

# Against the Policy of Depoliticization<sup>1</sup>

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**E**verything contained in the descriptive and normative term “globalization” is the effect not of economic inevitability but of a conscious and deliberate policy, if a policy more often than not unaware of its consequences. That policy is quite paradoxical in that it is a *policy of depoliticization*. Drawing shamelessly on the lexicon of liberty, liberalism, and deregulation, it aims to grant economic determinisms a fatal stranglehold by *liberating* them from all controls, and to obtain the submission of citizens and governments to the economic and social forces thus “liberated.” Incubated in the meetings of great international institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the European Commission, or within the “networks” of multinational corporations, this policy has imposed itself through the most varied means, especially juridical, on the liberal—or even social-democratic—governments of a set of economically advanced countries, leading them gradually to divest themselves of the power to control economic forces.

Against this policy of depoliticization, our aim must be to *restore politics*, that is, political thinking and action, and to find the correct point of application for that action which now lies beyond the borders of the nation-state, as well as the appropriate means, which can no longer be reduced to political and trade union struggles within national states. We must admit that the task is extremely difficult for many reasons. First, the political agencies to be combatted are very remote, and not just in geographical terms, and they are not at all like the institutions which traditional social struggles used to confront, either in their methods or the agents concerned. Second, the power of the agents and mechanisms that dominate the economic and social world today rests on an extraordinary concentration of all the species of capital—economic, political,

military, cultural, scientific, and technological—as the foundation of a symbolic domination without precedent, wielded in particular via the stranglehold of the media, themselves manipulated, most often unbeknownst to themselves, by the major international communications companies and by the logic of competition that sets them against one another.

It remains that some of the objectives of an efficacious political action are located at the European level, insofar at least as European firms and organizations form a decisive element among the dominant forces at the global level. It follows that the construction of a unified, Europe-wide social movement, capable of gathering together the various movements that are presently divided, both nationally and internationally, presents itself as a reasoned objective for all those who intend to resist with efficacy the dominant forces.

**An Open-Ended Coordination** No matter how diverse they are in their origins, aims and objectives, contemporary social movements all have a set of *common features* that creates a family resemblance among them. First, because they often originate in a refusal of traditional forms of political mobilization—especially those forms that perpetuate the tradition of Soviet-type parties—they are inclined to exclude any kind of monopolization by minorities and to promote instead the direct participation of all concerned (thanks in part to the emergence of leaders of a new type, endowed with a political culture superior to that of traditional officials and capable of perceiving and expressing new kinds of social aspirations). They are close to the libertarian tradition in that they are attached to forms of organization inspired by theories of self-management, characterized by a reduced role for the apparatus and enabling agents to recapture their role as active subjects—particularly from the political parties whose monopoly over civic intervention they contest. A second common feature is that they invent, or reinvent, forms of action that are original in both ends and means and have a high symbolic content. They orient themselves toward precise, concrete objectives that are important in social life, such as housing, employment, health, legal status for illegal immigrants, etc., and strive for direct and practical solutions. And they ensure that both their proposals and their refusals are concretized in exemplary actions, directly linked to the particu-

lar problem concerned and requiring a high level of personal commitment on the part of activists and leaders, most of whom have mastered the art of creating events, of dramatizing a condition so as to focus media—and consequently, political—attention on them, thanks to a firm grasp of the functioning of the journalistic world. This does not mean that these movements are mere artefacts, created from scratch by a small minority with the support of the media. In fact, the realistic use of the media has been combined with activist work which, carried on over a long period on the fringes of the “traditional” movements (parties and trade unions), and sometimes with the collaboration and support of a fraction, itself marginal and minor, of these movements, has found in various conjunctures the opportunity to become more visible and thus to expand its social base, at least temporarily. The most remarkable fact about these new movements is that they have immediately assumed an international form, partly by virtue of their exemplary character and partly because new forms of action have been invented simultaneously in different countries (as in the case of campaigns over housing).

(The specificity of these new forms of struggle lies, nonetheless, in the fact that they feed on the publicity given to them, sometimes reluctantly, by the media and that the number of people involved in a protest is now less important than the amount of media coverage and political impact achieved by a demonstration or action. But media visibility is by definition partial as well as hardly impartial and, above all, ephemeral. The spokespersons are interviewed, a few emotion-laden reports are broadcast, but the demands of the movements are seldom taken seriously in public debate, as a consequence of the media's limited understanding. This is why it is essential to sustain activist work and an effort at theoretical elaboration *over the long term*, irrespective of opportunities for media exposure).

