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From Critical Globalization Studies and Public Sociology to Global Crisis Studies and Global Justice Work: A Manifesto for Radical Social Change

John Foran

Abstract

This is a manifesto – a deliberately provocative and evocative text – designed to call on scholars of globalization to focus our work more directly on the study of the ongoing global crisis (which is seen far into the future) rather than on the specialized academic niches our work generally occupies. This is the move from (at best) a “critical globalization studies” to a “global crisis studies.”

Secondly, it urges global studies scholars, even those already engaged in public sociology or public intellectual work, to push further into making our work relevant and accessible to wider publics well beyond the university and journal publishing systems.

And finally, it advocates moving beyond even a “public sociology” directly to “global justice work” in a call to arms to academics and intellectuals to engage ourselves in global social justice action in any way of which we are capable. The text offers a reading of the global crisis as an organic set of interlinked crises, uses literary-like short case study sketches to make its points, provides a succinct thesis about how radical social change is successfully made, and includes a set of resources for scholar-activists.

Author Notes: I must thank a number of friends who read and gave invaluable feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, among them Rich Appelbaum, Bruce Bortin, Eric Selbin, and Richard Widick.

IN THE BEGINNING...

I

... is, was, and will be the crisis. It confronts us with a number of profound questions, such as:

- ◆ How are we to organize the economy to meet our own and the planet's needs (and how *do* we reconcile the needs of society and nature, on a collision course to disaster)?
- ◆ How are we to govern ourselves?
- ◆ What can we do about global poverty and inequality?
- ◆ What kinds of globalization do we seek, and
- ◆ How might we contribute to the project of getting "there"?

As Martin Luther King Jr. put it:

I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.... Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable.... We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of NOW. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.¹

The only question worthy of radical, politically engaged academics² today is: What do we do to help answer these questions, while there is still time to do so?

FROM CRITICAL GLOBALIZATION STUDIES TO GLOBAL CRISIS STUDIES ...

II

There are many ways to understand the crisis. We should discuss these with open hearts, passion, and imagination. These will be hard, difficult conversations that will require patience and practice as we learn from each other and other "others" along the way.

Perhaps we should drop, or broaden, or sharpen, our research programs to make sure that our research and teaching bear on crucial issues rather than the

somewhat more narrow ones our articles and books typically address, or the more abstract ones that preoccupy us as theorists. Let's tend to the real world we actually live in a small corner of, connected to (when not separated from) each other by an immense meshwork of human experiences, actions, emotions.³ This desire is what drew many or most of us in the first place. Real people in the real world facing (all too) real dilemmas and forced to make real choices. The weight and import of these realities is profound and more than any one person can (or should) bear, but together, as a community...

Let's make "Critical Globalization Studies" a "Global Crisis Studies" addressing the many heres and nows (and the pasts leading into them).

III

The crisis is really one of several interconnected crises, what Gramsci might have called an "organic crisis":

- ◆ The breakdown of globalization from above, neoliberal capitalism, or the so-called "Washington consensus," so clearly on display in the 2008 financial meltdown and the continuing, perhaps permanent, crisis of global capitalism;
- ◆ U.S. militarism and the new imperialism, which weaken the economic, ecological, and political systems of dozens of countries around the world, from Iraq to Afghanistan, Colombia to Honduras, Israel to Pakistan, and not least in the United States itself;
- ◆ Climate change, global warming, and peak oil, acting in concert with other crimes against nature, from deforestation to coal mining, fossil-fuel driven agri-business and industries, ruinous water policies, the extinction of species, and the intensification of extreme weather patterns and events – the science of *global warming alone* justifies the urgency expressed in this manifesto as a call to action;
- ◆ Majority (Third) World poverty, and the growing inequalities within and between nations, predating the emergence of neo-liberal capitalist globalization but exacerbated at an accelerating rate by Rich (First) World carbon emissions, and the depredations of transnational capital, Rich World states, and the global regulatory and financial triumvirate of the IMF, World Bank, and World Trade Organization.

