Counter-hegemony, anti-globalisation and culture in International Political Economy

Owen Worth and Carmen Kuhling

This article argues that studies of counter-hegemony and resistance in International Political Economy (IPE) have often ignored the cultural dimensions of anti-globalisation. We argue that a greater understanding of the elements needed for the articulation of counter-hegemony within IPE can be achieved through an engagement with the traditions inherent in the Birmingham School, and with the elements of Situationism contained within the anti-consumerist movement.

Introduction

Recent events such as the 'Battle of Seattle', the May Day demonstrations in Europe and the succession of anti-capitalist carnivals, often symbolically held during international summits geared at consolidating global policies of neoliberalism, have attracted much interest from critical readings within International Political Economy (IPE). Attempts to conceptualise these events in the context of 'counter-hegemony', or as a counter-movement, have been advanced by key figures within the Marxist/post-positivist tradition in IPE (Gills, 2000). However, what is often lacking in these studies is an actual engagement with the cultural interplays and practices that exist within the diversity of social movements that make up these various demonstrations and carnivals. In addition, cultural practices such as the development of Situationism and the legacy of the Situationist International have largely been neglected. While the growth of Cultural Studies may have arrived as a distinct critical discourse, aimed at providing an alternative to

materialist forms of structural Marxism (Johnson, 1986), much of the studies in counter-hegemony within IPE have tended to ignore the *actual* practices involved in the anti-globalisation movement, and have instead largely re-engaged with orthodox Marxism.

By drawing from certain observations made by Chin and Mittleman (2000), this article seeks to bridge studies of resistance within IPE and Cultural Studies by characterising the anti-globalisation movement as a form of counter-hegemony that engages with the ideology of neoliberalism; but also with infra-political practices that reveal more implicit forms of cultural resistance to capitalism and consumerism (Scott, 1990), rooted far more within the Situationist movement.

In particular, the article will examine the potential of micropolitical forms of resistance that have attempted to destabilise the hegemonic order of consumer society. It thus addresses a long-standing dichotomy in western Marxism between the 'political economist' and 'culturalist' positions on new social movements.

Conceptualising resistance from the macro: IPE and anti-globalisation

As a sub-discipline of International Relations, IPE has focused on aspects of power that are linked with economic structures, rather than with state-centrist interpretations of sovereignty. As multinational development, economic regionalisation and international capital flows became more established from the 1970s onwards, IPE began to attract more attention from mainstream International Relations, although most IPE analysis focused on state co-ordination and leadership (Keohane, 1984). The more 'critical' accounts within IPE have emerged through various attempts to understand global transformation through an engagement with Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and with the work of traditional political economists such as Polanyi and Schumpeter (Abbott & Worth, 2001). Globalisation is thus often defined as a relationship between material capability and the super-structural institutionalisation that has been constructed to realise this capability. As a hegemonic project, globalisation represents an ideology of neoliberalism that has been articulated to saturate various levels of global civil society

(Cox, 1987; Rupert, 2000). From this perspective, resistance appears as a form of counter-hegemony in which social forces contest and challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonic order.

The main problem with such studies of hegemony within IPE is that they do not sufficiently explain the complex forms of super-structural entities that engage with a hegemonic relationship. As a result, resistance to neoliberalism is often poorly assessed through top-down studies of counter-hegemony. Chin and Mittelman have attempted to address this conceptual weakness by suggesting a more complex critical analysis of the global economy. First, the counter-hegemonic model is placed alongside the model of counter-movement. For Chin and Mittelman, counter-movements refer to the social-protectionist reactions that emerged in response to the expansion and failure of the supposedly self-regulating market. States are forced to respond to the growing unrest created by market failure (Polanyi, 1944). In this way, the social democratic state is 'brought back in' after an initial period of marketisation.

Chin and Mittelman also argue for the importance of conceptualisations that draw on Foucauldian understandings of the micropolitics of resistance. This borrows from Scott's observation of resistance as *infra-politics* (Scott, 1990). Here, Scott argues that there is a more implicit form of resistance, carried out through various 'hidden transcripts' that ultimately exploit wider practices. For Scott, the strategies used in the anti-globalisation movement are indicative of resistance; but equally important are the forms of cultural practices, criminality and expression that appear at various levels within society (Scott, 1990). While not leading towards a conscious attack on the structuration of global forces, they illustrate the multiplicity of sites of power and resistance, and appear as testament to the politics of exclusion, allowing space for an engagement of global political economy with culture.

The social consequences of neoliberalism have not only resulted in resistance strategies that explicitly contest policy developments within organisations such as the IMF/World Bank; they have also led to struggles at the lower level of the 'everyday' (Amoore & Langley, 2002). Movements at the level of the global, national, regional and local that contest these changes can be seen to act as a counter-movement, which intersects with a larger, democratising counter-

hegemonic project as it seeks to contest the ideological norms and practices that have been embedded through the logic of the free market.

