Whose Streets? Our Streets!
Activist Perspectives on the Australian Anti-Capitalist Movement

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to provide a summary of the Australian anti-capitalist movement of 2000–01 as seen through the eyes of its activists. On the basis of 35 interviews conducted in mid-2002 we examine the background of the activist layer, the nature of the social networks and connective structures which shaped the Australian anti-capitalist movement, the character of the mobilising structures that were used to organise the protest movement, the degree to which the Australian movement was connected to international activity or learned from international political theorising, the tactics that were used at the protests, and the political frameworks that shaped the thinking of key activists. We conclude with some considerations as to the strengths and weaknesses of the movement.

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INTRODUCTION

The dramatic mass protest at the Seattle summit of the World Trade Organization in November 1999 is frequently understood to have announced the arrival at the core of the world economy of the burgeoning anti-capitalist movement which had been gathering force in the preceding decade (Bensaid, 1996; Bircham and Charlton, 2001). Since Seattle the movement has emerged in still greater strength in Europe, in particular in France, Italy and Spain, the site of the largest anti-capitalist mobilisations yet seen, with hundreds of thousands demonstrating in the streets of Nice, Barcelona, Genoa, and Florence.

As with any dramatic social movement, anti-capitalism, or the global justice movement as the phenomenon is known in the United States, has spawned a growing literature. This has focused mostly on the issues raised by the movement in the West – neo-liberalism, globalisation, privatisation and the market, the role of the international financial institutions, the reasons for continuing Third World poverty and international inequality, the domination of consumerism and brand image in Western societies, and the alleged decline in the power of nation states in the face of rampant multinational activity (Bove and Dufour, 1999; Klein, 1999; McMichael, 2000; Monbiot, 2000; Bircham and Charlton, 2001). There is also a growing literature describing the major protest events, and a rather more limited series of works on the major organisations involved and the individuals who have been drawn into the movement (Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000; Levi and Olson, 2000; Barlow and Clarke, 2001; O'Brien, 2001; Cohen and McBride, 2002; McNally, 2002; Watson, 2002).

The purpose of this article is to augment our understanding of two aspects of the anti-capitalist movement – the background and attitudes of the main activists who did the work to build the anti-capitalist mobilisations and the workings of the organisations which they used to bring thousands onto the streets. Other than a few relatively impressionistic and broad-brush accounts, relatively little is known on either of these scores.[2] In this article we present evidence from the Australian anti-capitalist movement in the period 2000–2001. In regard to the individual cadres of the movement we sought information on their social origins and their protest histories. Where do they come from? Where do they get their ideas from? What inspired them to get involved? Were they motivated to protest just by one or two elements of globalisation, or were they opposed to 'the system', broadly defined? How did their ideas change as a result of their involvement? And why did the anti-capitalist movement enthuse many of these activists more than 'single issue campaigns' had in previous years?

In relation to the organisations, we sought information on how exactly the committees operated. How were they networked? What was the balance between old and new activists? Was there anything distinctively 'Australian' about the activists, the methods used to build or the tactics used in protests? Was it a movement of movements or a movement of individual activists? (or a coalition of political organisations of various types?). Was the Australian movement an example of a transnational social movement or of cross-border diffusion, in Tarrow's (1998) typology? And what of the internet, believed by many to be a defining feature of anti-capitalist organising (Ayres, 2001)? Finally, we sought activist views of the future of the anti-capitalist movement in the shadow of the 11 September attacks on the United States and the subsequent unfolding of the 'War on Terrorism'.

Following our summary of the main features of the activists and the organising coalitions, we then turn to a broader analysis based on relevant literatures. First, we consider the Australian anti-capitalist movement in the light of the social movement literature of the 1980s and delineate the features that it shared in common with the classic 'new social movement' and those features in which it differed (Touraine, 1974; Habermas, 1981). Second, we consider whether the Australian movement can be regarded as contributing to 'global civil society' (Cohen and Rai, 2000; Scholte, 2000). Finally we conclude with some considerations as to the reasons for the its main strengths and weaknesses which

help explain the fact that the Australian anti-capitalist movement is, to all practical intents, currently dormant.

OUR STUDY

The Australian anti-capitalist movement

Although not as dramatic as the big mobilisations in Europe, the Australian anti-capitalist movement drew together thousands of protestors at three major mobilisations over the course of 2000–01. The first and most significant action was the blockade by 20,000 activists of the 11 September 2000 ('S11') meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) at the Crown Casino building in Melbourne (Burgmann, 2003). The second were the 'M1' protests outside the Stock Exchange buildings in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne on 1 May 2001. The first two of these M1 actions, involved 4,000 and 1,000 demonstrators respectively who attempted to shut down the operations of the stock exchanges on this day. In the case of the Melbourne M1 demonstration, actions were more diverse and included 500 protestors at a blockade of the stock exchange, 1,000 taking part in other actions, and 9,000 in total at a Unity March involving a large contingent of trade unionists. The third and final element of the wave of anti-capitalist protests that swept Australia in this period was the actions that were planned against the Commonwealth Business Forum in Melbourne on 3 October 2001 and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Brisbane, scheduled for 6–10 October 2001. Both conferences were cancelled only days before they were due to meet because of the inability of the British and Indian Prime Ministers to attend in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center. However, activists were involved in preparing for each of these three components of the Australian anti-capitalist movement in fortnightly or weekly meetings of organising bodies which met for between three and five months before the targeted event and, even though the Commonwealth forums were cancelled, a protest rally of 5,000 was held in Brisbane on 6 October, meaning that the Commonwealth forums are still relevant foci for study.