IV

U.S. foreign policy is an unmitigated global ill, a condition which sadly has not changed with the election of Barack Obama.⁴ Those of us *in* the U.S. must wake up from the nightmare of the militarism enacted in our names, its reflex to kill in the name of defending “our” way of life (and supposedly improving “their” quality of life), its will to exploit and discard the people of “the darker nations,”⁵ its masculinist bluster and its patriarchal benevolence, its hold on our minds in print and our culture on the screen, its seepage into our very bones, our families, our work and living spaces, our language, our dreams. This task falls in large measure to us. Many others will join us from every part of the world.

V

The world warms while the politicians lie, taking the outstretched hand of corporations covered in blood and ash. Ice shelves collapse while we academics are distracted by our own problematics, charts, diagrams, and footnotes (important as these may be). The corporate media, the hard right, the scientists and politicians (at least those paid for by the rich and powerful)⁶ tell us “the world may *not* be getting warmer,” or “technology will find an easy fix,” or “the market can rein in global warming with carbon capture, or cap and trade, or ...” – all the while shamelessly stealing and profoundly perverting the language of sustainable development.

Let’s merge our efforts here with the scientists, the parties, the movements of every color who are saying – or better, screaming – NO! The Rich World which has put the greenhouse gases into the air will need to be forced to make the changes necessary to bring atmospheric carbon dioxide down to 350 parts per million, and freely give the technology and money required to make good on its climate debt to the Majority World, which pays the highest price as the globe warms. We will shoulder this burden to the end of our days, so our children’s grandchildren can be born whole and live.

“All that is solid melts into air...” around us, as another manifesto by Karl and Friedrich put it, and it follows that our tasks are to locate and expose the interconnections among the aspects of the crisis; to be relevant and fearless; to be interdisciplinary, crossing all borders and boundaries. Let’s be open in our thinking and attentive in our conversations. And let us turn the attention of global studies – and especially critical globalization studies – to global crisis studies.

VI

Today, anyone who looks honestly at contemporary society, or truthfully writes or speaks about it, cannot but see it as broken and unsustainable, and this on a local, national, and global scale. This situation, one of intertwined global crises – climate change, financial meltdown, continued U.S. militarism, and growing inequalities within and between nations – forces upon us an ethical obligation.

Our task now is to do *public* intellectual work – “to engage multiple publics in multiple ways,”⁷ fashioning a public social science (not a science, of course, but more of a calling, an art, a way of seeing) that rises to the challenge of speaking of these crises with as large an audience as possible.

There are many relevant publics: the elites of this world who spin the policies, the activists in the counter-movements which seek to unmake them, the vast general public of readers and web searchers, the silenced and excluded, watching and waiting for their moment, or seizing it already wherever they are.⁸

We must speak bluntly and write plainly, from our hearts as well as our heads, in discussions as much as in our writing. Our scholarly articles and university press books no longer suffice. They are inadequate to the task (see thesis XI).

There are many ways to do this: in classrooms and public lecture halls, in the print media or on the blogosphere, in novels and plays, with film and video, on TV and radio, whether corporate, public, or independent, and, of course, in the streets and gatherings of the movements.

... AND FROM PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY TO GLOBAL JUSTICE WORK

VII

Crisis conjures resistance. There are new political cultures of opposition and resistance abroad in the night.

A political culture of opposition or resistance is born of the ways that people make sense of their experiences of domination, articulating powerful counter-stories that expose and oppose all powers that be. The new political cultures of radical opposition in the twenty-first century differ – as they should – from those of the twentieth. The present is thus a moment of profound *transition* in the revolutionary tradition, in which an older political culture, of armed struggle led by a vanguard in the name of socialism, is yielding to more inclusive, democratic, nonviolent struggles in the name of ... well, something else.

VIII⁹

A long time ago, over the mountains and across the deserts of Chile, a doctor tried to build socialism peacefully and democratically – nationalization by nationalization, one occupied factory at a time, turning landed estates into peasant-run cooperatives. For one thousand glorious days, before he was cut down in a hail of bullets, there was a new sun, and even the rocks and the trees were happy.¹⁰

A world away, and a generation earlier and later, in Kerala, India, radical reforms brought a quiet revolution. People lived longer, babies and mothers survived, and everyone could read. There was no armed insurrection, just a half century of left-of-center governments patiently piling reform upon reform, pushed by vibrant social movements from below that no one from above could stop, not the Congress governments, the Hindu right, or the IMF economists.