A third characteristic typical of these movements is that they reject neo-liberal policies aimed at imposing the will of the big institutional investors and multinationals. A fourth feature is that they are, to varying degrees, international and internationalist. This is particularly visible in the case of the movement of the unemployed or the movement led by José Bové's *Confédération paysanne*, where there is both a concern

and a resolve to defend not only small farmers in France but also the landless peasants of South America and other parts of the world. All these movements are both particularistic and internationalist: they do not defend an insular, isolated Europe, but through Europe, they defend a certain type of social management of the economy which clearly must be achieved by establishing a liaison with other countries—with Korea, for example, where many have great expectations of what can be achieved by transcontinental solidarity. As a final distinctive, shared characteristic, these movements extol solidarity which is the tacit principle of most of their struggles, and they strive to implement it in their action (by including all the “-less” within their ambit—the jobless, homeless, paperless, etc.) and in the encompassing form of organization they adopt.

Such a kinship of ends and means among these political struggles demands that we seek if not to unify all the scattered movements, as is often clamoured for by activists, especially the youngest among them who are struck by the degree of overlap and convergence, then at least to establish *a coordination of the claims and actions while excluding attempts of any kind to take them over*. Such coordination should take the form of a *network* capable of bringing individuals and groups together under such conditions that no one can dominate or cut down the others and such that the resources linked to the diversity of experience, standpoints and programs is preserved. The main function of such a network would be to prevent the actions of social movements from becoming fragmented and dispersed—being absorbed by the particularism of local initiatives—and to enable them to overcome the sporadic character of their action or an alternation between moments of intense mobilization and periods of latency. This must be done, however, without leading to a concentration of power in bureaucratic structures.

There are currently many connections between movements and many shared undertakings, but these remain extremely dispersed within each country and even more so *between* countries. For example, there exist a great many critical newspapers, weeklies, or magazines in each country, not to mention Internet sites, which are full of analyses, suggestions, and proposals for the future of Europe and the world, but all this work is fragmented and no one reads it all. Those who produce these

works are often in competition with one another; they criticize each other when their contributions are complementary and can be cumulated. The dominant in our society travel; they have money; they are polyglot; and they are linked together by affinities of culture and lifestyle. Ranged against them are people who are dispersed geographically and separated by linguistic or social barriers. Bringing all these people together is at once very necessary and very difficult. There are numerous obstacles, for many progressive forces and structures of resistance, starting with the trade unions, are linked to the national state. And this is true not just of institutional but also of mental structures. People are used to thinking and waging struggles at the national level. The question is whether the new structures of transnational mobilization will succeed in bringing the traditional structures, which are national, along with them. What is certain is that this new social movement will have to rely on the state while changing the state, to rely on the trade unions while changing the trade unions, and this entails massive work, much of it intellectual. One of the functions of researchers could (ideally) be to play the role of organizational advisors to the social movements by helping the various groups to overcome their disagreements.

This coordination, flexible and permanent, should set itself two distinct objectives: on the one hand, to organize campaigns of short-term action with precise objectives, through "one-off" ad hoc meetings; on the other, to submit issues of general interest for discussion and to work on elaborating longer term research programs by periodically bringing together representative of all the groups concerned. The aim would in effect be to discover and work out general objectives to which all can subscribe, at the point where the concerns of all the different groups intersect and on which all can collaborate by contributing their own skills and methods. It is not too much to hope that democratic confrontation amongst individuals and groups with shared assumptions may gradually produce a set of coherent and meaningful responses to basic problems for which neither trade unions nor parties can provide any overall solution.

**A Renewed Trade Unionism** A European social movement is inconceivable without the participation of renewed trade

unions, capable of surmounting the external and internal obstacles, on a European scale, to unification and reinforcement. It is only an apparent paradox to regard the decline of trade unionism as an indirect and delayed effect of its triumph: many of the demands which motivated trade union battles in the past are now inscribed in institutions which, being henceforth the foundation of obligations and rights pertaining to social protection, have become stakes of struggles between the unions themselves. Transformed into parastate bodies, often subsidized by the state, the trade union bureaucrats partake in the redistribution of wealth and safeguard the social compromise by avoiding ruptures and clashes. And when trade union officials become converted into administrators, removed from the preoccupations of those whom they represent, they can be led by competition between or within trade union "machines" to defend their own interests rather than the interests of those whom they are supposed to be defending. This cannot but have contributed in part to distancing wage earners from the trade unions and to deterring trade union members themselves from active participation in the organization.

