Crisis, social movements and revolutionary transformations

Alf Nilsen, Andrejs Berdnikovs and Elizabeth Humphrys

In every country the process is different, although the content is the same. And the content is the crisis of the ruling class's hegemony, which occurs either because the ruling class has failed in some major political undertaking, for which it has requested, or forcibly extracted, the consent of broad masses ... or because huge masses ... have passed suddenly from a state of political passivity to a certain activity, and put forward demands which taken together, albeit not organically formulated, add up to a revolution. A 'crisis of authority' is spoken of: this is precisely the crisis of hegemony, or general crisis of the state.

So wrote the Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci from behind the walls of Mussolini's prison, in his famous notes on "State and Civil Society". His words aptly describe the trajectory of crises in modern history – these are periods when the wheels of economic growth and expansion grind to a halt, when traditional political loyalties melt away, and, crucially, when ruling classes find themselves confronted with popular movements that no longer accept the terms of their rule and seek to create alternative social orders. The clashes between elite projects and popular movements that are at the heart of any "crisis of hegemony" generate thoroughgoing processes of economic, social and political change – these may be reforms that bear the imprint of popular demands, and they may also be changes that reflect the implementation of elite designs. Most importantly, however, crises are typically also those moments when social movements and subaltern groups are able to push the limits of what they previously thought was possible to achieve in terms of effecting progressive change. It is this dynamic which lies at the heart of revolutionary transformations.

Gramsci himself witnessed, organised within and wrote during the breakdown of liberal capitalism and bourgeois democracy in the 1910s through to the 1930s. Ours is yet another conjuncture in which global political elites have failed in an undertaking for which they sought popular consent, and as a consequence popular masses have passed from political passivity to activity. Since the middle of the 1990s, we have seen the development of large-scale popular movements in several parts of the globe, along with a series of revolutionary situations or transformations in various countries. There has been an unprecedented level of international coordination and alliance building between movements, and direct challenges not only to national but also to global power structures.
Each country has had its own movements, and a particular character to how they have responded to the neoliberal project. For some time many have observed that these campaigns, initiatives and movements are not isolated occurrences, but part of a wider global movement for justice in the face of the neoliberal project. In this issue of Interface we explore how social movements have responded to contemporary crisis and in particular the acute crisis that global capitalism entered into from late 2008. In order to contextualise this focus, it is useful to reflect on how crises and social movement struggles have coalesced to produce the current conjuncture.

**Lineages of the Current Crisis**

In late 2008, the world witnessed an economic crisis of such proportions that it has thrown the fundamentals of the neoliberal project into question. Even mainstream media commentators and representatives of the global capitalist elite made comparisons to the onset of the Great Depression of the 1930s – another crisis that followed a sustained period of unabated laissez-faire economics – and conceded the possibility that the bewildering architecture of global finance might be in need of some kind of public regulation.

The two moments of crisis are indeed deeply interrelated. The outbreak of the Great Depression in 1929 signalled the beginning of the end of the era of liberal capitalism – an era which had been consolidated under bourgeois hegemony in the nineteenth century. It was not just that the economic crash undermined the legitimacy of the liberal edifice that had prevailed during the Roaring Twenties; it also served as a catalyst for class struggles and social movements that had been ongoing since the closing decades of the 1800s (Silver and Slater 1999).

Allowing for brief periods of countervailing tendencies, the period stretching from the economic downturn of 1873-96 up to the First World War (WWI) was one of rising labour militancy (Silver 2003: 131-33). Although the early years of WWI saw a decline, it eventually proved to be a watershed as revolutionary crises spread throughout Europe (Halperin 2004: 283-5). During the years between WWI and the Second World War (WWII), there were several attempts by ruling classes to return to economic liberalism, but this merely triggered "a new round of social dislocation" in the form of the Great Depression of the 1930s, and unleashed yet another "vicious circle of international and domestic conflict", which culminated in the outbreak of WWII (Silver 2003: 142). Thus, WWII became a decisive turning point: "At its end, the region was wholly transformed. While previous conflagrations had been followed by restorations ... the decisive shift in the balance of class forces in Europe that had occurred as a result of World War II made restoration impossible" (Halperin 2004: 283). In place of the laissez-faire regime of earlier times, what emerged was a capitalist economy which – in the words of Karl Polanyi (2001) – was "embedded" in a series of social regulations that more or less effectively redistributed a larger share of the surplus produced to labour through rising wages and welfare provisions. In a historical class compromise, these concessions were offered in

The collapse of liberal capitalism was coeval with the end of European colonial rule throughout large parts of the world. Up until WWI, demands for national liberation in European colonies had largely been raised by native elites who "made little attempt to mobilise the mass of the population into the nationalist struggle" (Silver and Slater 1999: 200). During the interwar years, this changed as nationalist leaders extended the scope of opposition to colonial domination by integrating peasants and workers in their movements. Links were established between liberation movements, and the discourse of anti-colonialism was infused with demands for social justice and national development (Wallerstein 1990). The challenge of anti-colonialism resulted in a massive wave of decolonisation after 1945, which brought national self-determination to the countries of Asia and Africa (see Berger 2004; Prashad 2009). Although the Third World remained in a subordinate position in the global capitalist economy and its working classes saw less of the reforms that had benefited Northern workers after WWII, decolonisation did bring some significant concessions. It was evident to elite powers – in particular the USA as the newly emergent hegemonic state of the capitalist world-system – that sovereignty alone would not pacify the restive masses of the former colonies; it was also necessary to promote growth and development (Arrighi 1994). This compulsion was addressed through the establishment of the Bretton Woods system, which put in place an institutional framework for public regulation of international trade and finance. Allowing for the protection of home markets and support of domestic industries, this system granted some space for Third World states to pursue strategies of national development (Kiely 2007).

