

## Social Movements and Counter-Hegemony: Lessons from the Field

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**ABSTRACT:** The urban centre of Vancouver, British Columbia has been a fecund research site for the study of capital, state, and social movement relations over the past three decades. In this article, we summarize the findings of our research program spanning that politically volatile period, and we reflect on the formidable, but not insuperable, obstacles to challenging the authority of global capital. We conclude that a 'transformative politics' articulated through a neo-Gramscian approach and rooted in a generative 'globalization-from-below' is the most promising basis for counter-hegemony today.

**Keywords:** social movements; counter-hegemony; Gramsci; civil society; neoliberalism; historic bloc; war of position; social democracy; organic intellectuals

In an era when some academic sociologists have declared an end to class (Pakulski and Waters 1996), when others have argued that movement politics is now centred around "symbolic challenges" rather than material needs (Melucci 1996), and when still others declare the death of transformative politics that attempt to bring disparate currents into mutual alignment (Day 2005), the cultural authority of Marxism, and of the broad left, is under suspicion. For historical materialism, the emergence of "new social movements" has brought the challenge of mapping these diverse forms of popular struggle into a theoretical space defined primarily by classes and states. For the left, the challenge has been to move beyond the now doubtful projects of Leninism and social democracy, and beyond the fragments of multiform oppositional politics that the new movements have activated, toward a more durable unity-in-diversity that respects difference while building support for a

radical alternative to capitalist modernity. In addressing these challenges, within the domain of empirical sociology, we have found Antonio Gramsci to be a particularly helpful theorist. This paper condenses and reflects on some of our findings from studies of social movements in the last three decades.

Gramsci's great achievement was to bring to Marxism a language of politics that recognizes that the state is more than an apparatus of coercion, that the classes that compose historic blocs are not determined solely by the relations of production, and that popular forces and currents are often decisive in giving shape and form to the moralities by which we live. Rejecting the economistic orthodoxies of his time, Gramsci's open Marxism was a 'philosophy of praxis,' an affirmation that the social world is *constituted* by human practice. For Gramsci, the analytical imperative to transcend economism was fueled by a practical need for subordinate groups to move beyond

a defensive understanding of their immediate interests, to create their own *hegemonic* conception of the ‘general interest,’ capable of guiding a transformative politics. Gramsci famously emphasized the growing importance of civil society as a site distinct from state and capitalist production, on which an expanding array of social and political identities are forged and social struggles organized – a site for political mobilization and coalition formation (Urry 1981). With this in mind, Gramsci developed the concept of **historic bloc** to indicate the way in which a class ‘combines the leadership of a bloc of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production’ (Simon 1982:86).

For the bourgeoisie, one of capitalism’s two fundamental classes, hegemony is never more than a contingent accomplishment, secured by the efforts of vast, dispersed networks of organic intellectuals – in administration, law, culture and politics – whose business it is to organize the productivities, moralities, identities, and desires of subalterns, thereby constructing a relatively durable bloc of alliances reaching into civil society which are sustained via material and symbolic concessions that are often state-mediated. Gramsci likened the cultural power of the bourgeoisie in the West to a formidable system of earthworks and trenches, obliging the left to conduct a **war of position** within civil society – to gain ground through processes of moral-intellectual reform that prepare subordinate groups for self-governance by creating post-capitalist sensibilities and values, practical democratic capacities, and a belief in the possibility of a radically transformed future.

It is precisely in this sense that hegemony can be understood to cut both ways. It signifies the *organization of consent* – the practices and forms in which loyalty to bourgeois leadership in economics, politics, and culture is secured – but also the possibility of *organizing dissent* (Carroll 1997), and ultimately of constructing a counter-hegemonic bloc around labour and its allies.

In a research program beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the first decade of this century, we have spoken directly with hundreds of activists in a great range of social movements, in order to gain a sense of the prospects for building counter-

hegemony in these times. Our working assumption has been that contemporary social movements are, *prima facie*, agents of counter-hegemony in their organized dissent to the existing order. Within a Gramscian problematic, the central diagnostic question is whether and how such movements might be recognizable as counter-hegemonic “in a more proactive, visionary sense” (Carroll and Ratner 1994:6). With this in mind, our research has emphasized the broad question of **counter-hegemonic historic-bloc formation**, a question that brings in its train the strategic issue of the **conduct of a war of position** through which the balance of cultural power in civil society can be shifted and space won for radical alternatives, unifying dissenting groups into a system of alliances capable of contesting bourgeois hegemony. This paper takes stock of our work to date.

## The Dissolution and Formation of Historic Blocs

The temporal context for our research has been an era in which the organic crisis of fordist-Keynesian regulation, dating from the 1970s, provoked various neoliberal initiatives aimed both at dissolving the historic bloc that had organized consent in the post-war boom era and at constructing a new historic bloc around the economic nucleus furnished by a new wave of capitalist globalization and post-industrial accumulation. In this period, what Gill (1995a) has called a transnational historic bloc, composed of leading globalizing capitalists, incipient institutions of global governance such as the Trilateral Commission, and various organic intellectuals active internationally in political, cultural and economic fields, began to take shape, as the project of “globalization from above” sought to discipline local populations to new accumulation norms represented as non-negotiable (“There is no alternative,” claimed Margaret Thatcher), while offering the allure of cosmopolitan consumer choice and increased affluence for abstract individuals possessed of a morally worthy attitude of entrepreneurship. The relative success of neoliberal interventions in reorganizing consent around a restructured economic nucleus and a different pattern of class and popular alliances has been highly site-specific, and always qualified by problematical

features of neoliberalism: the “free market” requires a “strong state” to enforce its formal rationality in the face of unmet needs and aspirations, hence coercion can come to overshadow persuasion as the visible form of state power (Gamble 1988); the decline of class compromise and social reform renders the hegemonic bloc quite thin, as formerly integrated groups (organized labour, clients of the welfare state) become available for more radical oppositional politics (Cox 1987); the disintegrating impact of market relations and periodic crises on communal social relations can lead to popular discontent with the anti-democratic and brutalizing character of full-blooded capitalism (Gill 1995b).

