Global Visions and Grassroots Movements: An Anthropological Perspective

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Abstract

In the past decade many progressive anthropologists have been concerned with understanding the transformative possibilities of social movements in redefining and limiting the worldwide inroads of global capital. In emphasizing cultural transformation, Castells' approach in The City and the Grassroots *(1983) may help to conceptualize the idealistic and sometimes quixotic movements of the information age. Like Christopher Hill and other social historians, Castells seeks to understand culturally available paths and ideals that opened the possibilities for democracy, whether or not the visionaries succeeded at any particular historical moment. Today, working-class solidarity is less clearly defined in the face of a rapidly shrinking and ever-relocating manufacturing sector, while, at the same time, social provisions have been cut back and privatized. At the grey dawning of the twenty-first century, in the face of US imperialist aggression and increasing global corporate wealth, Castells' emphasis on the genesis of a new democratic vision as well as on mobilization around issues of collective consumption has become ever more salient.*

Twenty years after its publication, it is useful to reread and rethink the issues raised in *The City and the Grassroots*. In the past decade, many progressive anthropologists have been concerned with understanding the transformative possibilities of social movements in redefining and limiting the worldwide inroads of global capital (Nash, 2001; 2004). In emphasizing cultural transformation, Castells' approach presents a starting point for conceptualizing the idealistic and sometimes quixotic movements of the information age. Castells highlights breakthroughs in vision created by social movements. Concepts developed in the historical sweep of *The City and the Grassroots*, which includes 'theorized histories' (Castells, 1983: xx) of social protest from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, can possibly illuminate the analysis of contemporary anti-global movements and other forms of collective action in the twenty-first century.

Castells (*ibid*.: 305) argues that social movements generate counter-hegemonic ideas. In his words, an urban social movement is a 'collective conscious action aimed at the transformation of the institutionalized urban meaning against the logic, interest and values of the dominant class'. The crucial question of the 'transformation of . . . meaning' which is precipitated by social protest directly connects with anthropological perspectives on the creation of culture through what Katherine Verdery (1999: 34) refers to as 'beliefs and ideas materialized in action'. In her analysis of the transformative moments in Eastern Europe, Verdery goes on to say: 'In moments of major transformation, people may find that new forms of action are more productive than the ones they are used to, or that older forms make sense in a different way, or that ideals they could only aspire to before are now realizable. Such moments lead to reconfiguring one's world; the process can be individual or collective' (*ibid*.: 34). The quintessential accomplishment inherent in the social movements described in *The City and the Grassroots* might be the sense that they make 'ideals' seem 'realizable'. Thus, ideals of

democracy become real to sixteenth-century Spanish *comuneros* while, similarly, in the early twentieth century Glasgwegian tenants change the vision of housing from a commodity to a social entitlement — as did the Coalition for the Homeless in New York City in the 1980s (Hopper and Cox, 1982; Susser 2002a).

The City and the Grassroots exudes extraordinary optimism, especially when read in today's dreary political climate, representing the triumph of individualism and the celebration of increasing inequality. Castells (1983: 4) writes of the Castilian *comuneros*: 'Our main interest in analyzing the experience . . . is to identify the values, goals, and the social characteristics of the movement, and to understand their attempt to propose a new form of city and a new form of state, and thus a new society. We are less interested in considering . . . the reasons for their defeat'. He says (*ibid*.: 4) of sixteenth-century Spain, 'it is true that the triumph of the absolutist monarchy, supported by the feudal nobility, frustrated the promise of democracy represented by the *comuneros* and marked forever Spanish society. Yet our purpose is not to mourn lost democracies, but to understand the historical process of the formation of social movements, the ultimate sources of democratic life'. Like Christopher Hill in *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), his classic unearthing of the failed millenarian revolutionary visions of seventeenth-century England, Castells seeks the culturally available paths and ideals. Whether or not the visionaries succeeded at any particular historical moment, he wants to understand the actions and ideas, the cultural expressions, that opened the possibilities for democracy. At the grey dawning of the twenty-first century, and in the face of US imperialist aggression and global corporate wealth, such visions are not only much needed but also much in evidence in the massive worldwide anti-war movement and other recent events.

Castells' optimism becomes particularly evident in contrast to Michel Foucault who was also writing in the same period and who has had an even greater influence on anthropology. Foucault was discussing the ways in which society is constrained and limited — constraint is evident even in the very terms he employed, such as the discipline of the self and technologies of domination (Foucault, 1981). In their overall oeuvres both Castells and Foucault go beyond class, to describe overarching or interlinked ideas of knowledge, science and social institutions. But, for Foucault, there is almost no way to see beyond an era. Even rebellion must be expressed through contemporary discourse, which he sees as inevitably limited by its own categories, the mirror image of the categories of domination. For Castells, political mobilization or the act of collective resistance in itself generates and legitimizes alternate visions. He suggests that even in a situation where the politics of patronage finally rules, movements of land invasion, emerging from historically and spatially rooted social process, lead people to publicly question the priority of private property under capitalism. This alternative vision, and its practical reality expressed in settlements for the poor, is itself significant in the generation of future possibilities.

