Beyond Protest: Radical Imagination and the Global Justice Movement

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Abstract

Increasingly, both scholars and activists concerned with social justice recognize that radical imagination is essential to efforts to create sustainable alternatives to the pervasive hierarchies of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality that predominantly organize the current global world order. Yet, despite congruencies between radical theoretical insight and radical strategies of resistance, false material/ideological dichotomies persist, obscuring possible points of intervention in the capitalist utopias that sustain the status quo. The purpose of this project is to draw attention to projects of radical imagination within the global justice movement, and to offer theoretical and discursive tools to help the movement penetrate the ideological façade that renders the general public deaf—or worse, inimical—to the movement’s egalitarian goals.

Not infrequently, the pedestrian theorist is tempted to favor a mode of comportment that speaks the languages of systems of oppression, seeking within them redress or assistance. This temptation, seduction, is understandable and ubiquitous. We feel a need to demand equality, respect, and justice within a particular dominant construal of sense, even if that sense—conceptually, materially—requires that equality, respect, and justice be mechanisms congruent with fragmentation and domination.

-María Lugones

As processes of globalization spread corporate doctrine around the world, Western formulations of social hierarchy have increasingly become global phenomena that represent ideas of "modernity" and "progress." "Justice" and "equality" have come to be cast exclusively in capitalist terms, wherein "success," "independence," and "freedom" means taking a place--predetermined according to one's race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or nationality--in the social hierarchy as a producer and consumer. Scholars and activists concerned with social inequalities have extensively critiqued these discourses, lamenting the increasing corporatization of social institutions, the prevalence of a discourse that posits capitalism as desirable and inevitable in local and global contexts, and the way that these forces have led to a particularly insidious co-optation of radical and subversive thinking.

The dominant ideologies that prop up corporatist systems render invisible the violence necessary to maintain the wealth and comfort of a relative few. Disseminated through mainstream media and social institutions, such ideologies re-write history and erase moments of uprising; they cast those who challenge the world economic order as "terrorists" and those who struggle to survive under racist/classist/homophobic/sexist/ableist structures as "lazy." They obscure the connections and commonalities between people who might have shared economic or political interests and pit them against each other, eliciting the complicity of even those who have the most to lose under the current global world order. Together, such ideologies and the institutions through which they are disseminated reify and stabilize the hierarchies that order social realities. For radical movements that would seek to disrupt social hierarchies, the site of struggle is not just institutions, but the ideology that supports and runs through them. Those seeking to challenge the status quo must question how, if domination indeed occurs through the deployment of ideas, those ideas might be effectively challenged.

Due largely to the efforts of the global justice movement (GJM), resistance to these forms of domination has also become globalized. The GJM has been remarkably effective at challenging the neoliberal models of "success" formulated via institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, which have struggled to retain any semblance of credibility in recent years. The movement’s accomplishments, combined with the current global economic crisis, have created a rift in the discursive assertions upon which free market capitalism has rested. The fundamental instability of neoliberal economic policies has become evident to many who previously had an unshakable faith in "the system." What new order(s) might emerge from the economic collapse and the resultant regulatory processes remains to be seen, but there is reason to suspect that without sustained intervention, the future will hold more of the same, particularly in terms of state support for corporate/military interests over human welfare.

Beyond Protest
Ultimately, social transformation requires that we find ways to withdraw from hierarchical social configurations and live differently with each other, ways that can support the infinite degrees of variation that exist between individuals. How might societies be organized differently to serve the needs of their populations? How might work and cooperation be configured differently? Although there is a great deal of emphasis on imagination and the possibility of “other worlds” in the discourse of the GJM, social transformation remains elusive, in large part, I suggest, because the hopeful visions of the movement have not been able to disrupt the ideologies that foster complicity with the current world order. By tracing the lines of power through which dominant ideologies are circulated, this project seeks to locate the interstices between ideology and materiality where interventions of radical imagination might further the goals of the movement.

Methodological Approaches

This project employs feminist discursive analysis as its primary research method, examining texts generated by activists and scholars both within and outside of the global justice movement to better understand the tension that exists between social reality and imagination, the present and the future, and despair and hope. I write out of a deep concern with unchecked power exercised globally by the US in the form of “development” projects, trade agreements, and various other forms of capitalist indoctrination that conceal the socioeconomic disparities that exist within its own borders while recreating such conditions abroad. In this project I choose to focus primarily on GJM activism within the US because the corporate/military/governmental interests of the US are disproportionately represented in the structuring of the 21st century world order. Furthermore, although such efforts are growing in the US, workers’ movements and global justice activism outside of the US have proven to be quite adept at mobilizing grass-roots, egalitarian activism to create sustainable alternatives to capitalist systems. I see many parallels between the feminisms I value and the goals and strategies of the global justice movement, which by and large embodies the most radical theoretical insights of feminist, postmodern, postcolonial, and queer thinkers. Despite a dramatic increase in scholarship from fields such as sociology, political science, and international relations, it is critical that academics continue to draw attention not only to the individual strands of activist groups engaged in the struggle for global justice, but also the trajectory of the larger global movement of which they are a part.

