

# Global Complexity and Global Civil Society

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper argues that recent struggles against neoliberal axioms such as free trade and open markets have led to a militant reframing of global civil society by grassroots social movements. It contests that this struggle to invest the concept of global civil society with transformative potential rests upon an identifiable praxis, a “strange attractor” that disturbs other civil society actors, through its re-articulation of a politics that privileges self-organization, direct action, and direct democracy. The paper further suggests that the emergence of this “antagonistic” orientation is best understood through the lens of complexity theory and offers some conceptual tools to begin the process of analyzing global civil society as an outcome and effect of global complexity.*

**KEY WORDS:** global civil society; complexity; social movements; protest; globalization.

## INTRODUCTION

Its intricate social linkages stretched across vast distances are puzzling, indeed so difficult to grasp that new metaphors are urgently needed to help us to picture and understand them. Perhaps (to take an example) it is better to liken this society to the tens and hundreds of thousands of “nested systems within nested systems” described in certain versions of complexity theory. (Keane, 2003, p. 19)

The concept of global civil society (GCS) is deployed as a normative-ideal by a range of political actors because of its considerable rhetorical and strategic utility. In each instance it is presented as a version of the good society stretched to the ends of the earth. Almost uniformly perceived as progressive and democratizing, its composition varies according to one’s ideological position. Kaldor’s (2003) framework provides a useful orientation here. In what she terms the “activist” definition of GCS, it takes on a utopian quality and is manifest in the interstices between markets and states. In the “neoliberal” version it is an essential adjunct to the globalizing forces of free trade and privatization, and in the normative “ideal-type” she and Keane favour, it is a “dynamic non-governmental system of

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interconnected socio-economic institutions” that is capable of pluralizing power and problematizing violence (Keane, 2003, p. 8).

This paper adds a further definition: global civil society through the lens of global complexity – where GCS is perceived as a domain contested and variegated by multiple axes of cause and effect, reciprocity and ambivalence, an outcome and effect of “global complexity”: the interaction between “networks” and “fluids” that characterize planetary systems of production, mobility, and exchange (Urry, 2003). From this perspective, GCS constitutes a “state space,” a field of relations between variables of a self-organizing system, including the combination of ideological, organizational, and material investments that are represented in the definitions above. These denote attractors within the system that compete to consolidate their interpretation of GCS, dominate resources, and attribute meanings. The argument advanced here, is that the rise to prominence of the “alternative globalization movement” (AGM) (Chesters, 2003b) signifies the emergence of an antagonist attractor within GCS, an attractor that perturbs relations between global civil society actors and opens new directions for action, reflection, and critique.

This paper is part of a response to Taylor’s call for a “theoretical re-articulation” of GCS (Taylor, 2004a, p. 8; 2004b) and to Keane’s challenge “to develop theoretical imagery for better imagining global civil society” (Keane, 2003, p. 24), so we might get “beyond theories of GCS based on simple unilinear projections” (Munck, 2004, p. 21).<sup>3</sup> It advances these aims by suggesting a further heuristic device – the alternative globalization movement – to accompany that of GCS. This is what Keane would consider a “nested system within a nested system” and it involves a typological distinction between the “antagonistic” (Melucci, 1996) orientation of the AGM and the ideal type of GCS utilized by Keane (2003) and Kaldor (2003). It therefore marks an engagement with a movement that is actively involved in reframing the concept of GCS in order to support conflictual collective action, and goes some way to assessing the impacts and potential of this antagonist attractor.

The argument advanced in this paper suggests that when global civil society actors are differentiated according to their modes of organization, and their position vis-à-vis international systems of production, distribution, and exchange, it is possible to discern an antagonistic kernel within GCS that promotes a fundamental and systemic critique. This is important, as Melucci (1996) has pointed out, because most political discourse seeks to deny the existence of fundamental conflicts about the production and appropriation of social resources by reducing everything to a question of grievances or political claims. This paper argues that this antagonism is primarily, but not exclusively visible in the AGM. This movement has been influential in perturbing existing discourses around trade, the environment, and social justice and through its capacity to re-orient the field of relations between GCS and global governance structures (Chesters and Welsh, 2005a; 2005b). Finally, it is maintained that when one moves beyond complexity metaphors to the application of its conceptual framework of “emergence,” “small world networks,” and “strange attractors” one can begin to discern the reasons for these seemingly disproportionate “system effects” (Jervis, 1997), reasons which suggest new possibilities for our understanding of social change.

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<sup>3</sup> This paper forms part of a broader project aimed at elaborating a complexity analysis of global civil society and global social movements, see Chesters and Welsh, 2005a; 2005b.

## CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRACY

Many commentators have remarked upon the reflexive, dialogical, and deliberative character of civil society and its potential to invigorate democratic processes (Beck et al., 1995; Inoguchi et al., 1998; Lash and Urry, 1994). This interest has been given impetus by the much-heralded decline of participation in formal electoral processes, indicated by the low electoral turnouts amongst social democratic states and the increasing dissatisfaction with elected representatives indicated by survey data. Research produced by the Democratic Audit of the United Kingdom (UK) funded by the Rowntree Reform Trust indicates that participation levels in the 2001 general election were the lowest ever. The qualitative data from this study also indicates that the public “do not believe they possess the power they want through conventional politics” and are therefore becoming “increasingly sympathetic to direct action” (Dunleavy et al., 2001). Such observations add weight to proposals emphasizing the need to reassess fundamental questions about the nature of the state and governance in a globalizing world and to those calling for a rethinking of democratic structures and processes (Monbiot, 2004; Stiglitz, 2002; Wainwright, 2003).

These developments have combined to provoke a certain anxiety amongst political elites about the degree of legitimacy conferred by electoral processes and have led to a number of initiatives to increase political participation in local and national government, as well as attempts to seek out alternative means of engaging with and addressing the “democratic deficit.” In the UK, these include mandatory classes in citizenship for younger people, experiments with information technology to provide ease of access to polling, and a proliferation of inclusionary forums based around deliberative processes. In policy practice, this attempt to revive participation has been expressed through “new” deliberative processes, which are introduced alongside “older” democratic institutions. These experiments in deliberative democracy (Benhabib, 1996; Dryzek, 1990; Elster, 1998) include citizens’ juries, citizens’ panels, in-depth discussion and focus groups, consensus conferences, and round tables. Unfortunately, these proposals are subject to, and often frustrated by, the constraints of the framework within which they take place and the lack of institutional means for carrying them forward (O’Neill, 2001; 2002).

Disaffection with the political class and non-participation in the political process are compounded by changes to the composition and form of civil society, which have been well documented (Foster, 2001; Scholte, 1999; 2002; Shaw, 1996; 1999). In the UK nationally based civic associations representing particular class affinities have declined with the fragmentation of their bases of support and the advent of post-Fordist restructuring, whilst organized religion in all but its more fundamental guises has declined as an effect of its marginality to consumer capitalism. Two outcomes flow directly from this: First, the capacity of civil society organizations to assimilate conflictual currents within pseudo-state forms is diminished, giving rise to a decline in the legitimation of social norms by civil society (Etzioni, 1993; Putnam, 1995; Wolfe, 1989). Second, there is a rise in new opportunities for disaggregated forms of political expression that challenge the state as a locus of power and which seek other means and opportunities of redress. This includes direct action, self-organized alternatives, and campaigning and networking at an extra-national level.

This has contributed to institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organization (WTO) becoming the target of protest. These institutions have been used to critical engagement with civil society institutions closely linked to nation states and embedded in national political cultures, but they are now increasingly besieged by organizations and networks apparently seeking to construct and deepen a counter-hegemonic account of globalization to which they respond in confused and often contradictory ways. This is primarily because of the multivariate and conflicting demands articulated by this emergent global civil society and serves to demonstrate one of the dilemmas at the core of theorizing GCS as a normative-ideal. That is to describe and account for the potentially transformative and counter-hegemonic challenges posed by GCS whilst considering the underlying question of whether a domain committed to radical pluralism can ever attempt to be hegemonic.

However, the confused response of international organizations such as the WTO, IMF, and World Bank – which frequently results in a default mode of non-engagement and repression – is in part due to their previously effective model of instrumentalizing civil society participation to legitimize neoliberal reform and restructuring. This has been combined with ambivalence to the destabilizing effects those reforms might subsequently have for nationally-based civil society organizations. Thus, the growth of civil society networks that extend beyond the regulation of individual states and that engage in conflictual action (re)presents a new set of problems that were previously mediated at the national level. This is one of many unexpected outcomes of globalization, which include changes to the role of the state in international relations and the rise of GCS (Eschle and Stammers, 2004).

## **GLOBALIZATION, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE STATE**

Anti-globalization activists understand that sympathetic and mutually beneficial global ties are good. But we want social and global ties to advance universal equity, solidarity, diversity, and self-management, not to subjugate ever-wider populations to an elite minority. We want to globalize equity not poverty, solidarity not anti-sociality, diversity not conformity, democracy not subordination, and ecological balance not suicidal rapaciousness. (Albert, 2001, [www.globalpolicy.org](http://www.globalpolicy.org))