Today, the spectre of democratic socialisms in shades of pink haunts Latin America once again. From Brazil to Ecuador, Uruguay to El Salvador, and especially in Bolivia and Venezuela, the people have elected parties and politicians to stand together with them against the transnationals, the U.S., and the banks. A “socialism for the twenty-first century,” say Evo Morales, Hugo Chávez, and many others.

The lesson?

Don't be afraid of taking power (but watch out)...¹¹

IX

The carnival of the street and general strike of May 1968 in Paris and the courageous rebellions in Czechoslovakia, Mexico, the United States, and elsewhere that year offered a glimpse of the twenty-first century, sometimes breaking down the barriers to conversation among students, workers, and the middle classes. They sought democratic schools and autonomous factories where people's creativity and ingenuity would be unlocked rather than stifled, their slogan “Power to the imagination!”

Today, in Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatistas say “Join us. Anyone can be a Zapatista” (and each in her own way). The members of a community *dar su palabra* (have their say), while the “leaders” *mandar obedeciendo* (lead by obeying), each taking turns at the head of the *juntas de buen gobierno* (the good government boards) in the communities, together laying strong foundations in the cracks of capitalism,¹² *todos por todos, nada por nosotros ...*

In late November of 1999, in Seattle, a broad and unexpected movement emerged to fight not a national government, but a global system, and won a great victory through nonviolent direct action, shutting down the meetings of the World

Trade Organization, which till then had swept all before it. Fighting a *system* is not as easy as overthrowing a state (and the latter was rarely achieved in the past century in any case). Behind the institutions of global capital lie other forms of internal oppression and snares of power even more insidious: patriarchy, militarism, racism, fundamentalism, nationalism, environmental destruction, consumerism, media control, and the and arrogant and mind-numbing celebration of Rich cultures over all others. None of *this* is going to be undone swiftly or without cost.

Today, however, as the global justice movement puts it, *we are everywhere* ... fighting for climate justice, a new deal for the Majority World, a halt to U.S. empire and militarism. The visions of this movement of movements reflect basic life-centered values.

We've got the vision and the other side doesn't. We've got biocentrism, organic food production, direct democracy, renewable energy, diversity, people's globalization, and justice. What have they got? Styrofoam? Neoliberalism? Eating disorders? Designer jeans, manic depression, and global warming?¹³

The beauty and poignancy of the young activists who have shouldered this fight is captured in a deeply moving video-interview with Richard, one of the thousands of climate activists at Copenhagen in December 2009.¹⁴ The strategy is to undermine the system by withdrawing energy from it to transform and run our own communities, reclaiming our "power-to" and rejecting their "power-over."¹⁵

The lessons?

Don't be afraid to not take power (but this may not be enough...).

X

What I've learned so far ... is the result of the thought and action of many, many people, just one more voice in the dialogue we are all having, neither privileged nor unimportant.

It is this:

Deep social change can come as a result of both *electing* popular governments (however grand or local in scope), *and* forging social movements *to push them from below* and *alongside* to make good on the vision of their promises. Every now and then, a powerful synergy bubbles up between elected governments and popular movements, especially if they respect each other and as they start

to make solidarity with other movements, nations, and organizations elsewhere.

In other words, rather than being forced to choose between seeking to change the world through elections or building a new society from the bottom up, the future of radical social change may well lie at the many possible *intersections* of deeply democratic social movements and equally diverse and committed political coalitions.

What if we re-make power as we take it?

XI

The eleventh thesis was written long ago: “Hitherto the philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”¹⁶ To which Lenin and countless others have added: “What is to be done?” Let’s spend more of our precious energies and limited time on this planet to figure this out.

And in the end...

*Let’s change the world without taking power violently.*¹⁷

XII

As “Old Antonio,” the mythical Chiapan character embodied in many of Subcomandante Marcos’s poetic communiqués, puts it while he sleeps:

Antonio dreams that the land he works belongs to him. He dreams that his sweat earns him justice and truth; he dreams of schools that cure ignorance and medicines that frighten death. He dreams that his house has light and his table is full; he dreams that the land is free, and that his people govern themselves reasonably. He dreams that he is at peace with himself and with the world....