Methodology

The main source of information for this study is provided by interviews with 35 activists in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne, which were conducted in May to July 2002. In addition, the authors themselves had some involvement in the movement, with the first-named involved personally with all three. Both authors have had a long-term and active involvement with many progressive issues in Australia and are well-acquainted both with many of the individual activists in the Australian anti-capitalist movement and with the organisations of which they were a part.

Various criteria were used for selection of subjects. First, they had to be people who were involved in 'movement organisations', not 'extra-movement organisations'. Although trade unions, church groups, Amnesty International, and social welfare organisations all assisted indirectly in organising the protests in Australia, it was the organising alliances (e.g. S11 Alliance; M1 Alliance; Stop CHOGM Alliance) which played the major role in making things happen. Only those who attended the organising meetings on a regular basis were interviewed. In this sense, the methodology resembles that used by Bagguley (1995) in his study of activists involved in the British anti-poll tax movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Second, as much as possible we attempted to reflect the diversity of activists in our selection of subjects – younger and older, male and female, more experienced political activists and activists new to political campaigning.

Our 35 subjects represented about 20 per cent of the 150–200 activists who regularly attended organising meetings in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne over the course of 2000–01. This, we suggest, makes our subjects somewhat representative of the organising core of the anti-capitalist movement in Australia. Structured interviews involving approximately 70 questions, and lasting one to two hours each, were conducted with each of the participants in a variety of venues – mostly the subjects' own homes, but also cafes and on university campuses. Although the numbers of respondents

was not large enough to generate statistically significant results, we report the numbers in most cases to indicate the relative strength of the response.

Finally, we sought to ensure that our subjects were reasonably representative of the variety of political tendencies involved in organising the movement. Although the proportions varied from one campaign to another and from the beginning to the end of each, about one-half of the total number of anti-capitalist activists involved were members of political organisations involving a high level of agreement and a generally common set of politics. Accordingly, we have included 15 members of such groups in our sample. These groups are: three Marxist organisations – the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), and Socialist Alternative (SA) – and three libertarian groupings – the Autonomous Web of Liberation (AWOL), Love and Rage, and Revolutionary Action (RA).

The personal acquaintance of many of the subjects with the authors (both members of Socialist Alternative), and the reputations of both authors as supporters of the movement, contributed to our success in gaining consent for interviews, as we were seen as 'part of the movement' rather than outsiders. Generally speaking, those interviewed were keen to be involved, symptomatic of their belief in the significance of the movement to left-wing politics in Australia and their own political interests.

Our findings

The activists
The median age of our activists was 26 years, and the group was made up of 18 females and 17 males. Although there was no attempt to select participants on the basis of occupation, it was found that over half (19) were university students at the time of their interviews and a further two were full-time student union officials. Four others were unemployed, one was retired, two were full-time workers for trade unions or political groups, and the rest were employed in white-collar or service industry jobs. Only five had ever worked in any job which could be considered 'blue collar', and they were no longer employed there. This absence of blue-collar workers is an extension of the family background of the activists. Only four had parents whose last occupation might be considered blue-collar. Middle-class backgrounds – where they could be clearly determined - were over-represented – over half (19) had a parent who was either a manager, a self-employed professional, a school principal, military officer, senior academic or small business owner. The largest single occupation among their parents was teachers – nine had at least one parent who was a teacher. Almost half of all respondents (16) had at least one parent who had been involved or still was involved in some form of protest activity. Over one-third (12) had a parent who had been active in a trade union.

Anti-capitalist activism appears to be very much an activity of those living in the inner-city areas of the metropolitan centres. Virtually all of the respondents lived within 10 kilometres of the city centre – most lived even closer than that. All but two of the activists had some tertiary education, and 20 of the 35 had completed, were in the process of completing, or had discontinued a Bachelor of Arts. Other degrees included Music, Public Policy and Management, Economics, Commerce, Law and Science.