The form of capitalist accumulation that emerged after WWII, then – a regime of accumulation characterised above all by the embedding of the economy in structures of state regulation and control – was, above all, the outcome of a historical conjuncture in which "[s]uccess for the world's anti-systemic movements now seemed for the first time within reach" (Wallerstein 1990: 27). The origins of the present crisis can be traced back to the attack that global capitalist elites launched to disembed the market from regulation and control as economic stagnation set in towards the end of the 1960s (Harvey 2005).

The decades of the 1950s and 1960s were, on the whole, a "golden age" for capitalism in the sense that states across the North-South divide witnessed significant growth rates and increases in the standard of living of substantial sections of their populations (Armstrong, Glyn and Harrison 1991). However, by the end of the 1960s, the advanced capitalist countries had begun to descend into what would turn out to be a structural crisis: unemployment and inflation soared, productivity and profitability dwindled, and fiscal crises undermined the position of the dollar in the world economy (Kiely 2007). This occurred in the context of the rise of militant workers' struggles and new social movements that challenged bourgeois hegemony on multiple fronts (Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein 1989; Watts 2001). In this context, "[t]he upper classes had to move
decisively if they were to protect themselves from political and economic annihilation", and they did so through the project of neoliberal restructuring (Harvey 2005: 15). The first and crucial step in this direction was taken by the Nixon administration when, in 1973, it abandoned the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates. The effect was "to dis-embed financial capitalism from the embedded liberalism ... of the post-war agreement" and to lay the basis for the spiral of financialisation which has fuelled the current crisis (Kiely 2007: 61).

The neoliberal project gained a decisive footing in the 1980s. By the onset of the decade, the militant movements of the late 1960s and 1970s had either been defeated or fragmented, and the social-democratic left in the North was incapable of shouldering a credible alternative to its traditional Keynesian policy regimes. In the South, the developmental states that had been at the core of radical Third Worldism had collapsed under the weight of the international debt crisis, which erupted as advanced capitalist countries turned towards restrictive fiscal and monetary policies from the late 1970s onwards. In the North, the neoliberal agenda was advanced by and through both conservative and social democratic parties that came to power in the early years of the decade; in the South, it progressed through the imposition of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) administered by the World Bank and the IMF and supported by emergent elites seeking closer integration in global circuits of accumulation. Across the North-South axis, neoliberal policy regimes were fairly similar, and centred on restrictive monetary and fiscal policies as well as reduced public expenditure on welfare programmes, tax cuts, privatisation of publicly owned enterprises, and deregulation of industry and the labour market (Harvey 2005; Klein 2008). The question is, what was achieved through the entrenchment of this agenda?

The neoliberal counterrevolution essentially took aim at reversing the victories won by popular movements in the aftermath of WWII, and in doing this it succeeded in transferring wealth from popular classes to global elites on a grand scale. In a crucial survey of the achievements of neoliberalism, David Harvey (2005: 156) notes that the agenda of liberating the market from the constraints of state regulation has not succeeded in reinvigorating economic growth and productivity, and unemployment is at an all time-high. The sole success of neoliberalism in this respect, he asserts, has been to curb inflation. However, neoliberalism has nevertheless been a success from the point of view of capitalist elites across the world in that a key outcome of the project has been to "transfer assets and redistribute wealth and income either from the mass of the population towards the upper classes or from vulnerable to richer countries" (Harvey 2006: 153). This has been made possible through a range of mechanisms that he refers to as "accumulation by dispossession" – that is, through mechanisms such as privatization, which converts public assets to commodities and open up "new fields for capital accumulation in domains hitherto regarded off-limits to the calculus of profitability" (2006: 153). Through this process, neoliberalism has restored the class power of capital and enabled global elites to regain the ground that was lost to popular movements after 1945. In the process, inequalities within and between countries have escalated
dramatically, developmental advances in the global South have been undermined and in some cases reversed, and ever-larger sections of humanity have been marginalised from the orbits of production, accumulation, and consumption (Dumenil and Levy 2004; Davis 2006; Taylor 2008; Castells 2001; Hoogvelt 2001; Wade 2004; Waquant 1999).

A key mechanism of accumulation by dispossession is "financialisation" (Harvey 2005) – the proliferation of new financial trading models that followed in the wake of the unravelling of the Bretton Woods system and the consequent liberalisation of global finance. The scale of this proliferation is evident in the fact that, from 1980 to 1995, international currency transactions increased six times more than world trade – the ratio of currency transactions to total world exports increased from 8:1 in 1980 to 48:1 in 1995 – and in the equally astounding fact that the ratio between international currency transactions and total world GDP increased from 2:1 in 1980 to 11:1 in 1995. By 2001, the daily turnover of financial transactions in global markets had reached $130 billion – compared to $2.3 billion, which was the annual turnover in 1983 (Harvey 2006: 154). As John Bellamy Foster (2008) has pointed out, this represents a qualitative shift in the position of finance in the overall economy:

By the end of the [1980s], the old structure of the economy, consisting of a production system served by a modest financial adjunct, had given way to a new structure in which a greatly expanded financial sector had achieved a high degree of independence and sat on top of the underlying production system.