The spatial context of our research has been British Columbia, Canada – particularly the large urban centre of greater Vancouver – a political jurisdiction which has had “a sharper left-right focus than any other part of English-speaking North America” (Blake 1996:67) in which putative control of the provincial state veered from a neoliberal party intent on dissolving the fordist-Keynesian bloc in the 1980s<sup>1</sup> to a social-democratic party which throughout the 1990s attempted to reconcile the conflicting claims of labour, capital and a variety of new social movements (NSMs)<sup>2</sup> and back to a consolidated party of the right in the first decade of the new century.<sup>3</sup>

The story begins in the spring of 1983. In a context of a deep and protracted economic recession in which the collapse of world demand for resource products combined with labour-shedding transformations at the point of production to produce unemployment levels above 15%, a newly-elected Social Credit government brought forward a Thatcherite program of deficit reduction through austerity, the withdrawal of trade-union rights for state employees, and the weakening of safeguards for human rights. The austerity program signaled an abandonment of the project of class compromise and social reform, providing a conjunctural basis of unity between organized labour and a wide array of popular-democratic forces that included the radical left and NSMs. The Vancouver-

based left was quick to respond, assembling a broad alliance of organized labour with community grass roots groups under the banner of the Solidarity Coalition. But despite a series of escalating strikes, the Coalition collapsed when its core labour groups opportunistically accepted a settlement that met their own demands for job security, but left unmet the social and human rights agendas of the various community groups. Thus, the 1983 Solidarity Coalition, that began by allying the social proletariat of state employees with the clientele of the Keynesian Welfare State and with the radical left and NSMs, proved little more than a defensive mobilization that was betrayed by the tactical goal of its core constituents in labour’s efforts to preserve remnants of a Fordist historic bloc that had already been disavowed by capital (Carroll and Ratner 1989).<sup>4</sup>

Our subsequent research, focusing on the period of social-democratic provincial administration in the 1990s, has involved in-depth interviews with several hundred movement activists mainly in labour, feminist, environmental, anti-poverty, disability, peace, sexual liberation, and aboriginal groups.<sup>5</sup> In our analysis of transcripts from interviews conducted in the early 1990s, we began by focusing on the reputed divide between labour and NSMs, which in the wake of the failed coalition-building of 1983 might well have grown wider. Unions are often regarded as bereft of transformative potential and mired in bureaucratic economism, and conversely, NSMs are often thought

4 The 1983 campaign illustrated the problem of alliance-building on the left in the absence of a counter-hegemonic principle. The basis of unity in the coalition was limited to the realm of contingency, paving the way for the state’s cynical manipulation of weaknesses in the broad-based alliance and permitting a reconstituted class dominance. This rearticulation of labour’s interests in corporative terms meant that working-class struggle remained, at best, within the limits of ‘passive revolution’ and the consequent disillusionment of the community groups deepened the existing distrust of organized labour for having demobilized the post-Fordist historic bloc in its formative stages. When, in 1987, the provincial government made further attempts to bring labour relations under more authoritarian control, spurring another defensive mobilization capped by threats of a general strike, organized labour acknowledged the limitations of its episodic ‘wars of movement’ and undertook a strategy of dialoguing with community groups in order to create the foundation for an eventual shift in the balance of cultural and social forces. Whether this effort would be well-received by community groups, in the aftermath of Solidarity, was the cardinal question, one on which the formation of a ‘new historic bloc’ of dependable allies plainly hinged.

5 For descriptions of the methods used in these studies see Carroll and Ratner (1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1998 and 1999).

1 The Social Credit governments headed by William Bennett (1975-1986) and William van der Zalm (1986-1991).

2 The New Democratic governments headed by Michael Harcourt (1991-1996) and Glen Clark (1996-1999).

3 The Liberal government headed by Gordon Campbell (2001- )

to ignore structural issues in their valourization of identity politics; yet we found that both labour and NSM activists favoured fostering cooperative relations across diverse movements and saw labour playing an important role in that process (Carroll and Ratner 1995). Aside from a striking difference between them in their political party activism,<sup>6</sup> our findings gave evidence of a labour movement increasingly open to popular struggles, sensitive to the needs of diverse and marginalized constituencies, and tactically prepared, if not psychologically predisposed, to yield a leading role in whatever new articulatory process might form. Considerable networking was already occurring between many of the labour and NSM activists, as well as indications that unions had begun to join forces with NSMs in various coalition practices and strategies. Our findings, then, gave some basis for guarded optimism about prospects for a new historic bloc combining ‘old’ and ‘new’ social movements. Labour activists clearly had some investment in building solidaristic ties to other movements on an equitable if cautiously implemented basis. In their diverse reflections they resonated with the concerns for difference, autonomy, and cultural politics characteristically ascribed to NSM activists.

In two other respects – ‘master framing’ and ‘cross-movement networking’ – we noted strong commonalities and grounds for political cohesion amongst the various activists we interviewed, where the theoretically prescribed differences between labour and NSM activists would have predicted otherwise. The system of alliances that constitutes an historic bloc requires that constituent groups reach a shared understanding of the sources and nature of injustice. Such shared understandings or “master frames” move beyond single-issue politics to integrate the specific agendas of diverse movements into central interpretive frameworks, and lend coherence to movement politics by providing a moral-intellectual basis for solidarity. We found that three master frames were particularly prevalent in activists’ accounts of power and domination – a liberal frame (emphasizing individual freedom, rights and enfranchisement), an identity-politics frame, and a political-economy

frame. For the sample as a whole, the ‘political economy’ frame was by far the most prevalent, and appeared to serve as a common interpretive scheme for most activists across the entire spectrum of movements in our sample. Most of the activists we interviewed continue to understand domination and injustice as structural, systemic, and materially grounded. While the concern for “identity politics” enriches and partly transforms movement discourses by calling attention to fields and sites of struggle not punctuated by the political-economy frame, most of the activists shared an interpretive frame that views power as materially grounded in capital and the state, enabling activists in diverse movements to speak a common language in framing their political initiatives (Carroll and Ratner 1996a).