The City and the Grassroots was a departure from Castells' earlier work in that it took seriously the transformations wrought by social movements. The preface to *The Urban Question* invokes the power of conflict and the struggles of the street: 'At a time when the waves of the anti-imperialist struggle are sweeping across the world, when movements of revolt are bursting out at the very heart of advanced capitalism, when the revival of working class action is creating a new political situation in Europe, "urban policies" are becoming an essential element of governments' (Susser, 2002c:15). But, in the body of the book, Castells proceeds to discuss hegemonic urban ideology and the unyielding structures of the economy, real estate and politics. Written later than *The Urban Question*, *The City and the Grassroots* was not a naïve reflection on the inspiring turmoil of the 1968 Paris street demonstrations, nor the short-lived socialism heralded by the 1971 election of Salvador Allende as president of Chile. On the contrary, long after the massive student protests had subsided and the Allende regime had been overthrown by a military junta, *The City and the Grassroots* nonetheless asserts the possibilities for change heralded by movements for social justice.

Moreover, Castells documents a sense of efficacy in the vision of community movements and urban struggles that goes beyond class conflict. While he cites Antonio Gramsci and discusses the powerful impact of working-class experiences on the emergence of social movements, he does not restrict his view of transformation to a classic analysis of class contradictions. He adds to class questions of citizenship and identity as coming together to trigger collective action. In the 1970s Citizen Movement of Madrid, for example, Castells outlines the changing visions of public good which emerge from collective action across classes: 'while being fundamentally defined by the contradictions of urbanization, the Citizen Movement also emerges as a conscious mobilization for social change as a result of its connections with class structure, the political system, and continuing social movements' (1983: 264). While working-class neighborhoods, most assaulted by urban deterioration, launched dramatic protest, Castells emphasizes the significance of common goals for collective consumption in also mobilizing middle-class communities, for example to limit air pollution or demand efficient public transportation.

Most importantly, through the concept of collective consumption Castells introduces a way to talk about the body politic — the need for a concept of social good, broadening, without negating, concepts of class conflict and class analysis. Castells' vision dovetails well with David Harvey's concept of the body politic in the aftermath of 9/11 in New York City: 'The dangers of appeal to the idea of the city as a body politic as a normative goal are many. But if there is to be any kind of alternative to free-market neoliberalism/ capitalism . . . then some sort of collective action organized around the public interest is necessary' (Harvey, 2003: 28). Viewing the city as the body politic 'illuminates the ways in which the body politic offers a terrain of political contestation worth struggling over precisely because it is the locus of debate and action over what, exactly, might be the "nature of our task" as we seek to transform ourselves by transforming the urban process and the city as a physical and social environment in which we live' (*ibid*.: 44).

This contested vision of the body politic is illuminated in Castells' analysis of the community mobilizations in Madrid, but also in the housing movements in the Mission District of San Francisco. He sees progressive perspectives generated through recognized needs of collective consumption such as the development of public facilities, parks and livable neighborhoods as well as through labor struggles and characteristically working-class movements. Unlike Castells' later (1996) critical descriptions of shallow identity politics in a networked world, *The City and the Grassroots* recognizes the territorialized community base of gay rights groups in the Castro section of San Francisco, as they liberate public space for freedom of sexual orientation, occupying bars and streets, night and day. Castells interprets the vitality of San Francisco in the 1970s as a product of the mobilization of minority neighborhoods as well as the role of the gay community. However, he concludes (1983: 172) that 'because of the inability of different sources of popular protest and cultural innovation to unite over . . . alternative urban policies, the financial district made plans for further expansion, the gentrification process accelerated'.

An important contribution of *The City and the Grassroots* is the recognition of historical progress towards rights in the urban arena — from women in the early-twentieth-century tenants' association in Glasgow, to the 1970s demands of rights for sexual orientation and minorities in San Francisco, to the squatters demanding the rights to land in Chile. This is not a teleological Darwinian conception of progress that has no backwards steps, but it is an argument that people's ideas of rights and collective possibilities are, to a certain extent, built on previous victories and struggles. As Castells says of social movements (*ibid*.: 72): 'Their lasting effects are present in the breaches produced in the dominant logic, in the compromises reached within the institutions, in the changing cultural forms of the city, in the collective memory of the neighborhoods, and, ultimately, in the continuing social debate about what the city should be'.