It is interesting that these activists, despite the youth of many, were extremely experienced in protest activity. All but one had been involved in earlier campaigns about education, the environment, indigenous rights, women's liberation, peace or anti-racism. Prominent among the recent campaigns were those in support of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) (1998) and East Timorese independence (1999) or in opposition to the right-wing politician, Pauline Hanson (1996–97), federal government measures to undermine student unionism and university funding (1996–98), or plans to open uranium mining at Jabiluka in the Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory (1997–98). The protest history of many of these activists was so extensive that they had difficulty in remembering the many issues in which they had been actively engaged. But while their experience in these social movements was very considerable, the same cannot be said for their trade union experience. Where they had had jobs, they mostly joined unions – 21 of the 35 had been union members at some time. However, only nine claimed to have been active union members at any time, and only six had held a

delegate or other union position. But while their experience as activists in their own unions was rather limited, overwhelmingly they had played some role in support of unionists other than themselves – only three had not done so – and 28 had the experience of standing on union picket lines. A range of strikes were mentioned here, but by far the most common was the MUA dispute.

Student unionism has clearly been an important training ground for the anti-capitalist movement. At least 27 had been active in student unions or their equivalent, and 17 had held elected positions in them.

Embedded social networks and connective structures
The social networks linking these activists was extensive. Only three or four became involved in the coalitions organising protests without already knowing many others involved. Friendship circles and protest activity were closely intertwined. Overwhelmingly the activists said that a significant section of their friendship circle was also involved in organising the protests. In several cases, activists had few friends involved alongside them at the first protest – S11 – but found that their circle of friends changed so that by the time of M1 or CHOGM, a major part of their friendship network were also anti-capitalist activists.

Mobilising structures
The S11, M1 and CHOGM organising alliances generally met weekly over periods between three and five months. Attendance at meetings ranged from 20 to 100, depending on the city (Melbourne, a city with the largest left in Australia, usually attracting the highest attendance), the proximity to the event (the closer the event, the higher the attendance), and the event itself (with the S11 alliance attracting the highest attendance). The alliances were strictly focused on the task at hand and so, once the event in question was over, the alliances disappeared, leaving no formal structures in their place.

The alliances included both individual activists and members of far-left groups. At the time of S11, it appears that there were approximately equal numbers of each category around the country as a whole. However, it seems clear that in the later mobilisations, the individual activists began to drift away, leaving the M1 and CHOGM alliances more dominated by the left groups. Whether to operate alliance meetings by vote or through consensus was controversial. Those who described themselves as socialist or Marxist tended to remember the alliances as operated primarily by majority vote; libertarians, anarchists and autonomists stressed the attempt to find consensus and to vote only as a last resort.

All the activists argued that the alliances had considerable strengths in that their breadth and diversity brought together and activated people who had extensive outside networks of friends and other activists. This meant that the alliances reached people which neither the organised far-left groups nor the single issue campaigns had been able to approach before. However, almost all also thought that the alliances had weaknesses. Libertarians complained particularly of sectarianism between the competing organised groups, and bickering – especially about the process by which decisions were made – of the 'sterility of centralised organising' (i.10). Socialists complained about the annoyance of 'having to continually reinvent the wheel' in each open discussion (i.7). AWOL (Autonomous Web of Liberation), the broad libertarian group based in Melbourne, escaped these sorts of criticisms but seems to have been heavily based on social as well as political closeness. It was criticised by one participant for being 'too cool for school' (i.6) – informally requiring a certain 'look' and friendship circle – thus making it difficult for the uninitiated to become involved.

Affinity groups were seen by many of the activists as important innovations of the anti-capitalist movement. Amongst the 35 activists, 16 affinity groups were mentioned. These did not include several which, in reality, were either simply the existing left groups of which they were already members – e.g. the ISO and DSP – or an extension of them such as SA's Red Bloc. However, here too there was considerable disagreement about the importance of the affinity groups. Those from a libertarian or autonomist background saw them as very useful in the mobilisation which occurred. Those from the Marxist left rarely mentioned them at all. Those activists who saw them as important stressed the role they played in bringing together groups of people who knew and trusted each other to participate in the

mobilisations. Most such groups were formed from close friends and political associates. They ranged in size from four to 15 members. Several began life as larger groups but then split into smaller ones as problems of co-ordination emerged or because political or strategic differences emerged. Those who participated in such groups almost always saw them as valuable sources of personal support in situations where demonstrators came under physical threat from the police. Such groups were made up of people who 'knew and trusted each other' (i.1), who 'looked out for each other under pressure' (i.2) and provided a 'feeling of mutuality and trust, agreement and support' (i.35).[3] However, some participants also saw them as failing to cohere well under pressure and lacking discipline and coordination. (i.18)

The internet, email

The great majority of activists were drawn into activity by quite conventional means of personal contact. The internet provided a source of information, inspiration and ideas about forms of action, both through emails and through indymedia. This is the one element of the 'wired activism' discussed by Ayres (1999) that is sustainable in the Australian context. The internet provided Australian activists with a means of receiving up to date information on events or campaigns and a 'clearing-house' of information on anti-capitalist activism around the world. However, practical organisation of the movement was, for the most part, engineered through face to face meetings involving, within the core, people who had worked together on previous campaigns for at least a year or two. Fully 32 of the 35 interviewees were on at least one email list which promoted the protests. Most were on several – up to seven in fact.