Further to the task of coordinating action between the various social movements, we mapped out the network of cross-movement activism created by “cosmopolitan” activists who participate in multiple movement organization spanning diverse cultural-political fields, as in the trade unionist who is also active in an environmental group. Among our key findings were that the cross-movement activists understood injustice within a political-economic frame, and that movements in which political economy framing predominated – labour, peace, feminism, and the urban/anti-poverty sector – tended not only to supply most of the cross-movement ties, but to be tied to each other as well, forming a loose political bloc. A political economy framing of injustice seems to provide a language in which activists from different movements can communicate and perhaps find common ground, elevating single-issue and local contexts into more comprehensive critiques of power and more expansive forms of action. For these ‘cosmopolitan’ activists, cross-movement ties serve as media for reaching or maintaining consensual viewpoints on injustice spanning sectoral boundaries.<sup>7</sup> To a large extent, the network that knits movements into an incipient bloc emanates from the agency of these core activists, who may be thought to wear the Gramscian mantle of ‘organic intellectuals’ as con-

<sup>6</sup> NSM activists generally shun electoralism at any level beyond the local.

<sup>7</sup> Twenty-six cosmopolitan networkers in our sample carried over 50% of all the cross-movement ties that linked 155 of our respondents into a network.

ductors and organizers of the progressive movement sector. Virtually all of these activists shared the political-economic understanding of injustice.

That three-quarters of our respondents understood injustice in political-economic terms, while nearly half of them were “cosmopolitan” in their pattern of activism, calls into question the claim that social criticism has “split into myriad local critical analyses mirroring the social fragmentation of the left” (Seidman 1992:51). On the contrary, the adoption of a political-economy frame by cross-movement activists suggests that wider participation fosters more holistic political views, leading to recognition of commonalities that cut across different movements, so that activists from diverse constituencies are better able to grasp the interconnectedness of resistance struggles (Carroll and Ratner 1996b).

As an important caveat to the above, however, we found, in studying the experience of the first national coalition of social movements in Canada – the Action Canada Network – that shared political sensibilities among networking activists may not suffice to effectively challenge the ‘corporate agenda.’ The Action Canada Network (ACN) was founded in 1987 under the name of the Pro-Canada Network as a broad-based grouping of national organizations and provincial coalitions working for social justice and the defense of Canadian sovereignty, with the specific mandate of opposing the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and later, the North American Free Trade Agreement. The advent of coalition politics on a national scale was, in part, a response to the waning executive powers of the nation-state, added to the growing realization that sectoral solutions to societal problems could not adequately address the deleterious impacts of the global economy. The British Columbia chapter of ACN was formed in 1991, presenting a second chance opportunity for a counter-hegemonic project that might, in retrospect, atone for the failures of the earlier Solidarity Coalition, but, more importantly, halt the passage of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement and build an authentic democratic political culture. However, the national electoral victories of the Progressive Conservatives in 1988 and the Liberals in 1993, resulting in the respective passage of the FTA

and then NAFTA, drove the ACN, nationally and locally (in B.C.) into a moribund state, reinforcing the perception that since nation-states were heeling to transnational corporations (TNCs), remedies could not be sought on a strictly domestic plane – a more global strategy was required, one capable of enlarging the historic bloc by reframing ACN along more internationalist lines and around a unifying principle or vision that could last beyond the shifting alliances and episodic responses that tended to short-circuit the ‘war of position’ that was necessary to nurture the elements of social change.

With the decline of the ACN, the role of reactivating widespread opposition to the ‘corporate agenda’ was informally transferred to the Council of Canadians, a citizens’ organization founded in 1985. Initially focused on a left-nationalist project intent on protecting Canadian sovereignty through opposition to the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, the Council soon countenanced the tentacular powers of the TNCs and the collusive role of the institutions of ‘global governance; consequently, it extended its citizens’ agenda to an international level, cooperating with citizens’ organizations in other countries in successful campaigns to thwart passage of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (1998) and seriously disrupt meetings of the World Trade Organization in Seattle (1999).

Since then, the Council has been a tenacious advocate for progressive policies across Canada, striving to prevent corporate profits from trumping the public interest over vital issues such as bulk water exports, sustainable development, climate change, public transit, and food security. In its short history, the Council has been a conspicuous participant in various International and Global Days of Action, Alternative People’s Summits, and most recently, the protests against the G8 and G20 economic summits held in Toronto (Coburn 2010:215-18). It remains to be seen whether the Council’s consultative approach with members, activists, and coalition partners, can continue to mobilize a new historic bloc linking regional, national, and international social movement groups, though its impressive successes amidst the growing forces of an imperious market economy makes it clear that, henceforth, the struggle against

capitalist hegemony must be waged on both local and global fronts.

### **The Conduct of a War of Position**

As implied in the Gramscian elocution – ‘new historic bloc’ – the purpose in constructing a new alignment of class and popular forces is to challenge the dominion of the leading class across the state institutional networks and within the looser domains of civil society. For Gramsci, this entailed a strategic ‘war of position’ spanning successive conjunctures and shifting the balance of forces through interventions at various sites, particularly within the intellectual and moral realms of civil society.

One marker of success in the war of position is the achievement of a shared social vision for an alternative future (Purcell 2009). Among the diverse group of activists we interviewed in the early 1990s, there was some evidence of such a vision. When asked what kind of society they were striving for in their activism, nearly half of them described a “caring society” characterized by mutual respect and tolerance and by values such as compassion, fairness, and sharing; but while this vision of a caring society resonated across most movements and particularly among feminist, gay/lesbian and peace activists, few environmentalists subscribed to it, and by the same token few non-environmental activists subscribed to the ecological vision that most environmentalists endorsed. The fissure between the social-justice vision and the ecological vision points to a well-known and highly consequential weakness in the political culture of the contemporary left, to a breached flank in its war of position. To offer an ethical-political vision sufficiently robust to challenge capital’s domination of people and nature, humanistic concerns for social justice need to be welded to ecological concerns for stewardship and sustainability. Failure to bridge this difference has furnished an object lesson in the divide-and-conquer tactics of bourgeois passive revolution, as business groups have mobilized working-class identities behind anti-ecological campaigns with the lure of short-term jobs, while middle-class environmentalists have been indifferent to the livelihood concerns of workers and communities (Doyle et al 1997; Foster 1993).

