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RESISTANCE, SPACE & POLITICAL IDENTITIES



THE MAKING OF
COUNTER-GLOBAL NETWORKS

David Featherstone



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Resistance, Space and Political Identities

*The Making of Counter-Global
Networks*

David Featherstone



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To my parents

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David Featherstone

Glasgow and Liverpool, November, 2007

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Introduction

Space, Contestation and the Political

In Glasgow in June 2007 a delegation of activists from trade unions and social movements in Colombia presented evidence of British Petroleum's 'corporate crimes'. They gave testimonies of BP's poor environmental record in Colombia, particularly in Casanare. They also demonstrated what was at the very least complicity between BP and assassinations of leaders and activists of the Colombian Oilworkers Union USO. Since 1988 USO has suffered '105 assassinations of its members, 2 members "disappeared", 6 kidnapped, 35 wounded in assassination attempts, 400 internal refugees, 4 members in exile, 300 members have experienced death threats, 30 have been detained, 900 are undergoing criminal proceedings and 55 have been subject to "mobbing"'.¹ The Colombian speakers related this to the broader context of assassination and intimidation of trade unionists and to the impunity of multinationals in Colombia.

This event was part of a transnational set of mobilizations instigated by the People's Permanent Tribunal (PPT), a non-governmental tribunal set up to investigate and challenge the role of multinationals in Colombia. The PPT uses 'exemplary cases' 'to show how the Colombian state has facilitated and contributed to the exploitation of our natural resources by these companies, by committing crimes and permanently violating the rights of the individual citizens and their organizations' (PPT, 2007). The Glasgow event was one of seven preliminary public hearings being held in relation to the oil industry. There were four hearings in Colombia in Saravena, Barrancabermeja, El Tarra-Northern Santander and Cartagena. The PPT also 'invited supporting organizations in the home countries of the three biggest

corporations Occidental (USA); Repsol YPF (Spain) and BP (UK) to hold preliminary public hearings in the run up to the full tribunal' (Colombia Solidarity Campaign, 2007). The evidence presented at these preliminary hearings fed into a formal public hearing of these three oil corporations in Bogotá in August 2007.

These events produced a networked opposition constructed through connections between activists in different places and through bringing together different groups mobilising around oil politics and the political situation in Colombia. This book is about the forms of political identity and agency crafted through such 'unruly alliances and flows'.² The book explores the geographies of connection that have shaped forms of opposition to dominant forms of globalised practices. I argue that there are significant histories and geographies of networked forms of subaltern political activity that have frequently been omitted from both more totalising and nation-centred accounts of resistance. Further, the importance of these forms of political activity has been marginalized in debates on globalisation. This has had significant effects in both theoretical and political terms.

It is my contention that these histories and geographies of subaltern political activity profoundly unsettle accounts that construct globalisation as a contemporary process without history and uneven geographies and as solely the product of neo-liberal actors. In contrast I position globalisation as a set of unfinished processes with multiple and contested histories and geographies (see Massey, 2005, Slater, 2004). The book situates past as well as present forms of resistance as constituted through engaging with the unequal geographies shaped by dominant processes of globalisation. To engage with the dynamic and productive subaltern spaces of politics produced through such struggles I use the term 'counter global networks'. This refers to

networks of resistance to dominant forms of globalisation that are transnational in reach. I contend that telling stories about the geographies of connection formed through such struggles, and the forms of political identity and agency they have shaped can animate contemporary political imaginaries.

When the opposition to neo-liberal globalization first became internationally prominent and visible during the Seattle protests in 1999, these resistances were quickly labelled 'anti-globalization' movements. They were seen as representing an atavistic desire to return to bounded forms of the local or national. These debates have moved on. This is partly because movement activists and intellectuals refused the terms on which this debate was posed (see Bové and Dufour, 2001: 159; Graeber, 2002: 203; Klein, 2002a, 2002b: 76-84). They have shifted the terrain of debate from being pro- or anti-globalization to being about what kind of globalizations are produced. Their indictment of the current forms of neo-liberal globalization has been a condition of possibility for the discussion of the construction of alternative globalizations. As Boaventura De Sousa Santos has argued, what is at stake here are struggles for counter-hegemonic forms of globalization (De Sousa Santos, 2006: x). These movements have produced diverse alternatives to neo-liberal globalization, the *World Social Forum* being foremost among these.

That these debates have moved on to being about what kinds of globalization are produced is a testament to the generative, productive forms of political activity shaped through counter-global networks. This book seeks to engage with a number of intellectual challenges thrown up by these forms of spatially stretched resistance to globalization. Firstly, what kinds of political identities and agency are formed through these counter-global networks and how can they be theorized? Secondly, how are these networks

constituted, what forms of alliances and solidarities do they generate and what is the productive character of their activity? Thirdly, what are the histories and geographies of counter-global networks? Finally, there is a set of questions about the political significance of these networks and movements. To engage with these challenges I outline a relational account of space, place and political activity. The next section of this introductory chapter outlines the key elements of this approach. I then discuss the political positionality that structures the book and justify its use of both past and present struggles. I then outline the structure and content of the book.

Theorizing Networked Resistances

This book develops an explicitly relational approach to the political. It does this to engage with the challenges posed by networked forms of resistance to neo-liberal globalization. Central to this project is the assertion that there are both histories and geographies of subaltern political activity that are not bounded.³ They have been constituted through, and have constituted, various relations that stretch beyond particular places and sites. Understanding the connections that they have produced, articulated and crafted opens up important questions about the forms of political identity and agency generated through their activity. Such a set of concerns, however, is dissonant with many central assumptions about the geographies of resistance and subaltern political activity.