Rachel Strasinger
Framing the Global Justice Movement

The GJM is a collective body of movements referred to by a variety of names, depending on the perspective (and interests) of those seeking to describe it. Generally, the activism of the GJM seeks to resist human and environmental exploitation, often understood to be the products of unchecked capitalism/corporate power and/or the results of unequal relationships of power between states. While there is a great deal of overlap between strands of activism within the GJM, clearly identifiable participants include feminists, socialists, anarchists, student and youth activists, union organizers, farmers, land rights and indigenous rights activists, human rights organizations, immigrant rights organizations, queer and anti-racist activists, anti-corporate activists, activists concerned with US hegemonic practices, environmentalists, activists concerned with sustainable development and fair trade practices, domésticas, anti-sweatshop activists, and, more broadly, opponents of neoliberal policy as formulated by institutions such as the World Trade Organization and International Monetary Fund, against whom much of the movement’s activism has been directed.

Given the diversity of actors, strategies, and goals within the movement, any attempt to speak of it as a cohesive whole is unavoidably superficial and inherently misleading. However, the critical mass represented by these divergent actors is precisely what makes the movement such a powerful force for change in the world, and it is this potential that nonetheless compels me to speak of the movement as a whole. The radical potential for social transformation within this network of movements lies in its conception as a coalition of actors that have a variety of goals but identify common obstacles to achieving them. Unlike many previous social movements, organizing within the movement occurs around affinities rather than identities. As a temporary alliance that requires actors to work across differences (of identity, social location, politics, etc), coalition harbors the potential to facilitate radical social transformation. Furthermore, a specifically postmodern conception of coalition allows for the kind of shifting, adaptive response that I understand to be imperative in efforts to confront the insidiousness with which institutionalized hegemonic forces are able to silence, dismiss, and co-opt radical discourses in order to deploy them in the service of corporate greed. This is not to suggest that coalition is easy; indeed, many argue that work that is truly co-alescional requires some tension. As Bernice Johnon Reagon notes, “I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you're not really doing no coalescing.”

Conceptualizing the GJM as a postmodern coalition positions it as a suitable challenger of modernist discourses that understand difference as a threat to solidarity and unification. As Robin Teske and Mary Ann Tetreault have noted,
“Diversity threatens precisely because it undermines standardization and thereby attenuates the authority of elites and their power to control others.” Diversity for many within the GJM is understood “as a resource and a value at the same time,” for, “it is pretty obvious that ten people with diverse (even formally incommensurable) perspectives are more likely to be able to come up with a workable solution than ten people who all share exactly the same experience and point of view.” Furthermore, as Judith Roof and Robin Wiegman note,

Systems of political hierarchy based on differences of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are not parallel to each other ... but interlocked, mutually created, and mutually maintaining. A setback or advance in one reverberates through the whole matrix of hierarchy creating consequences far from where such change began. This point clarifies why the new social movements can and must try to center analyses from the perspective of lives that have been marginalized within each movement.

Coalition does not demand that all actors be reduced to only one facet of their identity (queer, poor, immigrant, woman, etc). Although actors needn’t be the same to work together towards common goals, it is nonetheless imperative to recognize how systems of oppression are fundamentally intertwined.

One of the identifying features of the GJM is that its activism is largely shaped by a commitment to prefigurative politics, which suggests that “the means for attaining a nonviolent, noncapitalist and truly democratic society must be consistent with the goal.” Prefigurative politics assumes that the futures that are desired can only be configured through actions in the present that are in alignment with such visions. If it is indeed the case that, as feminist scholar Audre Lorde warns, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” the GJM’s desire to “effect political change without reproducing the structures that they oppose” requires that the means are commensurate with the ends. This is not to romanticize the movement as being immune to the dominant modes of thinking about race, class, gender, and sexuality that plague the rest of society. However, any effort at social revolution requires that we strive to decolonize our thinking, and a commitment to critical reflexivity runs throughout the discourse and practice of the movement. Unlike dominant discourses about hierarchy that always seek to relegate colonial forms of thinking to the past, the discourses of the GJM largely acknowledge that these dimensions of power are always at work in social relationships.