To forge an alternative hegemony, counter-hegemonic movements must wed justice with ecology: “social groups that aspire to hegemony increasingly have to demonstrate their ability to pose solutions to a variety of issues related to nature and the environment” (Ekers and Mann 2009:289). This means, among other things, going beyond the politics of resistance, *into prefiguration*; i.e., developing “alternative forms of production and reproduction or alternative conceptions of nature-society relations” (Karriem 2009:318). Recent developments in Canada do suggest a tentative move in this direction, on multiple levels. In Victoria, a Transition Towns initiative has been gaining membership since 2009 and now has working groups focusing on a wide range of justice and ecology issues (<http://transitionvictoria.ning.com/>). In May 2010, a BC-based degrowth movement, with a strong critique of capitalist growth and an equally strong commitment to social justice, was launched in Vancouver (O’Keefe 2010), bringing a counter-hegemonic movement already influential in Quebec into British Columbia. A month earlier, on 22 April 2010, the Ottawa-based Polaris Institute announced the formation of a national Green Environmental Network (GEN), an alliance of many of the country’s leading ecology groups, labour unions and social justice organizations, “uniting around a common cause of building a green economy in Canada” (Clarke 2010). GEN was founded on the premise that “the economic model in this country has to be fundamentally transformed if Canada is going to measure up to the ecological challenges of our times” (Clarke 2010). Its vision statement, however, sees the “private sector” playing a key role in building the green economy, under the leadership of governments and publicly owned institutions (<http://www.greeneconomy.net.ca/>) – a transition strategy that could easily devolve into an elite-engineered passive revolution involving relatively minor regulatory adjustments to “business as usual,” along the lines sketched by Luke (2006).

In our more detailed examination of selected groups, we explored some of the challenges of carrying out a war of position as they relate to the building of oppositional cultures and the pursuit of media strategies suited to convey counter-hegemonic messages to wider publics. A fundamental

challenge to movements conducting a war of position is *to develop their counter-hegemonic capacities so that an oppositional culture can be sustained against the colonizing and marginalizing moves of capital and state*. Whether that challenge is met depends upon how creatively movement groups pursue three analytically distinct tasks: community-building, meeting the needs of constituents, and mobilizing and engaging in collective action. The dilemma is that all three tasks can be pursued by a given group in ways that either tie constituents to, or wean them from, hegemonic constructions of their interests and identities. Ideally, movement groups achieve some degree of practical efficacy in carrying out each task while framing their interests in ways that resonate with other movement struggles and avoid ‘system’ cooptation or marginalization. How effectively movement groups manage these critical tasks is in turn related to how they conceive their political project – whether as a ‘cultural politics of recognition’ in which injustice is seen as rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication, or as a ‘material politics of redistribution’ in which injustice is located in political-economic structures. In addition to this recognition/redistribution axis, Nancy Fraser (1995) identifies two basic forms of intervention for remedying either type of injustice – ‘affirmative’ and ‘transformative’ – the first referring to ameliorative corrections to injustices that leave intact the prevailing structures of power, and the second to interventions that aim at restructuring the underlying generative framework. The challenge for movement groups is to determine how they can pursue their three domain tasks in ways that lead beyond mere affirmation of their existing material needs and cultural identities, towards actual transformation of the structural mechanisms that generate inequality (‘maldistribution’) and disrespect (‘misrecognition’; see Table 1, below). Such counter-hegemonic politics break from reformist gestures of affirmation. They combine struggles for “cultural recognition and social equality in forms that support rather than undermine one another” (Fraser 1995:69).

By way of exploring the intricacies of this process we focused on three groups from our research sample that occupy fairly clear locations on the continuum

of cultural and material politics: The Centre, a gay-lesbian/bisexual community centre which vigorously contests the biases of conventional society and mainly pursues a project of recognition; End Legislated Poverty, the province’s largest anti-poverty organization with ties to labour and the traditional left, and oriented around redistributive politics; and the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities, which struggles to valorize and transform a precarious identity and to gain tangible improvements in the lives of disabled people, thus addressing issues of both recognition and redistribution.<sup>8</sup> Without recounting the detailed findings based upon our in-depth interviews with activists in each group (Carroll and Ratner 2001), some summary observations can be drawn about the organizational dilemmas that vitiate efforts to sustain oppositional cultures under the hegemonic constraints of neoliberalism.

In brief, the Centre (TC), faced with a needy and diverse clientele, placed its emphasis on the provision of specific services and on mitigating the effects of homophobia and related forms of disrespect for sexual minorities. Despite a premium on community-building as a means of increasing the self-esteem of its members, its diverse but socially isolated clientele perpetually subverted claims to any overarching identity that might be politically affirmed. At the same time, its small cadre of relatively affluent members has been attracted to the affirmative benefits of ‘mainstreaming,’ leaving TC without the resources either to address the pressing needs of its new constituents or the ability to engage in the deconstructive cultural politics that might reverse the forms of misrecognition suffered by its more discriminated clientele. End Legislated Poverty (ELP), with its overriding commitment to redistributive social justice claims, subordinated need-provision to its central project of political mobilization in issuing challenges of a transformative nature to the dominant order. While pursuing concrete affirmative goals in its advocacy

<sup>8</sup> End Legislated Poverty began its work under that name in 1985 and continues to serve the indigent Vancouver community. The B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities was founded in 1976, changing its name from the B.C. Coalition of the Disabled in 1990 to get rid of the reifying negative label. The Centre was first established in 1979, changing its name to QMUNITY in 2009, giving unabashed and full compass to its diverse (LGBT) “queer” clientele.