While many activists believed that the email lists were useful for getting more peripheral people involved, only six of the activists claimed that an email list was a factor in getting them involved personally. Even in terms of publicising the protests to broader layers of people, the internet was not mentioned by 24 of the 35. More than twice as many saw the mainstream media as most significant in drawing in broader layers to the protests than saw email or the internet as important in doing so – a point with critical consequences for the movement after S11. A few thought that the debates which took place in cyberspace were useful for political clarification before the protest events. However, this was controversial – just as many thought that these debates were worse than useless and became bogged down in sectarian debate and point-scoring. These found the lists a problem and, as a result, soon paid little attention to them. 'The email list was terrible – it became bogged down in sectarian and useless discussion about tactics between tiny groups' (i.3). 'Most of the time I found them annoying' (i.31). As for the actual work of planning the protest, 20 activists saw the traditional face-to-face meeting as most important for planning the protests, while only eight said that the internet or email was a significant way of organising. Only three listed any form of electronic activism as one of the activities which they personally undertook as a way of building one of the protests. While all the interviewees appear to have been extremely active, again more traditional forms of building protests – leafleting, postering, stalls, speaking in university lectures ('lecture-bashing'), graffiti runs, press conferences and media releases and organising benefit gigs – dominated.

The internet did not provide what Ayres (1999) suggests is 'at a minimum' a 'complement to street protest' in the case of the Australian anti-capitalist movement. Rather, it facilitated the 'framing' of the anti-capitalist movement and popularised the idea of blockading international financial institutions (IFIs), but it was not very relevant as a forum for activism in its own right. Suggestions by Ayres (1999: 136) that the internet 'provides disparate groups around the world with a means for collectively contesting new and emerging global arrangements' do not fit the Australian case.

Transnational political exchange

There is no doubt that overseas anti-capitalist protests – especially Seattle in 1999 – provided a powerful stimulus to the emergence of a movement in Australia; 30 of the 35 interviewed mentioned Seattle as a major reason why it took shape here. Seattle, in a word used by most, 'inspired' them and, taking place in a developed, Western country 'made us believe it was possible here' (i.5). A number of these activists had already thought about various 'new' forms of anti-capitalist mobilisation such as the model provided by the Zapatistas. But Seattle translated this into a framework more suitable for

Australian conditions – a 'new form of struggle that made things seem possible and exciting' (i.3). For those who already thought of themselves as revolutionaries, Seattle 'convinced [them] of the possibility of revolution in [their] lifetime'(i.20) and gave them 'a feeling of belonging to a bigger movement than our own'. (i.32)

Seventeen were connected with some form of transnational organisation which might have supported the protests. However, only 10 of these were linked to a broad activist organisation, as distinct from a party organisation such as the International Socialist Tendency. Only six of these 10 found that these connections had any bearing on their participation in the protests. Only three had personally attended a similar overseas protest before the Australian ones, and only six had done so since their first involvement in Australia. Thus it appears that transnational activism in the 'hard' sense used by Tarrow (1998) and others is not a central feature of the Australian anti-capitalist movement.

However, Seattle and other protests overseas, as well as providing inspiration and hope to local activists, caused a great deal of re-thinking of tactics amongst them. While mass pickets had taken place before, the blockade – involving a 'shut it down' mentality – became a 'given' after Seattle (i.8 and i.15). The idea of a more mobile protest than previous mass actions of this kind – capable of engaging with the authorities at many different points – was also influential. Whether blockades were, in fact, new or not, many activists believed them to be so – more than half saw them as innovative, if only in the duration and scale of the action. Affinity groups, spokescouncils and things that might be labelled 'creative activism' – the use of puppets etc – were also mentioned as tactics largely derived from overseas experience. The sense that the new activism was both more audacious and more creative than previous protests and that this was partly derived from overseas experience was mentioned by many: 'People dressed as turtles – that sticks in your mind more than someone with a megaphone' (i.35). In summary, the Australian experience appears to fit the 'cross- border diffusion' model of an internationally influenced movement rather than a coordinated and organisationally connected form of transnational social movement.

Local antecedents
Of course, no movement could have developed in Australia unless it also had its roots in local grievances. Australia helped to pioneer neo-liberalism in the 1980s and, since 1996, with the confident right-wing Howard government in office, there were many long-term grievances. Most of the activists mentioned a list of these as an explanation for the birth of the movement in addition to Seattle. However, there were clearly two schools of thought amongst them about the relationship of these local issues and issue-based movements to the anti-capitalist mobilisations which began with S11. On the one side were those who saw the local campaigns as gaining in strength over the last few years and eventually culminating, via the catalyst of Seattle, in S11. However, another view – from activists with a variety of broad political perspectives – suggested that the movement activists (including themselves) were finding it more difficult to mobilise in the period before S11 and that the anti-capitalist movement gave them a new direction and more hope. 'The struggle was so low, people weren't winning gains; people were demoralised. Because it was so broad, what better thing can we do than attack the whole system' (i.22). In other words, the anti-capitalist front resulted from a descending rather than an ascending series of more specific campaigns. 'Activists needed a home and the education movement was winding down' (i.17). 'Lots of people were involved in single issue campaigns, but it was becoming impossible to organise' (i.27).