The search for the origins of the GJM is difficult, as many of its components have had a decades-long, if not centuries-long, activist presence in the US and around the world. However, scholars and activists within the movement

Rachel Strasinger
generally identify the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas that coincided with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as a galvanizing event for the GJM, if not, as it is considered by many, “the” moment-of-origin. The Zapatistas are credited with strongly influencing the goals and tactics of the movement, including the rejection of hierarchical and centralized leadership and the implementation of collective and consensus decision-making practices, and the use of the internet as a means of publishing ideas and coordinating activist efforts. Additionally, the Zapatista resistance in Chiapas is largely considered to have acted as a catalyst that helped draw multiple groups together into the movement of movements now referred to as the GJM.

Social Forums provide opportunities for movement-building, and People’s Global Action (PGA) and the Independent Media Center (IMC) have played important roles in disseminating information on upcoming events, documenting government violations of human rights, and maintaining extensive archives of literature, film, and photos of protests. The development of online network hubs is invaluable to the goals of the GJM, especially when taking into consideration the efforts of the corporate media to demonize the movement in public discourse. GJM activists are often referred to as “terrorists” or cast as a “threat to the nation,” and many end up on FBI terrorist watch lists. The availability of online information about individual activists, demonstrations, and upcoming protests makes GJM activists an especially easy target for monitoring by the FBI. The FBI seeks to justify this surveillance by pointing to the actions of strands of the GJM that advocate the destruction of corporate property and confrontational encounters with the police during demonstrations. Although direct action and black bloc activism sometimes include acts of “vandalism,” they explicitly exclude acts of inter-personal violence, a point conveniently ignored in most coverage of the movement by the corporate media. In fact, as activist/anthropologist David Graeber asserts, “it is still impossible to produce a single example of anyone to whom a US activist has caused physical injury.” He suggests that “what really disturbs the powers-that-be is not the ‘violence’ of the movement but its relative lack of it; governments simply do not know how to deal with an overtly revolutionary movement that refuses to fall into familiar patterns of armed resistance.”

However, as Eddie Yuen notes, the task of making these politics evident falls to the activists themselves: “Broken windows are not self-explanatory, particularly in a society that conflates corporate property with personal property in the same way that it equates socialism with the loss of individual freedom and shared toothbrushes.” The issue of property destruction is a source of much contention within the movement, but to its credit, rather than allowing this difference in perspective and tactical approach to become a source of fragmentation, differences in approaches to activism are generally

**Beyond Protest**
accommodated by splitting off into groups at demonstrations, or positioning those most willing to encounter physical violence at the periphery. In theory, this “diversity of tactics” protects those who believe in non-destructive resistance from incurring the wrath of state forces. However, the violent reaction of state forces to even the most peaceful of demonstrators has been extensively documented.

Although some have observed that the initial inertia of the GJM appears to have petered out in the wake of its many accomplishments, an estimated attendance of over 20,000 activists from around the world at the recent United States Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan (June 22-26, 2010) suggests that the desire and commitment to seek out alternatives to the current world order persists. This commitment was captured in the theme for the 2010 Forum: “Another World is Possible, Another US is Necessary.” As a movement-building process, the Forum represents a threat to the structures upon which corporatist ideologies rest, in large part, because it represents alternative ways of being, doing, and relating. As Graeber asserts,

Visible alternatives shatter the sense of inevitability, that the system must, necessarily, be patched together in the same form--this is why it became such an imperative of global governance to stamp them out, or, when that’s not possible, to ensure that no one knows about them. To become aware of it allows us to see everything we are already doing in a new light.16

Not surprisingly, the Forum was almost completely ignored by the corporate media.

This lack of attention from the corporate media represents a major barrier for the movement. Although many of the organizations and activists in the GJM have a strong, visible presence in their communities, historically, the larger global justice movement only becomes visible to the general public during moments of mass direct action. However, as mentioned previously, these rare moments of mainstream media coverage disproportionately over-represent incidents of property destruction while under-representing brutal police repression, and therefore do little to circulate the goals of the movement within the larger culture. In fact, even under the best of circumstances, the complexity of the politics of the movement--and the realities to which they are a response--are frequently misunderstood. David Graeber summarizes:

A constant complaint about the globalization movement in the progressive press is that, while tactically brilliant, it lacks any central theme or coherent ideology. (This seems to be the left equivalent of the corporate media’s claims that we are a bunch of dumb kids}

Rachel Strasinger
Beyond Protest

touting a bundle of completely unrelated causes--free Mumia, dump the debt, save the old growth forests.) Another line of attack is that the movement is plagued by a generic opposition to all forms of structure or organization.¹⁷

These charges, in part, reflect an inability within the general public to recognize alternative forms of organization, and to hear messages that aren’t formulated within the context of a familiar, over-simplified ideology.