of an augmented welfare state and in its critique of “poor-bashing,” ELP activists have been more inclined to view their group as addressing the radical emancipatory needs of its constituency rather than the immediate needs for subsistence. The paradox for ELP is that the community-building effort required to sustain the long-term struggle essential to the pursuit of transformative goals is hard to accomplish with a demoralized clientele often preoccupied with sheer survival; moreover, ELP’s reliance on government funding to support its programs and modest staffing requirements places it in a supplicatory position – dreading cut-offs and anxious about exposing its dependent clientele to unacceptable levels of political risk. For the B.C. Coalition for People with Disabilities (CPD), disability has been a bivalent issue, calling up politics of both recognition and redistribution. Although CPD activists have projected a transformative agenda that would undo the basis for the abled/disabled distinction, their political action has focused primarily on lobbying for the affirmative goals of increased rights and entitlements, while also engaging in service-oriented work to improve the efficiency of social service delivery for constituents. This latter commitment strengthened members’ attachment to CPD, and thus enhanced community building, but the organization’s reliance on an issue-oriented lobbying strategy tended to lose ground in the context of ideologically spurred fiscal retrenchments, prompting reconsideration of its ‘pragmatic’ affirmative politics approach.<sup>9</sup>

In sum, with the advance of neoliberalism, all three groups found themselves deeply compromised in their efforts to wage an efficacious ‘war of position’ given the desperate neediness of their constituents, the seductions of ‘mainstreaming,’ and the public disapprobation (‘backlash’) fuelled by government and media recriminations. It is no coincidence, therefore, that TC and CPD grew to regret their heavy investment in affirmative politics, while ELP sought

ways to accelerate its transformative stance. Their combined experiences in the late 1990s underscored that a counter-hegemonic war of position requires a political synergy of aims across the three task domains that constitute oppositional culture so that affirmative and transformative goals can be pursued in ways that lead to short-term material and assimilative gains as well as to the long-term disarticulation of systemic hegemony.

One potentially invaluable resource for movements in pursuing their material and cultural politics is the mass media, given their prevalence as key sites of political contention in advanced capitalist societies. Conducting a war of position is obviously facilitated by strategic use of the media for counter-hegemonic purposes; consequently, we examined how three groups drawn from our research sample have developed media strategies as aspects of their specific political projects (Carroll and Ratner 1999). Alongside the ‘recognition’ project of The Centre and the ‘redistribution’ project of End Legislated Poverty, we studied the practices of Greenpeace (its Vancouver branch), a high-profile international NGO which, in our view, represents a third kind of political project that we classify as a ‘secular politics of salvation.’ Greenpeace’s problematic is conceived not in terms of ‘social injustice’ per se, but rather in terms of planetary survival – i.e., the nexus between humanity and nature. We compared the three cases, again using Fraser’s (1995) ‘affirmative’ and ‘transformative’ categories, as well as Gamson and Wolfsfeld’s (1993) model of movements and media as interacting systems in which ‘asymmetrical dependency’ between social movements and mass media renders movements highly dependent on media for mobilizing their constituents, validating their existence as politically important collective actors, and enlarging the scope of conflict in order to draw in third parties and shift the balance of forces in a direction favourable to a movement’s interests. At the same time, movements ought not be conceived as passive victims of mass media strategy, but can, to some degree, use the media to advance their own goals within a broader war of position.

Summarizing here how each of the three groups fared in developing their media strategies, Greenpeace

<sup>9</sup> All three groups contend with many of the same problems and limited resources that they faced at their inception. The Centre succeeded, to some extent, in mitigating the stigma of ‘queer identity’ through various celebratory spectacles (e.g., the annual Pride Day and parade) and human rights legislation, but ELP and the BCCPD are challenged by growing caseloads and forced budgetary restrictions in the current period of economic downturn.

was ostensibly the most successful of the three groups in manipulating mass media communication outlets for its own ends. The modus operandi of Greenpeace can be likened to a ‘politics of signification’ – engaging in often spectacular but non-violent direct actions of civil disobedience geared to attract media attention to the group’s framing of environmental issues. While these visual stunts have served Greenpeace well in a mediatized ‘war of manoeuvre’ – earning it media standing and group validation, as well as mobilizing financial resources from an otherwise passive conscience constituency – its actions have often been journalistically packaged as ‘infotainment’, predictably eroding public sympathy for Greenpeace campaigns and curtailing possibilities for an expanded war of position on the causes of ecological crises and their harmful consequences. Cognizant of the media’s asymmetric power to select and frame what is newsworthy, and aware that media stunts can be trivialized if disconnected from long-term educative strategies needed to anchor a transformative politics of salvation, in the mid-1990s Greenpeace embarked on a new strategy of displacing media corporations from the central position they had occupied in mass communications. The group increasingly used the Internet to bypass mass media, thereby reducing media dependency and eliminating asymmetry by ensuring that preferred frames reach an ever-broadening population of web-browsers. The scientific and cultural education component of Greenpeace’s program became integral to its global war of position, although a decade on one can still query whether this informational networking strategy effectively complements Greenpeace’s dramatic media tactics, saving the latter from the tepid fate of media ritualization.

Compared with Greenpeace, The Centre’s ‘recognition’ project was far less dependent on media coverage, though its relationship with the media was extremely asymmetrical. Since its affirmative/multicultural approach ruled out ‘wars of manoeuvre’ – media splashes or otherwise – its press releases were generally ignored by mainstream outlets. With little marketable copy to gain from The Centre, the media was by turns negligent and sensationalistic toward it. While The Centre was content to engage

in a low-profile ‘war of position,’ building some sense of community and seeking to represent its sexually diverse constituency in a morally positive light through well-targeted programs of popular education and alternative media, such a multicultural politics had its limitations. In narrowing its political horizons and tempering its actions to avoid hostilities with heterosexist (and intermittently homophobic) mainstream media, The Centre was able to wage only a very circumscribed ‘war of position,’ one that is consonant with the dominant institutions and confines struggle within the limits of ‘passive revolution’. Given its apolitical mandate to affirm rather than deconstruct hegemonic conceptions of sexual identity, and its cautious avoidance of conspicuous public actions that might provoke ‘backlash,’ The Centre may have made itself even more vulnerable to the uncharitable mercies of the mass media, thus reinforcing one of the key bulwarks inhibiting even its affirmative-based war of position.