The academic concern with globalization has reached near saturation point during the past decade and it is an intention to prolong these debates here. It should suffice to say that despite differences in accounts of the origins, patterns, and prognosis of globalization, surveys of this literature point to a remarkable level of agreement amongst commentators on the challenge globalizing processes pose to the state-centrist assumptions that are familiar from previous social science discourses (Held and McGrew, 2000). The idea of the nation-state as the principal organizing unit of political and economic life is called in to question by the growth of extra-national administrative bodies, transnational corporations, and the liberalization of capital and investment flows (Held, 2000; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Strange, 1996). This has led some commentators to the conclusion that “global networks” (Castells, 1996), “scapes” (Appadurai, 1990), and “flows” (Urry, 2000) should be the primary focus of investigation in the social sciences as these are the “true architectures of the new global economy” (Castells, 2000a, p.61) – an economy that has catalyzed a marked acceleration in the disparity between rich and poor along a number of axes:

hemispherically from south to north, regionally between “peripheral” and “core” countries, and nationally across class and ethnic boundaries (Castells, 1996, pp. 66–150).

This marks a break with the conception of civil society as channelling conflictual impulses towards resolution within state structures and the beginning of the opening out of multiple avenues, audiences, and opportunities through which to exercise conflictual relations, including the targeting of corporations and international systems of governance, and the possibility of self-organized alternatives. Add to this the enlargement of international communities of interest and affinity facilitated by computer mediated communications and the rise of issue-based networks that integrate virtual and real campaigning and we can begin to get a sense of what this emergent global civil society might look like.

The implications of these perspectives are that one must look outside the state at networked processes of interaction between state and non-state actors. This does not mean that the state is no longer important, but rather that we must consider the meshwork of national and extra-national political institutions, corporate, and civil society actors that co-produce the effects of the “global.” As Burawoy argues:

The dense ties that once connected civil society to the state are being detached and redirected across national boundaries to form a thickening global public sphere. Yet these connections and flows are not autonomous, are not arbitrary patterns crossing in the sky, but are shaped by the strong magnetic field of nation states. (Burawoy, 2000, p. 34).

This “magnetic field” and its complex effects are observable in the challenges posed to NGOs and other civil society actors trying to develop campaigns and mobilize around a range of issues including trade, agriculture, and health. Invariably these organizations need to apply pressure through the state as well as to attempt to gain leverage within global governance structures. The proximity of NGOs to these processes and their capacity to deliver a wide-range of social goods often ends with their participation in restructuring programmes, where the state rescinds its duty to provide essential services leaving NGOs to pick up the responsibility of care, often in the face of rapid and aggressive marketization. The apparent ambivalence of some NGOs to their assimilation within this neoliberal framework of “development” and their professionalized concern with the “realpolitik” of aid delivery has led to accusations that they are in danger of becoming “the shock troops of the empire” (Clark, 2003, p. 78) – an accusation directed particularly at those NGOs who have been instrumental in the management and delivery of economic and social “development” programmes such as those initiated by the World Bank.

The assimilation of NGOs by the neoliberal axiom of free trade raises a number of questions about the potential for social change contained within GCS. The political possibilities of civil society are often inferred from a Gramscian theoretical framework that originally privileged civil society because of a presumed continuity and overlap between the institutions of civil society and the apparatus used for reproducing the state through the transmission of normative values and disciplinary mechanisms. Civil society according to Gramsci (1976) was composed of organizations rooted in both state and people, thereby making it a privileged domain for political contestation. However, as observed above, these traditional forms of civil society organization are declining and are being replaced by newer organizations many of whom are less embedded in everyday social and cultural activity. As such, their transformative potential is limited to the symbolic contestation of dominant social codes often

expressed at an extra-national level, rather than with the revolutionary transformation or seizure of the state. Add to this the interpolation of the private in to the state and public spheres, and deciphering whether GCS is potentially a transformative domain becomes increasingly problematic.

Consequently, our attention is drawn again to the precise characteristics of what is being referred to within the discourse of global civil society. A number of questions are pertinent here and they suggest an important agenda for research. Is it possible or desirable to envisage a domain that operates as a counter-power to the forces of neoliberal globalization, a domain that is conscious of itself and that seeks to deepen connections across movements, organizations, and networks? How might it be organized, what forms could it take and where would we look for it? Furthermore, do the established NGOs, trade unions, and newer social actors such as ATTAC, best represent this global civil society, those whose challenges are potentially reconcilable within capitalism's systemic capacity for assimilation and mutability? Or, are those who adopt more openly confrontational repertoires equally, or more acutely "representative" of GCS, presuming therefore that they express some deeper antagonistic conflict? More interestingly is whether we can perceive this hybrid combination of individuals, movements, and organizations, this networked domain of social solidarities as a unified or unifiable opposition, or whether indeed, we would want to?