Financialisation is a strategy that has worked to the distinct advantage of global capitalist elites. As Harvey (2006: 154) has pointed out, deregulation has enabled "the financial system to become one of the main centres of redistributive activity through speculation, predation, fraud and thievery" - whether it is through stock promotions, Ponzi schemes, structured asset destruction through inflation, asset stripping through mergers and acquisitions, debt incumbency, corporate fraud, or dispossession of assets through credit and stock manipulations.

Financialisation was also, of course, at the core of the crisis of 2008-2009, which originated in the US housing market. By the late 1980s, trading in financial assets had become increasingly central to Wall Street banks. New trading models that focused on exploiting short-term differences and shifts rather than promoting long-term investments emerged – and these models would, if necessary, create asset price bubbles in order to influence price levels in their favour. Gradually, these new models were consolidated in what Gowan (2009) called "a shadow banking sector". The shadow banking sector consists of new form of banks – for example, hedge funds, private equity groups, and special investment vehicles – that engage in speculative arbitrage without regulatory control. These banks in turn focus their activities on new forms of financial products and practices, especially the credit derivatives market, where they buy and sell collateralised debt obligations (CDOs)\(^1\). These new banks

\(^1\) CDOs are bundles of securitised house mortgages, which combine high, medium, and low risk mortgages, along with other types of debt, with high credit ratings.
discovered a lucrative business in converting consumer debt into securities and selling these to pension and mutual funds. However, in order to finance this the banks took on more debt against the wager that returns on securities would remain above the cost of borrowing. For some time, the prospects for this seemed good: lowered interest rates combined with generous repayment schedules produced a bubble in the sub-prime housing market as low-income groups were able to buy houses even when prices were rising. The mortgages of these low-income groups were in turn sold on a large scale in CDOs: in 2005, the amount of sub-prime mortgages had risen from $56 billion in 2000 to $508 billion in 2005. The bubble burst, however, when, in the last quarter of 2006, the interest rate was hiked in order to protect a falling dollar, causing major banks and investment firms to collapse like what they had increasingly become, namely castles made of sand (Blackburn 2008; Foster 2008; Gowan 2009).

The collapse of the sub-prime housing market and the crisis it triggered did not only lay bare the contradictions of the growth model of the capitalist heartland – a growth model centred on consumer demand driven by credit expansion in a context of stagnant and declining incomes and a lack of new investment – but also seemed to vindicate the indictment of the global capitalist economy that had first caught the world’s attention on the streets of Seattle ten years before, when massive protests played a key part in shutting down the WTO ministerial conference in November 1999 and signalled the crystallisation of a "movement of movements" that challenged the hegemony of neoliberal globalisation.

Looking back at a decade of efforts to organise anti-capitalist resistance at a transnational scale, Katharine Ainger (2009) writes about the crisis and its significance for social movements:

The movement was like the child in the crowd as the emperor of global neoliberalism wheeled by, pointing out that his cloaks were woven from financial fictions and economic voodoo. They must now be credited for their prescience. Today, everybody can see the emperor has no clothes ... We are entering a singular moment of climate chaos and food shortages, a social and energy crisis as well as financial meltdown.

The question we have to ask ourselves, and the question posed in this issue of Interface, is of course what challenges and opportunities the crisis has offered to movements in their specific locales of struggle, and how and to what extent movements have responded to these challenges and opportunities. Ainger is indeed right in pointing out that the current crisis is composite, and that it goes to the very heart of capitalism as a system of economic, political, social, cultural, and ecological organisation. It is also evident that global capitalist elites are responding to their loss of hegemony with increasingly coercive strategies – this is evident not only in the increasingly brutal policing of protest and the onslaught on civil liberties as a result of the "war on terror" after September 11, but also in the increasing criminalisation and penalisation of poverty and the containment of so-called failed states (Gill 1997; Wacquant 1999; Duffield 2001). Yet as Gramsci reminds us, "[i]t may be ruled out that immediate
economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events. They can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life”. It is therefore necessary to question whether the "movement of movements" has mobilised effectively to exploit the crisis of legitimacy that is engulfing global neoliberalism, in order to decisively advance an agenda of progressive social change, either in the form of substantial reform, or in the form of revolutionary transformation, as popular movements did when the liberal capitalist order crumbled in the middle of the twentieth century.

Scenarios of Resistance

Francis Fukuyama’s thesis, that the new era would involve globalisation victorious and the acceptance of liberal social and economic organisation universally (1992), was in crisis at the end of last century. As the "movement of movements" grew, social movement participants argued and imagined quite a different future to that offered by the current world system.

In Mexico the Zapatistas raised grievances over sovereignty and repression in Chiapas, and the Water Wars were fought in Bolivia. Demonstrations over poverty and foreign debt grew, and in 1998 a significant demonstration of approximately 70,000 protesters at the G8 Summit in Birmingham remonstrated that third world debt should be forgiven. On the same day, in other locations, there were solidarity actions and over 30 events where activists under the banner of Reclaim the Streets "took back" parts of their cities (Grenfell 2001: 243; Klein 2000: 319 – 320).