Castells did not lack a sense of complexity or compromise in his vision of social movements. If one follows the detailed fieldwork descriptions, one finds clear

documentations of failure. For example, the failure of the San Francisco gay population of the 1970s to unite with lesbians over issues of the family, the disintegration of political ideals in Chilean squatter movements in the face of patron–client relations with state politicians and their eventual compromises with the state, or the anti-democratic power of *caciques* in Mexico City (much of which was documented in the works of anthropologists such as Wolf, 1957; Peattie, 1971; Leeds and Leeds, 1976; Mencher, 1983; and Leeds, 1994). But, overall, the evaluation that emerges is that social movements were able to shift people's vision of the possible — today we might say 'alter the discourse'. So, for example, in 2004 the long erratic history of grassroots activism in the US countered some of the conceptual and political failures of limited identity politics outlined by Castells in his analysis of the Castro District in San Francisco. Gays, lesbians and the feminist movement coalesced to march for reproductive and sexual rights and the idea of gay marriage became equated with civil rights.

The fact that Castells is talking about 'urban' movements need not limit the usefulness of his analysis to the urban alone. *The City and the Grassroots* is replete with discussions of the relationship of urban social movements to the nation state — in Chile, in Spain and elsewhere. In fact, Castells evaluates the effectiveness and trajectory of social movements in relation to the structure of the state both in terms of 'dependency' (in relationship to a world capitalist system) and in terms of the moment in the history of democracy of each particular state. In the tradition of Mumford (1961), Castells understands cities as expressions of forms of domination within a society and never as isolated in their relation to other social processes. He sees the integral relation of the rural with the domination of the urban in much the same way as the anthropologist Eric Wolf conceptualized peasants as a product of the state as they sell agricultural produce to the cities to pay taxes to the state (Wolf, 1966). From this perspective, Castells' emphasis on changing visions and meaning could equally be applied to what we might today regard as rural movements, such as those emerging around genetically modified crops or the preservation of biodiversity.

In the current era, in attempting to trace social movements, we face the complexity of the NGO (non-governmental organization) operating in the neoliberal global context. NGOs with complex transnational roots demand a multitude of rights (some contradictory with others) in an arena of murky class divisions and compromised public/private funding. Nevertheless, confronting widespread corporate control and privatization, we find social movements emerging with an emphasis on collective consumption couched in demands for the restoration of the 'commons' — these demands contain within them a recognition of the rapid private appropriation or enclosure of public goods as well as a vision of the possibilities for change in the global era.

It is no surprise that *The City and the Grassroots* should take on new interest in this moment of US aggression and the threats to democracy of the US state. Public rights naturalized over two hundred years of approximation to democratic governance in the US and Western Europe, have been mortally threatened. The US state, functioning as the center of a global empire, undermines centuries of *habeas corpus*, more recent but no less sacrosanct international agreements represented by the Geneva Conventions, fair elections and the presumed disinterest of federal agencies in the protection of food, drugs, environment and health. Such threatened losses in public rights make visible the underlying notions of collective consumption inscribed in the welfare state while at the same time demonstrating the tenuous and historically contingent nature of such seemingly established institutions.

In this new era, the few very rich have benefited, while many of those previously considered middle-class are finding themselves sinking to lower incomes without the means for good education or health care or the ability to assure a privileged class position for their children. Privatization of public goods, including education and housing, and the lack of public access to transportation, leads us to recognize the enormous

underpinning of the commons in the visions of the welfare state of the twentieth century (Susser, 1996; Clarke, 2004).

Castells was making a profound contribution to our understandings of the significance of social movements in his development of the ideas of collective consumption or, in other terms, the possibilities for progressive critique and social vision to emerge around the 'body politic'. Today, working-class solidarity is less clearly defined in the face of a rapidly shrinking and ever-relocating manufacturing sector. As social provisions are cut back and privatized, mobilization around issues of collective consumption become ever more salient.

The idea of citizenship, which Castells uses extensively to represent the collective or the public, has become problematic because of the exclusions implied by the term, especially since 9/11. As the USA and many European countries have tightened their borders and attempted to limit social entitlements to 'citizens', this term has taken on an exclusionary aspect less marked in the 1980s (Clarke, 2004). Many anti-global protests have attempted to change the vision of 'citizen' to address these new restrictions and, in this respect too, can be understood as fighting for the right to the 'commons'.

The diverse social movements which have been grouped under the rubric anti-global have in fact generated new visions for the current era — the social meaning of the movements for biodiversity (Alvarez *et al.*, 1998), anti-mafia (Schneider and Schneider, 2003) and prevention and treatment for HIV/AIDS (Daniel and Parker, 1993; Susser, 2004) have been based most effectively on shared concepts and recognition of the public good.

