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## **Alter-activism: emerging cultures of participation among young global justice activists**

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Through ethnographic fieldwork among young global justice activists based in Barcelona, Paris, Mexico City, and San Francisco, this article examines an emerging political praxis we call alter-activism. We argue that alter-activism represents an alternative mode of (sub-)cultural practice and an emerging form of citizenship among young people that prefigures wider social changes related to political commitment, cultural expression, and collaborative practice. Alter-activism specifically involves an emphasis on lived experience and process; a commitment to horizontal, networked organisation; creative direct action; the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs); and the organisation of physical spaces and action camps as laboratories for developing alternative values and practices. Although observers tend to associate these attributes with global justice movements generally, we contend they are more precisely linked to youthful movement sectors and are particularly visible among alter-activists. Moreover, rather than a complete break, alter-activism expands on many of the features associated with past youth movements, although it is more highly globalised, more profoundly networked, more open and collaborative, and more deeply shaped by new technologies than its predecessors.

**Keywords:** citizenship; politics; youth culture

On the evening of 23 January 2005, the night before the fifth World Social Forum (WSF) in Porto Alegre, Brazil, 30 young global justice activists sat in a circle inside the Caracol Intergalactika at the International Youth Camp. Inspired by the Zapatistas, the Caracol provided a space for activists to share ideas, strategies, and tactics with the goal of building another world. A smaller group had spent the past few months discussing the project via email lists and chat rooms, but most of the participants had just met each other that night. The meeting began with a round of intros. A tall, lanky Venezuelan began by describing his urban collective in Caracas, which was organising local neighbourhoods from the ground up, providing an autonomous alternative to Chávez' Bolivarian revolution. Next, a 23-year-old woman presented her activist network from Paris and their recent actions, followed by a Spanish media activist, who conveyed his excitement about the free software movement. A student from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) then explained his group's project of urban Zapatismo, bringing the lessons they had learned about horizontal organising to the streets of Mexico City.

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As the presentations continued, the similarity of the projects and ideas became clear. Despite their different backgrounds and political contexts, each of the young activists expressed a profound critique not only of neoliberal capitalism, but also of the hierarchical organising practices of the traditional left. A litany of common themes emerged: horizontal organisation, collaborative networking, grass-roots counterpower, alliance building, and creative direct action. Whether from San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Lima, or Milan, these young activists shared a common language and vision for how to confront power and bring about social change. There was also a familiarity and ease of interaction, as if everyone had known each other for years. When the intros concluded, the group got down to work, defining a collective position *vis-à-vis* the official forum, dividing into groups, and finalising the workshop schedule. With little need for discussion, someone volunteered to be a moderator, and another a note keeper. A consensus decision-making process then began. Although the group had never worked together, everyone knew what to do, pointing to a common set of practices to go along with their shared discourses and assumptions. How can we explain that young activists from so many different places were able to work together so effortlessly? What common experiences allowed them to do so?

Based on ethnographic fieldwork from 1999 to 2007 among global justice activists in Barcelona, Paris, Mexico City, and San Francisco, and during various social forums, network gatherings, and direct action protests, we suggest that a shared set of political-cultural practices has emerged among young, largely urban and middle-class global justice activists we refer to as *alter-activists*. We argue that alter-activism represents a specific type of (sub-) cultural practice and an emerging form of citizenship among young people that prefigures wider social changes related to political commitment, cultural expression, and collaborative practice. Specifically, alter-activism refers to a mode of activism based on lived experience and process; a commitment to horizontal, networked organisation; creative direct action; the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs); and the organisation of physical spaces and action camps as laboratories for developing alternative values and practices.

Although observers tend to associate these attributes with global justice movements generally, we contend that they are more precisely linked to specific movement sectors and are particularly visible among alter-activists. At the same time, it is important to point out that not all young global justice activists are alter-activists and not all alter-activists are young. Still, alter-activists are *more likely* to be young. Furthermore, rather than a complete break, alter-activism expands on many of the features – participatory democracy, egalitarian organisation, and direct action – associated with past youth movements, including the New Left of the 1960s and new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s such as radical feminism and environmentalism. As we shall see, however, alter-activism is more highly globalised, more profoundly networked, more open and collaborative, and more deeply shaped by new technologies than its predecessors.

The analysis presented here is based on participant observation at mobilisations, including anti-World Trade Organisation (WTO) actions in Seattle and Cancún, Mexico (November 1999 and September 2003); protests against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Prague (October 2000); anti-World Bank and European Union actions in Barcelona (June 2001 and March 2002); and anti-G8

protests in Genoa (July 2001), Evian (2003), and Heiligendamm (2007). We have also collected data during various social forums: the WSF in Porto Alegre (2001, 2002, 2003) and 2005), Mumbai (2004), Bamako (2006) and Nairobi (2007); the European Social Forum in Paris (2003) and London (2004); and the US Social Forum in Atlanta (2007). Finally, we have conducted fieldwork among, and over 100 qualitative interviews with, alter-activists from the US-based Direct Action Network (DAN), the Catalan Movement for Global Resistance (MRG), the Paris-based Vamos, and Global Alliance S9 in Mexico City.

In what follows, we begin by discussing the recent literature on (post-)subcultures and emerging forms of youth citizenship. We then examine the relationship between young people and the global justice movement, before analysing the core features of alter-activism as they relate to wider global justice networks and previous youth-based movements. Next, we discuss the specifics of alter-activism and then propose several explanations for the global spread of alter-activist culture and practice. Finally, we conclude by assessing the prospects and limitations of alter-activism with respect to political change and longer-term social transformation.