## **GLOBAL NETWORKS: ANTAGONISTIC MOVEMENTS**

Castells has demonstrated how the rise of "network society" means that societies are increasingly structured through "a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self" (Castells, 1996, p. 3) meaning that "global networks of instrumental exchanges," international financial organizations, transnational corporations and the like, have the capacity to selectively "switch-off" groups, organizations, and even countries and regions from global networks.<sup>4</sup> The prevailing logic of economic networks in an era of neoliberal ascendancy has been to demonstrate this capacity to excess. However, at the same time the impacts upon communities of having been "switched off" and abandoned to the fate of marginality, have also facilitated a return to the self, in the form of self reliance and the valorization of particularistic or "local" identities, hence the polarization between "Net" and "Self" in Castells account. The network form is not unique to corporations however, and the evolution of networked relationships between diverse social groups has been an increasing feature of protest and social activism. Increasingly the threat from "fluid" capital in an era of "liquid modernity" (Bauman, 2000) and its capacity to organize the means of production in dispersed locales without external controls or regulatory frameworks has led to the expansion of oppositional networks which are necessarily international and increasingly global in character (Edelman, 2001). These networks are sometimes facilitated through direct contact, but are increasingly maintained through computer mediated communication, and such networks have been successful on a range of issues including the "electronic fabric of struggle" (Cleaver, 1998) woven during the Zapatista insurrection and the successful opposition to the proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

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<sup>4</sup> Argentina is a recent example of this tendency (Jordan and Whitney, 2002; Notes from Nowhere, 2003).

These networks are employing confrontational, imaginative, and highly symbolic repertoires of collective action based upon the ethos of “direct action for direct democracy” and they have generated ripples beyond their obvious impacts upon international trade summits and related policy fora. The militancy and participative character of these movements has been significant in catalyzing reflection amongst civil society actors, including some prominent NGOs. Greenpeace International, for example, professed to feeling “outflanked” by the effectiveness of these movements (Greenpeace, 2001) and are now embarked upon a five year rolling programme of internal debate – *Breaking Down the Walls* – with proposals for action and deliberation aimed at addressing both its own democratic deficit and broadening its focus of opposition.

What is being described here is the emergence of an antagonistic current to GCS that is composed of networked actors often in dense national or regional clusters, connected into global affinity structures maintained by computer mediated communications and reconfigured during intense periods of social interaction around specific protest events or reflexive gatherings. However, attempts to understand this have been hampered by the over concentration on the “novelty” of the WTO protests in Seattle in November–December 1999, which belies the prior existence of these international networking processes. The “success” of Seattle only makes sense in this context (Chesters and Welsh, 2004; Notes from Nowhere, 2003).

A typological distinction has to be made between the normative interpretation of social movements within GCS and the alternative globalization movement (Chesters, 2003b). This is best illustrated through reference to Melucci’s distinction between forms of collective action and social movements. Melucci defines a social movement as a collective action which: (i) *invokes solidarity*, (ii) *makes manifest a conflict*, and (iii) *entails a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action takes place* (Melucci, 1996, p. 28). This last point appears somewhat ambiguous, until we examine Melucci’s definition of the “systems” within which action might take place. He identifies four differing types of social movement, which are defined symbiotically in relation to the system invested by these forms of collective action; consequently, in elucidating the differing types of social movement he is also describing the four different systems. These systems are unable, by definition, to absorb the challenge of the collective action without substantive change to their internal logic or organizational form. This typology is analytically useful as a means of differentiating between the differing instrumental, purposive, and expressive orientations of the social movements that help constitute GCS.

The first type of social movement Melucci identifies is described as “conflictual networking” and takes place within the lifeworld. Primarily, he argues that “forms of popular resistance are always present in society, creating a free space that precedes visible action” (Melucci, 1996, p. 34). These forms of popular resistance do not necessarily involve challenging the production and appropriation of society’s resources. They are, instead, the series of conflictual social relations that are characterized by challenges to normative values and behavior within everyday life. Beyond this field of action, Melucci recognizes three further movements which he terms claimant movements, political movements, and ultimately, and most abstractly, antagonistic movements.

A *claimant movement* is normally situated within an organizational system and seeks a different distribution of resources, roles, and rewards. It might be mobilized to seek or defend a set of conditions and rewards which it has, itself, internally

defined as appropriate, thereby pushing the conflict beyond the operative level to the level at which norms are produced. Examples of such movements might include campaigns for disabled access to public buildings and transport, or the campaign for same-sex marriages.

A *political movement* breaches the limits of compatibility within the formal political system, by challenging forms of representation, influence, and decision-making, thereby endeavouring to create new avenues for participation and expression and drawing attention to previously excluded interests. Historically examples of such movements in the UK would include suffrage campaigns such as those conducted by the Chartists and the Suffragettes, whilst a contemporary example would be the campaign for parliamentary proportional representation.