Some, at least, of the activists saw the anti-capitalist movement as a chance to mobilise on a greater scale than their issue-based groups had been able to do. Ironically, to them it seemed easier to draw people into an overall attack on capitalism than to mobilize them in more defensive struggles against a feature of it – a rally against education cuts or the like.

There is no doubt that the involvement of many different groups and individuals with varied concerns gave some of the activists the feeling that there was not simply a protest with many demands – but a convergence of struggles that had not taken place before. Moreover, there was a sense on the part of some that the movement represented a turning point in that they were no longer on the defensive –

7

desperately trying to stave off another neo-liberal attack – but were going on the attack against capital itself (i.3).

However, three local campaigns – anti-Hanson, Jabiluka and the Maritime Union dispute – do seem to have played a positive role in several ways. Many activists mentioned these as pioneering – or at least giving them experience – in the techniques of the militant mass blockade which later became important in the broader anti-capitalist mobilisations. Moreover, they combined mass, physical action with an attempt to actual *make happen immediately* what the activists wanted to see – rather than to pressure a government or company. The idea was to stop Hanson speaking, to stop the Jabiluka project, or to stop the wharves (docks) working, rather than to indirectly pressure an authority to behave differently. In the same way, the S11 protest was not merely symbolic; there was a real attempt to interfere with the functions of the WEF and therefore to challenge the workings of capitalism. Some of these activists found this a refreshing contrast to much of their previous activism.

The repertoire of contention
All of the respondents felt that the anti-capitalist mobilisations of which they were a part were a new form of protest in that the target was new – capitalism as a whole. The choice of target – major meetings of the corporate world, the stock exchange or CHOGM – produced the idea that they were challenging systemic problems in the world rather than symptoms. All thought that the diversity of the groups and individuals involved at the protests contributed positively – several added that this was important in ways other than simply the extra numbers which such diversity could provide. Diversity was important in that it provided a sense of the convergence of struggles – of many people attacking the system from a variety of angles.

But according to these activists, there was nothing really distinctive about the protests in Australia compared to those overseas. They either thought that there was no difference or suggested that the Australian protests were less violent and confrontational than some had been elsewhere. Several mentioned, as a minor point, a different balance of forces on the left in Australia as a point of contrast – but even here, these differences were mostly seen as minor.

Violent clashes, however, did occur. Only four of these 35 activists had not been involved in a physical clash with the police or authorities during the protests. Some had mixed feelings about this – many saying that the violence made people afraid. But, overall, most activists believed that the clashes – which they universally believed to have been initiated by the police – showed that the movement was prepared to stand up for itself, that they may have radicalised new activists, and that they 'showed collective power … rather than the usual image of the left looking weak' (i.3). Moreover, what violence happened has not deterred them. All, with only minor qualifications, said that they were prepared to take the risk of such physical clashes in the future. Some looked forward to it.

What they saw as the highlights of the protests in which they took part were remarkably consistent. The number of people who appeared on the first morning of S11, the inability of the police to break through the blockade on that day, and the fact that WEF delegates were prevented from attending were frequently mentioned. So too was the blocking of the car of the conservative Premier of Western Australia, Richard Court. The arrival of a large union contingent on the 'unity march' in M1 in Melbourne was another. In a more general sense, the protests, especially S11, gave the activists a feeling of enormous confidence – a feeling that 'we will win' (i.10). It suggested to some the possibility of real grassroots democracy operating on a large scale (i.9), how well the masses of people there looked after each in solidarity (i.22), and a sense of the new energies involved (i.11). S11, one respondent claimed, 'gave the movement a year's worth of optimism' (i.11).

The reaction of the media, various levels of government and the police confirmed the activists in their existing views. Firstly, it provided proof of the complicity of all of these with global capitalism (i.19). Secondly, it confirmed that the target – especially the WEF – was, indeed, the right one. That the police had to mobilise on a large scale and react violently and that leading politicians and the media seemed to exaggerate the danger which the demonstrations presented showed the activists that what

they were doing was important (i.20, i.26), or a serious threat to the system (i.14, i.9). One respondent claimed that these reactions by the authorities indicated that they took the protestors 'more seriously than we take ourselves' (i.6).

This did not mean, however, that the activists were uncritical of the protests. Here, those of libertarian stripe argued that the protests were blighted by marshals appointed beforehand and armed with megaphones, sometimes overly dominated by organised socialist groups and that competition between these groups attempting to recruit marred the mobilisations. The issue for them was 'ownership' of the protests (i.12). Socialists tended to see the weakness as a lack of working class or union involvement.

