COMMENTARY

The global moment

Seattle, ten years on

Rodrigo Nunes

What are we to make of an anniversary that no one celebrates? The year 2009 may be remembered for many things: the greatest capitalist crisis in over a century, the first year of the Obama presidency, the transformation of the G8 into a G20 (and the first massive geopolitical rearrangement since the fall of the Soviet bloc), the ecological crisis definitively establishing itself as a widespread concern (even if it means very different things to different groups). One thing, however, was conspicuously absent from the year's calendar: the tenth anniversary of the protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle, which made of 1999 the year when the 'anti-' or 'alter-globalization' movement, or 'movement of movements', or 'global movement' became a visible phenomenon across the world.

In 2009, of course, 'celebration' was not very high on the agenda, even – or especially – if looked at from the point of view of those protests. If anything, the problems highlighted then seem more pressing now, the threats they pose more acute. More importantly, while the danger grows, the redeeming power seems to recede. It is tempting to say that time has proved those protesters ten years ago right, but the capacity for immediate action in the present seems ever more remote. Today, the liveliness of debate, the wealth of different experiences and – more importantly – the intensity of mobilization, the determination and the hope of those years seem far away. Surely this is sufficient reason to revisit the period, as a source of inspiration and a way of stoking whatever embers are left? in which case, should the silence be interpreted as yet another symptom of the present lethargy? Or could it also be a sign of a something else: an unspoken avoidance or implicit recognition of that period as a source of impasse, a dead end?

The failure of the 2003 anti-war mobilizations to stop the Iraq war opened the season of public questioning regarding the effectiveness of 'the movement'. Thus, for instance, Paolo Virno:

> The global movement, from Seattle forward, appears as a battery that only half works: it accumulates energy without pause, but it does not know how or where to discharge it. It is faced with an amazing accumulation, which has no correlate, at the moment, in adequate investments. It is like being in front of a new technological apparatus, potent and refined, but ignoring the instructions for its use.[1]

By 2007, a major player in the World Social Forum process wondered whether the time had not come for it, 'having fulfilled its historic function of aggregating and linking the diverse counter-movements spawned by global capitalism… to give way to new modes of global organization of resistance and transformation'.[2] It became common to hear that 'the movement' had failed to produce 'proposals' or 'alternatives', and hence squandered its accumulated energy and opportunities to deliver on the promise

that the blue-sky lightning of Seattle had suggested. There were many alleged culprits: the incapacity to deal with diversity, or an absolute emphasis on diversity making political definitions impossible, depoliticized 'movementism' and 'life-stylism', the atavistic reformism of parties and unions (and of course NGOs).

Yet if one asks the seemingly straightforward question of what has been achieved since then, it is just as true to say 'a lot' as 'not nearly enough'. The various blows to the WTO project, successful anti-privatization campaigns such as the ones around water and gas in Bolivia, the election of progressive governments across Latin America, the opposition to the neoliberal constitution in Europe, the defeat of the CPE in France… plus a huge number of local victories, small victories, partial victories, even defeats that resulted in the creation of new possibilities that might one day result in victories. One could certainly ask: what does any of this have to do with the 'global movement' as such? But this, precisely, takes us to the crucial difficulty in talking about a 'global movement': how are we to tell it apart from its constituent parts? How are we to isolate whatever these parts do *as parts* from what they do in conjunction with others, or the aggregate effect of what all of them do?

Take the struggles against the WTO – the one example from those above that can be least problematically attributed to the 'global movement'. Until the Seattle protests, negotiations soldiered on with the time's distinctive sense of inevitability, and governments would hardly bother to inform, let alone consult, their citizens. That sudden crystallization managed to foreground a dissent that could have remained marginal and powerless if not for that instant when certain forces recognized themselves in a common struggle, and it certainly began to tilt the agenda. A series was opened that made it possible for opposition to neoliberal policies to grow, for different movements to communicate with and reinforce each other, for other moments of convergence to occur, in a chain of positive feedbacks that undoubtedly contributed to, for example, the election of progressive governments in Latin America. It may be that the effective cause of the WTO's 'derailing' was, in the end, the stronger stance taken by the governments of some developing states around the negotiating table; this, however, would probably not have happened had it not been for the presence of movements outside the gates, or for the broader sequence at the turn of the century through which this series unfolded. Nevertheless, at the time when these ultimate effects were produced, the 'global movement' was already regarded by many of its participants as a spent force.