While there were growing protests and disquiet, it was the blockades at the Seattle WTO Summit on November 30 1999 that launched this new movement on to a global stage (Cockburn, St. Clair and Sekula 2000; Starr 2000). Building on the campaigns of the previous decade around third world debt, corporate responsibility, environmental justice and poverty, the protests blockaded the WTO meeting venue and prevented access of delegates to the building. The importance of Seattle was that campaigns and movements involved in raising political grievances that were often seen as peripheral moved to the centre of political debate. In that moment it became clear that what were previously viewed as marginal concerns on the globe’s fringes, had a distinctly urban representation and had moved (or marched) to the heart of political life. This new urban character was underlined by the use of urban streetscapes as fields of contestation, with chants such as "Whose streets? Our streets!" and "This is what democracy looks like". Questions were raised about global democracy and the sustainability of the current economic system. The legitimacy of the current order was in question, and a crisis of authority was clear.

Dissent was diverse, from movements in the developed world such as Jubilee 2000 and in the developing world such as Via Campesina. While the organisations and campaigns had specific aims – such as debt forgiveness or land justice – they were also enmeshed with a growing global critique of
globalisation, and behind the protests there were three critical socio-economic elements involved in the development of the movement. While all usefully described as criticisms of neoliberalism, three distinct forms exist: critiques of the Washington Consensus; critiques of globalisation; and critiques of the commodification of identity.

In 1989 John Williamson had coined the term the 'Washington Consensus' and detailed ten agendas that he believed the Washington elite agreed should be implemented in almost all Latin American countries to ensure their economic viability – from fiscal discipline and trade liberalisation to privatisation and deregulation (Williamson 2003: 10). Those criteria formed the basis of the agenda promoted by the Bretton Woods institutions and endorsed by Western Governments globally (Ellwood 2001). The criteria were, however, seen by the developing movement as only in the interests of the global ruling elites and in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 cracks appeared in this consensus from both above and below. Previous influential advocates, such as Harvard Economist and former advisor to the IMF Jeffrey Sachs and former Chief Economist of the World Bank (WB) Joseph Stiglitz, became increasingly and publically critical of the implementation of the agenda (Stiglitz 2002). The criticisms were on the basis that not only had the agenda failed to deal with the extreme poverty and social disadvantage in the South, but also that the agenda itself had been responsible for exacerbating the problem. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Tiger Economies, where "more of the same" was being promoted as the appropriate cure, resistance grew (Callinicos 2003a: 8).

The 1990s had also seen an unprecedented shift in the dialogue regarding economics in mainstream debate and the academy, and it was talk of globalisation that dominated (Kiely 2005: 1). As detailed above, in relation to the developing world this took the form of the Washington consensus and was imposed in part from the outside. A similar project known by various names existed in the North, such as Thatcherism in Britain, Reaganism in the United States and economic fundamentalism in New Zealand. The term globalisation was used to reflect a range of processes and claims regarding the economic, political, cultural and technological transformations within society. For some, globalisation was bound up in the rapid technological advances related to the Internet and satellite circulation of news and culture. Alternatively, others saw it as related variously to economic interconnectedness or global governance. Various definitions and understandings flourished, and the appreciation of globalisation reflected the political position and general discipline of the writer or activist (Starr 2000: 5 – 6).

But rather than simply being seen as a greater interconnectedness of the world economy or technology alone, most activists in social movements used the term colloquially to mean a process underpinned by the contested implementation of the neo-liberal and "free trade" project facilitated largely by the governments of the global north and institutions such as the IMF, World Bank and WTO (della Porta et al. 2006: 3). It was the questioning of globalisation that was at the heart of this growing movement. Importantly, and as Alex Callinicos argues in An
Anti-Capitalist Manifesto, the debate around globalisation is the contestation of the phenomenon along two dimensions – an explanatory debate around what it is and the extent to which it is occurring, and a normative debate as to whether it is "a good thing" (2003a: 144). As he points out, the views on one axis do not imply a certain view on the other. This is an important insight as it allows somewhat disparate actors, in terms of an understanding of what globalisation is and whether it is as significant, to join forces in a campaign against its perceived excesses and implications. Excesses which were receiving wide publicity in the mass media, arising from reports such as one in 1998 from the United Nations Development Program that noted the world's 225 richest people had a combined wealth of a trillion (US) dollars, and that this was equivalent to the combined annual income of the world's 2.5 billion poorest people (United Nations Development Program 1998: 30).

Alternatively, some of the foundation to the new movement resulted from concerns around the commodification of identity and culture. Released just moments after the Seattle demonstrations, Naomi Klein's book No Logo was in part a portent of the rising movement of movements (as it was conceived of and finalised before Seattle) and alternatively a cohering force for activists involved within it. Its words and enormous popularity gave heart to activists. In No Logo the movement found a theoretical scaffold for many of the concerns that were articulated at Seattle and the subsequent protests in Melbourne, Prague, Quebec, Gothenburg, and Genoa. Klein focused her book on the question of branding and the corporate multinational agenda of lifestyle creation, reflecting on the paradox this creates when one considers the outsourcing and sweatshop labour used to create the products. Klein saw this dilemma intractably linked to the practices of multi-national corporations, who seek the greatest profits through the lowest overheads. Klein argued that while once the resistance to the practices of multinationals was from protectionist quarters, who sought to protect local profits and industries, "connections have formed across national lines...[where] ethical shareholders, culture jammers, street reclaimers, McUnion organisers, human rights hacktivists, school-logo fighters and Internet corporate watchdogs are ... demanding a citizen-centered alternative to the international rule of the brands" (Klein 2000: 445 – 6).