Furthermore, many were much more critical of M1 than of S11. Whereas S11 had a real target which represented global capitalism, many argued that the choice of the stock exchange as a focus for M1 seemed false – a 'faux protest' (i. 28, i.16, i.19, i.24). An important element of the political opportunity structure in the anti-capitalist movement appears to be the presence of a suitable target. The absence of an IFI meant that a similar level of enthusiasm could not be recreated. The protests were correspondingly smaller and many activists felt less enthusiastic about them.

Political frameworks
The activists were motivated by a dislike of the whole system, not just one or two small parts: issues were generalised very easily. It was the very generalisation against 'the system' or against capitalism that encouraged activists to get behind this more than they had single issue campaigns. The picture which emerges from this study is that this was not a 'movement of movements' – comprised of activists whose primary concern was this or that issue. On the contrary, given the choice to nominate their main political concern at the time of the protests – such as the environment, third world issues, etc. – 31 of 35 respondents described themselves in very general terms – labelling their concern simply as 'capitalism', 'the class system', 'everything', 'the system', 'injustice'. This is consistent with their descriptions of their broad political world view at the time. Thirteen described themselves as socialist or Marxist and nine as anarchist, anarcho-communist or libertarian communist. Others nominated autonomist, 'socialist with autonomist tendencies', 'socialist with anarchist tendencies' or a 'socialist – anarchist mix' as their views. Only one claimed to have been a social democrat before S11 and one was an adherent of the principles of Catholic Social Justice.

These responses suggest a very high level of political generalisation amongst the activists before the anti-capitalist movement began. In other words, the activists who built the protests were mostly the fairly established far-left, highly experienced and with sophisticated political views. We have already seen that they had been active in many movements as well – but they had taken part in them on the basis of these developed far left politics. When asked why they chose this form of political protest rather than conventional reformist means – attempting to influence parliamentarians etc – all but one claimed that such means did not work and many added that they were in favour, in principle, of mass action as a method of creating change.

Moreover, Seattle and other overseas protests did not fundamentally alter the broad political views of these activists. Some moved a little toward more decentralised models of organising. But while all but one claimed to have been enormously inspired by it, only two said that it changed the way they thought about fundamentals. After the Australian protests, a number of protestors said that they had become less sectarian or thought differently about questions of organising. But a few changed their broad views – several moving in a distinctly libertarian direction and several others joining socialist groups.

ANALYSIS

Having summarised the main characteristics of the activists and the organising structures we now discuss the Australian anti-capitalist movement in the light of some of the important questions that have been raised in the social movement literature.

The anti-capitalist movement and the 'new social movements'

In many ways, the Australian anti-capitalist movement fits well within the tradition of the new social movements explored by a host of writers from Touraine (1974) onwards. In relation to their organisational practice, the activists emphasise direct democracy and participatory structures (Dalton, Kuechler, and Burklin, 1990: 11–13; Brand, 1990: 26). They are overwhelmingly from middle-class backgrounds with university training (Day and Robbins, 1987; Mattausch, 1989; Brand, 1990, 26; Dalton et al, 1990: 4). They are motivated by broad ideological goals and collective welfare, not personal gain (Dalton et al, 1990: 12). They stand in opposition to the 'alienating effects of commercialisation and bureaucratisation of everyday life' (Brand, 1990: 26) and promote the 'expressive and social aspects of participation' in mass action (Dalton et al, 1990: 13). They also seek to broaden the repertoires of contention by the 'parallel and flexible use of both conventional and unconventional actions' (Rucht, 1990: 173).

There are, however, significant differences. In the first place, the activists studied here largely did not consider themselves to be primarily committed to a single issue but were opposed to the global capitalist system as a whole. Secondly, to the extent that organised groups were important in the creation of these three mobilisations, they were mostly far-left groups operating at a high level of political generalisation rather than single-issue activist groups. In this sense the Australian anti-capitalist movement also appears to differ from that in North America in that it is not a 'movement of movements' as described by Naomi Klein and others.

The relatively narrow range of political ideologies encompassed by the Australian anti-capitalist organising core has several implications. The activists appear to be, by and large, more radical than their new social movement predecessors of the 1970s – they want to mount a revolutionary attack on the system not call for 'democracies to adapt and change' (Dalton et al, 1990: 3). In his discussion of the role of global social movements and global civic society Scholte (2002: 148) distinguishes between transformist, conformist and reformist movements. The activist component of the Australian ACM was evidently transformist in nature. It did not seek particularly to engage with the World Economic Forum or World Trade Organisation, so much as to 'name the enemy' (Starr, 2000). Scholte (2000: 191-93) outlines the various 'promises' of global civil society. The Australian anti-capitalist activists sought certainly to provide civic education, not least in the thousands of leaflets distributed, the media releases circulated, the newspaper and magazine articles written, and the radio interviews given. They sought to give voice to indigenous voices, women, workers, and others marginalised by neoliberalism. They sought to enhance transparency and accountability on the part of the organisations targeted. However, they did these things not in order to bring about corporate globalisation with a human face, or to engage with it, but to stop it in its tracks. By attempting to shut down the WEF, protestors were demonstrating their perception of it as an elitist and illegitimate structure.