Counter-hegemony and the (re)-engagement with culture

While the pursuit of hidden transcripts and infra-politics has been aired as one that could add to a greater understanding of the processes of counter-hegemony within IPE, there has been, as yet, a reluctance to continue to follow up some of the observations that have been made. However, readings of Gramsci by Hall and Laclau have provided a neo-Gramscian framework that can accommodate such concepts (Rupert, 2000). Rather than being situated within a traditional Marxist analysis of state-economic base, Hall's and Laclau's readings of Gramsci presuppose that the relationship between ideology and class is not determined by a fixed set of social structures, but is rather articulated through a multitude of power relations—cultural, social or practical—which, nevertheless, ultimately refer back to production. As Hall states:

> Where Gramsci departs from classical versions of Marxism is that he does not think that politics is an arena which simply reflects already unified collective political identities, already constituted forms of struggle. Politics for him is not a dependent sphere. It is where forces and relations, in the economy, in society, in culture, have to be actively worked on to produce particular forms of power, forms of domination. This is the production of politics—politics as a production. This conception of politics is fundamentally contingent, fundamentally open-ended. (Hall, 1988: 169; quoted in Rupert, 2000: 13)

This point of departure opens up new possibilities for understanding resistance to neoliberalism. It allows for the exploration of fragmented forms of resistance to global power relations that, ultimately, can be seen as attacks on capitalist relations of production. This chimes with Gramsci's conceptual distinction between the *war of movement* and the *war of position* as strategies of resistance. Gramsci

metaphorically relates the first of these to a military war, and categorises it as a full-frontal attack upon the hegemonic state and its super-structural entities (Gramsci, 1971). In a war of movement, the entire legitimacy of hegemony is contested by an ideological attack not only on the major agencies and structures of the order, but also on the complex forms of civil societal common sense that hold the order together. Indeed, it is the manoeuvre against common sense that provides the most strategic part of this form of counter-hegemonic activity. The intricate dynamics of hegemonic common sense within civil society mean that for a war of movement to achieve any level of success, a tactical and sophisticated frontal assault would be required (Gramsci, 1971).

The war of position refers to more subtle forms of contestation that are strategically aimed at transforming common sense and consciousness. Gramsci uses 'boycotts' as an example of a war of position, but there exists a multitude of both implicit and explicit factors involved in the war of position (Gramsci, 1971). Its main aim is to fundamentally contest the legitimacy of 'common sense' within an historic bloc by exposing and exploiting its weaknesses, thus destabilising its hegemonic consent. Indeed, the war of position can be seen as a decisive moment in the success of a counter-hegemonic movement. For if such a project manages to exploit the weaknesses—and thus de-legitimise—an hegemonic order, and constructs a feasible and favourable alternative, then the likelihood of its success increases. As Gramsci notes, 'in politics, once the war of position has been won, it has been won definitively' (Gramsci, 1971), and, as argued by Richard Lester in a similar vein, 'without a successful penetrative war of position in civil society, any kind of offensive aimed at overthrowing the state's institutional apparatus will come to grief precisely on the "trenches and fortifications" of civil society' (Lester, 1995).

This 'more culturally inclusive' construction of counter-hegemony allows for a greater understanding, within IPE, of the anti-globalisation movement. In addition, such a framework provides a basis on which to explain the various activities that exist within the movement. One example is provided by the Zapatista uprising, which took place at the beginning of 1994 and demonstrated that certain forms of resistance can simultaneously address international and local

political economy. The Zapatistas came to prominence within hours of the start of the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), in January 1994. Their objectives appeared to be two-fold: first, the rebellion was geared towards enshrining land rights for the indigenous Mexican peasants that would be impossible to grant under the new NAFTA laws on the liberalisation of land. These land rights had previously been enshrined in the Mexican Constitution, after an historical struggle between the colonial classes and the peasants that led to the formal recognition of the cultures and rights of the peasants within the Mexican nation-state. Second, the rebellion was the first to draw upon the wider processes of the 'network society' in order to gain support for its actions (Castells, 1997). By engaging with internet and media outlets, the Zapatistas have managed to gain support from international blocs and alliances, all of which are geared towards a contestation of the wider processes of neoliberalism. In addition, subsequent 'carnivals against capitalism' have responded in kind to the rebellion through the symbolic donning of masks—a form of disguise used by the rebels during the insurrection. Since Seattle, the mask has been recreated and used by anti-consumerist demonstrators drawing on the traditions of Situationism.