Of course the counter movement took action as well, and activists faced brutal repression at protests. For example on the second day of the s11 protests in Melbourne, Australia, demonstrating against the World Economic Forum, the police force committed dawn and dusk assaults on blockades, using batons and fists on protesters (Burgmann 2003; McCulloch 2000 – 1). Only days later at the Prague protests against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) almost one thousand protesters were arrested, and Amnesty International claimed the police abused human rights and in some cases their actions verged on torture3. Nothing of course prepared protesters for the murder of Carlo Giuliani by the Italian Carabinieri at the Genoa protests in

---

2002 (della Porta, Peterson and Reiter 2006: 19 – 20). As the movement grew it was clear that the global elites would continue to deploy the force of the police and military to deal with the movement’s willingness to the test the limits of allowable civil disobedience and legal protest rights.

It was, however, the events on September 11 2001 in New York and Washington that provided the greatest challenge to the new movement as it attempted to deal with this change to the global political sphere, whilst also mounting a campaign against the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. September 11 had the immediate effect of pushing the movement off the streets. The protests scheduled for the IMF/WB annual general meeting in Washington on September 28 – 30, 2001, were called off even before the meeting itself was cancelled (Callinicos 2003b). A number of planned actions were re-cast by protest organisers as anti-war demonstrations (Podobnik 2004). In the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rise of US military action, activists were contemplating what the Wall Street Journal has asked far earlier in an editorial:

Remember the antitrade demonstrations? They were the top item in the news before terrorists attacked the World Trade Centre. Now they have receded to the netherworld where we have tucked all the things that seemed important then.4

Many activists felt that the event that turned the movement of movements from one on the offensive to one on the defensive, and in response to the attacks many movements were turned to a focus on the wars in the Middle East and responding to the widespread racialising occurring in the West. The space for debate in the mainstream media about neoliberalism and globalisation was squeezed out and "the political events following the September 11 attacks in 2001 gave rise to a dramatic shift in the consent/coercion balance of the neoliberal world order" (Stephen 2009:487).

September 11, however, did not mark the end of social movement struggle, but simply a change to its form. Moreover, on a global scale dissent exploded in the form of opposition to the wars waged by the US on Afghanistan and Iraq. The combined numbers of protesters on street demonstrations between 3 January and 12 April 2003 is estimated at 36 million by French academic Dominic Reynie (2005). Thus, in terms of sheer numbers, the mobilisation against the latter invasion was the largest political protest ever undertaken, leading the New York Times to call the anti-war movement the world’s "second superpower".

In some Latin American nations struggles have taken a different path to those in other parts of the globe. There, social movements campaigning over the implementation of the IMF project spilled over into anger with the local democratically elected governments of several countries. In this context, mass involvement of the rural poor joined with urban working classes and others to heavily shape national politics. There was a direct impact on the political situation at the top of society in Brazil with the election of Lula da Silva, in

---

Venezuela with the election of Hugo Chávez, and more recently in Bolivia and elsewhere.

While Lula was elected on a wave of disquiet from the struggles of the about neo-liberal austerity measures, in particular the struggles of the MST (Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement) and Via Campesina, he has maintained what might be called "market friendly policies" (even if relations with the United States have cooled during his incumbency). Although there have been growing concerns about his failure to lead change on certain systemic issues, and there is dissent within Lula's own Workers Party, in a context of a quicker-than-expected recovery from the GFC he remains popular despite his inability to run for a third elected term under the Brazilian constitution.

In Venezuela Chávez has attracted the attention of many involved in the movement of movements, as his election came on the back of the defeat of a military coup and the lockout of the foreign run oil industry. Chávez famously launched a plan to create "socialism in the 21st century" and has continued to critique and attack global elites, in particular on the global stage at United Nations meetings. However a political crisis has opened up in the face of corruption, bureaucratisation and the slow pace of change. The inability of Chávez to deliver on the hopes of the social movements that brought him to power has created increasing disillusionment internally and recently a victory for the right wing opposition in referenda and local elections. The direction of political struggle is uncertain in such a period of crisis.

In the global South, neoliberal restructuring has been under attack from popular movements since its initial introduction through SAPs in the early 1980s. Average per capita income fell by 15 per cent in Latin America and 30 per cent in Africa – the two continents of the global South that were the first to enter into the ambit of neoliberal restructuring – and poverty rates showed alarming increases. Unemployment rose rapidly in the same period, food prices escalated dramatically, and public spending on health and education plummeted. As the developmental states in the global South lost whatever limited ability they once had to undergird people's livelihoods through public spending, they also lost legitimacy among their citizens. This was reflected in the dramatic mushrooming of so-called "austerity protests" and "IMF riots" across countries in the South in the 1980s and the early 1990s: more than 150 protests took place to challenge the impacts of structural adjustment and defend the rightful entitlements of low-income groups and the poor (Walton and Seddon 1994).