### **(Sub-)cultural politics and new modes of political engagement**

Many of the recent debates within youth studies have revolved around two related, yet hitherto disconnected bodies of scholarship: changing forms of youth (sub-)cultural practice and the rise of new forms of citizenship associated with an apparent decline in formal political participation among young people. Whereas the former has shifted from a focus on symbolic resistance among discrete, working-class subcultures toward an emphasis on the highly shifting, temporary, and politically ambiguous modes of belonging and consumption within contemporary post-subcultures, the latter has specifically addressed changing modes of political commitment, but has neglected the cultural aspects of these emerging forms of citizenship (but see Furlong and Guidikova 2001). Alter-activism forces us to consider both the broader (sub-)cultural and more narrowly political dimensions of collective life for young people under late modernity.

In the 1970s, building on the Chicago School's approach to subculture as a way to understand deviance as a 'normal' cultural response to specific socio-economic conditions, theorists at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) understood style-oriented subcultures among working-class youths in post-war Britain as a reaction to socio-structural changes in British society (Bennett 1999, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Influenced by Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the semiotic theories of Roland Barthes, the case studies in *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) demonstrated how youth subcultures, including rockers, skinheads, and punks, represented spectacular forms of symbolic resistance. CCCS viewed subcultures as cultural texts which communicated resistance to class oppression through stylistic bricolage (Blackman 2005, p. 6). However, this subcultural resistance was largely imaginary, failing to resolve the underlying structural contradictions.

Various critiques took the CCCS approach to task for reading too much politically into subcultural practice, imposing a symbolic interpretation that focuses on resistance without taking into account the meaning of subcultural practice for participants (Miles 1995, Muggleton 2000). Other scholars have taken aim at the

concept of subculture itself for creating a false sense of coherence and stability, obscuring how relations among youths, particularly within late modern consumer society, are more open and fluid (Bennett 1999, Muggleton 2000, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004, pp. 6–11). Such critiques have led to a new genre: ‘post-subcultural studies’ (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003, Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004), where youth cultures are seen as ephemeral, fragmented, and individualised (Shildrick 2006, p. 127).

Critics have pointed out that post-subcultural studies tend to neglect structure, politics, and broader cultural practices (Greener and Hollands 2006, p. 399, Shildrick 2006, p. 70, Shildrick and MacDonald 2006). Moreover, although post-subculturalists usefully pointed to the more fluid, flexible nature of contemporary youth cultures, they overlooked those that were overtly political (cf. Hesmondalgh 2005, p. 30, Greener and Hollands 2006). As Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) point out, ‘if CCCS over-politicised youth formations, then post-modernist and other post-subcultural positions have been equally guilty of under-politicising them’ (14). UK dance cultures, for example, take on a radical bent when they link up with do-it-yourself protest (Blackman 2005, p. 11), including ‘anti-roads’ actions and ‘reclaim the streets’ parties. Such anti-capitalist ‘protest formations’ use subcultural codes ‘within the political (not only the cultural) field’ (Blackman 2005, p. 11). As St John (2003) argues, ‘techno-tribes’, such as Reclaim the Streets, combine pleasure and politics via an innovative subcultural politics involving carnivals of protest, ICTs, and decentralised networks to challenge neoliberal capitalism (cf. Kahn and Kelner 2003).

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, a growing body of literature has examined the decline in traditional modes of political participation among young people. Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that, compared to older generations, young people in the West are less likely to vote, be part of mainstream parties and unions, and participate in other forms of conventional politics (Norris 2002, Adsett 2003, Gauthier 2003). For example, in Europe, observers have noticed a ‘decline in voting numbers, with a below-average turnout among young people by roughly ten points, and a growing division in the rate of participation between young people and other age groups’ (Commission of the European Communities 2003, p. 6). In Canada, electoral non-participation reveals a difference of more than 20 points between pre-baby boomers at age 20–30 and the current generation (Gauthier 2003). Moreover, surveys reveal a negative opinion of unions among youths today (Galland and Roudet 2001, pp. 158, 217). Young people are thus portrayed as exhibiting a loss of confidence in democratic institutions (Muxel 2001, Hurrelmann and Albert 2002, Galland and Roudet 2005), a development that some see as a threat to democracy (Norris 2002). However, analyses that equate a lack of formal participation with apathy mistakenly blame young people for this situation and overlook alternative forms of political engagement.

Our research among young alter-activists suggests that civic engagement may not have declined among young people, so much as changed in form, supporting recent studies that posit the rise of new modes of political engagement and citizenship (Youniss *et al.* 2002, Gauthier 2003, Pleyers 2005, Vromen 2003). Reflecting previous eras of youth mobilisation, such as the 1960s (cf. Esler 1971, Gitlin 1987), many young people are attempting to redefine politics itself (della Porta 2005, p. 192, Wieviorka 2005). The decline in formal participation thus does not indicate a

rejection of politics per se, but reflects changing forms of participation, which are increasingly flexible and individualised (Lichterman 1996, Kovacheva 2005, p. 25). Indeed, young global justice activists are often critical of formal political and civil society associations such as political parties, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which they view as hierarchical, bureaucratic, and distant from their grass-roots base. Alter-activism thus represents an alternative form of democratic participation, which is at once cultural and political, a new mode of global citizenship, *and* an emerging form of transnational (sub-)cultural practice.