Circulating these alternative visions within the larger culture is particularly urgent in light of the recent economic crisis, which, for many, has only exacerbated the already difficult conditions of survival. The global credit meltdown under the technological-economics of the current world order means that those who once knew security under late capitalism have joined the ranks of the impoverished.¹⁸ The crisis necessitates that the movement find ways to make visible its alternative visions, many of which are formulated through its practices of solidarity. As Graeber explains,

...In North America especially, this is a movement about reinventing democracy. It is not opposed to organization. It is about creating new forms of organization. It is not lacking in ideology. Those new forms of organization are its ideology. It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy. Ultimately, it aspires to be much more than that, because ultimately it aspires to reinvent daily life as whole.¹⁹

In this time of unprecedented questioning of the global world order, before efforts to return things to “normal” as quickly as possible succeed, the GJM and those who support its goals have a prime opportunity to intervene, and it is this re-invention of daily life that holds the greatest potential to transform society.

The Necessity of Radical Imagination

Social transformation—breaking with the present reality—necessitates some form of re-invention, whereby modes of thinking and acting refuse to be aligned with processes that transmit abusive power. Such an endeavor requires radical imagination. Radical imagination refers to the re-examination of persistent problems that impede efforts at social transformation. It also refers to a process (ideally collective) wherein people endeavor to first visualize and then materialize that which does not yet exist. As feminist scholar and poet Adrienne Rich suggests,

Beyond Protest
...if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at the moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name.  

Indeed, it seems likely that if we take as our starting point the less-than-desirable realities of the present moment, possibility is already delimited and confined to the rules of that particular moment in space and time. Radical imagination functions as vehicle by which we build anew rather than re-act to the old. Gloria Anzaldúa articulates this dilemma in her criticism of the “counterstance,” which is inherently limited in what it can achieve because it is a reaction to the beliefs and values of the dominant culture:

A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. ...All reaction is limited by, and dependent upon, what it is reacting against... It’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life.

For Anzaldúa, the counterstance can only result in the production of an under-theorized opposite reaction. Reaching for a new consciousness, Anzaldúa argues, requires that we “leave the opposite banks, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes.”

Maria Lugones further elaborates on the dangers of the reactive thinking when she states,

To think of the logic(s) of resistance only in terms of reaction is to reduce it in a dangerous way, since reaction does not add anything creative to the meanings contained in that which is resisted, except some form of ‘no.’ When resistance is reduced to reaction, it is understood in the physical model and thus contained in action. But resistance is not reaction but response—thoughtful, often complex, devious, insightful response, insightful into the very intricacies of the structure of what is being resisted.

Each step we make intellectually to accommodate the rules of our present, less-than-desirable reality brings us further into compliance with the very system we seek to transform. The vein of our thinking is required to be reactive (starting with what we don’t want) as opposed to radically imaginative (starting with what we do want). We become negotiators rather than revolutionaries. When we

Rachel Strasinger
Beyond Protest

concern ourselves only with pragmatics, only with the present reality, we confine possibility to that which already exists. The realm of new possibility for which Anzaldúa and Lugones argue can only be accessed through the destabilization of reactive thinking that reifies dominant social orders.

Theorizing her own identities as queer, Chicana, feminist, and mestiza, Anzaldúa details the challenges of negotiating life as one who is infinitely configured as “other,” always constructed as being on the “wrong side” of the cultural border. Borders function to both separate and contain in much the same way that the cultural production of difference serves to preserve and consolidate power, as they are “set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them.” Like many others, Anzaldúa finds potential in resistance that emerges from marginal social locations. Examining these spaces of marginality reveals a great deal about the local and global nature of interlocking oppressions, and the violence required to preserve locations of privilege. Imaginative approaches to theorizing marginalized subjectivities reveal the “pure,” unified, homogeneous subject as an illusion. The borderlands dweller represents a new kind of discursive being, exhibiting a new kind of consciousness that Anzaldúa refers to as la conciencia mestiza. This consciousness transgresses norms of gender and sexuality, reversing dominant narratives that posit racial “purity” as ideal, rejecting linguistic colonization, and claiming marginality as a space of powerful resistance. Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness,” is an “alien consciousness” resulting from “racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization.” La mestiza rejects the imperative to inhabit one binary term over another and instead opts to create a new location for herself.