Financial crises continued, of course, to rock the countries of the global South throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s. The early 1990s witnessed India turning to the World Bank and the IMF in order to be bailed out of a dramatic balance of payments crisis. The Chiapas uprising was less then a year old when Mexico was plunged into a dramatic fiscal crisis in December 1994. After several years of financial liberalisation, the so-called tiger economies of East and South-East Asia plunged into crisis in 1997. This crisis enabled the extension and consolidation of neoliberal restructuring in the region, but also provoked some
of the most dramatic popular riots in recent times in the region, forcing, among other things, the resignation of President Suharto in Indonesia. In December 2001, the economy of yet another "star pupil" of the IMF and the World Bank collapsed: Argentina experienced a dramatic economic crisis and, concurrently, popular protests that within a span of two days had succeeded in forcing the president to resign. During this period, the character of social movements in the South also changed, from defending the rights and entitlements that were entrenched in the developmental state towards envisioning and constructing alternatives to the processes that have done so much to deprive and disempower the popular classes – whether in the form of radical agendas for land reform, workers' control over factories, or alternative models of development (see Motta and Nilsen forthcoming).

Although, since the middle of the 1990s, we have seen the growing opposition to the neoliberal project and the crystallisation of the movement of movements in several parts of the globe, there are areas remaining largely untouched by these processes. For example, there is still a lack of left and emancipatory social movements in many countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The situations vary from state to state in these regions. On the one hand, there are quite a few social movements in the Balkans and the countries of Central Europe which correspond ideologically and programmatically to movements in the West or the South. On the other hand, most of the former Soviet Union countries have not been affected much by the wave of intense international networking between global justice and solidarity movements during the last fifteen years. Instead, there has been another, more regional networking which has embraced many countries of the area.

In contrast to the West and the South, many social movements and direct action groups in the ex-Soviet region did not originate from anarchist, progressive or green worldviews. Instead, they often either represent radical forms of right-wing nationalistic and xenophobic political culture, which has dominated most of the ex-Soviet area during the last twenty years, or they have developed varieties of Red-Brown ideological mixtures (National Bolshevism, Autonomous Stalinism, various domestic forms of Third Position, New Right etc.). Genuinely left and emancipatory groups in the region remain small and still a marginal force. In some countries, for example, in Latvia, there are no observable leftist groups at all. This perhaps is the explanation of why, despite the fact that the present crisis has hit Latvia harder than other countries of the European Union, there are still neither massive popular protests nor Labour mobilisation. The only massive crisis-related demonstration in Latvia, in which the protesters reached around 14000 people, was organised on 18 June 2009 by the Free Trade Union Confederation of Latvia against the amendments to the 2009 State budget prescribing substantial decrease in expenses related to social sector (Berdnikovs 2009). It is noteworthy that there has not been significant protest or campaign against the Latvian government's deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
As a counterpoint to this, it is clear that in some countries in Eastern Europe this has not been the dominant trend, for example in Poland. There, successive waves of neo-liberal shock therapy have been met with significant trade union and worker resistance as well as unprecedented electoral backlashes against successive pro-market governments. There have also been very large protests against Poland’s involvement in the war on Iraq as well as a 10,000 strong demonstration against the Warsaw Summit of the WEF in 2004 (Hardy 2009: 184 – 205).

Iceland, Greece and Thailand move

Political passivity, though, is not the common feature of the period. In the context of the present crisis, there are societies responding resolutely to anti-popular policies of their governments and international financial institutions. The nationwide referendum in Iceland in which more than 90 percent of voters resoundingly rejected debt repayment imposed by the banks, is a good example. Many voters appear to have paid little heed to warnings that without the debt repayment agreement, Iceland will be unable to raise loans from the IMF or succeed in a bid for fast-track membership of the European Union (Quinn 2010).

In Greece, broad masses of the people have moved decisively into intense activity. Following the youth revolt of December 2008, Greek movements responded to the government’s cuts packages with a wave of strikes and demonstrations. Thus there was a series of general strikes against the cuts imposed by the IMF, European Union and the Greek government, which led to a violent response by the state. Despite the brutal repression by the Greek police, the protests were the largest seen in recent decades, and prefigured the current resistance to attempts to impose savage austerity measures on the Greek working class in the name of reversing a sovereign debt crisis to the satisfaction of the bond markets.

Finally, the deepening economic crisis has also exacerbated a chronic political impasse in Thailand, pitting a radicalising mass movement of the urban and rural poor against the forces of the Thai political elite and military in a virtual civil war situation.

While these flashpoints have attracted the attention of both alternative and mainstream media, there is a paucity of discussion and analysis on how other social movements across different regions have responded to the present crisis or have used it to advance their agendas. In this issue of Interface, we encouraged submissions that explored the relationship between crises, social movements and revolutionary transformations, the character of the current crisis and how social movements have related and responded to it.

In this issue
The articles in this issue highlight aspects of the present economic crisis, the relationship of social movements to it and possibilities of revolutionary transformations. In addition to the themed articles dealing with these issues, there is a special section in response to David Harvey’s piece "Organising for the Anti-Capitalist Transition", which discusses the opportunities for an anti-capitalist movement in the current crisis setting. As in previous issues of *Interface*, there are a number of non-themed articles on aspects of understanding social movements.

This issue begins with Hilary Darcy’s interview with Ashanti Alston, a former member of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. The piece focuses on gender politics within the Black Panther Party and the role of women, queers, womanist and feminist groups within contemporary radical black politics. The interview also examines the heritage of Malcolm X from a unique point of view, in particular the influence of his teaching on the role of women within the Black Panther Party.

The interview with Ashanti Alston is followed by a testimony to Tim Costello, a worker-intellectual and a former truck driver who became a leading labour advocate and theorist. The testimony from Jeremy Brecher, an activist, writer, historian and long-time friend of Costello, reveals many interesting aspects of his friend’s life. Brecher tells of his first meeting with Costello in New York around 1969, talks about their collaboration on different books, and discusses Costello’s relationship with the radical student movements of the late 1960s.