How are we to think through this paradox: that its greatest victory arrived after its wane? What if the reluctance to celebrate today comes from a difficulty in thinking of a 'global movement' in any meaningful way? What if this, rather than dichotomies such as 'openness' versus 'decision-making', is the impasse that is sensed? And what if – to advance a hypothesis in the bluntest possible way – *the global movement never existed*? What if it was a *moment*, rather than a *movement*?[3]

One world is possible

The most literal way of speaking of a 'global movement' would be as a reference to those groups posing only explicit global goals, or whose space of action was essentially transnational. In the face of the plethora of social forces mobilized around the world at the time, however, such a definition seems scandalously narrow. (The greater currency enjoyed among many by the phrase 'global movement of movements' was no doubt due precisely to its indefinite, near-infinite inclusivity.) To limit the frame of reference in such a way would turn 'global movement' into a very reductive synecdoche. Yet this is exactly the *pars pro toto* logic that was (and is) often used by media commentators, whereby the expression comes to refer to what, in the global North, was the period's most visible manifestation: the cycle of summit protests (Seattle, Prague, Quebec City, Genoa and so on) and counter-summits (Social Fora and the like).

Avoiding this synecdoche is crucial, not only to stay close to the self-understanding of the actors concerned, but also to undo the confusion at the source of the present impasse. Thinking in terms of moment allows us to do so. This was a moment, first, because there was an intensification of activity on various fronts, including mobilizations against structural adjustment and privatization (Bolivia, South Korea, various African countries, Canada), against multinational corporations (oil companies, as in the Niger Delta; sweatshop-based brands, as in the USA), against migration policies (the *sans papiers* in France, various border camps in Europe, North America, Australia), against GMOs (several Via Campesina campaigns around the world), and many more. In most cases, these were not pitched as 'global' campaigns as such; they took place in the space of local or national politics, had national legislation and policies as their referents, and unfolded within a complex, multilayered field of relations and causal series where their 'global' dimension was always filtered by local, national and regional struggles, correlations of forces, institutional arrangements, conjunctures and contingent events. In this case, speaking of a 'global movement' appropriately would refer to nothing more than the sum total of these various forces' activities, the outcome of their political interventions and the transformation of social relations they managed to produce. Except that 'movement' would still have a metaphorical sense, calling a whole what is really only a collection: something whose only criteria for membership would be existence on the same globe, something that could never be totalized or given any kind of unitary shape or direction – a 'wild' in-itself, never to be fully appropriated for-itself.

However, there is one characteristic of the moment that began in the mid-1990s that sets it apart from previous cycles of struggle that took place simultaneously in various parts of the globe, such as those of the 1840s, 1920s–30s and 1960s–70s. In the sense disclosed by it, the 'global movement' would in fact exist only for-itself, and this for-itselfness would be the very quality making its emergence unique: a for-itself whose in-itself is not given. What is the unique characteristic of that emergence? This was the first cycle of struggles that defined itself in terms of its global dimension. The material element determining this difference was, of course, capitalist globalization itself, which created and strengthened structures and flows of communication, movements of people and goods to such a scale that the potential for connections between different local realities became widely accessible not only to the actors instrumental in the advance of capital, but potentially also to those who wished to resist it. This expanded potential for exchange and the production of commonalities resulted in enhanced awareness of the different impacts of neoliberal globalization, their interconnectedness, the

forms taken by resistance to them, and the ways in which these resistances could be placed in relation with each other. This, in turn, enabled concrete exchanges and mutual support between different local experiences, which, finally, conjured a potential: that of momentarily focusing this localized political activity into moments of shared relevance, whether at a global level (such as the mobilizations against the WTO or the Iraq war) or more locally.

These three factors – *awareness*, *concrete exchanges* and *potential for convergence* – constitute that moment's global dimension; and there is no contradiction between affirming this dimension as its defining feature and the fact that most of the movements and campaigns then active had local or national politics as their space of action and main referents. As a matter of fact, these three factors are precisely what created the mirage of a movement, when in fact what one had was a moment of rapidly increased capacity for communication and coordination, and wide-eyed astonishment at a just-discovered potential for channelling much of that activity into determinate spatio-temporal coordinates, creating moments of convergence whose collective power was much greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, while most of the activity effectively occupied the national or local political space, the key characteristic of that period was the widened perception of global processes. The 'global movement', in this sense, was literally something that existed in people's heads, and in the communication between them.

