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Searching for Radicalism in a Corporate Age

Gus Speth

Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism
by Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron
Polity, 200 pp.

As national and international challenges mount across the full spectrum of human affairs, and as more and more acute observers conclude that the problems we face trace back one way or another to our system of political economy—the corporatist, consumerist capitalism that we have today—it is timely to ask, where is the activism that might change the system?

Some would say that it is currently surging. But Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron in their new book *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism* are skeptical. Addressing the prospects for an organized transnational movement, they see “little chance of a global grassroots uprising able to transform the world order.” Turning to the possibility of a more decentralized “movement of movements,” they ask, “Do the facts really suggest that mobilizing the grassroots in this way can ever slow globalization? Or replace capitalism? Or achieve peace and justice? Many activists certainly think so. But our analysis suggests that this is unlikely, and gets unlikelier with each passing year.”

What Dauvergne and LeBaron see as critical to the goals they seek is the rise of a radical activism that will “challenge political and corporate authority and call for structural change...Solutions for radical activists cannot arise from within the structures of the capitalist system but must instead get at the root causes.” “What we are trying to understand,” they write, “is why so many activists

within longstanding social and environmental movements are increasingly accepting and working within the frame of global capitalism.”

The book’s great value lies in its contribution to the analysis of the headwinds driving against the rise of this radical activism. Prominent in their analysis is the active suppression and discouragement of dissent. The authors contrast the escalating protests pre-9/11—at international trade talks, World Bank meetings, G8 summits, and elsewhere—with the post-9/11 situation and the concurrent increasing frequency of paramilitary policing, forced emptying of streets and parks, criminalization of protests, branding of protesters as terrorists, and heightened surveillance of activists.

Another headwind they describe is the breakdown of social capital, group solidarity, and shared political consciousness—in short, the loss of the infrastructure of dissent. Runaway businesses, throwaway cities, and fast-moving populations—and, in the United States, the decline in union membership—have all contributed to this breakdown. We have lost many of the most important settings where group dissent can be born. Closely related to these patterns is the individualization of responsibility. The fault, dear friends, is not in the system but in ourselves. We need to buy more that is fair trade, GMO-free, and organic. If only we all drove Priuses, then we could save XYZ tons of carbon from going into the air. In the process, the authors note, we channel more and more time and energy into the market as consumers, and less and less time as citizens collectively addressing the paucity of responsible consumer choices and the curse of consumerism generally. “With social life privatizing and fragmenting,” the authors note, “activism and politics require more time, just as people have less and less time to become involved.”

Protest Inc. also highlights the enclosure of activism in increasingly large and bureaucratic NGOs. In the NGO world, there are three dominant, interconnected imperatives: winning victories, getting credit for one’s accomplishments, and raising money. In many, perhaps most, contexts today, the desire to be “effective” compels NGOs to a certain tameness. We see this, for example, in the severely circumscribed world of climate advocacy in Washington, DC, today. The imperative to get credit for accomplishments and to raise funds to get more underlie the current fracturing of each progressive cause into an often bewildering array of separate, competing

groups, each promoting its own brand. And in our world of creeping corporatocracy and plutocracy, NGO success on all three fronts can benefit greatly from close links to business and family wealth. But the closer one gets, the narrower the range of acceptable critique becomes.

I suspect there are other forces sapping the strength of radical activism. Certainly, in the United States, there are some who see our situation as overwhelming and hopeless—too far gone to save, more game over than game on. Even more find it all too painful or difficult to think about, so they do not even try. Others who might be prepared to struggle ask, for what? Quietly, they fear that Margaret Thatcher was correct when she famously said that “there is no alternative.” Clearly, more needs to be done to establish with a wide public the plausible possibility of a Great Transition to a new political economy—the next system.

Dauvergne and LeBaron package their core points and much more in what they call the corporatization of activism (though not everything fits neatly). They see an overall trend towards a situation where “more and more corporations [are] financing and partnering with activist groups [and] activists are increasingly communicating, arguing, and situating goals within a corporatized frame.” They see a world “where the agendas, discourse, questions, and proposed solutions of human rights, gender equality, social justice, animal rights, and environmental activist organizations increasingly conform with, rather than challenge, global capitalism.”

Overall, *Protest Inc.* is feisty, provocative, and persuasive on many points, and it raises vital issues. Where is radical activism when we need it? Can we expect existing environmental and other NGOs to deliver it? The book is not optimistic on either question. Nor should the reader expect a bold plan of action. The authors’ goal, they say, is to sound a loud alarm, to send a warning shot “across the bows of corporatizing activism, moving along conversations among activists about strategy and encouraging re-evaluation of public policies that stifle grassroots activism.”

But the book has definite shortcomings. Like the authors, I believe some important things can be seen best from 30,000 feet, but this book carries that approach to an extreme. It often overgeneralizes and overstates, only to be forced into repeated let-us-be-clear-what-we’re-not-saying qualifications. It takes a lot of easy shots at groups like the Nature Conservancy, World

Wildlife Fund, and Conservation International, as if anyone ever expected them to be radical activists.

The authors also see a trend of increasing NGO coziness with corporations and capitalism and a weakening of NGO resolve to challenge the system. At least judging from my experience with environmental NGOs, my reading of history is a little different. The main environmental NGOs opted to work within the system well over 40 years ago, and little has changed on that score since then. My concern, which I have now written up several times, is that we should have changed. We should have realized that we were winning battles but losing the planet and that we should reassess our strategy and launch a new environmentalism aimed at systemic changes that could lead us to a new economy and a new politics.

My larger concern with the book, though, is its failure to look more searchingly at the prospects for deep, transformative change. The issue deserves more than the brief invocation of “corporatization.” It would be helpful to know, for example, what the authors’ theory of change is. Even with the long odds they see, if they have not abandoned hope altogether (and the book itself is good evidence that they have not), there must be some set of circumstances that they would agree might launch a Great Transition. What are they? Here, the authors would do well to consult for guidance the work on scenarios, agency, and strategy gathered on this website. Certainly, the potential role of crises features prominently in many such analyses, but says little about crises and essentially nothing about the climate change tsunami right off shore.

Linked to the omission of a theory of change is the failure to look systematically at whether the levers of change are beginning to move. I, for one, think that they are and that we are seeing the birth of a new activism, some of it radical in both intent and method. But I would have liked to know more about what the authors think. Regardless of who has the better crystal ball on this matter, Dauvergne and LeBaron are right that societies are perilously close to losing the ability cope and that large NGOs have failed to face up to the extent of change needed.

About the Author



Gus Speth is an Associate Fellow at Tellus Institute and a professor at the Vermont Law School. In 2009, he completed his decade-long tenure as Dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. From 1993 to 1999, Gus Speth was Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and chair of the UN Development Group. Prior to his service at the UN, he was founder and president of the World Resources Institute, professor of law at Georgetown University, chairman of the US Council on Environmental Quality under the Carter Administration, and senior attorney and co-founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council. He currently serves on the boards of the New Economy Coalition, the Center for a New American Dream, and the Climate Reality Project. His latest book is a memoir, *Angels by the River*, to be published by Chelsea Green Publishers in October 2014.

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