Counter-hegemony, Situationism and anti-consumerism

While the Zapatistas constitute an example of a counter-hegemonic movement that directly challenges the supra-national structures of neoliberal globalisation through the mobilisation of international blocs around the issue of local land rights, other movements associated with the anti-globalisation project challenge globalisation at the more subtle, but also significant, level of culture and ideology. For instance, the new 'anti-consumerist' or 'anti-corporate' movement, frequently identified with the works of Canadian journalist Naomi Klein, aims at forms of contestation intended to transform common-sense assumptions about civil society and, more specifically, the ideology of consumerism. Sklair (2001), Bauman (1998) and others claim that such challenges to globalisation at the level of cultural *ideology* are as significant in effecting social transformation as movements to directly challenge the structural political economy of globalisation. According to Sklair, it is

'important to theorize about the "culture-ideology" of consumerism, its role in confusing the issue of the satisfaction of basic needs, and the difficulty of mobilizing against global capitalism on the basis of anti-consumerist ideology … any attack on capitalist consumerism is an attack [on] the very centre of global capitalism' (Sklair, 2001). Sklair's emphasis on culture is consistent with recent developments in the field of Cultural Studies, which sees culture not simply as a symptom of globalised capital, but also as a source of a new 'political imaginary', providing sites of expression for a micro-politics of resistance, in terms of lifestyle politics, that could potentially inform, transform and affect in complex and subtle ways the myriad of structures which reproduce neoliberal consensus (Hetherington, 1996).

Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* (2001) focuses on the emergence of what she calls a new type of anti-consumerist activism, which challenges the intrusion of the commodity form into all avenues of public and private space. Some aspects of this anti-consumerist movement can be understood as subcultures of resistance to neoliberal globalisation, in the tradition of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. Hebdege (1979) illustrates how punks deliberately and purposefully crafted a strongly oppositional style of dress, jewellery, music and general demeanour, designed to expose the social contradictions of post-war Britain during the unemployment crisis of the 1970s and early 1980s. In his terms, the subversive power of punk lay in its power to wage 'semiotic warfare' in order to provoke visual outrage, disrupting the taken-for-granted world through, for instance, semiotically subverting authority figures and symbols such as the Queen, Thatcher, and the British flag. He says 'the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them … rather; it is expressed obliquely in style … the objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed … at the profoundly superficial level of appearances' (Hebdege, 1979).

Whereas punks expressed a 'semiotic resistance' to the post-war hegemony in Britain, Klein's 'culture-jammers' express a 'semiotic resistance' to the hegemony of neoliberal globalisation, through a variety of strategies designed to transform and subvert advertising messages and, therefore, the ideological foundation of consumer society. 'Ad-busting', 'ad-bashing' and the other strategies of anti-globalisationists identified by Klein subvert the messages purveyed by

advertisers, by exposing the various contradictions underlying advertising messages. For instance, the cynical targeting of vulnerable populations is exposed through the practice of 'skulling' or drawing skeletons, or writing 'Feed Me' on billboard models, in order to highlight the connection between advertising and eating disorders in teenage populations; the false equation of consumer 'choice' with agency is exposed by, for example, changing the Nike billboard slogan 'Just Do It' to 'Just Screw It'; the vacuousness of advertising messages is exposed through similar subversive interventions: for example, changing Absolut vodka slogans to 'Absolut Nonsense'.

Also popular is the strategy of juxtaposing images of consumer logos and icons with scenarios depicting poverty, war, and other direct and indirect effects of globalisation: malnourished children in Haiti (a site of toy and clothes production for the Disney corporation) wearing Mickey Mouse glasses, or T-shirts which proclaim 'Coke ads lie'. In this sense, culture-jammers use what they call the philosophy of 'ju-jitsu', or turning the momentum of the enemy back upon itself (Klein, 2001).

While anti-consumerist activists engage in a wide variety of strategies of resistance at a micropolitical level, many are members of 'virtual communities' with networks at local, regional, national and transnational levels. As Klein argues, the accessibility of new technologies makes the circulation of ad parodies much easier, and has facilitated the sharing of a variety of media technologies that have been used in such parodies (Klein, 2001). This practice of culture-jamming is, of course, not new. It has its roots in early- to mid-twentieth century art movements such as Dadaism and surrealism, and reached political maturity with the subversive artistic interventions of the Situationist International (S.I.), led by Guy Debord. The S.I. developed a strategy of 'détournement', which involved lifting an image, message or artefact out of its intended context and recontextualising it in order to create new, usually subversive, meanings, often designed to shock or provoke (Worth & Abbot, 2001; see also Barnard in this issue).

Such critical engagements with consumerism, commodification and the advertising industry were also evident in experimental literature such as Patrick Hamilton's *Impromptu in Moribundia* (discussed by Maycroft in this issue). In keeping with Baudrillard's claim that, in the context

of the 'society of the spectacle', more and more distracting and phantasmagoric images must be created in order to seduce the increasingly bored and hyper-stimulated consumer (Ritzer, 2001), culture-jammers create a 'spectacle' in order to combat the consumerist 'spectacularisation' of society.