An *antagonistic movement* is more theoretically abstract in that it challenges the production of society's resources in the most fundamental way, not only in terms of the allocation of resources, but in the very nature of their production, distribution and exchange. Whilst no movement can ever be completely antagonistic, that is, without recourse or relationship to existing formal systems of social and political representation and decision-making, an antagonistic orientation may be empirically observable within certain movements, and might become increasingly manifest in circumstances where organizational or political systems attempt their repression through a process of criminalization.

The rise of the AGM is indicative of this last category, an expression of a fundamental conflict over the form of production and distribution of crucial social, economic, and ecological goods, a movement(s) that has acquired momentum due to the assimilation and decline of traditional state-centric channels for civil society expression. This "movement of movements" (Mertes, 2004) or "network of networks" (Melucci, 1996) represents a "new" and distinctive voice, which has attempted to militantly redefine GCS as a constituent space of counter-power, critique, and contestation, giving succour to those seeking a new agent of social transformation. A position most apparent in Hardt (1995) and Hardt and Negri's work (2000):

Civil society is absorbed in the state, but the consequence of this is an explosion of the elements that were previously coordinated and mediated in civil society. Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the centre of society that opens up in networks; the individual points are singularized in a thousand plateaus. (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.25)

One of the most interesting attempts to re-frame global civil society as the key interlocutor between people(s) and capital is to be found in the communiqués of the Mexican Zapatistas, and particularly those authored by Subcommandante Marcos (2001). His repeated calls upon "international civil society" to intervene in their conflict with the Mexican state and his characteristically poetic valorization of the "disarming facelessness of civil society" (Marcos, 2001, p. 54) led to the first *Encuentro* (encounter) in 1996, held in the Rainforest of Chiapas and styled as an "intergalactic" meeting for humanity and against neoliberalism. This was an invitation to their global network of civil society supporters: activists, artists, academics, and others to consolidate their relationship with the Zapatistas and each other and to begin to theorize and implement a global strategy of networked resistance. The *Encuentro* process catalysed by the Zapatistas also led directly to the founding of People's Global Action (PGA), an international network of resistance movements, including landless peoples, indigenous rights organizations, small

farmers, independent media collectives, squatters, environmentalists, and community organizations.

This Zapatista model of GCS as global public sphere, a space of encounter, deliberation, and exchange also helped to inspire the World Social Forum process (Houtart and Polet, 2001) which was eventually manifest in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Sen et al., 2004; Fisher and Ponniah, 2003) as:

an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and linking up for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism and to the domination of the world by capital. (World Social Forum International Council, Charter of Principles, Section 1)

The social forum process has since expanded to include regional social fora in the Mediterranean, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The first European Social Forum (ESF) meeting in Florence during October 2002 attracted around 50,000 participants and led to a proposal for the February 15, 2003 anti-Iraq war protests. This globally coordinated collective action was the singular largest manifestation of GCS and the biggest protest ever to have occurred. The second ESF in Paris during November 2003 attracted similar numbers and scheduled over 1,000 seminars and plenary sessions engaging with major political, policy, and civil society concerns. These actions and events comprised a social force constitutive of what *The New York Times* called “the second superpower.”<sup>5</sup> There is a “new power in the streets” that is challenging both the economic orthodoxies of neoliberalism and the “inverted” totalitarianism underpinned by permanent war (Wolin, 2003).<sup>6</sup>

These events and the subsequent commentary on them begin to shed light on the questions raised above about the possibility of GCS constituting a counter-hegemonic domain. They also move us beyond traditional political concerns with the seizure of state power. Instead, in the social forum model we are presented with an alternative vision of freely cooperating autonomous actors engaged in the day-to-day management of their own lives through a vital, open and uncoercive public sphere. At its core, this project desires to dissolve “political society” in to “civil society” and with it to reformulate a truly democratic and participatory public sphere, as Marcos explains:

It will primarily be a revolution resulting from struggles on various fronts, using many methods, under various social forms, with various degrees of commitment and participation. And its result will not be the victory of a party, an organization, or an alliance of triumphant organizations with their own specific social proposal, but rather a democratic space for resolving the confrontation of various political proposals. (Zapatista Communiqué, January 20, 1994).

In the following section, this paper introduces some thoughts on the nature and dynamics of the AGM and tries to account for its seemingly disproportionate

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Taylor, “A New Power in the Streets,” *The New York Times*, February 2, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> By “inverted totalitarianism” Wolin is describing the integration of corporate capitalism with political power to promote “generalized fear.” He considers it inverted because of its reliance upon promoting “a sense of weakness and collective futility” amongst people in comparison to the Nazi regime, which he argues, was dependent upon a sense of collective power and strength.

capacity to disrupt and disturb conventional understandings of social and political change. It elaborates some ideas from complexity theory that form a means of engaging with and understanding the AGM.