Compared with The Centre, End Legislated Poverty adopted a more pro-active media strategy focused on popular education and periodic collective actions. Committed to a transformative coalition politics of class struggle, ELP strove to reach out beyond its immediate constituency of “the poor,” ideally requiring a level of media support precluded by its trenchant critique of capital and the elected legislators of poverty. Like The Centre, and in contrast to Greenpeace’s deft command of mainstream media attention, ELP had only a peripheral media standing and therefore came to rely upon alternative and local media – neighbourhood or regional newspapers, its own monthly paper, and cable channels – in order to construct a more overt politicized identity grounded in ‘community’ and direct experiences of privation. At times ELP has courted the mass media to magnify specific campaigns and protests, but it remains wary of media “poor-nography” with its denigrating frames of “welfare cheats” and “deserving poor.” Indeed, given its radical transformative agenda, ELP has been nearly always on the brink of deviantization by the mainstream media, especially when its counter-hegemonic actions are perceived as truly threatening to the media’s own corporate sponsors.

In sum, the experiences of these three groups

indicate that the mass media offer, at best, unpredictable support to movements engaged in counter-hegemonic politics. When organized dissent is given coverage, media accounts are usually commercially motivated and liable to reconstructions that mock or demonize the groups on which they report. No small wonder that mainstream journalists – agents of the hegemon – are unlikely to lend credence to counter-hegemonic struggles. Barring the improbable accession to editorial control of mainstream media by sympathetic (or merely neutral) purveyors of social reality, the mass media certainly cannot be expected, of their own accord, to reduce either asymmetry or partiality in the movement/media relation, especially with regard to transformative agendas, notwithstanding any and all claims of journalistic “objectivity.” Where movement agendas are more modestly restricted to affirmative goals, the mainstream media are more apt to present such issues to wide audiences, although here too, the media is prone to exercise censorship depending upon the existing scope of ideological tolerance and the fiscal capacity to support social change. The ascendancy of neoliberalism gives little comfort in that regard. One possible recourse for movements has been to produce their own alternative media, a strategy sometimes adopted but often limited by a lack of sufficient resources and by the practical restriction of alternative media to specific target populations, making this tactic effective only for affirmatively oriented groups, not for those seeking broader changes that require a wider base of support.

Perhaps the most hopeful prospect in the field of media relations for a viable counter-hegemony lies in the proliferation of the Internet, which presents interesting possibilities for movements pursuing various political projects to circumvent dependence on mass media by developing openly accessible interactive communication networks at relatively low cost. Such a strategy not only bypasses the mass media; it converts mass audiences into more engaged communicative agents and reaches beyond the regional and national markets which typically delimit media audiences. These and other practices that democratize media may be crucial preconditions for transformative politics in a globalized world (Carroll and

Hackett 2006). Indeed, the rapid growth of transnational corporations makes it virtually imperative that movement struggles now be internationalized since waging wars of position on sequestered fronts can no longer slow down the unfettered mobility of capital. An increased awareness of the interconnections of movement struggles and a global convergence of strategies centered on the motif of ‘resistance to capital’ (Rustin 1988), and facilitated by the new untrammelled technologies of mass communication, may well be the foundation for a revisited socialism in these allegedly post-socialist times.

Ironically, the political party most ideologically aligned with socialism is an unlikely instigator of any socialist renaissance in British Columbia. The opportunity to reconcile the tasks of state management and social democratization was afforded the B.C. New Democratic Party in its two electoral victories in the decade of the 1990s. Our in-depth interviews with state officials from six key ministries and NDP members of the legislative assembly at the end of this period revealed the difficulties experienced by the BC NDP government in its efforts to mobilize progressive social policies in the face of business imperatives, an entrenched civil service bureaucracy, and the often single-minded purposefulness of its own social movement allies.<sup>10</sup> Whether it was the ‘brokerage pragmatism’ of the Michael Harcourt government, or the bold class rhetoric initially trumpeted by Glen Clark, neither approach could resolve the problem of sustaining a coalition of labour-left and the ‘new social movements’ while heeding the functional requirements of a capitalist system. Consequently, the NDP’s decade in government led neither to a dominant position in parliament nor to the embedding of social democratic policies and reforms able to fundamentally challenge the power of capital. Both NDP administrations ended on a puerile note, with the two premiers enmeshed in media-blown scandal – overall, a disappointing run of social democratic governance that ushered in a resounding electoral victory by a united right-wing ensemble.

Nor did the NDP display much political fortitude in its oppositional role during the subsequent decade

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of our findings, see Carroll and Ratner (2005a, 2007).

of rule by the Liberal government, with its market-centered social vision. Between the government's accumulation of windfall revenues from the private sector during the pre-2008 economic boom, and the NDP's timorous posture of civility on the chance of enhancing the party's centrist appeal, political activism was quieted and public wealth incrementally passed into private hands. However, the soaring costs involved in mounting the 2010 Winter Olympics, combined with the effects of a sharp recession, has set the stage for Liberal stringencies, probable new waves of resistance, and inevitable calls for alternative social visions capable of molding the elusive 'new historic bloc.' At this point, the electoralist predispositions of NDP stalwarts – trained on recapturing the traditional centre of the political spectrum – suggest that they are not poised to foment this transformation.

## Conclusions

This article reports work spanning three decades, which applies most immediately to the specific situation in a part of Canada. Nevertheless, we can venture to offer some conclusions that may have wider applicability in the consideration of counter-hegemony today.

With regard to the question of historic blocs, we must acknowledge the paradoxical character of neoliberalism's remarkable successes in the last three decades. The consolidation, from above, of a transnational historic bloc championing neoliberalism, and the success of neoliberalism in converting human relations into market relations, in immiserating vast sections of a growing proletariat (North and South), and in hollowing out much of the nation-state-centred politics through which the left won concessions in the era of organized capitalism, were by the turn of the century, incontrovertible. The left, in Leninist form, had largely collapsed, along with the demise of most socialist states; the social-democratic left had become in great part neoliberalized with the recognition that few policy levers remained for implementing progressive reforms in what for capital is increasingly a "borderless world" (Carroll and Ratner 2005b). As Michael Burawoy (1985) presciently observed a quarter century ago, there are interesting, if harrowing, parallels between the

neoliberal regime of hegemonic despotism, in which unprecedented mobility gives capital decisive structural power at the level of communities and states, and the Satanic mills of the mid-nineteenth century, when submission at the point of production was largely guaranteed by the Hobson's choice between wage labour and pauperism.

