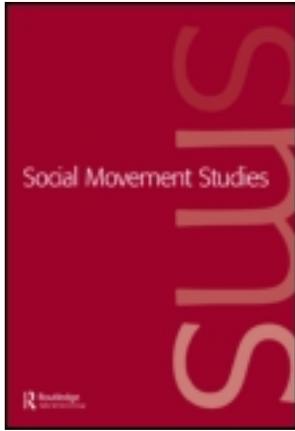


This article was downloaded by: [Christopher Gunderson]

On: 19 April 2013, At: 17:59

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csms20>

No Easy Victories, the Difficulties of Defying the Empire

Christopher Gunderson ^a

^a Fordham University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Version of record first published: 14 Apr 2013.

To cite this article: Christopher Gunderson (2013): No Easy Victories, the Difficulties of Defying the Empire, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, DOI:10.1080/14742837.2013.787760

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.787760>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

REVIEW ESSAY

No Easy Victories, the Difficulties of Defying the Empire

CHRISTOPHER GUNDERSON

Fordham University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Dying Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Global Resistance (Rethinking Globalizations Series)

Francis Shor

Abingdon, Routledge, 2010, xi + 194 pp., index, £80.00, ISBN 978-0-415-77822-0 (hardback); £24.99, ISBN 978-0-415-77823-7 (paperback)

Protest and Organization in the Alternative Globalization Era: NGOs, Social Movements and Political Parties

Heather Gautney

New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, ix + 237 pp., index, £52.00, ISBN 978-0-230-62024-7 (hardback)

Francis Shor and Heather Gautney are both US-based activists and scholars. They have written two very different books that, in a manner that combines their own activist commitments with rigorous scholarship and argumentation, examine the politics of resistance to the US-led neoliberal restructuring of global capitalism. Both will be useful resources for students and activists interested in understanding the global wave of protest that began in Tunisia and that has more recently exploded across the USA. In *Dying Empire: U.S. Imperialism and Global Resistance*, Shor locates the restructuring of global capitalism, and the resistance it has generated, within a wide-ranging critique of the USA as an imperialist country that considers not just the cultural, economic and military effects of US imperialism on the rest of the world, but also the contradictions that arise for citizens of the USA as some of them attempt to act in what Shor calls ‘afflicted solidarity’ with the victims of US imperialism. In *Protest and Organization in the Alternative Globalization Era*, Gautney is more narrowly focused on the important history of the World Social Forum (WSF) as an ‘open space’ within which socially and politically diverse forces in the broad alter-globalization movement (AGM) have come together to discuss and debate their efforts to realize ‘another world’.

Correspondence Address: Christopher Gunderson, Fordham University, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, 2022 Beverley Rd. #9, Brooklyn, NY 11226, USA. Email: christophergunderson01@gmail.com

© 2013 Taylor & Francis

As a consequence of political, generational and disciplinary differences between their authors, the books are oddly complementary with opposing strengths and weaknesses. Shor is an historian whose book is deeply informed by his experiences in solidarity work with the Nicaraguan revolution in the 1980s, while Gautney is a younger sociologist shaped by the AGM of the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Shor's book is a very ambitious attempt to make sense of the present impasse confronting US activists. He seeks to accomplish this through an examination of the historical processes through which the USA came to anchor a globe-straddling empire and of the gendered and racialized ideological projects that accompanied those processes from the inception of the USA to the present. The book is divided into three main parts. In the first part, Shor reviews in brief the history of the USA as an empire-building country in order to explain the contemporary 'civic isolation and irresponsibility' which he sees as 'another kind of "blowback" from the U.S. imperial agenda' (p. 29). Using his own experiences, first as a participant in a delegation of peace activists to Nicaragua in 1984, and then building houses with Habitat for Humanity in post-Katrina New Orleans, Shor considers the various ways that 'the arrogance of power, the missionary zeal of self-righteousness, the falsely confident over-reach' that 'accompany U.S. imperial dominance abroad' are 'often replicated in the well-intentioned solidarity efforts of citizen movements at home' (p. 42). In the second part, Shor looks in succession at the military, economic and cultural dimensions of what he sees as a comprehensive strategic effort on the part of US elites to maintain US global pre-eminence in the face of what appeared, in the 1970s at least, to be its 'inevitable decline' (p. 6). Shor sees this decline as 'a direct consequence of the crisis of profitability and increasing financialization of capital in the 1970s' (p. 6) but also entangled with the USA's military defeat in Vietnam. The third and final part of the book discusses the more recent emergence of 'global civil-society' and considers the radical alternatives to the status quo reflected in a variety of grassroots democratic movements, including the Zapatistas and the WSF.