## **COMPLEXITY AND GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY**

What has been outlined above is the discursive construction of a global field of struggle, constituted by the forging of connections between social movements operating in a context defined by the hegemony of neoliberalism and the arrival of the information age. GCS and in particular the AGM has proliferated by using inclusive methods of organizing, pluralistic patterns of intervention and the targeting of organizations, events, and situations that have a global impact – and as such have resonance for social movements and other sympathetic constituencies globally. An additional success of these targeted actions against the G8, WTO, World Bank, or IMF has been the enormous cross-fertilization of ideas, concepts, and collective action repertoires resulting from the express desire of organizers to see politically contiguous actions proliferate in the same spatial and temporal context. In this sense, a thousand flowers have metaphorically bloomed.

The AGM has therefore provided the means through which politically engaged people can conduct the necessarily collective work of deciphering their individual experiences of globalization and forging from them shared understandings that can become the basis of recognizable needs and therefore political demands. This work takes place within the “shadow realm” (Welsh, 2002) of alternative fora and networked interaction facilitated by coordinating bodies such as People’s Global Action (PGA). PGA has been a prime mover behind most of the large anti-capitalist mobilizations in recent years, including the protests in the City of London, Seattle, Prague, Gothenburg, and Genoa. Yet, their role is one of the least documented aspects of the alternative globalization movement. PGA was founded in Geneva in February 1998 and its first action also took place in Geneva in May of that year when PGA coordinated protests against the WTO who were meeting to celebrate 50 years of free trade (GATT) and to announce Seattle as the venue for their next Ministerial Conference. This led to what was then the most significant instance of public disorder in Switzerland’s post-war history, including mass protests, clashes with riot police, and property damage to the retail outlets of multinational corporations.<sup>7</sup> This is an instance of opposition to the WTO that is absent from any of the most recent accounts of these movement networks (Brecher et al., 2000; Cockburn et al., 2000; Dannaher and Burbach, 2000; Starr, 2000), despite it being a portentous indication of what would later transpire on the streets of Seattle.

This absence in the literature results from the methodological and theoretical difficulties associated with analyzing subterranean networks comprised of non-linear flows of people, resources, and ideas. Recent ethnographic and anthropological work has taken these problems seriously (Chesters and Welsh, 2004; Mueller, 2003; Osterweil, 2004; Sullivan 2004) and what this work repeatedly demonstrates is that proximity to specific groups or organizations alone is analytically insufficient. To capture the dynamics of this movement(s), one must literally be adrift within the

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<sup>7</sup> This display of “intemperate” (Chesters, 2000) excess was exceeded in 2003 when the G8 met in Evian on the French side of the Swiss–French border, leading to a prolonged period of rioting in nearby Geneva and the occupation of the border post by activist groups.

network, engaging with movement actors in material and immaterial spaces and sensitized to the emergence of qualities that are irreducible to the sum of the parts of that network.

The key to understanding the AGM is not to be found amongst individual actors be they groups or organizations. Instead, we must focus our attention upon the processes of interaction *between* actors. If we are to reveal anything about how the AGM works, we must look to processes and to form, for it is within this hidden architecture that something of the dynamic strength of the AGM can be grasped. The AGM displays what are known as “small-world” characteristics (Watts and Strogatz, 1998), it consists of hubs and nodes that are typified by a penumbra of “weak links.” In network analysis, this structure demonstrably allows for rapid communication and is resilient to all but the most focused of attacks. It is also associated with generative processes that lead to macro-level outcomes that are not always apparent to their participants. To use the idiom of the contemporary complexity sciences<sup>8</sup>, what the AGM seems to demonstrate is a set of *emergent* properties that are the outcome of complex adaptive behavior occurring through participative self-organization from the bottom up. This organizational form and the behavior that structures it leads to the emergence of a collective intelligence that in turn drives forward the same processes in feedback loops leading to a substantial increases in agency and potential.

The concept of emergence describes the unexpected macro outcomes produced by reflexive actors engaged in complex patterns of interaction and exchange, outcomes that are historically determinate and unknowable in advance. Of interest is the apparent operation of these feedback loops within the AGM, whereby the emergent properties of acting in a decentralized, participatory, and highly democratic manner are recognized at a collective level as affording a strength, durability, and interconnectivity that would otherwise be absent and this feedback reaffirms the praxis that gives rise to the emergent properties. Recent scientific work in this field has demonstrated (Barabasi and Albert, 1999) that emergent properties are ubiquitous in complex network forms, albeit they often go unrecognized. What appears to have occurred within the AGM and what is potentially its great strength, is that its affinity with acutely democratic means and its adoption of a decentralized praxis has encouraged organizational forms that give rise to emergent properties and that the advantages conferred from organizing according to these principles *have been recognized*.