A wind comes up and everything stirs. Antonio rises, and walks to meet the others. He has heard that his desire is the desire of many, and he goes to look for them....

In this country everyone dreams. Now it is time to wake up.¹⁸

* * *

The time for academic sleep-walking is over. The time for radical social justice work is here. If you are already on the path, keep going. If you are a student, a young instructor, or even one of us older (if not wiser) ones, don’t be afraid to move in new directions.

Another world is necessary. Another world is possible ... if we can make the shift from critical global studies and public sociology to global crisis studies and global justice activism.

* * *

Hope is an orientation, a way of scanning the wall for cracks – or building ladders – rather than staring at its obdurate expanse. It’s a worldview, but one informed by experience and the knowledge that people have power; that the power people possess matters; that change has been made by populist movements and dedicated individuals in the past; and that it will be again.¹⁹

What will get us there? Nobody knows, but hope – and dreams – are important.

There are *many* paths to a better future, one worthy of us and for our children, and depending on the situations that people face wherever they are, it should be no surprise that there will be different paths to the flowering of elected radicals from above pushed by uncompromising radical movements from below, or perhaps the other way around. These, to me, seem among the best ways forward.

ENDNOTES:

¹ This is actually a pastiche of more than one speech, including “I Have a Dream” from the August 28, 1963 March on Washington, and other speeches.

² Let’s define “radical academics” as those who seek to change the world deeply, and for the better. Martin Luther King Jr. speaks eloquently on this subject.

³ The term “meshwork” refers to non-hierarchical, horizontally-organized movements, direct action networks, or affinity groups. See Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

⁴ I realize that not all will agree with so un-nuanced a statement; even radicals may find it undialectical. But this is a manifesto....

⁵ As put by the title of Vijay Prashad’s *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007).

⁶ Thankfully there are spectacular exceptions – many of the world’s climate scientists, Jim Hansen courageously and publically among them, are not bought and paid for, and even a few politicians can make this claim, most of them outside the United States, unfortunately. See James Hansen, *Storms of My Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009). Among the world’s

politicians, listen to the speeches made at the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference by Muhammad Nasheed (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7f32B-OfwE>), Evo Morales (<http://links.org.au/node/1411>), and Hugo Chávez (<http://yesbuthowever.com/hugo-chavez-copenhagen-8136340/>), presidents of the Maldives, Bolivia, and Venezuela, respectively [all accessed July 21, 2010].

⁷ As Michael Burawoy put it so well in his 2004 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association: <http://www.jstor.org/pss/4145348>. For a forward-looking program for critical sociologists see Michael Burawoy, "Meeting the Challenges of Global Sociology – From Gothenburg to Yokohama," *Global Dialogue*, newsletter of the International Sociological Association 1 (1) (September 2010), accessible at <http://www.isa-sociology.org/global-dialogue/newsletters/globaldialogue1.pdf> and "Challenges for a Global Sociology," *Contexts* (Fall 2009), 36-41, accessible at <http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS/Contexts.pdf>

On the experiences of public intellectuals, see Katharyne Mitchell, editor, *Practising Public Scholarship: Experiences and Possibilities Beyond the Academy* (UK/US: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).

On the potentials and pitfalls of activist scholarship, see Charles R. Hale, editor, *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (Berkeley: University of California eScholarship, 2008), accessible at <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z63n6xr>

⁸ Patrice Lumumba's last letter, written to his wife just before his death, includes the lines: "We are not alone. Africa, Asia, and free and liberated people from every corner of the world will always be found at the side of the Congolese. They will not abandon the light until the day comes when there are no more colonizers and their mercenaries in our country.... without dignity there is no liberty, without justice there is no dignity, and without independence there are no free men.... History will one day have its say, but it will not be the history that Brussels, Paris, Washington or the United Nations will teach, but that which they will teach in the countries emancipated from colonialism and its puppets. Africa will write its own history, and it will be, to the north and to the south of the Sahara, a history of glory and dignity." I first found this speech on a website devoted to Raoul Peck's magnificent film *Lumumba*; it can be accessed at http://www.africawithin.com/lumumba/last_letter.htm [Accessed July 21, 2010].