Similarly, feminist philosopher and biologist Donna Haraway employs the metaphor of the cyborg to disrupt binaries of human/machine, nature/technology, self/other, animal/human, science fiction/social reality, etc. Haraway’s cyborg is a hybrid of machine and human, fiction and social reality that, in its strategic disloyalty to myths of origin, identity, purity, and innocence, has the potential to avoid recreating the problematic power dynamics it seeks to transgress. As a “fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource,” the cyborg bridges the gap between social reality and social imagination, an act that Haraway contends is necessary for any project of “historical transformation.” The cyborg is, in part, an effort to model new ways of thinking that can further the politics of socialist feminism. Furthermore, because the cyborg represents an interfacing of human and machine (that disrupts narratives about human domination over technology/nature), it also represents a reclamation of technology in the interests of the people, a retrieval of the control of technology from the exclusive domain of corporate/military/government interests.
To a great extent these kinds of radical imaginings run throughout the global justice movement. The belief in the possibility of other world(s) has been reformulated by scholars and activists in the GJM in a variety of ways. Voicing alternative modes of being, doing, and relating is particularly important because, as Jackie Smith notes,

If it is to compete effectively against those advocating a neoliberal vision for the world, the democratic globalization network must consciously strive to articulate its own alternative vision in an emerging ‘global public sphere’. … This struggle is not only about how to express ideas of resistance, but it is also about how to get one’s message heard.  

The GJM already brings radical imaginative thinking to its activism and politics, demonstrating a desire to engage and subvert dominant ideologies. Many of the tactics of the global justice movement--spectacle, carnival, performance, parody, and “culture jamming,” for example--suggest an ability to co-opt dominant ideologies and critically deploy them in ways that reveal the often hidden forms of violence necessary to maintain the status quo. Groups such as Reclaim the Streets (RTS) seek to reclaim the commons, often through the coordination of rowdy dance parties held in unexpected locations, such as on subway cars, in the middle of roads, highways, or urban centers to protest capitalism and the dominance of public spaces and pollution caused by vehicles. For RTS, such an approach is both pre-figurative and engaging in a way that traditional forms of protest are not. As RTS organizer William Etundi explains, “Lockdowns and marches aren’t the world we want to create. It’s through our parties and our performances that we imagine liberation.”

These and other tactics employed by the GJM are often conceptualized by scholars and activists within the movement as a kind of carnival, a form of resistance that is “halfway between party and protest, resisting at the same time as proposing, destroying at the same time as creating” alternative ways of being and interacting. According to Notes from Nowhere, carnival functions as a kind of inversion of the social order that exposes the power structures and illuminates the processes of maintaining hierarchies--seen from a new angle, the foundations of authority are shaken up and flipped around. The unpredictability of carnival with its total subservience to spontaneity, where any individual can shape her environment and transform herself into another being for an hour or a day, ruptures what we perceive to be reality. It creates a new world by subverting all stereotypes, daring imaginations to expand their limits, turning the present world upside down, if only for a moment.
Where competing realities brush against each other, as they do in the space of the carnival, those realities that previously seemed inevitable come to be revealed as one of many options. As Stephen Pfohl notes, “To be loosely caught up in festival is to be ambivalently (dis)positioned at the borderlines of a given social order and its ritual (re)construction. It is to be at the crossroads between order and chaos.” In this way, carnival functions as a kind of borderlands, a space of ideological contamination rife with opportunities for cultural cross-pollinization, a political festival from which cyborg, mestiza, and alien consciousnesses might emerge. Within the context of GJM activism, carnival is an invitation, a strategy, and a momentary transformation of space into “other worlds” of possibility. However, carnival cannot necessarily be taken as an unequivocal space of liberation and possibility. Indeed, it is possible to see carnival as actually helping to maintain the dominant social order. By creating a temporary reprieve from the rules and expectations of daily life, frustrations and tensions are released, allowing the order to remain intact for the remainder of the year. Extending the transformative energy of carnival past a brief moment in time requires nothing short of the re-invention of daily life and the structures that organize it.

Structures of Inequality

Creating lasting social transformation is a difficult task that is further complicated by the nebulous relationships between space and power. Some of the most destructive convergences of space and power are mediated via institutions--particular sites through which dominant ideologies are transmitted and power is naturalized and spatialized. For Louis Althusser, ideology is “the imaginary relation of … individuals to the real relations in which they live.” Because ideology describes an imaginary relationship that has material consequences, the false dichotomy of ideological/material works to obscure the ways in which ideology shapes materiality and vice versa. The relationship between the ideological and the material is elusive, in part, because the workings of power are ubiquitous and, to the extent that they are understood to be “natural” and “normal,” largely invisible. In order for power to be accepted it must hide itself; “its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.” As Kathy Ferguson notes,

- to engage in … oppositional activity one must first penetrate the façade of ideological neutrality that administrative structures claim for themselves and see them as political arenas in which domination, manipulation, and the denial of conflict are standard operating procedures.

What, then, are these hidden mechanisms of power? As an intangible but inescapable force in the world, what are the operations that guide, structure,
and solidify power? What are the rules that bestow it unevenly on populations in ways that are both observable and measurable, while the force itself remains largely invisible and generally unacknowledged?