### **Young people and the global justice movement**

The growing body of scholarship on the global justice movement has emphasised various defining characteristics, including the diversity of movement actors – ecologists, feminists, union and party organisers, anti-debt campaigners, solidarity activists, etc. – the networked form of the movement; its global scope; the widespread use of new ICTs and confrontational direct action; a commitment to egalitarian, directly democratic process; and a more general repoliticisation (see Castells 2004; della Porta 2005; della Porta *et al.* 2006; Juris 2004, 2008a; Pleyers 2004; Wieworka 2005). However, although some of these analyses mention the importance of youth, the specific role of young people within the global justice movement is rarely examined, and this is at least partly due to the inter-generational nature of the movement (cf. della Porta 2005).

However, the influence of young people within the global justice movement is readily apparent. Although protests and forums are indeed inter-generational, our fieldwork revealed that activists on the front lines of resistance were often young, ranging from their late teens to early thirties. There have been few age-related surveys of global justice movements, but at least two sources corroborate our observations. First, an analysis of the WSF by the Brazilian research group IBASE (2005) found that young people are a majority at the forums. The percentage of participants aged 14–34 increased from 63.2% in 2003 to 70.8% in 2005. In the latter year, those aged 14–24 comprised 42.2% of participants compared to 28.6% for those 25–34. Meanwhile, more than 90% of campers at the International Youth Camp were younger than 35, with more than 60% between 14 and 24.<sup>1</sup> Second, Donatella della Porta (2005, p. 182) reports that the percentages of participants under 34 at the 2001 protests against the G8 in Genoa and the 2002 European Social Forum in Florence were 81.7% and 82.6%, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Beyond the large number of young people that take part in global justice events, many of the characteristics often said to define global justice movements are strongly associated with younger alter-activists. At the same time, as pointed out above, not all young global justice activists are alter-activists. In this sense, we have identified five categories of youth activism in the global justice movement, which are neither rigid nor exhaustive, but are rather meant as heuristic devices.

### **Young revolutionaries**

As we observed in our fieldwork, traditional leftist parties still have significant influence among young people given their radical goals, clear-cut visions, and organising strategies based on infiltrating less politicised groups. Revolutionary

sectors are often the only groups that reach out to young people. Young revolutionaries are committed to state-centred strategies; anti-capitalism; and traditional forms of membership, recruitment, and belonging. Examples include young members of organisations linked to the Trotskyist Fourth International, the International Socialist Organisation in the USA, the Socialist Workers Party in the UK, and youth sections of communist and other leftist parties in Europe and Latin America. Youth wings of the Brazilian Worker's party or Chávez' Fifth Republic Party in Venezuela have been particularly active.

### ***Institutional youth actors***

Many young activists within the global justice movement belong to, volunteer with, or work for leftist parties, unions, NGOs, and other formal associations, either directly or as part of their youth sections. Some behave similarly to their older counterparts, while others bring, as an activist with *Vamos* explained, 'a refreshing approach to organisation and new ways of becoming involved'.<sup>3</sup> The global justice movement has enabled productive collaborations between the dynamism of young activists and the experience of older militants. Nevertheless, many formal associations, even those with a decentralised network structure, such as ATTAC (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens, or 'Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens' in English), have had difficulty engaging young people.

### ***Poor and minority youth actors***

Paradoxically, poor and minority youths, including young immigrants and people of colour who suffer most from neoliberal policies (cf. Blossfeld *et al.* 2005), are less visible in the global justice movement (cf. Starr 2004). However, youth of colour have been more involved in recent mobilisations, such as the 2003 protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas in Miami or the US Social Forum in Atlanta in 2007. In addition, anti-war marches have also provided an opportunity for poor and minority youths in Europe to participate in global peace and justice-related protests, but this has not generally led to further involvement. Specifically with respect to the social forums, relatively few young *favela* residents in Brazil have participated in the WSF, while even during the second European Social Forum in 2003, which was held in the Parisian suburbs, a significant gap remained between immigrant youths and middle-class activists.

### ***Autonomous youth movements***

Autonomous youth movements are organised around small, anti-capitalist collectives and include squatters, anti-militarists, alternative media practitioners, and others who stress local struggles and collective self-management. Autonomous movements reject all forms of hierarchy, stressing independence from parties, unions, NGOs, and representative institutions. Whereas alter-activists favour local-global networking and flexible alliances, autonomous activists support localised strategies, while promoting a radical, anti-systemic critique. Autonomous activists are extremely critical of what they perceive as more institutional global justice events,

including world and regional social forums. As a counterweight to the official social forums, autonomous youths have organised their own '*libertarian*' spaces and forums in Porto Alegre (2003), Paris (2003), London (2004) and Caracas (2006). At the tactical level, autonomists tend to engage in militant action, including Black Bloc tactics targeting corporate targets and the police (Juris 2005b).

### ***Young alter-activists***

Like their counterparts with autonomous movements, alter-activists are also critical of institutional sectors and the Marxist left, stressing horizontal coordination, direct democracy, and flexible forms of commitment. However, whereas autonomous movements emphasise the local and are wary of alliances, alter-activists are committed to an ethic of openness, local-global networking, and organising across diversity and difference. Alter-activists participate in broader global justice events, including regional and world social forums, but they do so by keeping 'one foot in, and one foot out', maintaining a critical attitude toward internal hierarchies and non-democratic practices. Alter-activist discourses and practices, which are characterised by creative forms of action and an emphasis on process and experimentation, are found among young people around the world, but are more prevalent in Europe and North America.