In my own work on movements for the prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS, I have been struck by the significance of the 'transformation of . . . meaning' precipitated by grassroots movements. From 1998 to 2002 the social movement for AIDS prevention and treatment for people in poor countries, specifically on the African continent, transformed global visions and even moral standards (Susser, 2001; 2002b; 2004). In the 1990s, it was generally accepted that treatment for the poor (in poor countries) was too expensive. Since 2000, treatment for people with AIDS has emerged as a moral imperative. It is no longer acceptable to leave poor people to die. Although many new policies are not yet in place, massive global funds have been allocated for this purpose (Susser, 2002). Even the cynical political manipulation of the distribution of funds for treatment demonstrates a revised symbolic order. Social movements altered the symbolic, economic and political landscape to force the recognition that medication is a human right and that health trumps profit (Petchesky, 2003).

In Mexico in the 1990s the Zapatista movement in Chiapas became a worldwide symbol of anti-global protest. As one of the first groups to rebel against the rapid dispossession of the commons, they led international opposition to neoliberal policies, early implemented in Latin America.

June Nash argues that images of collective good were generated among the Mayan population of Chiapas from their recent historic experience of communal goals with respect to agricultural production and village continuity:

> Because they are not complicit in the universalizing notions of capitalist expansion, indigenous societies often retain unique worldviews that place them in the center of a collective enterprise to maintain the world in balance. These distinct visions, predicated as they are on substantive economies . . . in a particular society . . . provide a positive coexisting alternative to a world predicated on universal self-regulating markets (Nash, 2001: 2).

This indigenous social movement articulated visions which energized or emboldened a much broader set of anti-global social movements. Nash argues that:

> social movements generated by people deprived of their subsistence resources . . . become linked with global nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with issues of environmental damage and human rights deprivation, including the right to live. It is in these transnational spaces that new forms of governance are emerging which may enable the human

species to survive in a globally integrated world that permits alternative ways of survival and coexistence' (*ibid.*: 3).

In *The Power of Identity* Castells (1996), too, pointed to the significance of the Zapatista movement in articulating an emergent anti-global vision. However, in this later work, he argued that the informational age generates a shallow form of identity politics. In contrast, many of the new anti-global movements discussed above appear to be territorially grounded with the ability to organize across space and to affect the state.

Clearly anti-global movements are powerfully based in identity of experience that, I would argue, manifestly crosses class lines. Nevertheless, such identity movements are also grounded in city neighborhoods, rural cooperatives and historical collective action across multiple issues. I suggest such movements are better described in terms of a theory of 'commons', 'common property', collective consumption or collective needs and a grounded culture of common experiences such as Castells developed in *The City and the Grassroots* than by superimposed ideas of identity politics (Castells, 1996) or its derivative, ethnoscapes (Appadurai, 1996).

The idea of collective needs harks back to calls for human rights or environmental justice — shared rights to health, land, air, water, rather than to a narrow interpretation of identity or working class politics. To contextualize an analysis of grassroots movements of the twenty-first century, I would suggest that such powerful and multiple emerging movements may in fact respond to newly emerging forms of stratification in the global economy manifested or precipitated by the increasing privatization and reductions of the public weal. People are recognizing and struggling against 'a continuing process of capital accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005:159) or 'predatory capitalism' (Appadurai, 2000: 17). The diverse deprivations which have resulted from the assaults of corporate capital have led to the emergence of internationally linked social movements, rooted in common needs and place-specific experiences while effectively crossing multiple borders of class, identity and nation. In a world beset by imperial aspirations and the hegemonic legitimation of individual aggrandizement, such movements are an important force for democracy.

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Résumé

Au cours de la dernière décennie, bien des anthropologues progressistes ont cherché à comprendre les possibilités de transformation qu'offrent les mouvements sociaux dans la redéfinition et la restriction de l'invasion planétaire du capital mondialisé. En mettant en avant la transformation culturelle, l'approche de Castells dans The City and the Grassroots *(1983) peut aider à conceptualiser les mouvements (parfois naïvement) idéalistes de l'ère de l'information. A l'instar de Christopher Hill et d'autres historiens sociaux, Castells s'efforce de comprendre les chemins et idéaux accessibles culturellement qui ont fourni des ouvertures à la démocratie, que leurs acteurs visionnaires aient réussi ou non à tel ou tel moment de l'Histoire. Aujourd'hui, la solidarité de la classe ouvrière est moins nette en dépit du rapide recul et des relocalisations constantes du secteur manufacturier tandis que, parallèlement, les prestations sociales sont diminuées et privatisées. A l'aube morne du vingt-et-unième siècle, face à l'agression impérialiste américaine et à la richesse croissante des multinationales, l'intérêt que portait Castells à la genèse d'une vision démocratique différente et à une mobilisation autour des questions de consommation collective se révèle de plus en plus pertinent.*