Yet neoliberalism's victory – the rational tyranny of the global market – unavoidably reinvigorated opposition from below, which, like neoliberalism itself, threw off the national castings of fordist-Keynesian class compromises and began to pose its politics in a global field (Carroll 2007). One of the remarkable implications of neoliberalism has been to vindicate a class dialectic that post-modern fashion reputedly consigned to the dustbin of history. As the neoliberal historic bloc has taken shape, particularly in the form of its peak governance bodies such as the G8, OECD, IMF and WTO, a growing collection of counter-hegemonic movements began to shadow its activities, making effective use of both a global mass media and a rapidly developing Internet alternative media to challenge the authority of global capital. The participants in such momentous campaigns as the Battle in Seattle (1999) hailed from many places and movements, but clearly shared the same political-economic framing of injustice we found among various activists in Vancouver. The networks linking these activists and their organizations not only span across movements but are increasingly transnational, as is the understanding of the forms of domination against which activists are struggling (Della Porta et al 2006).

In contemplating the conditions of possibility for an expansive counter-hegemonic bloc, developments in nationally organized labour movements seem propitious, but conceptualizing the crucial nexus between economic nucleus and the popular-democratic requires that we think beyond immediate forms of class organization and politics. The reality of the 20th century was universalization of the capital-labour relation: in the advanced capitalist North and tendentially in the South, the vast majority was proletarianized (Berberoglu 2009). Yet the global working class is an extremely diverse and fractured formation; therefore, the strategic alignment of

labour, across national borders, though crucial, does not mean that there is one form in which such transnational solidarity might thrive (Rahman and Langford 2010). Equally important, particularly in the North, is the growth of social unionism, a sign that labour perspectives are reaching into popular-democratic fields, and vice versa.

Of course, recognition that the capital-labour relation can only be undone through the *collective* agency of capitalism's fundamental subaltern class does not imply that "class struggle" – with its resonances of working-class identity politics – can suffice as a unifying counter-hegemonic trope. Given the diverse ethical-political claims that fuel contemporary movement politics, a broader more inclusive construction is more fitting, such as the "resistance to capital" political-economy theme suggested by our research. But if "class" is no longer central in counter-hegemonic discourse, or if labour no longer qualifies as its singular spearhead, then the question is whether labour, with its disproportionate resources, is prepared to play a shared collaborative role rather than arrogate to itself the leading role in upcoming struggles. Certainly our research suggests that any continuing imperiousness on the part of labour would seriously damage the potential for the formation of a new historic bloc. Moreover, the organic intellectuals of the left who coordinate future struggles should qualify to undertake this task not by virtue of their particular class background or even by direct experience of oppression, but by their cosmopolitan political-economy understanding of the roots of contemporary social conflict, as our study of cross-movement activism suggests.

As to the conduct of the war of position, here the challenge for social movements is to create and occupy new spaces for alternative identities, moralities, and ways of life, thereby activating a long-term process of building a counter-hegemonic bloc through popular education, consciousness-raising, community development, self-reliance, etc. These kinds of sustained initiatives could, in combination, move beyond the defensive mobilizations of protests to what Williams (2008) has aptly termed a counter-hegemonic generative politics that supports a new ethical hegemony, marked by social visions of renewed community and

a "caring" society that recognizes the internal relation that links humanity and nature. Yet the task of developing counter-hegemonic capacities so that oppositional cultures can be sustained against the colonizing and marginalizing moves of capital and state is an immensely difficult one: it calls for a politics that is transformative and that engages the cultural media and state structures in ways that contest the system's hegemony. Attempts to devise effective strategies raise complex questions about whether "identity politics" and "material politics" are at all divisible and how they might be effectively linked, whether the short-term gains of affirmative remedies to injustice obviate the possibilities for transformative change, restricting progressive politics to the dubious benefits of passive revolution. The utility of the Internet in furthering a war of position poses the question of whether it can assist as a means of linking local, regional, national, and international groups into a functional historic bloc. War-of-manoeuvre campaigns such as the defeat of the MAI (1998) and the Battle in Seattle (1999) underline the effectiveness of cross-movement and cross-national communicative practices, but as the hiatus in alter-globalization politics following the declaration in 2001 of a 'War on Terror' (and accompanying criminalization of dissent) showed, such campaigns may catalyze but cannot in themselves construct a transnational historic bloc. Although problems of coordination and resourcing will prove massive in building and sustaining such a bloc across specific conjunctures and beyond the predominantly anglophone, advanced capitalist centre of the world system, the recent emergence of progressive governments in South America offers a model of revolutionary praxis and hope.

These are some of the considerations that stem from our research and are pertinent in thinking about how to wrest control of the globalization process from its neoliberal paladins. In the years of neoliberalism's ascent, the dramatic weakening of the mediatory role exercised by governments between capital and labour rendered the left strategy of defending a nationalist stance more or less obsolete. Yet like other social structures of capital accumulation, neoliberalism's own successes sowed the seeds of its crisis. In economic terms, as David McNally

(2009) has shown, the crisis of neoliberalism was already evident in the Asian financial meltdown of 1997. The ensuing decade inflated a bubble economy that burst in the autumn of 2008, putting neoliberalism's own deregulatory logic into question and also undermining premises of what Agnew (2005), following Gramsci (1971), has termed Americanism, as endlessly expanding, credit-driven consumption came unstuck in global capitalism's heartland. But this organic crisis has involved more than economic failings and associated crisis management strategies such as the corporate bail-outs and stimulus spending packages of 2008-2009. Integral to it have been the challenges from below, from the Zapatista's declaration of war against neoliberalism in 1994 through the Battle in Seattle and the various incarnations of Social Forums, to recent general strikes in Greece and France in resistance to a new wave of post-crisis austerity: in each instance, a critical, collective response from below to the privations and indignities that are neoliberalism's legacy. Such campaigns and wars of position challenge the hegemony of neoliberal globalization and work against the ideological effects of the commodification of everyday life, gesturing however incompletely to another possible world.