While some of the more contemporary Situationist-inspired interventions discussed above have been the work of self-proclaimed individual anarchists, these practices are also the basis of the formation of 'media collectivities', with chapters in Boston, Seattle, Montreal and Winnipeg (Klein, 2001). These groups practice 'subvertising', combining ad-busting with the publication of 'alternative' magazines, pirate radio broadcasts and the creation of independent videos, all with anti-consumerist messages. These jammers are joined by a global network of 'hacktivists', who break into corporate websites and leave their own messages behind. As such, anti-corporate activists come from a variety of positions on the political spectrum, and have roots in socialist, anarchist, feminist and environmentalist traditions. Some of the Situationist activities of this movement have succeeded in garnering media attention and highlighting the anti-globalisationists' cause through spectacular and, at times, humorous media stunts. For instance, anti-globalisationists made world news by staging 'pie-in-the-face' protests, 'pieing' Bill Gates, Chevron's ECO Ken Dern, and former WTO director Renato Ruggario, under the slogan 'to their lies, we respond with pies' (Klein, 2001).

Central to the philosophy of 'culture-jamming' is the idea that reclaiming public space is itself a political act. For instance, Klein claims that anti-consumerist sentiments have emerged in part because people in North America and Europe are becoming so profoundly resentful of aggressive marketing campaigns, that they experience themselves as being aggressively 'stalked' by a kind of 'cultural fascism'. She identifies culture-jamming and other such practices as attempts to reclaim public space as advertisement-free, 'unbranded' space. Klein links the 'Reclaim the Streets' and 'Global Street Party' projects in Britain and North America with anti-globalisation projects, on the basis that participation in parties, carnivals and festivals gives us a sense of 'what society would look like in the absence of commercial control' (Klein, 2001). This is in keeping with Bakhtin's work on medieval popular culture, which shows how the carnival provides a release from daily life and the constraints it places

on individuals, by advocating transgressive behaviour that challenges conventions of social order and authority. This transgression often takes place, as Stallybrass and White (1986) have suggested, through the symbolic inversion of the meanings associated with the established binary codes that make up a culture.

It should be noted that Situationist protests and carnivalesque environments, while clearly transgressive and spectacular, are not, in every instance, strictly counter-hegemonic. Perhaps not surprisingly, not all members of the anti-consumerist movement are concerned with relocating affluent consumption within a broader picture of profound global inequality.

Some groups within the general movement have been more concerned with individual consumer rights: a position that runs the risk of reducing political action to the issue of 'proper' consumer choice. For instance, a recent book entitled *The Ethical Shopping Guide: The Guide to Guilt-free Shopping* (2004) implies that if one merely consumes the proper products, one is playing a part in global democracy—a position perilously close to a potentially reactionary rhetoric of liberal individualism.

However, despite such instances, the predominant political affinity expressed in the anti-consumerist movement is with movements that directly contest the project of neoliberal globalisation. Moreover, anti-consumerist websites and magazines (such as *Adbusters)* illustrate that there is significant overlap of membership between Situationist protesters, 'sweatshop-busters', and supporters of movements such as the Zapatistas and the World Social Forum. Aspects of the anti-consumerist movement can therefore be viewed as examples of Gramsci's 'war of position'.

For instance, some anti-consumerist campaigns have resulted in the mobilisation of a variety of protests and strategies, in the past ten years, to direct the media spotlight onto the discrepancy between the positive images propagated by well-known multinational corporations, notably Nike, McDonalds, Disney and Shell, and exploitative international labour practices and human rights violations.

Protests that draw attention to the contradictions and exploitative excesses of consumer society while rearticulating consumption within broader global inequalities do, therefore, potentially destabilise hegemonic consent, and thus present

a potential challenge to the neoliberal global political economy.

These protests, in their stronger forms, destabilise common sense, have the potential to convert sceptics to the cause of anti-globalisation, and may in fact promote a heightened sense of group-belonging or community—solidarity—amongst protestors. They provide an example of Gramsci's 'war of position'.

Conclusion

The cultural activities of the anti-consumerist movement, coupled with wider practices and events that are articulated against globalisation, demonstrate the importance of including diverse groups in the study of resistance. The rituals expressed in anti-globalisation demonstrations not only express moments of affinity with labour representatives, environmentalist and NGO campaigners and other counter-hegemonic movements; they also present a potential 'rupture in discourse' in the popular consumer imaginary, and in this fashion have the potential to produce a new political imaginary at the level of the everyday. Studies within IPE need to develop a wider understanding of these practices, so that they can be articulated more thoroughly within 'mainstream' studies of counter-hegemony and resistance. As Laclau suggests in *The Making of Political Identity* (1994), counter-hegemonic strategies articulate a wide variety of competing identities, at a wide variety of levels, but each provides a basis for analysis.

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