There is an urgency to *Dying Empire* that makes it alternatively compelling and difficult to read. Although Shor sees in the Zapatistas and the WSF real possibilities for 'another world', he is deeply worried about the inability of US citizens to break out of the deeply entrenched ideological frameworks that so persistently 'afflict' their solidarities. There is little question in Shor's mind that the empire is coming down. The unanswered question is whether it will crash and burn or whether the landing will be softened by effective solidarity on the part of the empire's citizens. Shor's arguments are both persuasive and over-weighted with references to an astonishingly broad range of critical theoretical perspectives and cultural phenomena. The problem is that despite truly valiant efforts on Shor's part, he cannot possibly do justice to all of the questions he takes up in the space of one short book. Instead of pausing to illustrate or tease out the implications of an important point he makes, he rushes instead to the next point. It is easy to understand why he does so. The stakes are high and he has a lot of important points to make, but the consequence is a book that will have a narrower audience than its arguments deserve. If only because her focus is narrower, Gautney's account of the emergence of the WSF and the conflicts within it over questions of political organization and strategy is less manic than Shor's book. Where Shor looks back to the colonial origins of the USA, Gautney is content to begin her narrative with the crisis in Keynesian fiscal policies and the ascendance of neo-liberalism in the 1970s before jumping into the emergence of the AGM in the late 1990s and the initiation of the WSF in January 2001. Gautney then gives us a very straightforward and

therefore very useful history of the WSF. The WSF was conceived of as a response or an alternative to the annual World Economic Forum, in Davos, Switzerland. Gautney gives a chronological account of the first seven years of the WSF, recounting its various major meetings in Brazil, India, Venezuela, Mali, Pakistan and Kenya and tracing its various internal controversies and organizational evolution, including the organization of national and regional social forums. 20,000 people attended the first WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and the largest meeting, also in Porto Alegre in 2005, attracted 155,000 people with attendance declining somewhat at the subsequent forums. Whatever one's views on the various controversies that have followed the WSF from its birth, it is undeniably an unparalleled event in the history of social movements, and the most significant single institutional expression of what Shor calls 'global civil society'. There are probably a few dozen books on the WSF in English alone. Gautney's, however, offers the best and most accessible capsule history I have read.

The heart of Gautney's book, however, is her discussion of the persistent contradictions between what she calls 'the three most prominent groups in the WSF', namely 'NGOs, anti-authoritarian social movements, and political party members'. She devotes a chapter to each group and its involvement in the WSF. This discussion too is highly informative. From its inception, the WSF was conceived of as an 'open space' in which diverse forces could come together for purposes of discussion, but which would deliberately avoid taking formal political positions. Armed organizations (like the FARC in Colombia, but also the more favorably regarded Zapatistas), political parties and elected officials were barred from attending as delegates on the grounds that they would likely compromise the 'non-deliberative' character of the gathering, by which they mean not that there are not to be substantive political discussions, but rather that the meetings are not supposed to make decisions or public statements in the name of the WSF as a whole. One of the consequences of this approach, however, has been to make the WSF and its planning process, a constant arena for, and object of, conflicts between groups with quite divergent interests and ideological outlooks, without providing a satisfactory mechanism for the resolution of those conflicts. By prohibiting 'deliberation' in this sense, the WSF unintentionally enshrined a process of endless squabbling.

Gautney's critical eye is at its sharpest when she is looking at the role of NGOs and political parties in the WSF. Her description of the undemocratic consequences arising from the unequal access to resources and power on the part of NGOs and political parties with access to state resources exposes the profound limitations of an undifferentiated notion of 'global civil society' that does not acknowledge the critical distinction between, on the one hand, a delegate from a peasant organization whose travel expenses were covered by contributions from fellow peasants and, on the other hand, a paid staff member of an NGO who receives funding from the Ford Foundation. Needless to say, the latter sort of groups' greater access to the resources to pay for air travel and hotel rooms ensured their disproportionate representation at WSF meetings. The question of resources came into sharp relief at the Nairobi WSF in 2007 where the price of admission excluded the vast majority of Kenyans, where government officials gave concessions to family members, and where a sponsorship deal with the Kuwaiti cellphone company CelTel made a mockery of the WSF's supposedly anti-corporate character. The Nairobi meeting illustrated in particularly vivid fashion how, by blocking its development into an organized global political force that could actually challenge neo-liberalism, the 'non-deliberative' character of the WSF facilitated neo-liberalism's penetration of the WSF itself.