This is distinct from previous generations' 'internationalism': it refers to a shared belonging to an interconnected, interdependent world, rather than an aggregate of nation-states to be revolutionized or reformed one by one.[4] This means not only a heightened awareness of the commonality of natural commons, but a clearer grasp of the effects at a distance produced by a global market, and of the possibility of intervening in relation to these effects in ways that are necessarily restricted neither to national borders nor to the nation-state as the sole agency to be addressed. It is the increase in types of connection today – supranational (multilateral organisms, information networks), transnational (migrant networks) and infranational (among different regions affected by the same problem, for example, dams) – that opens up the possibility of interventions that need neither depart from the nation-state, nor retain it as their sole or immediate referent.

It has been argued that the famous 'Earth rising' photograph had an effect on the development of environmentalism; and indeed there is enormous power in the idea that 'there is only one world': once a physical limit is placed on the capacity to universalize, the rational operation of seeing one's lot as necessarily tangled with others' is given a concrete outline. That this 'concrete universalism' is coupled with the increase in the capacity to exchange and cooperate with 'concrete others' from all over the globe is one of the novelties of 'globalism'. Under its light, every struggle appears as neither exclusively local nor exclusively global: all struggles communicate on different levels, while no struggle can *in practice* subsume all others. There are no partial, 'local' solutions that can stand in isolation, and there is no 'global' solution unless this is understood as a certain possible configuration of local ones. What ended up being labelled as a 'movement' (the cycle of summit protests and counter-summits) was therefore nothing but the tip of the iceberg: the convergences produced by a much wider and deeper weft of connections, both direct (as when groups engaged in communication and coordination with each other) and indirect (when struggles resonated and reinforced each other without any coordination), among initiatives that were sometimes very local, sometimes very different, sometimes even contradictory.

That there was no 'movement' as such does not mean that it did not produce concrete effects; every moment of convergence fed back into these initiatives, creating and reinforcing connections, and strengthening the globalism that defined the moment,

nourishing the (subjectively effective) notion that all of this belonged in the same movement. This strength, however, would reveal itself as also being a weakness. The 'we' of that period became progressively stabilized as the 'we' of the summit protests and counter-summits – certainly a multitudinous, diverse 'we', but one which managed to sustain itself largely because of the short-lived nature of those convergences, their externally, negatively given object (where the 'one no' always had precedence over the 'many yeses'), and the positive feedback produced by their own spectacular, mediatic strength. The more entrenched the synecdoche became, the more these convergences came to be treated as an end in themselves, rather than strategic tools and tactical moments in what should be the constitution of 'another world'.[5]

Yes and no

That moment's passing can be partially explained by the impossibility of inhabiting the global level as such. The technological and tactical innovations ('swarming', the 'diversity of tactics' principle) that enabled large-scale convergences can only function at such a scale when their objects are externally given and negatively defined: anti-WTO, anti-war, and so on. The much-lamented lack of 'proposals' was never actually that; there was a dizzying *collection* of proposals, and what was perceived as a lack was in fact the impossibility of having 'the movement' subscribe to any of them *as global movement* – that is, *as a whole*. Moreover, there is a serious difficulty in thinking of global 'proposals' by analogy with those that can be placed in national political space, given that at the global level there is no one to address directly. One cannot lobby or influence transnational structures in the same way as national governments, as the unaccountability and imperviousness of the latter to political process is structural rather than contingent; whatever accountability they may have is ultimately mediated by national structures.