Because of their relatively homogeneous political outlooks, the anti-capitalist activists do not experience the tension between 'fundamentalism and pragmatism' (Dalton et al, 1990: 11) evident in the new social movements of the 1970s, which comprised radicals working alongside rightward-moving former revolutionaries. By the same token, the Australian anti-capitalist activists differ from the anti-capitalist movement of Europe and North America, where Marxists and anarchists organise alongside officials from NGOs, consumer lobby groups and mainstream left parties who seek reforms within the international financial order rather than its overthrow (for example, Attac in France (George, 2001) or the World Development Movement in the U.K. (Coates, 2001)). This is not to say that the 'moderates' do not march or blockade alongside the radical anti-capitalist activists but that, by and large, they do not take a leading role in building the actions.

Another factor that differentiates the anti-capitalist movement not just in Australia but internationally from the new social movements of the 1970s is that it has not emerged in the context of 'the levelling of class conflict by welfare state regulations at a relatively high standard of material well-being' (Brand, 1990: 26). Rather, the opposite. The anti-capitalist activists are the product of two decades of economic slow-down and social polarisation in most countries of the OECD. This has created the

potential for and, occasionally, the actual achievement of alliances with the established labour movement – the famous 'teamsters and turtles' at Seattle.

The background and attitudes of the Australian anti-capitalist activists reflects a strength as well as the great weakness of the movement. The strength is the very high level of political generalisation which they have adopted – the focus on the system as a whole – the refusal to see individual protest issues as separate from each other – but as aspects of a repressive and exploitative world system. A further strength is the willingness of these activists to both work hard and to 'put their bodies on the line' to attack the representatives and symbols of global capitalism. These factors mean that the activists in the Australian anti-capitalist movement are under no threat of co-option by social democracy.

Their weakness is that of their own networks, campaigns and organisations. If our survey of the activists is even roughly representative, then the movement is overwhelmingly led and the main work done by people who already consider themselves to be opposed to capitalism and keen to see it overthrown. Such a layer is, of course, still a very tiny minority in Australian society. Its capacity to mobilise through its own connections and resources is necessarily extremely limited. This is reflected in the importance of the media – and indeed the media over-reaction – to mobilising for the protests: 'If you heard 20,000 people were going, you thought 'I'd better be there'' (i.22). As several activists pointed out, the media provided far less coverage of the M1 2001 protest before the event than it had for S11 2000. The activists' own networks could not fill the gap and mobilise independently. The reliance on the media became especially problematic when the Australian news media effectively ceased covering the continuing round of anti-capitalist summits that took place in 2001–02 in Gothenburg, Genoa, Nice and so forth. Without constant exposure to the international movement, it became more difficult for anti-capitalist campaigners to get people involved.

The future of the anti-capitalist movement in Australia

Following the World Economic Forum Summit in September 2000 and the cancellation of CHOGM in October 2001, it was an open question whether the Australian anti-capitalist movement would be able to survive the onset of the 'War on Terror' and the associated change in the Australian political landscape. The evidence from M1 protests in 2002, which were one-quarter of the size of 2001, was one sign that the movement was on the downswing, but the real test came in November 2002 when a 'mini-ministerial' conference of the World Trade Organisation, comprising 25 trade ministers, was held in Sydney. In contrast to S11, the 2002 WTO protests were small and ineffectual, drawing in only 2,000 activists, overwhelmingly dominated by the left groups and their periphery. In 2003, M1 protests were abandoned altogether, the exception being a trade union march organised by the Victorian Trades Hall Council in Melbourne, and this was held within a traditional trade union May Day framework.

The relatively narrow social base of the Australian anti-capitalist movement is perhaps the key explanation for the dormant state of the movement in Australia in 2003. The Australian anti-capitalist movement did not create any new ongoing or permanent organisations, either national (e.g. Attac; the Genoa Social Forum) or transnational, and its failure to break through beyond the tiny left groups to real social forces has contributed to its apparent decline. Although many activists were supportive of the labour movement and keen to involve it further in future mobilisations, their own backgrounds and current occupations illustrate their very limited roots within it. Thus, when organised trade union involvement in the anti-capitalist movement has occurred, it has happened as a result of the decisions of official leaders outside the movement.

Furthermore, unlike the situation in Europe or, to a lesser extent the United States (Ashman, 2003), the Australian anti-capitalist movement has not made the transition successfully to an anti-war movement. The networks that were built during the anti-capitalist movement played no role in organising the massive anti-war demonstrations of February and March 2003, which were the largest in Australian history. Indeed, some elements of the anti-capitalist movement, notably the autonomist groups, were disdainful of the movement, regarding it simply as an 'old-fashioned single-issue movement'. The

anti-war demonstrations were built instead by layers of older peace activists, trade union leaders, the left groups, and, to some extent, simply the example of large demonstrations in Britain and the United States.