### **Alter-activism as an emerging global culture of participation**

In the following section, we analyse the main features of alter-activist practice, stressing its relationship to the wider global justice movement and the continuities between diverse forms of youth activism within different movements and historical periods. The rejection of hierarchy and formal organisation; multiple, shifting alliances; an emphasis on participatory democracy; and the search for a new politics, as well as the use of spectacular direct action, can all be found in previous youth movements dating back to the 1960s, if not before. Indeed, as Anthony Esler (1971) pointed out with respect to the New Left, 'The crucial importance of the Youth Revolution of our times lies not in its alleged uniqueness, but in that very continuity with history which the Movement itself – and most of its critics – have so vehemently denied' (cited in McKay 1996, p. 3). At the same time, many of the features that characterised past youth-based movements are expressed in specific ways in the contemporary period, particularly in light of the deepening process of globalisation and the rise of new ICTs.

At the most general level, alter-activism represents an emerging political culture. On the one hand, it is an *activist* culture, a particular way of understanding and working toward social change. On the other hand, it is a *youth* culture, a shared way of experiencing the world, building common identities and lifestyles, and interacting with others beyond or within the 'interstitial' spaces of institutional life (Feixa 1998, p. 84). Still, young people are divided along axes of race, class, gender (Wyn and White 1997, p. 75), and political orientation. It is thus more precise to talk about youth subcultures. However, whereas subcultures tend to imply coherence and rigidity, and are often associated with style and resistance, alter-activism is diffuse, directly political, and proactive, involving an active construction of common values, discourses, and practices.



### *Creative direct action*

On the morning of 30 November 1999, thousands of protesters on the streets of Seattle stood with their arms linked in the massive human chain surrounding the conference centre where the WTO summit was being held. Young alter-activists dressed as dancing turtles and butterflies, symbolically representing the negative impact of WTO rulings, danced through the crowd, generating compelling media images. As the tension on the streets began to mount, young, autonomous militants in black, with gas masks buckled to their waists and hoods and bandanas covering their faces, began darting in and out of the protesters. That afternoon they smashed the windows at major corporate outlets in downtown Seattle: Nike, Starbucks, the Gap, and Bank of America. At the same time, alter-activists and the majority of participants remained festive. The city felt like a huge street carnival, overflowing with protesters playing instruments, marching, singing, and dancing, all the while carrying massive puppets and banners.

During the siege of the Prague convention centre, where the meetings of the World Bank and IMF were set to take place on the morning of 26 September 2000, hundreds of Italian-led Tute Bianche marched with their white overalls, protective shields, and foam padding, while another several dozen young revellers danced their way behind a samba band, wearing pink and silver lingerie, colourful glitter, and feathers. Meanwhile, groups of Radical Cheerleaders and Pink Fairies entertained a crowd of non-violent blockaders, taunting police and performing ironic cheers inspired by the tactics and aesthetics of UK-based Reclaim the Streets. On the other side of the congress centre, however, Black Block militants threw cobblestones and Molotov cocktails at the riot police, transforming the surrounding area into a spectacular war zone (cf. Juris 2008b).

After the final march against the WTO on 21 September 2003 in Cancún, thousands of activists approached the fence dividing downtown from the resort area where the WTO meetings were taking place. Suddenly, young Mexican women and Korean trade unionists began attacking the fence, while others shouted slogans and sang. After roughly an hour, a hole finally opened in the fence, leaving protesters face to face with the police lines guarding the 'no-protest zone'. Although police and journalists expected violent confrontation, the protesters immediately sat down and observed a moment of silence commemorating the Korean peasant leader who had taken his own life to protest WTO policies earlier that week. After speeches by Latin American and Asian activists, protesters burned an effigy representing the WTO and laid flowers before the police. As the riot cops looked on, confused and impotent, hundreds of alter-activists began dancing to the beat of Korean, Latina and North American music to celebrate their symbolic victory.

These vignettes from our field notes point to one of the most recognisable and clearly subcultural aspects of alter-activist practice: the use of creative, spectacular direct action to make hidden conflicts visible (Melucci 1989). Although, as noted above, creative direct action has been linked to global justice movements generally, these practices are most closely associated with younger, more direct action-oriented sectors, and particularly, alter-activists. Despite arising in distinct contexts, the tactics employed by young alter-activists all produce theatrical images for media consumption. Beyond their utilitarian goals – shutting down summit meetings – mass actions are complex cultural performances that allow participants to

communicate symbolic messages while providing a forum for producing and experiencing symbolic meaning via ritual interaction. The theatrical performances staged by activists from diverse alter-activist networks, including symbolic conflict (White Overalls and Black Blocks) and carnivalesque revelry (Pink and Silver), capture mass media attention, but also embody and express alternative identities.

The use of spectacular tactics to create 'image events' (Deluca 1999) is not entirely new. For example, the 1960s New Left (Gitlin 1980, Stephens 1998) and more recent environmental movements (Deluca 1999) are well known for their theatrical protest. Youth culture has been an important feature of these struggles, including the street theatre and bazaar antics of the diggers and yippies in the USA (Doyle 2002), carnivalesque festivals at the Parisian barricades in May 1968 (Vienet 1968), and recent Reclaim the Streets protests (Jordan 1998), as well as militant street fighting by anti-Vietnam War protesters (Rhodes 2001). However, while past youth struggles have also been global (Katsiaficas 1987), the speed and density of global flows and greater ease of international travel mean that direct action tactics diffuse more rapidly today. In addition, whereas previous youth protests had a national focus, alter-activists have organised against global targets and for transnational audiences. Meanwhile, physical and virtual global communications networks allow alter-activists to exchange ideas and debate tactics in real time.