John Charlton’s article was written in 2000 as a follow-up to Charlton’s classic "instant" oral history of the Seattle protests, "Talking Seattle", published in 1999. The article is enriched by an introduction that Charlton wrote in May 2010, examining important events since the year 2000 such as Bush’s victories, 9/11 and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the bank crisis of autumn 2008 and the protests in Greece.

The next articles touch on the issue of revolutionary possibilities, from different points and perspectives and in reflection of various challenges and risks. Colin Barker examines critical moments in the history of Polish Solidarity. He argues that Solidarity was, at least potentially, a social-revolutionary movement, but that compromises with the ruling regime, misplaced trust in "mediating forces" and abandonment of the goal of taking political power led to failure.

Kirk Helliker then analyses the issue of social transformation by focusing on two radical conceptions of emancipation. The first is based on a state-centred approach and proclaims the possibility of emancipation within, through and by means of the state. In contrast, society-centred emancipation speaks of developing counter-power inside civil society despite and without the state. By using this broad dualistic distinction, Helliker examines different notions of civil society, looks at particular struggles and discusses the politics of emancipation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Samuel R Friedman’s article addresses a fundamental question: how to create a radical social transformation without establishing equally bad or worse systems
of domination? Experience has shown that reformist social democracy leaves capitalism and state bureaucracies intact and that revolutionary movements have created or been transformed into non-democratic state bureaucracies. The author offers for discussion 14 theses that outline actions, formations and ideas that are needed for a real socialism-from-below.

Jean Bridgeman's piece links the practice of self-organised community learning to the possibility of structural transformation. As a working-class activist, community educator and researcher, Bridgeman discusses her findings from an action-research project that she has been making among working-class drug users in a small town in Ireland. Gaining people's trust, using their own lived situations as starting points, sharing common experiences and critical questioning are crucial for both positive community transformations and the development of resistance to class power.

Alfredo Duarte Corte contributes to the debate on whether it is possible to "change the world without taking power". By discussing some autonomous experiences in Mexico, the author reflects on the possibilities of developing anti-capitalist practices outside traditional institutional politics and the state.

Peter Waterman's article discusses the 2009 Belém World Social Forum, the first World Social Forum since the current financial crisis of capitalism. In his review of this event, Waterman distinguishes between the presence and programmes of the traditional national/international union organisations and that of the small, if growing, "alternative" Labour and Globalisation network.

In her event analysis, Maria Kyriakidou continues on the theme of gender politics, drawing upon the example of Greek leftist feminists who undertook action against sexist perceptions underlying the political formations of the Left in which they participated. According to Kyriakidou, there is an inherent contradiction in the fact that one can fight against the capitalist state and war as part of a movement within which that person embodies and reproduces the power structure, authority and hierarchy of patriarchal societies.

Anne Elizabeth Moore focuses her action note on the 2009 Winter Unlympiadi that was organised against the attempt to bring the 2016 Olympic Games to Chicago. Given the expected negative impact of the construction of the Olympic Stadium and Olympic Village on the local community, groups of artists and activists made a creative response by organizing the Unlympic Games. The purpose was to raise public awareness and questions about the prospect of a 2016 Chicago Olympics.

Beth Gonzalez and Walda Katz-Fishman discuss their event analysis in the context of the present crisis and its implications for revolutionary action in the United States. The authors assess the underlying economic processes and anticipate new openings for social movements in the U.S. Gonzalez and Katz-Fishman believe that the current moment holds tremendous revolutionary potential and that the struggle for the immediate needs of a broadening section of the American people can be done in tandem with the struggle for a consciousness of actual interests.
This is followed by a special section "Debating David Harvey", devoted to the discussion of David Harvey's recent essay "Organizing for the Anti-Capitalist Transition". The section begins with Harvey's piece, which the author kindly allowed us to reprint. By using political economy analysis, Harvey argues that the current crisis offers a window of opportunity to reflect on how the transition to socialism or communism is to be accomplished. He continues by developing a co-revolutionary theory and points to five "broad trends" that can contribute to revolutionary transformations.

We present six responses by activists and scholars from different parts of the globe. The first is written by a long-time activist, Wille Baptist, who endorses Harvey's critique of capitalism but suggests that effective resistance to the system will have to be led by the poor. Relying on his experience in organizing amongst the poor for more than 40 years, the author argues that, historically, successful social movements have been led by those most affected by the problems they are working to resolve. A united struggle of the poor will require a massive program of training poor people as political leaders.

A K Thompson criticises Harvey for dismissing the local level and situated experiences. Although he finds Harvey's account of the current capitalist crisis to be mostly correct, he has some concerns with Harvey's co-revolutionary theory. Rather, Thompson believes it is necessary to open up dialogues about the political importance of daily life and begin from a dialectical analysis of the relationship between daily life and the trans-local processes that organise it.

Benjamin Shepard argues that it is hard to imagine a more coherent articulation of what is wrong with an existing state of affairs than Harvey's. However, he questions Harvey's prescription for solutions. The tension remains in how to connect the systemic analysis with movement practices and a feasible strategy toward action.