But these internal causes cannot alone explain why trade union members are ever less numerous and active. Neoliberal policy also contributes to the weakening of the unions. The flexibility and, above all, casualization of an increasing number of wage earners and the ensuing transformation of working conditions and labour standards contribute to making difficult any united action. Even the work of keeping wage earners informed is made difficult as the remnants of public aid continue to protect only a fraction of wage earners. This shows how essential and difficult it is to renovate trade union action, which would require rotation of positions and calling into question the model of unconditional delegation, as well as the invention of new techniques needed to mobilize fragmented, casualized workers.

This organization of an entirely new type that has to be created must be capable of overcoming fragmentation on grounds of goals and nations, as well as the division into movements and trade unions, by escaping both the hazards of monopolization (or, more precisely, the temptation and attempts at appropriation that haunt all social movements)

and the immobilism often generated by the quasi-neurotic fear of such hazards. The existence of a stable and efficacious international network of trade unions and movements, energized by mutual confrontation within forums for negotiation and discussion, such as the *Estates General of the European social movement* should make it possible to develop an international campaign which would be altogether different from the activities of the official bodies in which some trade unions are represented (such as the European Trade Union Confederation). It would also consolidate the actions of all the movements constantly grappling with specific—and hence limited—situations.

**Bringing Together Researchers and Activists** The work required to overcome the divisions between social movements and thereby to bring together all the available forces arrayed against the dominant forces, themselves consciously and methodically coordinated, must also be directed against another, equally fateful division: that between researchers and activists. Given an economic and political balance of forces in which the economic powers that be are in a position to enlist unprecedented scientific, technical, and cultural resources at their behest, the work of academic researchers is indispensable to disclose and dismantle the strategies incubated and implemented by the big multinationals and the international bodies, which, like the World Trade Organization, produce and impose putatively universal regulations capable of gradually turning the neo-liberal utopia of generalized deregulation into reality. The social obstacles to such rapprochement are no less great than those that stand between the different movements, or between the movements and the trade unions. Though they are different in their training and social trajectories, researchers engaged in activist work and activists interested in research must learn to work together, overcoming all the prejudices they may harbour about one another. They must endeavour to cast off the routines and presuppositions associated with membership in universes governed by different laws and logics, by establishing modes of communication and discussion of a new type. This is one of the preconditions for the collective invention, in and through the critical confrontation of

experiences and competencies, of a set of responses which will draw their political force from being both systematic and rooted in common aspirations and convictions.

Only a European social movement, strong of all the forces accumulated in the different organizations of the different countries and with the instruments of information and critique elaborated in common forums of discussion such as the Estates General, will be capable of resisting the forces, at once economic and intellectual, of the large international corporations and of their armies of consultants, experts, and lawyers massed in their public relations agencies, think tanks and lobbying agencies. Such a movement will be able also to replace the aims cynically imposed by bodies guided by the pursuit of maximum, short-term profit with the economically and politically democratic objectives of a European social state, equipped with the political, juridical, and financial instruments required to curb the brute—and brutal—force of narrowly economic interests. The call for an Estates General of the European Social Movement is in line with such a vision (see the Web site: [www.samizdat.net/mse](http://www.samizdat.net/mse)). It does not in any way aim to represent the whole of the European social movement, still less to monopolize it in the tradition of “democratic centralism” dear to the erstwhile servants of Sovietism, but purports to contribute practically to making it happen by working ceaselessly for a gathering of all the forces of social resistance, on a par with the economic and cultural forces currently mobilized in the service of the policy of “globalization.”

### **Ambiguous Europe: Reasons to Act at the European Level**

Europe is fundamentally ambiguous, of an ambiguity that tends to dissipate when one views it in a dynamic perspective. There is, on the one hand, a Europe autonomous from the dominant economic and political forces and capable, as such, of playing a political role on a world scale. On the other, there is the Europe bound by a kind of customs union to the United States and condemned, as a result, to a fate similar to that of Canada, that is to say, to be gradually dispossessed of any economic and cultural independence from the dominant power. In fact, truly European Europe functions as a decoy, concealing the Euro-American Europe that is on the horizon and which it fosters by winning over the support of those who



expect of Europe the very opposite of what it is doing and of what it is becoming.

Everything leads one to believe that, barring a thoroughly improbable rupture, the tendencies leading Europe to submit to transatlantic powers, symbolized and materialized by the Transatlantic Business Dialogue, an umbrella organization of the 150 largest European firms, which is working to abolish barriers to world trade and investment, will triumph. Due to the fact that it concentrates at the highest level all the species of capital, the United States is in a position to dominate the global field of the economy. And it can do so thanks to such juridical-political mechanisms as the General Agreement on Trade in Services, a set of evolving regulations aimed at limiting obstacles to "free movement" and stipulated provisions, drafted in the greatest secrecy, functioning with lagged effects, in the manner of computer viruses, by destroying juridical defense systems, which prepare the advent of a sort of *invisible world government* in the service of the dominant economic powers which is the exact opposite of the Kantian idea of the universal state.