### *Network-based organisational forms*

This networked dimension of contemporary alter-activism is one of its most innovative features. Youth-oriented and other new social movements have long favoured diffuse, informal, and participatory forms, as evidenced by the New Left (Breines 1989, Polletta 2002), radical feminism (Polletta 2002), anarchist-inspired direct action (Epstein 1991), and white middle-class environmentalism (Lichterman 1996). Julie Stephens (1998) refers to the intense egalitarianism of cultural radicals in the 1960s as an 'anti-disciplinary politics': 'a language of protest which rejected hierarchy and leadership, strategy and planning, bureaucratic organisation and political parties' (4). Although today's alter-activists are critical of hierarchy and centralisation, they are not opposed to organisation, leadership, and strategy per se (cf. Polletta 2002). Instead, like their more organisationally minded predecessors, they are trying to build participatory structures that reflect their directly democratic ideals. At the same time, given the new technologies at their disposal, alter-activists have been able to develop their networks beyond the local scale.

Over the past nine years, we have conducted fieldwork among numerous alter-activist networks, including the US-based Direct Action Network (DAN), the Movement for Global Resistance (MRG) in Catalonia, GAS9 in Mexico City, Vamos in Paris, and People's Global Action (PGA), on a global level. Whereas previous movements required centralised structures to facilitate communication and coordination at a distance, new ICTs allow activists to maintain such interactions via horizontal, peer-to-peer contacts (Juris 2008a). In contrast to traditional parties and unions, alter-activism involves the creation of broad umbrella spaces, where diverse individuals, organisations, collectives, and networks converge around common hallmarks, while preserving their autonomy and specificity. This is precisely what young global justice activists mean when they refer to a 'new politics'. However, rather than a feature of global justice movements *writ large* (pace Polletta 2002, della

Porta 2005), the commitment to new forms of democracy is most clearly visible within more youthful sectors of the movement.

In particular, alter-activist networks reflect the new forms of participation and shifting memberships that Paul Lichterman (1996) has identified as an emerging pattern of individualised commitment among middle-class activists in the West. In our fieldwork, we found that alter-activists prefer temporary, ad hoc coalitions, and are more committed to the movement and its values than any particular organisation. Participation is thus individualised, but also concerned with collective goals and collaborative practice. As MRG's manifesto states, 'We understand MRG as a tool for collective mobilisation, education, and exchange, which at the same time respects and preserves the autonomy of participating people and groups, reinforcing all the voices taking part in the action.' In this sense, alter-activists favour open participation over rigid membership. Another MRG document thus explained that the network 'has a diffuse structure, and involves a diffuse sense of individual identification with the movement. MRG should ... be understood as a movement "without members"'.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, despite their flexible form and the fact that many were initially created as temporary coordinating vehicles, alter-activist networks often continued beyond their original *raison d'être*. For example, although Seattle DAN was founded as a loose coalition of direct action, environmental, and community groups to coordinate WTO actions, activists went on to build a continental structure. The national network soon faltered, but local DAN chapters remained active in several US cities. MRG was similarly created to mobilise Catalan activists around the anti-World Bank and IMF protests in Prague. After three years of organising, the network finally 'self-dissolved' in January 2003. Paris-based Vamos, created during the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa, began by carrying out public education on neoliberalism and mobilising bus loads of students to international protests. Since 2002, Vamos has carried out symbolic actions on issues such as migration, the Iraq War, corporations, and neoliberal reforms, while organising alternative spaces and action camps during the anti-G8 protest in Geneva and the European Social Forum in Paris, both in 2003. Likewise, GAS9 initially mobilised young Mexicans against the 2003 WTO summit in Cancún, but went on to organise massive 'youth assemblies' involving students, libertarians, communists, educators, and NGO workers. After the protest against the Inter-American Development Bank in Guadalajara, activists decided to focus on local activities, alternative media, and support for Zapatistas campaigns.

Finally, like many New Left as well as radical feminist and environmental organisations, alter-activist networks tend to have no formal hierarchies, elected positions, or paid staff, while decisions are taken by consensus. Whereas many previous attempts to build directly democratic organisations were limited in scope, alter-activists have developed broader-based participatory structures. Moreover, whereas New Leftist and early feminist organisations relied on informal decision making and friendship (Polletta 2002), alter-activists have built on the formal consensus processes developed in the US direct action movements of the 1970s, but they have done so on a larger geographic scale. Indeed, US-based alter-activists have helped diffuse collaborative decision-making practices transnationally. Moreover, networks such as GAS9 or Vamos have developed similarly dynamic, participatory structures, while PGA has done so on a global scale.

Alter-activists emphasise horizontal structure and democratic process as a political end in itself, leading to an egalitarian, dynamic, and flexible form of activism. However, alter-activist networks also have their limitations. For example, given the lack of formal structure and clear chains of command, they can be highly unstable. Moreover, despite a commitment to egalitarian relations, informal hierarchies often emerge, which tend to be less democratic and more difficult to control (Polletta 2002, Juris 2005a, p. 57; cf. Juris 2008a). Influence within alter-activist networks is largely shaped by factors such as public-speaking skills, social capital, or having the time and resources to attend meetings. Overlooking such power imbalances and avoiding explicit decision-making rules can allow some leaders to gain disproportionate influence.