The Australian anti-capitalist movement appears from the foregoing to have contributed relatively little to organisational capacity-building in terms of Australian or global civil society (Scholte, 2000: 180). The failure to build social movement capacity has been a characteristic weakness of Australian politics for many years. Since the end of the long post-war boom in the mid-1970s, the 'Lucky Country' is perceived by many Australians to have lost its lustre (leaving aside the many who never participated in its benefits). Living standards have on average risen, but the aggregate figures mask growing inequality, a general sense that work has become more stressful and uncertain, and a belief that society is now harsher and meaner (Watson et al, 2003). The Labor Party, to which Australian workers have looked to represent their interests, governed for 13 years between 1983 and 1996 and was responsible for initiating large parts of the neoliberal economic agenda (Bramble and Kuhn, 1999).

To some degree the result has been working-class demobilisation, evident from falling rates of union coverage and strike rates, which are both at the lowest levels for nearly a century. At times, however, the appearance of passivity and resignation has been shattered by sudden explosions of activity in opposition to some aspect of the neoliberal or, more recently, imperialist agenda. Australian society has since the early 1990s seen several significant movements that rose as if out of nowhere but quickly subsided – against a right-wing government in Victoria, against French nuclear testing in the Pacific, not to mention the anti-Hanson campaigns, the East Timor campaign, and the MUA dispute already referred to. The million-strong anti-war demonstrations in mid-February 2003 were just the latest example of such an explosion of oppositional popular sentiment.

Two things are evident from this volatile political environment. First, there has been, over time, a steady rise in participation in such events, indicative of a gradual disillusionment with mainstream politics. This is most evident comparing the million who marched in the most recent anti-war movement with the 100,000 who marched against the first Gulf War of 1990-91. The general, albeit partial and uneven, shift leftwards is also evident from the increasing support for trade unionism in opinion polls, the rise of the Greens, and the growing popular opposition to privatisation. However, no organisation exists to give this sentiment some stability or direction. The left groups simply do not have the social roots to perform this role. The Greens have the material basis to play such a role but the party is overwhelmingly electoralist rather than activist. And the trade unions have the social weight and strategic power to provide the social struggles with a real ability to transform the political climate, but their demobilisation over the past 20 years prevents them from doing so. Social protest in Australia therefore takes the form of episodic explosions, rather than a steadily ascending curve, and this is likely to be the case until Australian working class organisation recovers. The failure of the Australian anti-capitalist movement to produce a new layer of activists and a permanent organisational legacy is therefore consistent with the general pattern of left-wing politics in Australia over the past decade.

However, this is not to say that the anti-capitalist movement has left no legacy. It was rooted in a generally increasing popular scepticism about the activities of big business and 'the market' which had been developing over the previous 15 years. It has in turn contributed to the further development of this sentiment, most notably in the ready understanding by the anti-war demonstrators of the important role played by oil interests in the war on Iraq. Furthermore, the activities of the anti-capitalist movement internationally and in Australia have had an impact on governments and businesses. This has been most evident at the level of discourse (Scholte, 2002: 153). The invitation to Indian activist, Vandana Shiva, and the leader of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Sharan Burrow, to speak at the Melbourne World Economic Forum in September 2001 was a reflection at least of the organisers' realisation of the need to lend legitimacy to the event even if it had no apparent effect on the content of the decisions made at the summit. Likewise, in the lead-up to the aborted CHOGM summit, the Queensland state government made much of CHOGM being a 'people's event', in an effort to disguise

its actual content as an inter-governmental summit whose purpose was to make the world safer for international business and 'counter-terrorism'. Much expense and effort was devoted to public relations around CHOGM in an attempt to win popular support and to marginalise anti-CHOGM protests. It is uncertain what effect these efforts had on mass consciousness. Nonetheless, the Australian activists were highly sceptical of these 're-badging' efforts, as they were of attempts by the World Bank (under expatriate Australian James Wolfensohn) to portray itself as an agency dedicated to eliminating world poverty.

When compared to the anti-capitalist/ global justice movement, internationally, therefore, the Australian movement was marked by some underlying weaknesses which contributed to its early demise. It has left behind no organisational structures or clearly identifiable layers of activists turning into action around the war or any other social issue. Its residue can be seen, however, in the contribution that it made to the gradual growth in social discontent in Australian society which has been under way for a decade or more.

NOTES

[1] The authors would like to thank Paul Jacobs, Les Thomas, Louise O'Shea and Marc Newman for their assistance in conducting the surveys that are reported in this paper. We would also like to thank those who agreed to be interviewed for this study. Responsibility for the content of this paper, however, rests with the authors.
[2] Journalistic accounts of activist organising (for example, Greif, 2000) are typical of the literature on the activists, while Anon (2001) has produced a useful summary of the main aims and objectives of the major international organisations, but does not provide any analysis of their internal modes of operation. The only systematic study of the backgrounds and attitudes of anti-capitalist activists unearthed by the authors of this article is the doctoral research on the Finnish movement by Lindholm (in progress and unpublished).
[3] (i.1) refers to Interview 1 of 35, and this system is used throughout this paper.

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