Between Individuality and Collectiveness: Email Lists and Face-to-Face Contact in the Global Justice Movement

Anastasia Kavada, University of Westminster, UK

ABSTRACT

Decentralized and internally diverse, the Global Justice Movement (GJM) is thought to be influenced by its use of the internet. Operating in an environment characterized by the conditions of globalization and late modernity, the movement strives to be a collective that accommodates individual difference. Focusing on the organizing process of the European Social Forum, this article examines the role of email lists and physical meetings in realizing this ‘unity in diversity’. Based on interviews with movement activists and a content analysis of three email lists, this article examines how online and face-to-face communication practices engender different dynamics in terms of individuality and collectiveness. While communication on email lists tends to afford divergence, diversity, and individual autonomy, face-to-face contact enables convergence, unity and the affirmation of the collective. Thus, it is the combination of those two modes of communication that helps the movement to fuse seemingly opposing dynamics.

Keywords: Collective, Community, Email Lists, European Social Forum, Face-to-Face Communication, Global Justice Movement, Individuality, Internet

INTRODUCTION

Operating in an environment characterized by the conditions of globalization and late modernity (Giddens, 1991), contemporary social movements must respond to two seemingly incompatible demands; they are required to construct a sense of community among their participants while allowing space for individual difference. Taking the Global Justice Movement (GJM) as its case in point, this article explores the communication practices that facilitate this mixture of individuality and collectiveness. The following sections present in more detail the GJM and its proposed characteristics. They also review writings on the relationship between online and offline communication practices with community-building and individualization drawing from the field of internet studies, social movement research and organizational theory. The empirical material presented in the second part of the article provides an insight into the divergent dynamics generated by face-to-face and email communication in the European Social Forum (ESF); the former related more
with feelings of collectiveness, the latter with individual autonomy.

**THE GLOBAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT, DIVERSITY AND INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY**

Emerging from the consolidation of activist networks developed over the 1980s and 1990s (Smith, 2001), the Global Justice Movement (GJM) has been defined as:

*the loose network of organizations (with varying degrees of formality and even including political parties) and other actors engaged in collective action of various kinds, on the basis of the shared goal of advancing the cause of justice (economic, social, political, and environmental) among and between people across the globe.* (della Porta, 2007, p. 6)

Landmark campaigns, including the Zapatista solidarity network and the campaign against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998, constituted vital points of convergence (Smith & Smythe, 2001). The bonds created through them were activated during the organizing of the ‘Battle of Seattle’ in late 1999, the first high-profile protest of the GJM where participants managed to disrupt the meeting of the World Trade Organization.

In the years that followed, ‘alter-globalization’ activists protested during the meetings of large international institutions, such as the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, they developed their own summit process through the establishment of the social forums. These operate as “an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences, and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neoliberalism” (World Social Forum Charter of Principles, 2001). The success of the first World Social Forum (WSF) in 2001 led to the development of the process on a regional and local level.

The European Social Forum (ESF), on which this article will be focusing, was first held in Florence in 2002, while subsequent ESFs took place in Paris (2003), in London (2004), in Athens (2006), and in Malmo (2008).

These meetings and protests are organized and attended by a diverse array of actors whose stark ideological differences normally prevent them from working in coalition (Bennett, 2005; della Porta, 2007). The ‘Battle of Seattle’, for instance, was coordinated by a transnational network that included trade unions, anarchist groups and organizations concerned with poverty, human rights and the environment. Constituting a distinct characteristic of the movement in relation to its predecessors (della Porta, 2007), this heterogeneity seems to stem from the global conditions that marked the movement’s emergence. This is because opposition to neoliberalism, deregulation and capitalism is as wide-ranging as their perceived impact, managing to unite disparate organizations under the ‘global justice frame’ (Lichbach & Almeida, 2001).

Yet the same global conditions are also responsible for shifts in processes of identity formation that seem to demand a greater recognition of individual subjectivity (Giddens, 1991). This is because capitalism and global economic change have had a fragmenting effect on traditional institutions of society (Bennett, 2003). While these transformations have increased stress, insecurity and the complexity of life decisions, they have also enlarged the individual’s freedom to identify with actors outside of dominant institutions. Identity tends to become a journey of exploration, a self-reflexive project, “involving re-invention, therapy, self-improvement, personal and planetary renewal, and spiritual quests” (Bennett, 2003, p. 28).

Therefore, current social movements need to accommodate the fluid, flexible and fragmented identities of their participants, providing a fertile ground for pursuing one’s journey of self-exploration. For Touraine (1997), the point is “to recognize each individual’s right to combine, to articulate in their own experience of personal or collective life” (cited in della Porta,