Laurence Cox criticises Harvey for focusing so much on structural analysis and political economy, while ignoring and trivialising actually-existing movement practice. According to Cox, the structural analysis does not tell us where people are suffering and about to enter the struggle, and how we can make links with them and what form those links might take. The fundamental question "what should revolutionary actors do?" is left untouched by political economy.

Anna Selmeczi responds to Harvey by examining the "living politics" of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the largest South African shack-dwellers' movement. The author asks if Harvey's commitment to scaling up the level of political action, alongside a project of political education, risks removing politics from the grasp of the people who are currently struggling to restore their right to political speech and imagination.

The article by Marcelo Lopes de Souza discusses a "right to the city" concept which has been developed by Harvey elsewhere. He tries to show the limits of Harvey's approach and considers what a "right to the city" could be from a libertarian point of view. The author argues that, from such a point, Harvey's
words sound very much like an attempt to see partially new phenomena through old lenses: namely through the lenses of statism, centralism, and hierarchy.

In our key document section, the group of authors (Romina Veliz, Luciano Zdrojewski, Pablo Cortés, Ana Guerra, Ezequiel Adamovsky, Martín Baña y Aldo Chiaraviglio) discuss alternative modes of practicing people's history (divulgación de historia). Since modern history has been written by the ruling elites in order to legitimate their rule, there is a necessity for new historical narratives, as well as new historians capable of articulating these narratives.

Emma Dowling reviews the book *The Will of the Many: How the Alterglobalisation Movement Is Changing the Face of Democracy*, written by activist and researcher Marianne Maeckelbergh. Dowling argues that the book unpacks the alterglobalisation movement's practices of organisation and decision-making in order to demonstrate how prefigurative politics work in real life. In contrast to previous social movements, it is forms of organisation – as opposed to ideals or goals – that are alterglobalisation movement's ideology.

Adrienne Showalter Matlock reviews Daryl J. Maeda's book *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America*, which examines the influence of the Asian American activist and identity movement of the 60s and 70s on the formation of Asian American identity. Since the importance of Left and radical groups has not been discussed widely in previous research on the Asian American community, the book makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on both the formation of this community's identity and the activism of the 60s and 70s.

In her review of Rory McVeigh's book *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, Allison L. Hurst emphasises that the importance of understanding right-wing movements, especially those that construct racist and nationalist frames to explain massive social changes, has perhaps never been more urgent than it is today. McVeigh's book provides persuasive arguments that some of the current social movement theories are inadequate to explain right-wing movements or social movements that originate with the privileged.

Donagh Davis reviews Mastaneh Shah-Shuja's book *Zones of Proletarian Development*, which represents an innovative approach to analysing contemporary social movements and popular contention against the capitalist order. According to Davis, Shah-Shuja deserves credit for the novel initiative to bring the theories of Soviet writers such as Bakhtin, Vîgotsky and Volosinov to discuss contemporary protest activism and revolutionary politics.

Long time anarchist Deric Shannon highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the book *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* by Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt. Shannon argues that the authors try to represent class struggle anarchism, sometimes called revolutionary or communist anarchism, as the only anarchism, and this is both a major strength of the book, but also one of its weaknesses.

Janeske Botes reviews the book *Contesting Patriotism: Culture, Power and Strategy in the Peace Movement*, in which Lynne Woehrle, Patrick Coy and Gregory Maney analyse the discourse of 15 North American peace movement
organisations throughout five conflict periods. Botes believes that, apart from its academic merits, the book is able to benefit peace movement organisations worldwide in the construction of messages aimed at the public.

The issue is closed by Israel Rodriguez-Giralt's review of the anthropologist and activist Jeff Juris' book *Networking Futures: The movements Against Corporate Globalisation*. This book explores the political and cultural practices involved in the construction of transnational networks by activists who oppose neoliberal globalisation. For these activists, the network as such turns into a powerful cultural ideal and into a primary organisational logic that models and inspires new forms of radical direct democracy.

We hope that these various pieces, which are written by both movement participants and academics, contribute to a dialogue between academia and activism and provide a living interaction between the different notions on the relationship between crises, revolutionary transformations and many other aspects of social movement activity.

**Bibliography**


della Porta, Donatella et al. 2006, *Globalisation from Below: Transnational Activists and Protest Networks*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.


Silver, Beverly and Slater, Eric 1999. "The social origins of world hegemonies", in Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver (eds.), *Chaos and governance in the modern world-system*. Cambridge: CUP


About the authors:

Alf Gunvald Nilsen is a postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Bergen, Norway. His research interests include social movement theory and research, the political economy of capitalist development, and critical development research - with a particular focus on social movements in the global South. He has written and published on the Narmada anti-dam movement and social movement theory and research in a number of international journals, and is the author of Dispossession and Resistance in India: The River and the Rage (Routledge, 2010) - a monograph on the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Alf Nilsen is currently involved in participatory research on adivasi struggles and the political economy of the local state in western Madhya Pradesh.

Andrejs Berdnikovs is an activist and a researcher at the University of Latvia. As an activist, he is particularly dedicated to academic solidarity initiatives and alternative science communication. His research interests include social movements, self-organized communities, revolutionary parties and affinity groups in the ex-Soviet region. He uses the methods of participatory action research and co-research in his efforts to empower marginalized and disadvantaged communities. During 2008-2009 he was a Fulbright Research Scholar at the University of Washington, Seattle.

Elizabeth Humphrys is a social movement activist in Sydney, Australia. She is a part time research student at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), and researches the impact of 9/11 on the global justice movement.