## **EMERGENCE IN PLATEAUX**

As a “movement of movements” or “network of networks” (Melucci, 1996) the AGM has mounted confrontational collective action using consensus and directly democratic mechanisms in protests against transnational financial and administrative institutions. It has also carved out “new” democratic spaces in which to deliberate on complex global problems and attempted to frame these problems within the discourse of other worlds being possible.

In our work on framing processes within global social movements, Welsh and I have referred to these events, both protests and gatherings, as “plateaux” (Chesters,

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview on complexity theory, see Chesters, (2004).

2003; Chesters and Welsh, 2002; 2005).<sup>9</sup> Plateaux is a richly evocative term but is relatively under-theorized, so Massumi's definition is particularly helpful here:

...a plateau is reached when circumstances combine to bring an activity to a pitch of intensity that is not automatically dissipated in a climax leading to a state of rest. The heightening of energies is sustained long enough to leave a kind of afterimage of its dynamism that can be reactivated or injected in to other activities, creating a fabric of intensive states between which any number of connecting routes could exist. (Massumi, 1992, p. 7)

Movement plateaux (summit sieges and social forums) fulfil this role. They render visible the iterative character and fractal patterning of overlapping networks and make manifest processes of interaction and exchange between global locales, between the virtual and the real, between new social actors and familiar forces of antagonism. They are both geographically discrete and temporally bounded "events" that are simultaneously extensive of space and time, stretched and warped through interaction on e-mail lists, dedicated chat rooms, web logs, text messages, and a variety of mobile technologies. As such, we conceptualize them as moments of temporary but intensive network stabilization where the rhizomatic substance of the movement(s) – groups, organizations, individuals, ideologies, cognitive frames – are simultaneously manifest and re-configured.

These plateaux provide a reflexive impetus for movements, an opportunity to recognize "oneself" and the points of connection between one's identity and actions and those of other participants engaged in similar struggles. They also allow for the exploration of difference (identity, politics, strategy, goals) through theoretical and practical innovation, such as cognitive and symbolic reframing (Chesters and Welsh, 2004) or the construction of distinct spatialities within the one temporality (action zones, different protest repertoires). These plateaux involve the formulation and shaping of political projects at the local and global levels, further strategic and tactical reflection, skill sharing, and the construction of alternative means of communication and information exchange, as well as the development of mechanisms for the expression of solidarity and mutual aid. Plateaux are increasingly a means through which phase transitions occur in movement forms; they precipitate increases in flows of energy, which produce non-linear changes in the system (of relations) conducting that energy. Phase transitions of this type might involve dramatic metamorphoses such as a discrete national campaign group becoming a transnational affinity network, a workers party becoming a movement-party, or they may be far subtler, a "leader-less" culture framed as a "leader-full" culture, for example.

Throughout, movement plateaux correspond to the definition advanced by Deleuze and Guattari of a "continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, p. 22). This is evident in the World Social Forum movement – "the representation of a new democratic cosmopolitanism, a new anticapitalist transnationalism, a new intellectual nomadism, a great movement of the multitude" (Hardt and Negri, 2003, p. XVI). This process has enabled activists to "bridge worlds" through the deliberate construction of spaces wherein weak links

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<sup>9</sup> Whilst the concept of "plateau(x)" is most commonly associated with Deleuze and Guattari, 2002, it originates in the work of Bateson, 1973.

between diverse movements could be made. The importance of “social bridges” for the elaboration of communication and access to resources is a point made strongly in Granovetter’s (1973) seminal work on the strength of weak ties and latterly from those elaborating theories of small world networks (Barabasi, 2002; Buchanan, 2002).

This counter intuitive argument suggests that it is the weak ties between people, not strong friendships, that are most important when it comes to such things as launching a new project, finding a job, and accessing news. This is because weak ties are crucial for being able to communicate beyond ones immediate social (or activist) worlds. Close friends and fellow activists almost inevitably move in the same circles and as such are most likely to be exposed to the same information. Weak ties have to be activated to open new channels of information and maximize potential for agency – ties which might include e-mail contacts, people met during meetings, at protests, and during gatherings. There is also a need to be able to connect with those activist hubs – individuals active within many networks (“spiders at the centre of many webs”<sup>10</sup>), networking spaces (such as forums and information exchanges), and social centres – without undue interference from structures and hierarchies or barriers to participation such as class, culture, age, gender, and race that would inhibit such connections.

