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Justice, Democracy and Social Agency in a Global Age

Graham Leicester



Photo: Occupy London tents, 2011. Picture taken by Neil Cummings

We welcomed the sociologist [Geoffrey Pleyers](#) to Ramsay Garden this month. His main interest, explored in his excellent book [Alter Globalisation](#), is 'social agency'.

How can we become social actors in a global age, actors able to make a real change in the systems in which we live? His research, involving interviews with activists in many countries over the last decade, reveals two dominant pathways to change: the way of subjective experience and the way of reason.

The way of subjective experience, he told us, is about local change, changing your day to day life, your behaviours. It accepts that everyone is part of the problem and can therefore be part of the solution. This kind of action is personal and local. It does not lead to a manifesto. It does improve lives.

But it does not change the world. Geoffrey used the example of Mexico where there are plenty of innovative examples of direct local democracy and alternative ways of living, sitting inside a country with an intensely neoliberal government and hideous inequality. 'Islands of beauty' within such a system are not enough. And it also takes an inordinate amount of time to organise this kind of movement, the one based on 'being the change' – there is no easy organisational blueprint.

By contrast, the way of reason suggests that in order to solve global problems we first need to understand them. The people who follow this path, in Geoffrey's experience, read lots of books and listen to 'boring lectures by economists'. They are really dedicated. More so than the political system itself: Geoffrey gave the



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example of the French Parliament in 1998 which spent two days debating the opening date for the hunting season and 15 minutes discussing the World Trade Organisation treaty.

The way of reason believes in detailed research and investigation and expertise. They lobby governments and policymakers to achieve change. And they have had some success – for example their advocacy for a [Tobin Tax](#).

But this way too has its limitations. Whilst they advocate for participatory democracy, the movement itself often becomes hierarchical (based on expertise and authority). And although the way of reason has been very powerful in predicting crisis, it has less to say on what to do after it hits (eg economic and social policy after the financial crisis). Geoffrey suggested that there is a dangerous tendency to assume that crisis is inevitable and will itself trigger change. Both propositions can be seen as diminishing (at least) the call to action.

Geoffrey then turned his attention to the latest manifestation of the global justice movement: [Occupy](#). He was struck by how the movement itself had been very small (certainly by comparison with some of the older movements he had studied like the [World Social Forum](#)). But they gained a huge amount of publicity: '300-400 people camped outside St Paul's were written about in *The Economist*'.

It is better, he suggested, to view Occupy as one part of a much larger tapestry. Whilst Occupy grew out of the financial crisis, in practice it shares with other parts of the movement a concern with democracy, in particular a widespread mistrust and dissatisfaction with the structures of representative democracy. Even if it elected exceptional people, his interviewees told him, representative democracy is now flawed. It is unequal: 'corporate power and lobbyists have more influence than humble voters'. It is empty: 'we vote for governments and then decisions are taken elsewhere, in Brussels and Berlin'. And it is meaningless: 'there is no real choice – all main parties are in favour of the corporate agenda for globalisation'.

In effect the movement offers four different correctives to representative democracy, which Geoffrey suggested should be seen as complementary to it rather than as alternatives. They are not the politics we read about in the press, conducted by parties at conferences. These are 'subterranean politics':

- Direct democracy: the Occupy camps were spaces on the edge of society where the normal rules did not apply. The process was really impressive: everyone speaking for themselves and figuring out how to reach decisions without resorting to techniques based on money or power. But there comes a point at which these processes become too cumbersome. The Barcelona camp had 21 Commissions and 62 Sub-Commissions. People were in permanent committee meetings. Some occupiers felt it was a relief when the New York Occupy camp was broken up – because it became difficult to manage. In Madrid they decided to dissolve the camp because all of its energy was by then committed to its 'assemblies about how to run assemblies';
- Responsible democracy: the Transition movement (away from fossil fuels etc towards a more sustainable lifestyle) is about living your values. It has become a huge movement all over Europe, eg changing consumption habits, local food, voluntary simplicity and so on. This too faces problems of scale. Conviviality and connection are vital parts of the movement and are lost when things get too big. Interviewees suggested that even if they could not change the larger systems they were determined not to contribute to them, not to 'play their game'. Hence people are taking responsibility for their own actions. Many of these people have rejected representative democracy. 'We believe more in the vote with a credit card [consumer power] than the vote at the ballot box'.
- Expert networks: some people seek to intervene directly in the policy debate, forging strong connections to policymakers. They tend to assume that the best arguments will prevail, and that once they do they will automatically become the basis for policy. They are usually disappointed. Not least because their advocacy is often for single, specific policies which take no account of the wider system. And because they are easily out-gunned as advocates by the

corporate lobbyists;