Any effort to transform social realities requires methods of resistance that disrupt abusive power without reinscribing it. Radical activists and scholars deploy radical imagination to disrupt social hierarchies, which consolidate and preserve power under the guise of protecting the (imagined) purity of race, class, gender, and sexuality (i.e., whiteness, wealth, masculinity, heterosexuality) from differences that are conceptualized as viral, contagious, and tainted. Those who are "othered" in society are viewed as potential contaminants of the purity that hierarchy presumes to preserve. Because hierarchies materialize through a discourse of binaries that privilege one component of the relationship over another (i.e., rich/poor, white/black, male/female, straight/queer, domestic/foreign, etc.), these binary configurations effectively--and often violently--erase all social realities that are not contained therein. It is those whose identity, social location, or bodily existence lies outside of (or remains invisible within) a binary term that are constructed as most threatening to the social order, and often, whose existence is threatened most severely. As spaces through which ideology is disseminated, institutions are not spaces that can tolerate bodies that refuse to reflect dominant ideologies, or worse, actively seek to subvert them.

The relationship between administrative hierarchy within bureaucratic institutions and social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality should be understood as converging to both normalize and produce unequal social relations. According to postmodern political geographer Edward Soja:

> Hegemonic power, wielded by those in positions of authority, does not merely manipulate naively given differences between individuals and social groups, it actively produces and reproduces difference as a key strategy to create and maintain modes of social and spatial division that are advantageous to its continued empowerment and authority.36

We are socialized into hierarchy in part through the ubiquity of bureaucracy, but this socialization extends well beyond the bureaucracy to order social relations that materialize as racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. The ability to move in and out of physical spaces is predetermined by one’s position within this social order. As María Lugones explains:

> Visualize, remember, and sense a map that has been drawn by power in its many guises and directions and where there is a spot for you. All the roads and places are marked as spaces you may, must

Rachel Strasinger
or cannot occupy. When you think about the map, you see that people are organized and channeled spatially in ways that contain them in a systematic way from getting together against the grain of power.\textsuperscript{37}

The spaces that we “may, must, or cannot occupy” are determined largely without our input or consent. What status we can acquire in relation to these institutional spaces—as employees, employers, clients, customers—depends on how social categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc. have converged to define our relationships to the states in which we live.

Kathy Ferguson understands bureaucracy as the “scientific organization of inequality” that “serves as a filter for ... other forms of domination, projecting them into an institutional arena that both rationalizes and maintains them.”\textsuperscript{38} Bureaucracy—institutional hierarchy—has an inextricable relationship to social hierarchy that is concealed by the institutional pretense of political neutrality. As Ferguson explains, “by claiming to be the nonideological instrument of technical progress, bureaucracy clothes itself in the guise of science and renders itself ‘ideologically invisible.’”\textsuperscript{39} However,

seen in the light of the ubiquity and intensity of their control mechanisms, bureaucracies are much like explicitly authoritarian political systems. They share a common goal of regimentation and manipulation of human life for purposes of rendering it predictable and directing it toward behavior that supports, or at least fails actively to challenge, the established authority structures.\textsuperscript{40}

Bureaucracies create a crisis of accountability. Everyone who works at Coca-Cola’s corporate headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia is just “doing their job”—just “a cog in the machine”—and therefore not responsible if, for example, the Coca-Cola plant in Kerala, India is dumping toxic waste into the scarce drinking water supply of local residents. With the exception of the highest level employees, most workers are just following company rules that they had no say in making, which makes it easy to disavow complicity. Such scenarios illuminate the point at which institutional hierarchies (bureaucracy) and social hierarchies (race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability) intersect: the lower-level workers from corporate headquarters are all “just trying to get by.” Although many are complicit with dominant systems because they subscribe to the ideologies that legitimate them, many are complicit because they feel they have no other viable choice. Their choices for employment may be severely constrained, and although it is these lower-level employees (“cogs”) who
enable the "machine" to keep working, they are considered by the institution to be the most expendable.

The GJM explicitly rejects this institutional regulation of personhood. Institutions, along with the technologies of violence that sustain them, are often the objects of rejection. In its recognition of institutions as sites of struggle, the GJM engages in what Lugones refers to as "trespassing," acts of resistance that place bodies where they are not meant to be: blocking access to meetings of the WTO, for example. As Lugones explains, "Trespassing against the spatiality of oppressions is also a redrawing of the map, of the relationality of space. Trespassing is very difficult to achieve, since there are a great many ways to entice one back to the road of collusion with power."41 The kinds of “trespassing” engaged in by the GJM explicitly refuse to collude with the (often invisible) spatialization of power that radiates from locations embedded within institutions. Because they mark the physical boundaries of social power, institutions are appropriate targets of resistance.