### *New information and communication technologies*

One of the main factors distinguishing alter-activism from previous youth movements is the innovative use of ICTs. Given that younger generations have grown up using computers, it should come as no surprise that they have been at the forefront of incorporating new technologies, such as the Internet, into their everyday routines (Henderson *et al.* 2002, Lee 2005). In this sense, alter-activists have employed ICTs to organise direct actions and share information and resources, as well as plan and coordinate activities. Although young alter-activists primarily use email and electronic listserves, they also create temporary web pages during mobilisations to provide information, resources, and contact lists, and post documents and calls to action, as well as house discussion forums and Internet relay chat rooms. Moreover, particular networks have their own web pages, where activists post reflections, analyses, updates, links, and logistical information (Juris 2005c). Interactive websites offering multiple tools for coordination are becoming increasingly popular, including open publishing projects, such as Indymedia, which allow users to post news and information freely without editorial selection and control.

Independent media activism forms part of a global radical media culture among young alter-activists. For example, Indymedia, founded during the Seattle protests, is a transnational network of local Web-based projects that allow alter-activists to create and circulate alternative news and information. During actions and gatherings, hundreds of activists take to the streets to record video footage, snap photos, and conduct interviews, while Indymedia centres become dynamic communication hubs buzzing with activity as protesters upload files, swap information, and edit videos. There are now more than 120 Indymedia sites around the world, while the global network receives up to two million page views a day (Juris 2005c). Alter-activists have also practised 'tactical media', including the playful parodying of corporate advertisements, as in 'culture jamming', or new kinds of electronic civil disobedience, such as the 'virtual sit-in'.

Finally, alter-activists have used new ICTs within temporary media labs featuring digital audio, video, and streaming to experiment with horizontal collaboration while expressing their directly democratic ideals. In this regard, the Euraction Hub Project at the November 2002 European Social Forum in Florence provided an open space for sharing ideas and experiences, experimenting with new ICTs, carrying out autonomous actions, and organising in a horizontal and participatory fashion. Inside the hub, young media activists organised workshops on themes such as

hacking the borders and corporate Europe, digital media activism, and culture jamming. The project was viewed 'as an implicit critique of vertical, non-inclusive, and non-participatory structures', and a tool for reflecting 'on activist communication and new forms of expression of antagonism and conflict'.<sup>5</sup> The hub was thus meant as an alternative to the hierarchical practices of the official forum. At the same time, its egalitarian, playful, and exploratory spirit reflected an emphasis on process, experimentation, and lived experience within alter-activist cultures.

### *Protest camps as interstitial experimental spaces*

Inspired by the Argentine rebellion in 2001, the 2002 No Border Camp in Strasbourg employed a decision-making structure based on a network of self-managed neighbourhoods or *barrios*. Each barrio would manage its affairs through a local assembly, while decisions affecting the entire camp, including those related to infrastructure, security, media, or collective actions, would be taken through larger 'spokescouncil' meetings, or *inter-barriales*, involving delegates from each local barrio. As the introduction to the camp handbook, or 'the manual of inter-barrio geopolitics', explained:

One of our objectives is to implement a complete vision of the world(s) we're fighting for in the here and now, and right down to the smallest details of daily life.... The individuals and collectives involved in the preparation of the camp have decided upon a philosophy of organization based on an on-going search for self-management, decentralization, autonomy, and ... equality.

The 'Intergalactic Village' at the June 2003 mobilisation against the G8 in Evian adopted a similar model of organisation based on thematic barrios and an open, participatory form of organisation. The camp involved nearly 4,000 activists and left a lasting impact on young French global justice activists. In Mexico, during 2005 alone, youth camps were organised in Oaxaca, near Mexico City, and along the US-Mexican border. During the protest against the G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany, the three camps hosted over 10,000 activists and were used as bases for launching direct actions, and places to sleep, eat, meet other activists, and debate alternatives, as well as spaces to experiment with self-managed forms of social interaction within everyday life. The days featured protest marches, and sessions to plan direct actions to block the roads to the G8, as well as meetings and workshops where activists could share their experiences. In the evenings, the camps were transformed into lively spaces for discussing politics, singing songs around small fires, presenting independent films, and dancing during all-night techno raves.

The participatory networking ethic associated with alter-activism has been particularly visible during the kinds of temporary action spaces and youth camps depicted above. As with similar spaces associated with prior environmental, anti-roads, and other movements (Jordan 1998, McDonald 2006), alter-activist camps are bases for launching actions, sites for holding workshops, spaces for socialising and generating emotions, and laboratories for experimenting with new forms of interaction. Such camps provide a time out of time, a liminal space where hierarchies are temporarily suspended. Indeed, at least in theory, there are no formal leaders, decisions are made by consensus, and residents are encouraged to help build,

organise, and administer the space on a daily basis. At the same time, alter-activist camps are globalised, bringing together activists from countries around the world.

Despite their utopian goals, alter-activist camps often present complex, even intractable challenges, including informal hierarchies, uneven levels of participation, and political divisions. Moreover, alter-activist camps are ephemeral: once they conclude, groups tend to dissolve and networks dilute. Alter-activist camps thus reflect the individualised, shifting, and diffuse nature of late modern sociability as well as a contrasting trend toward communalism (Maffesoli 1996). Within such intense spaces, individual experiences intersect with collective histories, transforming political identities, beliefs, and commitments in lasting ways (McAdam 1989).

### *Lived experience, collaborative process, and global connectedness*

Taken together, the commitment to egalitarian organisation, horizontal networking, and collaborative interaction within physical and virtual spaces translates into an emerging political vision among alter-activists that emphasises lived experience and process. Unlike more institutional and Marxist sectors of the global justice movement, alter-activists are committed to a model of revolution as an ongoing process involving self-managed, autonomous spaces. Such visions are not entirely new. Indeed, the New Left, particularly in France, was also characterised by an overriding desire for self-management and autonomy from bureaucratic institutions (Katsiaficas 1987). However, the rise of new ICTs as well as globally networked political formations has provided new resources for putting this vision into practice on a transnational scale.