- Mobilisers: there is a fourth group who continue to see the state as important, and national policy as critical. They participate in representative democracy, they work to elect progressive governments, but they do not trust them to deliver. And so they mobilise street protest to provide pressure. This view seeks to mobilise popular protest as a counterweight to the influence of corporate power.

All four forms can be seen both in different movements in different countries, and within any single manifestation. Indeed, whilst Occupy is no longer visible as an occupation, Geoffrey argued, the issues it raised and the people involved are still very much present – but as mobilisers, experts, or living experiments in alternative practice.

The protests are not against democracy, they are calls for more and more varied democracy. Expectations have been raised. The challenge now is to figure out how to move beyond the limits of each of the four forms, to figure out how they can each effectively complement representative democracy. That is the path now being explored by would-be global citizens and social actors.

The discussion that followed this presentation raised a number of other issues:

- Occupy seemed to be very open, accessible and inclusive, everybody given a voice. But in practice in some cities radical left parties tried to infiltrate and were expelled. Occupy London stock Exchange was particularly effective in engaging 'the way of reason' and acknowledged experts. In New York, the trade union movement was very helpful behind the scenes with its experience and infrastructure, little noticed by the media;
- the Arab Spring was about democracy, social justice and dignity – so some of the same issues as Occupy. Dignity speaks to the importance of subjective experience. It is best to see these different protests not as a single movement but a 'global wave of movements'. Symbols resonate from place to place – the v mask, the powerful symbolism of the occupied square (Tahrir Square in Cairo, Plaza del Sol in Madrid) and so on;
- these movements can be successful in creating an empty space that is indispensable to start a democratic society, eg removing the dictator. But they want to change the world without taking power themselves. In various Arab countries, we saw that well organized actors that were not key actors of the revolutions could then easily move in to fill the vacuum;
- who are the people involved in these movements? And what part does nationalism and identity play? How do they come to see themselves as global citizens? These are difficult questions to answer in the abstract. The roots of the global justice movements are in the South – indigenous movements, small farmers, the dispossessed. But then allied to the expertise in the North. In the occupy camps, Generally the people are young. Some are students, other members of the 'precariat' (living precarious lives). They are disappointed by the current system, have very high expectation in terms of democracy and they have time on their hands (the movement takes time). They may not succeed in bringing major immediate changes: but the subjective experience will provide rich learning;
- it is difficult to say what 'success' is for these movements. Most of them are not only political. And it takes time, decades, both to establish an orthodoxy and to overturn one. In a way the battle is never 'won'. Did organised labour 'win'? No – but it has significant achievements to its name and will continue to organise.

All in all this was a fascinating contemporary reflection on some of the issues raised by our previous speaker, [Alexander Broadie](#), on the Enlightenment notion of the good citizen. Like Adam Smith, Geoffrey Pleyers has been ‘down at the quayside interviewing the merchants’ – talking to the people actually involved in the global justice movement in all its many forms and seeking to understand it in all its diversity. He provides a useful map to what is otherwise a largely hidden world.

I found myself in conclusion reflecting on two things. First: how will the four modes of ‘social action’ Geoffrey has identified – direct democracy, responsible democracy, expert networks and street-level mobilisation – find expression in the next couple of years in the run up to the referendum on Scottish independence? How will the ‘subterranean politics’ in Scotland come to the surface?

And secondly, when those who have participated in these processes, those who have enjoyed the rich subjective learning experience of the global justice movement, are 10 – 15 years older, with children and mortgages, what kind of society – and democracy - will they start to shape around them? Perhaps the marriage of the way of reason and the way of subjective experience that we see struggling to be born in these movements gives us a glimpse provides a glimpse of the future.

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