Contrary to the widespread idea that the policy of "globalization" tends to foster their withering away, states in fact continue to play a crucial role in the service of the politics that weakens them. It is remarkable that the policies aimed at disarming states to the benefit of the financial markets have been decreed by states—and, moreover, in many cases, states governed by socialists. This means that states, particularly those led by social democrats, are contributing to the triumph of neoliberalism, not only by working for the destruction of the social state (most notably, the destruction of workers' and women's rights, which depend directly on the "left hand" of the state) but also by concealing the powers for which they act as relays. And they also function as decoys: they draw the attention of citizens to fictitious targets (strictly national debates, whose prototype is everything having to do in France with "cohabitation") kept alive by a whole range of factors, such as the absence of a European public space and the strictly national character of political, trade union, and media structures. One would need here to demonstrate how the desire to boost circulation inclines newspapers to confine themselves ever more to national politics, if not national politicking,

which remains profoundly rooted in national institutional structures, such as families, churches, schools or trade unions.

All this means that politics is continually moving farther away from ordinary citizens, shifting from the national (or local) to the international level, from an immediate concrete reality to a distant abstraction, from the visible to the invisible. And that the individual, or, to use Sartre's term, "serial" actions invoked by those who never stop talking of democracy and "citizen control," count for little in the face of the ruling economic powers and the lobbies they hire at their service. It follows that one of the most important and difficult questions is to know at what level to carry on political action—the local, national, European, or world? In fact, scientific imperatives are in agreement with political necessities here and require that we travel along the chain of causality back to the most general cause, that is, to the locus, now most often global, where the fundamental determinants of the phenomenon concerned reside, which is the appropriate point of application for action aimed at effecting genuine change. Thus, for instance, if we take immigration, it is clear that at the national level we only grasp factors such as the policy of the national state that, aside from fluctuating to meet the interests of the dominant social forces, leave untouched the root of the matter, namely, the effects of neoliberal policies or, to be more precise, of so-called "structural adjustment" policies and especially of privatization. In many countries these policies lead to economic collapse, followed by massive layoffs which foster mass movement of forced emigration and the formation of a *global reserve army of labour*, which bear with all its weight on the national workforce and on its collective claims. This is happening at a time when ruling bodies are expressing openly, most notably in the texts of the WTO, their nostalgia for old-style emigration, that is, an emigration composed of disposable, temporary, single workers with no families and no social protection (like the French *sans papiers*) ideally suited to providing the overworked executives of the dominant economy with the cheap and largely feminine services they need. One could make a similar argument in relation to women and the gender inequalities visited upon them insofar as women's fate is inextricably linked to the "left hand" of the state, both for work (they are particularly represented in the health, education and cultural sectors) and for the services they need in the present

state of the sexual division of labour (nurseries, hospitals, social services etc.), they are the prime victims of the dismantling of the social state. The same could also be said of dominated ethnic groups, such as blacks in the United States who, as Loïc Wacquant has pointed out, suffer directly from the downsizing of public employment insofar as the Afro-American bourgeoisie, which grew after the Civil Rights Movement, rests essentially on government jobs at the local, state and federal levels. As for political action, if it wishes to avoid going after decoys and deluding itself with inefficient intervention, it too must track back to the actual causes. Having said this, those actions, which, like those deployed in Seattle, are targeted at the highest level, i.e., against the bodies that make up the invisible world government, are the most difficult to organize and also the most ephemeral—all the more so as, even if they base themselves on networks and organizations, they are mainly the product of an aggregation of autonomous forces.

This is why it seems to me, first, that it is at the European level that actions which purport to produce effects can and must be targeted. Second, if they are to go beyond mere “happenings,” symbolically efficacious but temporary and discontinuous, these actions must be based on a *concentration of already concentrated social forces*, that is, on a confluence of social movements that already exist throughout Europe. Informed by theoretical work aimed at formulating realistic political and social objectives for a genuine social Europe (such as the replacement of the European Commission by a genuine executive responsible to a parliament elected by universal suffrage), these collective actions, carried out through the coordination of collective, must work to constitute a credible counterpower. They must, that is, work to create a European social movement (“unified” or “coordinated,” thus the singular), capable, by its mere existence, of bringing into existence a European political space that currently does not exist.

## Notes

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1. Translated by Loïc Wacquant from “Contre le politique de depolitisation” which appeared in *Contrefeux* 2, Paris, Raisons d’agir Editions, 2001, by kind permission from Jérôme Bourdieu.