In our interviews and observations, young alter-activists continually expressed a view of social transformation as ongoing collaboration. Rather than messianic visions or an established project, alter-activists often articulate a model of social change through quotidian practice. As a flyer for an autonomous space at the 2003 European Social Forum in Paris explained, 'We are feeling our way, seeking out concrete and emancipatory paths toward the transformation of social relations.' Rather than rejecting politics, as mentioned above, alter-activists are attempting to build directly democratic 'living utopias' (Peterson and Thörn 1994), which are ambiguous in the sense of undergoing continual elaboration and are expressed directly through mass actions, organisational structure, and technological practices. This vision combines a commitment to internal democracy and autonomy – feminism, anarchism, and Zapatismo have been influential in this regard – with an emphasis on openness and networked collaboration tied to more recent technology-oriented activism, including the free software movement.

Many young alter-activists we interviewed specifically contrasted this model of social change to that of other global justice movement sectors, particularly more institutional parties, unions, and NGOs. As an activist from MRG pointed out, 'We are promoting decentralised participation, making each group responsible for their part so decisions are taken among many people as opposed to the old politics where a small group has all the information and decides everything.' Unlike traditional actors, alter-activists stress grass-roots participation and personal interaction in the context of daily life. Movement meetings, neighbourhood relations, and protest camps become spaces to experience and experiment with alternative ways of life, as a document from Vamos explains, 'We do not separate our practices and aims. We opt

for a horizontal, anti-sexist, self- and eco-managed mode of operating.' This differentiates alter-activists from more institutional actors, whom they criticise for, as an activist from *Vamos* put it, 'not being aware of process ... [thinking that] there is no difference between means and ends. Our manner of working has to reflect the values we are defending in our resistance.'

Moreover, alter-activists have articulated a resolutely global vision, while continuing to stress autonomy and local self-management. An MRG-based activist thus characterised her ideal world as a network of 'small, self-organized, and self-managed communities, coordinated among them on a worldwide scale'. Although similar ideals have been expressed within past youth movements, alter-activists have the technological tools at their disposal to begin putting these visions into practice through their everyday organising.

### **Connections across time and space**

Whether independently developed or directly inherited, alter-activism reflects numerous political and (sub-)cultural practices that have also characterised past youth-based movements, from the 1960s New Left to the new social movements of the 1970s and 1980s, including radical feminism and environmentalism. These practices include creative direct action, the development of egalitarian structures and new forms of participatory democracy, the organisation of action camps and other physical spaces, and the articulation of utopian visions based on collaborative process, lived experience, and global connectedness. At the same time, however, alter-activism is characterised by several specific features that enhance its scale, scope, and influence with respect to prefiguring new forms of political and organisational practice. In particular, the deepening of globalisation, along with the rise of new ICTs, makes alter-activism more fully globalised in terms of the speed, density, and simultaneity of global flows; more highly networked; more open to diverse identities; and more fully collaborative than past youth movements, characteristics that have come to be associated with global justice movements more generally.

In addition to temporal connections, alter-activism also involves important links across space. Indeed, as we have seen, alter-activists from around Europe and North and Latin America, share similar political and cultural conceptions, discourses, and practices. How can we explain this transnational confluence? First, 'relational' and 'non-relational' links (Tarrow 2005) among activists have helped diffuse alter-activist ideas, discourses, and practices. With respect to the latter, flows of information and images circulate indirectly through mass and alternative media. As a result, Seattle and other global justice protests have become common reference points for alter-activist protesters around the world. Direct relational links have also been established via digital networks and personal contacts. Hundreds of young backpackers have travelled in Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America learning about alternative forms of social, cultural, and political practice at diverse sites such as social forums, Zapatista villages, and Piquetero neighbourhoods.

Another explanation has to do with the increasingly similar upbringing and lifestyles of young people around the world. As Tarrow and McAdam (2005) suggest, the adoption of new ideas, cultural objects, and practices does not depend on information alone, but also requires a modicum of identification between innovator and adopter (p. 129). The global youth culture that emerged in the 1960s has greatly

expanded, resulting in increasingly global consumer identities and consumption patterns. Middle-class youths everywhere watch MTV and American movies, wear Levi's, and listen to global music, leading to what Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2007) refer to as a 'global generation'. Indeed, alter-activists are using the tools of globalisation to build a global movement of youth rebellion: networking, distributing news via Indymedia, participating in global chats, sharing common cultural references, mobilising against international summits, using similar protest styles and tactics, and coming together during international gatherings.

Finally, the similarities in alter-activist culture, particularly among middle-class students, can also be explained in terms of life cycle and generation effects. On the one hand, youths are more deeply influenced by the characteristics and values associated with the information society (Castells 2004) in which they have grown up. Surveys show that in comparison with the overall population, young people value more flexible, autonomous forms of commitment and are quicker to adopt new ICTs (Galland and Roudet 2001), which, as we have seen, are critical to emerging alter-activist practices. Young people today are also part of the post-Berlin Wall generation shaped by an accelerating rejection of traditional politics and the Soviet socialist alternative.