Manifesting Alternatives

However, survival, for many, necessitates collusion with dominant powers, and unless viable options for a livable life can be presented to contest the capitalist imperative to produce and consume,42 it is unlikely that a massive social revolution can be mobilized. People have little concept of a reality in which their physical needs could be met outside of an engagement with a capitalist system. This lack of imagination is a condition that has been manufactured:

Hopelessness isn’t natural. It needs to be produced. If we want to understand this situation, we have to begin by understanding that the last thirty years have seen the construction of a vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a kind of giant machine that is designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures. At root is a veritable obsession on the part of the rulers of the world with ensuring that social movements cannot be seen to grow, to flourish, to propose alternatives; that those who challenge existing power arrangements can never, under any circumstances, be perceived to win.43

Likewise, Stephen Duncombe argues that the greatest success of conservatives has been their ability to “convince most people that there is no alternative” to the current world order.44 Duncombe suggests that we have no alternatives because we’ve “distanced ourselves from our dreams."45 The development of visionary alternatives is essential if the movement is to realize its full transformative potential, and it is my contention that no group is better suited to

Rachel Strasinger
such a task than the GJM—the largest network of resistance to hegemonic power that history has even known.

Constructing alternatives simultaneously saps the energy from dominant systems of power currently in place, for “the state is not something that can be destroyed by a revolution but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior. We destroy it by behaving differently, by contracting other relationships.”46 The deceptively simple truth is that there are no armies without soldiers, no corporations without workers, no sprawling suburban malls without shoppers. The GJM recognizes that reconfiguring relationships is a way of reconfiguring space. The Zapatista concept of encuentro, “a politics of space and a politics of listening,” captures this ethos. As Manuel Callahan explains,

The Zapatista model of encuentro does not rely on ideology, organizational affiliation, or even identity. Encuentro is ... a political space convened for dialogue, analysis, and direct action that deliberately and creatively acknowledges and respects difference, i.e., different political proposals and cultural practices that emerge from a variety of subject positions, histories, and political commitments. The model of encuentro—as strategy, process, space, gathering, event—depends on the mutual recognition of the dignity of the participants in order to collectively imagine new horizons.47

The importance of space and process embedded in the idea of encuentro recognizes the necessity of people from multiple social locations coming together to share ideas, as well as the importance of collective processes of imagining the future.

Although the movement has shown that there are many ways to begin transforming society, in this moment of exacerbated economic crisis, I believe an especially potent intervention is the re-imagining of work. Work, whether it involves preparing a meal in the home or production in a factory, offers endless opportunities to reconfigure human relationships through cooperation and mutual aid, and allows for a horizontal rather than top-down spatialization of power. Solidarity economies, which range from child care collectives to worker-owned factories to community time banks, have the potential to transform and strengthen communities ravaged by the logic of corporate greed. The current culture of consumption necessitates a class of people for whom survival means producing things which they themselves cannot afford, often under toxic, hazardous, or otherwise dangerous conditions. Transforming the meanings and structures of work as they have been configured in late capitalism represents an intervention in the ideological/material dichotomy, for when people become
accountable to one another rather than to a system, the conditions of existence have been transformed.

There is by now a great deal of evidence that solidarity economies represent alternatives that are both viable and sustainable. As David Graeber explains,

Those wishing to subvert the system have learned by now, from bitter experience, that we cannot place our faith in states. The last decade has instead seen the development of thousands of forms of mutual aid association, most of which have not even made it onto the radar of the global media. They range from tiny cooperatives and associations to vast anti-capitalist experiments, archipelagos of occupied factories in Paraguay or Argentina or of self-organized tea plantations and fisheries in India, autonomous institutes in Korea, whole insurgent communities in Chiapas or Bolivia, associations of landless peasants, urban squatters, neighborhood alliances, that spring up pretty much anywhere that where state power and global capital seem to temporarily looking the other way. They might have almost no ideological unity and many are not even aware of the other’s existence, but all are marked by a common desire to break with the logic of capital. And in many places, they are beginning to combine. “Economies of solidarity” exist on every continent, in at least eighty different countries. We are at the point where we can begin to perceive the outlines of how these can knit together on a global level, creating new forms of planetary commons to create a genuine insurgent civilization.48

Growing these alternatives from the ground up, filling the emptiness of spaces abandoned by the flighty logic of profit-driven capital, does not require a cohesive ideology, but it does require a commitment to practices of solidarity. People, in any event, seem much more willing to respond to viable alternatives to their present realities than they do to the imposition of ideology.

