through centralized organizations that manifest the traditional, hierarchical understanding of power, but must develop out of the widest possible sort of participation. (Ackelsberg 167)

The anti-globalization movement has already been clearly influenced by anarchism, as exemplified by the autonomous, decentralized, loosely organized structure of protest events. Nevertheless, activists on the left still have a long way to go in creating widely participatory democratic processes that could actually provide a significant space for the construction of representative, inclusive, and egalitarian alternatives to global capitalism. For if we are to effectively confront the exclusionary and exploitative process of globalization, we must do so in ways that are explicitly inclusive and non-oppressive, which requires that each of us confront the different ways in which we can be alternately oppressed and oppressor. This means that all of us have the responsibility to challenge the power relations that privilege western, white, and male voices, so that we can engage in truly participatory discussions about alternatives based on what Nira Yuval-Davis calls "principles of rooting and shifting – that is, being centred in one's own experience while being empathetic to the differential positioning of the partners in the dialogue" (cited in Collins 245).

The importance of radically democratic and participatory dialogue cannot be underestimated, since it is the only way to ensure that those who are most adversely affected by globalization can express their perceptions and opinions. In particular, a crucial task for the left remains to build much stronger links between anti-globalization struggles and grassroots movements. For as feminist analyses of power suggest, without respect for and attention to the voices of those whose struggles have been marginalized, any effort to construct solutions will necessarily be partial, inequitable and exclusionary. The feminist concept of empowerment is also crucial, for the creation of locally-grounded, truly democratic spaces wherever we can will enable many of us to become agents of our lives for the first time, thus empow-

ering us to us to take action against the ravages of global economic restructuring. Above all, a commitment to opening up democratic space within the movement and grounding our struggles in our communities would help ensure the free expression and collective construction of visionary ideas that are currently marginalized in the rush to bring down global capitalism.

Despite the clear benefits of participatory and inclusive processes, creating truly democratic dialogues among the various elements that make up the anti-globalization movement is no small endeavour, and poses innumerable challenges. After all, there is no guarantee that those who oppose globalization will be committed to listening to different ideas based in realities different than their own. Nevertheless, Naomi Klein insists that the strength of the movement so far has been its refusal to embrace an "overarching revolutionary philosophy," which indicates an aversion to any particular ideology claiming to speak for all (12). Instead of attempting to impose an all-encompassing platform of action, activists are "holding out for an acceptably democratic, representative process to take [their] resistance to the next stage" (Klein 13). Engendering this process is crucial, and stands out as the challenge facing all of us who seek radical social transformation.

In order to challenge the seeming inevitability of globalization and inspire much broader resistance, it is thus vital that we create spaces on the left for the democratic, community-grounded, and collaborative articulation of alternative visions. Despite the challenges inherent in the search for solutions, it is the responsibility of both academics and activists to go beyond mere critique to think creatively about the possibilities for social transformation. However, feminists assert that we must ensure that the voices of those who have been traditionally marginalized must become central to any discourse around

globalization as must the visions of those engaged in local grassroots struggles. For it is only through respectful, honest, and inclusive dialogue about alternatives that the seemingly impossible dream of a peaceful, just, and egalitarian world can become reality.

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<sup>1</sup>Feminism is not monolithic, nor is it necessarily visionary. There are many different (sometimes contradictory) strands of feminist thought, some of which are as exclusionary and hierarchical as the patriarchal structures they critique. Yet I believe that an egalitarian, liberatory, and visionary impulse exists within feminism which can provide us with an inspirational ideal. I thus consider the "best" version of feminism to be that which calls for radical social transformation and an end to all oppression – the creation of a whole new system, not just equal power sharing within the one that exists. This is the meaning of feminism that I will use throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup>See in particular the work of Maria Mies.

<sup>3</sup>The various social actors that oppose corporate-driven globalization are often inappropriately lumped together and called the "anti-globalization movement," despite the fact that there is no unified movement with a cohesive mission. I must therefore qualify my use of the term to explain that I refer not to a singular social movement with a common purpose, but rather a loose coalition of countless disparate movements who oppose globalization in one form or another, for many different reasons.

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