Life-cycle effects reinforce these trends, as alter-activism is uniquely compatible with a period alternatively called *extended youth* (Cavalli and Galland 1993; cf. Furlong and Cartmel 1997), *post-adolescence* (Williamson 2002), or *emerging adulthood* (Arnett 2004). Social changes over the past two decades, including the extension of education, precarious job markets, and extended dependency on parents, have postponed the transition to adulthood and profoundly modified social relations in the West (Cavalli and Galland 1996, Leccardi and Ruspini 2006, Santaro 2006). This delay has allowed more free time for activities such as experimenting with alternative lifestyles, travelling, and activism. This period is also associated with traits that characterise alter-activism, such as a thirst for lived experience, experimentation, and risk taking (Arène 1999). Not surprisingly, then, as reflected in the statistics above, a large percentage of global justice activists can be characterised as post-adolescents or emerging adults.

### Conclusion: incorporating youth or transforming politics?

On 26 January 2005, the Brazilian president, Ignácio Lula da Silva, addressed a packed *gigantinho* stadium during the WSF. Two years earlier, Lula had drawn widespread adulation within the forum as the first elected president from the leftist PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or 'Workers' Party' in English). This year he was roundly criticised by many for allying himself with global financial elites against the interests of his grass-roots base. When hecklers began taunting Lula during his speech, the president retorted,

Those of you who aren't from here, don't be afraid. These people that don't want to listen are sons and daughters of the PT who rebelled. That's typical of youth, and one day they are going to mature, and we'll be here with open arms to welcome them back. (*The New York Times*, 28 January 2005, p. A9)

According to Lula, youth is a stage of development characterised by disobedience and rebelliousness along the inevitable path toward adulthood.<sup>6</sup> Young



people are generally given to unruliness and excess, but will evolve into 'mature' political beings. The category of youth is pathologised and thus depoliticised. Indeed, many older activists and politicians conceive youth as raw material to be shaped through careful cultivation within formal political organisations. In this article, we have conceived young political actors as *active cultural producers* (Caputo 1995). Alter-activism is not an 'immature' mode of political commitment, but points to an alternative form of citizenship and an emerging set of (sub-)cultural practices. Indeed, alter-activists are well adapted to current values, practices, and opportunities. Alter-activism reflects key tensions associated with late modernity, including seemingly contradictory trends toward individualisation reflected in multiple, shifting patterns of commitment (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, Vinken 2005) and resurgent communalism involving collaborative, embodied, and affective interaction within intimate spaces of daily life (Maffesoli 1996, McDonald 2006; cf. Sweetman 2004).

In this sense, the practices and tensions associated with alter-activism should not be viewed as social problems to be solved but rather as shifts in contemporary modes of political engagement brought about by longer-term social, cultural, and economic transformations. This perspective suggests that such practices and ideas will not necessarily disappear as alter-activists 'grow up' and move into formal political institutions. Just as the 1960s generation introduced profound political and cultural changes, alter-activism is also likely to have long-lasting effects. Some alter-activists may continue to engage in alternative modes of engagement throughout their lives. Others will bring their ideas, values, and practices to bear within more traditional settings. Indeed, once we begin to view young people as cultural producers, other possibilities emerge. Rather than asking how democratic institutions can better reach out to and integrate youths, we might ask how young alter-activists might influence and strengthen democratic institutions.

As Karl Mannheim (1952) argued, given their 'fresh contact' with received traditions, young people are more open to new ideas and practices, particularly during periods of social change (Sherrod *et al.* 2005, p. 15). Their novel vantage point may help young activists develop innovative solutions with respect to organisation and broader political dynamics. Alter-activists have already had a dramatic impact on how the WSF is organised, for example, as the 2005 edition moved closer to the network-based model of the youth camp (Juris 2005a). Similarly, their novel modes of coordination using new ICTs, consensus process, and open participation constitute experiments in building directly democratic forms of globalisation from below. Although surely utopian, at their best, alter-activist practices may help generate new ways of thinking and acting that better respond to emerging possibilities and challenges at local, regional, and global scales. At the same time, alter-activism has significant shortcomings, such as the propensity for informal hierarchies discussed above. Moreover, although alter-activists have helped to make struggles for global justice visible, their policy impact remains limited. Indeed, their rejection of representative politics and distrust of formal structure makes it difficult for institutional interlocutors to engage them effectively. However, beyond the political realm, alter-activists ultimately aim to generate longer-term social and cultural change.

As Bajoit and Fransen (1995) point out, young people, especially those with higher levels of status and education, tend to be at the forefront of major

transformations, and are often viewed as 'barometers' of social change (Miles 2000). Rather than declining when young activists reach adulthood, alter-activism may become more important as a political culture with the diffusion of the values, practices, and technologies of late modernity. Indeed, alter-activism prefigures new forms of (sub-)cultural politics and citizenship that involve emerging modes of individualised commitment as well as innovative collaborative practices. In this sense, young alter-activists are active producers of society itself. Further studies of alter-activism are essential not only to better understand global justice movements but also to grasp key aspects of contemporary social change.

## Notes

1. The majority of campers came from Brazil and neighbouring countries, while the age of forum participants more generally was slightly older for those coming from other regions.
2. Moreover, 55% of participants at the anti-G8 protests and 44.1% of those at the European Social Forum were younger than 24 years of age.
3. All quotations are cited from personal interviews unless otherwise indicated.
4. MRG document regarding network identity, structure, and functioning, circulated on the [global@ldist.ct.upc.es](mailto:global@ldist.ct.upc.es) listserve (18 October 2000).
5. EUR@ACTION Hub Project. Available from: [www.nadir.org/nadir/initiative/agg/space/hubproject.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiative/agg/space/hubproject.htm) (Accessed 19 March 2004).
6. This is ironic given that Lula represents a movement that itself began as a rebellion against military dictatorship.

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