In sum, we see an important link between the defensive coalitions of the 1980s and early 1990s and the bloc that began to emerge more visibly by the mid-1990s. In Canada and elsewhere, after decades of class collaboration during the post-war boom, formations like the Solidarity Coalition of 1983 and the Action Canada Network of the early 1990s began a process of rebuilding a popular oppositional bloc, initially united around the state-centred defense of social citizenship rights associated with the Keynesian welfare state. But it is only with the consolidation of neoliberalism that radical, internationalist claims have begun to take hold, as movements repudiate the state-centred politics of class-compromise and passive revolution. The failures, or at best strictly circumscribed gains, of popular movements and coalitions that take national and subnational political fields as their operational horizons make it clear that globalization from below is the only viable basis for counter-hegemonic politics today. The formation of a transnational bloc, however, cannot be reduced to a single formula or agency, but

has a character reminiscent of Che Guevara's call to create multiple Viet Nams in an international field of struggle whose strategic end is "the real liberation of all peoples" (Guevara 1967(1969:159)). Media-savvy shadowing of the bourgeoisie's attempts at transnational governance, whether at the WTO's meetings or elsewhere, simply provides a particularly visible example; most initiatives will take a less dramatic form, as in the practice of solidarity with progressive regimes such as Bolivia, Cuba and Venezuela and the mounting of local actions whose political significance is strategized in a global field. As Gramsci recognized, in such politics "the line of development is towards internationalism, but the point of departure is 'national'.... Yet the perspective is international and cannot be otherwise" (1971:240).

Ultimately, to pose counter-hegemonic politics in a global field requires us to expand our sense of justice beyond the recognition/redistribution distinction, discussed earlier, in two ways: to incorporate on the one hand what Fraser (2005) has more recently termed the question of representation, and on the other, what we have termed the question of ecological salvation. Fraser holds that recent globalization has driven "a widening wedge between state-territoriality and social effectivity," thereby problematizing the state-centred *politics of representation* in which human communities are inscribed within nation-states (2005:83). In a globalizing world, the Westphalian frame, which "partitions political space in ways that block many who are poor or despised from challenging the forces that oppress them", has been shown to be a "powerful instrument of injustice" (Fraser 2005:78). For counter-hegemonic politics, the key question is: "how can we integrate struggles against maldistribution, misrecognition and misrepresentation within a *post-Westphalian* frame?" (Fraser 2005:79). As with the politics of recognition and redistribution, mis-representation can be remedied through affirmation (replicating the state form, with its inherent exclusionary practices, while validating the sovereignty of a subaltern group, as in national liberation), or transformation. A transformative politics of representation rejects the hegemonic arrogation to states and transnational elites of control over the framing of political representation. Fraser

Table 1: Four dimensions of contemporary justice politics (based on Fraser 1995; 2005; Carroll and Ratner 1999)

Type of injustice	Form of remedy	
	<i>Affirmation</i> within extant relations	<i>Transformation</i> of generative mechanisms
<i>Recognition</i> (status)	Liberal pluralism (e.g. multiculturalism)	Deconstruction (e.g. queering identity)
<i>Redistribution</i> (class)	Liberal reallocation (e.g. KWS)	Restructure economic relations (e.g. socialism)
<i>Representation</i> (state)	Redraw state boundaries or create states (e.g. national liberation)	Change grammar of political representation (e.g. WSF as a transnational public sphere)
<i>Salvation</i> (humanity-nature)	Technological fixes, regulatory practices (e.g. alt energy; carbon taxes and trading)	Transcending the growth economy (e.g., Cochabamba Protocol, degrowth)

offers the World Social Forum, with its emphasis on constructing a transnational public sphere, as the key example. She holds, further, that, owing to the “deep internal connections between democracy and justice” (2005:85), there can be no redistribution or recognition – in a transformative sense – without representation (2005:86). It is transformative remedies, in all three instances, that point in the direction of counter-hegemony, rather than that of co-optative reform.

What has become increasingly apparent is that these three forms of social justice intersect with a raft of injustices and survival concerns stemming from ecological and climate crises – which as we noted in our analysis of Greenpeace (1999) – can also be remedied in affirmative and transformative ways. The former remedy attempts to mitigate the impact of capitalism’s ecological overshoot<sup>11</sup> through technological fixes and regulatory policies that leave unchanged the grow-or-die logic of capital that generates ecological predation (Luke 2006). The latter remedy strives to reconstruct the humanity-nature relation along truly sustainable lines that place human flourishing and grassroots democratic control at the centre, as in the recent Cochabamba protocol (Angus 2010; Albritton 2007). The challenge for counter-hegemonic politics is to foster oppositional cultures and political forms that give life to the transformative

possibilities in these four analytically distinct fields, both at a quotidian level and in strategic engagement with state and capital (see Table 1).

In adopting a neo-Gramscian approach today, our task is to reformulate Gramsci’s ideas so that they are applicable in the global context. Among issues identified here, this means recognizing that the strategic alignment of counter-hegemonic forces must reach well beyond national groupings (indeed, the national and sectoral interest is now always problematic); that the war of position is unlikely to be conducted through the agency of a monolithic and statist political party but rather by coalitions (including parties) that create new political agents and forms in civil society; that the class reductionism implicit in the assumption of a “working class” identitarian core to the historic bloc is no longer tenable amidst the plethora of diverse subjectivities and discourses; and that the organizers of dissent need not originate from or represent a “class,” but rather find common ground in an ethical-political project that unifies oppositional cultures around a democratic socialist alternative to capital’s injustices and ecological calamities.

<sup>11</sup> Overshoot refers to the tendency for humanity’s ecological footprint to outstrip the carrying capacity of the biosphere to maintain complex living systems. See Rees and Wackernagel (1996).

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