⁹ For the form and tone of theses VIII and IX, I owe a debt of gratitude to the historical and political vignettes of Eduardo Galeano, author of *Century of the Wind* (New York: Norton, 1998), and, more recently, *Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone* (London: Portobello Books, 2009).

¹⁰ I have lifted this beautiful phrase from the lips of Felipe Quispe, an Aymara indigenous leader who is critical of all politicians, including the radical president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, and who puts his struggle this way: "The foreigners can

stay as long as we get 90 percent of the power. If not, there will be war.... We will rewrite history with our own blood. There will be a new sun, and even the rocks and the trees will be happy,” quoted by Christian Parenti, “Bolivia’s Battle of Wills,” *The Nation* (July 4, 2005), 18.

¹¹ Eric Selbin reminded me of the highpoint of the Mexican revolution, when in December 1914 the victorious forces of Pancho Villa from the north and Emiliano Zapata from the south converged to take control of Mexico City. Neither one was comfortable sitting in the presidential chair and both soon returned to their homes, opening the door for far more conservative forces to win the revolution. They knew in their bones that power corrupts.

¹² As the title of a long-awaited book by John Holloway puts it, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

¹³ Patrick Reinsborough, “Decolonizing the Revolutionary Imagination: Values Crisis, the Politics of Reality, and Why There’s Going to Be a Common-Sense Revolution in This Generation,” pp. 161-211 in David Solnit, editor, *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2004), 178-80.

¹⁴ This powerful speech can be viewed and heard at <http://yesmagazine.org/planet/were-not-done-yet> [accessed October 10, 2010, itself a day of global protest and affirmation].

¹⁵ These are the terms used by John Holloway in his paradigm-shifting book, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (London: Pluto Press, 2002, revised 2005).

¹⁶ The famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, penned by Marx in 1845.

¹⁷ To be clear, the movements will be nonviolent, which doesn’t say anything about their powerful opponents. In fact, as Richard Widick has eloquently put it to me: “You’re really talking about structural change in the libidinal economic flows of globalization – and blood is already flowing everywhere.... recall that the Civil Rights Movement was propelled by violence – it was only when committed peoples were willing to die, and to throw their bodies at the mercy of the state, and stop up the gears long enough to provoke violence from the right – only then that the media paid attention and broadcast the images and created the global publics capable of marshalling the political will to make radical changes in the structure of government. This was also true in the labor movement. This was also true in the anti-slavery movement. It may be happening right now in the streets in Iran – once the state kills enough of the population, perhaps the workers will join the students and paralyze the dictatorship with a general strike. They might take power nonviolently – but there will be violence” (e-mail communication, January 4, 2010).

¹⁸ Subcomandante Marcos, *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, translated by Frank Bardacke, Leslie López and the Watsonville,

California, Human Rights Committee (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), 50.

¹⁹ Rebecca Solnit, "The Secret Library of Hope," quoted in "Deal or No Deal?" (2009), available at <http://www.very.org.uk/dealornodeal/dond.pdf> [accessed February 2, 2010].

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On the Web

- www.tomdispatch.com: weblog of U.S. historian and writer Tom Engelhardt, that is in my view the world's best English-language website for critical analysis of global social movements, U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and the multiple crises of contemporary capitalist globalization.
- <http://libcom.org/library/twelve-theses-on-changing-the-world-without-taking-power>: John Holloway presents in 12 theses the compelling central arguments of *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, providing links to many of the discussions it has engendered.
- <http://www.juancole.com/>: "Informed Comment: Thoughts on the Middle East, History, and Religion." A window onto Middle Eastern politics and U.S. foreign policy by a well-regarded historian of the Middle East outraged by the horrific blunders of the Bush administration from 2001 on.
- <http://www.climate-justice-action.org/>: the home page of Climate Justice Action, "a global network of people and groups that are committed to taking the urgent action needed to avoid catastrophic climate change."
- www.350.org: "an international campaign dedicated to building a movement to unite the world around solutions to the climate crisis – the solutions that science and justice demand. *Our mission is to inspire the world to rise to the challenge of the climate crisis – to create a new sense of urgency and of possibility for our planet.*"