The World Social Forum process is perfect example of movement plateaux with its explicit recognition of the value of, and desire for, a space of enunciation, interaction, and iteration that is coextensive with the actions of movement networks and organizations without trying to represent them, or in turn to be represented by them. Nor is the social forum movement conceived of as temporally or geographically bounded, instead its Charter of Principles recognizes that:

The World Social Forum at Porto Alegre was an event localized in time and place. From now on, in the certainty proclaimed at Porto Alegre that “another world is possible,” it becomes a permanent process of seeking and building alternatives, which cannot be reduced to the events supporting it.  
([www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/))

Relatively powerful actors have attempted and so far failed to control this process, which remains remarkably resilient and resistant to co-option despite the efforts of minor political parties (such as the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire in France, Rifondazione Comunista in Italy, and the Socialist Workers Party in Britain) and wealthy campaigning organizations (such as ATTAC) that provide much of its material infrastructure.

This is due primarily to the complex character of the system of relations comprising social forums. The variable and contested structures of the forum movement are emergent properties of processes of interaction in real and virtual domains; they are both adaptive to, and contingent upon, the differing contexts of their manifestation. This capacity to change structure in response to external environments is a quality that signifies a high degree of self-organization and renders the forum movement particularly adept at perturbing established political and

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<sup>10</sup> This is a description proffered to the author by a Dutch activist from People’s Global Action.

economic discourses, through the distillation of complex and abstract argumentation combined with “social force” (Welsh, 2000, pp. 189–190) and political pressure.

It is this combination of elements: large numbers of interacting individuals, groups, and movements constituting an open system that adapts to its environment leading to increased reflexivity facilitated by feedback loops and non-linear processes of interaction and iteration that leads to even greater complexity. It can therefore be argued that these plateaux are combinatory expressions of complexity effects realized through assemblages of material and immaterial elements. They are shaped by the material infrastructure of mobility and communication systems that are a pre-requisite of a “network sociality” (Wittel, 2001) and through their emphasis upon co-presence, face-work, meetings, and encounters, they point to how these material assemblages realize the potential of small world networks. What emerges is a network of networks, increasingly shaped by an eclectic mix of minoritarian subjectivities, of *virtuosi*, including net-workers of various kinds – artists, hackers, mediatistas, and academivists (Notes From Nowhere, 2003) – whose capacity to resist co-option by party discipline and ideological strictures is growing as a direct result of increasing complexity.

## **CONCLUSION: THE ANTAGONIST ATTRACTOR WITHIN GCS**

The emergence of global social movements characterized by an antagonistic orientation and their organization through horizontally structured networks of real and virtual relations has profoundly influenced the trajectory of GCS. This is discernable in the effect of movement plateaux, such as the siege of international trade summits or the growth of the social forum process, where the AGM has produced a surfeit of material and symbolic resources that enable the expression and linking of conflictual currents – movements, organizations, groups, and individuals. These plateaux are shaped by a number of ideological inputs, including: liberal constitutionalism (human rights, anti-corporatism, fair trade, democratic representation); socialism (trade unions, welfarism, internationalism); anarchism (participation, direct democracy, direct action); and, ecologism (environment, sustainability, nature) – each of which interacts with the others exchanging, assimilating, and adapting concepts, slogans, symbols and other cognitive, emotive, and affective resources.

From these ideological motifs emerges a hybrid anti-capitalism, albeit a minority of their exponents would perceive themselves to be taking an explicitly anti-capitalist position. During interactions between different groups and individuals within these plateaux “anti-capitalism” has a similar effect to a “strange attractor” in complexity theory, it causes a perturbation in the pattern of behavior and the mode of being of those bodies encountering it as a discursive practice. The iterative communication of experiences and ideas, and the formulation of proposals “by movements of civil society... opposed to neoliberalism and to domination of the world by capital” (WSF Charter of Principles) declares the stakes to be fundamental and therefore to concern the production and exchange of crucial social and economic goods. This opens new directions of movement for civil society bodies such as NGOs, charities, and religious groupings, that would otherwise tend toward the equilibrium offered by normative forms of political engagement (e.g., institutional lobbying).

This breach in the system of relations and signification allows for engagement, albeit briefly, in more speculative, dynamic, and hybrid repertoires of collective

action and discursive democracy. Some of these possibilities, immanent in the plateaux of counter-summitry, social fora, and associated protest events, are realized through the passage of formerly regulated social actors in to an open system of determinate chaos where outcomes are likely to be unplanned and unpredictable. In this context, the medium becomes the message. The model of social change implied is faith in a process of encounter and deliberation sedimented in movement plateaux where critical discourses and affective solidarity can reconfigure non-linear networks and multiply weak links to create a plane of consistency between heterogeneous actors. This does not obviate the need for “politics,” nor does it smooth away the familiar dilemmas of any organizational process (resources, leadership, democracy, and so forth). Instead, alongside the network form in which they are manifest, it privileges these processes as the locus of political action, suggesting a need for new modalities of investigation and a willingness to countenance theoretical excursions appropriate to the complexity of global civil society.

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