This became evident in 2005 in the attempt by a group of intellectuals associated with the World Social Forum to elaborate what they saw as a distillation of that profusion of ideas into a minimal, consensual programme.[6] Ultimately, the main problem with this document was not the way in which it was drafted, the lack of gender balance, or any of the other criticisms raised at the time, but that it is entirely unclear what its presumed target audience (the WSF, 'the movement') could actually do about proposals pitched at such a global level – apart from organizing demonstrations incorporating them as rallying points. They do not even function as demands, as there is no one to demand them from. At this level, antagonism remains purely representative: expressing a dissent that has no means of enforcement. This kind of dissent has some effectiveness in a parliamentary democracy, of course, provided it corresponds to a large enough constituency representing a relevant electoral variable. The problem is that, at the global level, this is impossible. However crucial it is to keep open the potential to focus political activity on singular global moments, such potential exists only as a consequence of capacity built at the local level, not as its substitute; it is only to the extent that local struggles enhance their capacity to act in their immediate environment that they can act globally in meaningful ways. In fact, privileging convergences can sap resources from local capacity-building, when the point should be precisely that the former reinforce the latter. If they do not, antagonism, rather than being the other half of building autonomy, comes to replace it; and, in doing so, it loses the grounds on which it can find support. It becomes the expression of political contents from which it is impossible to draw political consequences.

There was another reason why the global became uninhabitable. The context in which the 'global moment' unfolded changed drastically with the onset of the 'war on terror'. Not only was the main focus of conflict moved elsewhere ('good' versus 'rogue'

states, 'fundamentalism' versus 'democracy', 'Islam' versus 'the West'), it was displaced to a level of confrontation no movements were willing or able to occupy (state apparatus versus 'terror'). Moreover, the combination of an atmosphere of constantly reiterated alarm, and the creep into spheres of legislative and policing measures that served to criminalize social movements, had the subjective impact of reinforcing feelings of isolation, fear and impotence. Many individuals abandoned political involvement altogether; individuals and groups disengaged from the global level, refocusing on the local. In other cases, investment in the global at the expense of the local led to a disconnection between politics and life, representation (or antagonism) and capacity-building, burn-out, or a replacement of slowly built consistency for the quicker, wider, but also less sustainable, effects of the media.

Is the 'global moment' over? Yes and no. The material conditions that enabled it remain, as do the elements of awareness of global processes and (the potential for) concrete exchanges. There is no going back on this, as there is no going back on 'globalism', or the political consciousness of belonging to a single world. Whatever movements appear in the future will in all likelihood share these features, and they will do well to look back to those years and draw some lessons from what went right and wrong. To say that the expectations then built around the use of information technology (as almost a substitute for other forms of political action) were exaggerated does not mean that their possibilities have been exhausted, the recent Iranian protests being a good example. If anything, one would expect to see much more made of their potential for diffuse initiative and rapid dissemination; yet the question will always be, once the 'great nights' they can produce have passed, how to give consistency to the excess they throw up.

On the other hand, these movements would do well to disarm some false dichotomies that were strong then, such as the supposedly definitive choices between autonomy-building and antagonism (the latter requires the former to exist, the former at various junctures requires the latter to expand), or between absolute openness and capacity to act (any movement, any decision always strikes a balance between the two), or even 'taking' or 'not taking' power (recognizing the limits of what the state *can* deliver does not diminish the need to always push beyond them). It is far more important to develop the collective capacity to choose what mediators to have, *what* mediation to accept, and *when*. Building on these, managing to move beyond them; now that would be cause for celebration.

Notes

1. Paolo Virno, 'Facing a New 17th Century', 2004, www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno4.htm.
2. Walden Bello, 'The Forum at the Crossroads', 2007, www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/noticias_textos.php?cd_news=395.
3. This distinction is inspired by Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1968.
4. Even before the thesis of 'socialism in only one country' and the tactical retreat into nationalism, it was the case that proletarian universalism necessarily required the (national) communist party and trade-union movement as the initial supports and local agents of 'world revolution'; solidarity and collaboration among revolutionary movements mirrored the bourgeois internationalism of solidarity among nation-states.
5. One example of this entrenchment is the proposal for a permanent International Day of Action every two years. Tellingly, one proponent says of this idea – where 'one central subject, which touches everyone in the world, can be commonly put forward once every two years' as the theme for simultaneous worldwide demonstrations – that the theme 'could be global warming, trade, out-of-control finance, debt … I don't even care what the theme is; it's the principle of choosing it and of the unity that creates visibility that I think is important.' Susan George, 'Contribution to the Debate on the Future of the Social Forums and the Alter-globalization Movement', 2008, www.tni.org/detail_page.phtml?&act_id=18081.
6. VV.AA, 'Porto Alegre Manifesto', 2005, at www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2005–02/20group_of_nineteen.cfm.