In the presence of thousands of global justice activists at the 2010 USSF, it was easy to imagine that we are, in fact, on the verge of “creating new forms of planetary commons.” Facilitators of solidarity economy workshops recognized the need to both strengthen the existing network of economic alternatives and support the formation of new solidarity projects through the dissemination of information and technical support. Many communities are fortunate enough to have a variety of global justice activist organizations that can work together on shared commitments, but supporting the development of new alternatives within smaller or more isolated communities is also necessary. Mapping out the existence of groups willing to coalesce around affinities would appear to be an essential step towards forging new opportunities for cooperation.

Rachel Strasinger
Work is certainly not the only domain that offers a productive point of intervention for radical imagination. Creating an equitable society capable of meeting the essential needs of the population will likely require an engagement with science and technology, realms of knowledge that are simply too important to leave to “specialists.” Haraway contends that “lay” folk must become technologically literate to counter technological dominations in the current world order.\textsuperscript{49} The GJM’s adeptness at cyber-mobilization and reclamation of a cyber-commons through internet channels such as the PGA begins to respond to this challenge. Finding ways to draw radical thinkers from “scientific” fields (engineering, physics, agriculture, biology, etc.) into involvement with GJM activists around issues such as environmental degradation, global water crises, food shortages, and access to medication could bridge gaps between the worlds we imagine and the technological advances necessary to implement these visions. In this way, radical imagination might begin to inform a different reality.

This project has endeavored to make evident the necessity of radical imagination in transforming the current world order. I have sought to draw out the parallels between radical imagination in feminist and postmodern thinking and the practices and politics of the GJM. In light of these parallels, it is my contention that the GJM deserves greater scholarly attention than it has received, particularly from feminist scholars and others concerned with social justice. Those who are already positioned within academia should support scholarship that places focus on the work of the GJM. Furthering this dialogue might lead to more productive conversations about, for example, radical ways to reclaim the commons or decolonize public education, and help bridge the gap between theory and praxis with which so many theorists are concerned.

Most importantly, it is my hope that through the application of radical imagination, visions of the future might emerge that have the potential to disrupt the collective trance engendered by capitalist utopias. I find exhausting the politics of rejection, of articulating endless “nos” to the violence and greed fostered by the current global world order. This is not to suggest that analysis and criticism of the politics of the present reality are no longer necessary, but to suggest that projects of radical imagination are equally necessary. I desire to add my voice to a conversation that seeks to articulate alternatives that engender hope, the strongest antidote to fear and complicity that I can imagine. I suspect that social transformation hinges on our ability to circulate hopeful, livable visions of the future. Such a project necessitates forums for collective, divergent, radical imaginings of the future.

To be clear, it is not my contention that we can “imagine” our way out of the current world order, or that more pragmatic approaches are not also necessary. We are indeed firmly embedded in a present of delimited possibility. However,
the only way to avoid re-creating the very structures we seek to dismantle is to think outside of, and against, the technologies, institutions, and ideologies that order and structure the present reality. Radical imagination is not an end in and of itself; but it is the beginning of any effort to build something new. We must decolonize our ways of thinking, relating, and imagining. As we imagine and reach towards new worlds that do not yet exist, we transform and stretch the present moment to include previously impossible possibilities. This is the task—and the promise—of radical imagination.

Endnotes

1 Rachel Strasinger recently received her MA in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from the University of Cincinnati in Cincinnati, OH, USA. She currently works as a Program Resources Coordinator for a non-profit organization. As a musician, artist, and scholar, she is constantly seeking new and creative ways to merge art, scholarship, and activism.

2 I use the term corporatist here to mean “a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business … [characterized by] huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security.” (Klein p.15).

3 To be sure, domination in many parts of the world also occurs at the point of a gun. However, this paper is concerned largely with the forces at work in creating the conditions through which domination-by-force comes to be an acceptable reality.


Rachel Strasinger
Beyond Protest

12 Ibid, Engler.
22 Ibid, Anzaldúa, p. 100.
23 Ibid, Lugones, p. 29.
24 Ibid, Anzaldúa, p. 25, emphasis in original.
27 Ibid, Haraway.
31 Ibid, Notes from Nowhere, p. 174-175.
38 Ibid, Ferguson, p. 8.
39 Ibid, Ferguson, p. 16.
40 Ibid, Ferguson, p. 17.
41 Ibid, Lugones, p. 11.
42 While many see consumption/production as a choice rather than an imperative, I contend that failing to “choose” to be a producer/consumer, at best, positions one as disposable, and at worst, an enemy of the state.
44 Ibid, Duncombe, p. 179.
46 Gustav Landauer qtd in Ibid, Notes from Nowhere, p. 388.
47 Ibid, Callahan, p. 3, emphasis in original.

References


Rachel Strasinger


Beyond Protest