Gautney's analysis is at its weakest in her discussion of what she calls the 'anti-authoritarian social movements' which clearly have her sympathies. The terminology itself obscures an important distinction between broadly defined social movement organizations and actors on the one hand, and the explicitly anti-authoritarian, anarchist or autonomist groups which, depending on their circumstances, may or may not have a base in broader social movement activity. To be sure, this blurring is not just in Gautney's mind. Anarchists, autonomists and other 'anti-authoritarians' of different stripes played an important role in the AGM, in particular, in the organization of both non-violent acts of civil disobedience and in the rowdier actions of the 'Black Bloc'. And certain anti-authoritarian notions—an instinctive distrust of all political parties, a preference for loose, decentralized or networked forms of organization and an opposition to working through the state—were, and remain, widespread in different measures among many AGM activists who would never self-identify as 'anti-authoritarians' in the way that Gautney is using the term.

The danger here is in underestimating the influence not just of political parties, states and NGOs but of daily life under capitalism on the often contradictory thinking of social movement actors. By counting every independent social movement actor as an 'anti-authoritarian', the persistent hegemony within the WSF of political perspectives anathema to anti-authoritarians becomes a simple function of the supposed lack of organizational democracy rather than of the ideological influence those perspectives actually exercise within an always inadequately defined 'global civil society'. Of course, the idea that the WSF could ever actually be a completely decentralized and leaderless 'open space' was always an illusion. The first WSF was organized by a self-constituted eight-member WSF Organizing Committee which then selected another hundred plus organizations to constitute an International Committee that would be charged with organizing subsequent meetings. The problem becomes evident when Gautney deals with controversies over two documents, *The Porto Alegre Consensus* and *The Bamako Appeal* drafted by leading figures in the WSF in 2005 and 2006, respectively. Both of these documents were attempts to articulate a common political program for the WSF and to thereby transform it from an inchoate 'non-deliberative' gathering into a vehicle for globally coordinated resistance to neo-liberalism. The anti-authoritarian response to these initiatives, and this is true of Gautney's treatment as well, was not primarily to critique them on the basis of their political content, but rather on the supposedly undemocratic process involved in their drafting. Of course, the absence of a deliberative process in the first place meant that, as a practical matter, any effort to initiate such a process would come from a smaller group than the whole WSF. A genuinely democratic response to this dilemma would be for the anti-authoritarians to propose an alternative statement and then to debate, amend and eventually vote on the competing proposals. By making the inevitable limitations of the drafting process—rather than the political content of competing proposals—the issue, the effective result of the anti-authoritarian response was the maintenance of the depoliticized WSF favored by well-connected liberal NGOs that Gautney so effectively critiques earlier. This dynamic is hardly unique to the WSF and this is another reason Gautney's book deserves our critical attention. From Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, the open forum model represented by the WSF has been applied in public plazas with similar contradictory results.

Shor and Gautney's books will be valuable to both scholars and activists struggling to make sense of the global tsunami of protests that began with the Arab Spring and that

swept the USA in late 2011. Both offer important historical background and thoughtful analyses that should help readers see these recent events in their larger context. Shor's interesting book should be read by undergraduates in classes on social change, globalization and international relations, but for the reasons indicated above, will more likely be judged suitable for graduate students. Its arguments need to be understood by the rank and file of popular movements in advanced capitalist countries, especially the USA. Regrettably, they will likely reach only the most theoretically inclined readers. Gautney has also written an interesting book. It is astute in its dissection of certain problematic dynamics within the WSF process while it is blind to others. It is, nonetheless, an important contribution to our understanding of the contradictions of a newly emergent global civil society that will undoubtedly find a welcome place not just on the shelves of social movement specialists but on the nightstands of activists and in undergraduate and graduate courses on social movements and globalization.

Christopher Gunderson is a post-doctoral fellow in Sociology at Fordham University and recently completed his dissertation, a study of the intellectual origins of the Zapatista rebellion in southern Mexico. He is looking for more secure and gainful employment.