One of the central arguments of this book is that dominant ways of thinking about the geographies of political activity and resistance have been complicit with the construction of resistance movements as bounded. The dynamism of neo-

liberal globalization has frequently been counterposed to the settled, bounded spaces of subaltern political activity (see Castells, 1997; Escobar, 2001; Harvey, 1989, 1996; Swyngedouw, 2004). This position has been most dramatically posed in David Harvey's aphorism that 'working-class movements are ... generally better at organizing in and dominating place than they are at commanding space' (Harvey, 1989: 236). This way of thinking about the geographies of subaltern politics is not innocent. It has had severe effects on attempts to engage with the forms of identity and agency generated through subaltern political activity. One of the key aims of this book is to counter the dispossession of agency that flows from these understandings of the spaces of subaltern political activity. To do this I outline a theoretical vocabulary that engages directly with networked forms of resistance. The aim of this is to foreground the dynamism of subaltern spaces of politics rather than to make them the settled, bounded 'other' of neo-liberal globalization. This involves the following key theoretical interventions.

Firstly, I situate place-based politics, even those struggles designated 'militant particularisms', as the products of relations. Long-standing traditions in geographical theorising have treated place and space as constitutively separate (Cox, 1998, Harvey, 1996, Tuan, 1979). This counter-position of space and place structures the dispossession of subaltern agency in accounts of the constitution of spatial relations. The position developed here disrupts from the outset this counter-position of space and place (see Massey, 2005: 177-195). Rejecting this bifurcated view of space and place permits a focus on the ways in which place-based politics is produced out of negotiations with translocal connections and routes of subaltern activity rather than being 'fixed, local places' or as the 'origins' of political struggles (Mitchell, 2002: 69,

Harvey, 2000: 241). This account of place-based politics has consequences. It opens up possibilities for accounting for the dynamic formation of subaltern identities and agency. Rather than viewing struggles as formed in particular places, then networked, this allows more ongoing, contested, recursive and generative relationships to be posed between place-based political activity and networked relations.

Secondly, this account is based on a particular account of networks. I define networks as the overlapping and contested material, cultural and political flows and circuits that bind different places together through differentiated relations of power. This draws on theoretical work that disrupts ways of theorising networks, and the social more generally, as the sole product of intentional, human-centred action (Law, 1986, 1994, Latour, 1993). In line with such work I position networks as 'materially heterogeneous'. By this I understand networks to be the connections and relational effects generated through associations of humans and other diverse entities which are constituted through multiple and contested relations. I do not see networks, as some have, as a privileged alternative form of spatial organisation of politics which is necessarily non-hierarchical. I contend, rather, that this ontology of the political can bring significant theoretical resources to bear on the fissiparous, contested and uneven spatialities generated through political activity.

Thirdly, I adopt a networked account of the geographies of solidarities. The formation of solidarities has often been reduced to the constitution of linkages between discrete bounded actors in different places or nations. Here I develop a processual account of solidarities and connections as networked, ongoing, contested and productive. This evokes the productive character of articulations and solidarities as part of the ongoing constitution of social and material

relations (Braun and Disch, 2002: 507). Thus, rather than solidarities being seen as fixed interests formed around a static object, they can be reconfigured as ongoing interventions in the orderings of networks. This also permits a focus on the different relations of power through which transnational political networks are generated, formatted and shaped.

Finally, I position the geographies of contestation and the formation of antagonisms as dynamic, generative in process. Networked accounts of political activity have often evaded the significance of contestation to the political (see Braun and Disch, 2002; Featherstone, 2007; Lee and Brown, 1994). I argue, in contrast, that developing networked ontologies of the political offers resources for theorizing political agency and identities. I thus reject an account of antagonisms as bearing on disembodied values or fixed interests that pre-exist the conduct of political activity. Rather, I situate the formation of antagonisms as ongoing contestations over the orderings of associations of humans and non-humans. I develop a focus on the explicitly spatial practices through which antagonisms are constituted through using the term 'maps of grievance'. This term is used to foreground the diverse spatial practices through which geographies of power are brought into contestation through political activity.⁴

These theoretical interventions have implications for the accounts of political identities and practices developed throughout the book. I draw on the distinction between politics as an 'institutionalized arena of the political system' and the political 'as a type of conflictual relation that can develop in any area of the social' (Slater, 2004: 22). The book engages with different forms of resistance to dominant globalizing practices which in many ways are outside of, though certainly not autonomous from, institutionalized politics. I am concerned with the disruptive, generative

geographies of political contestation they produce. In this regard, though the book is fundamentally concerned with forms of 'resistance', I find it useful to go beyond the concerns with the relations between resistance and domination that have structured debates in geography (see especially Pile and Keith, 1997; Sharp et al., 2000). Instead, I take as my focus the diverse forms of identity and agency constituted through subaltern political activity. This position refuses to view 'resistance' politics as the mirror of domination. It foregrounds the dynamic trajectories of resistance politics, while not evading the forms of contested geographies of power that are constructed through resistance politics.

To do this the book draws on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's relational account of political identities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Their work views political identities as produced through political activity, rather than seeing the political as an arena defined by negotiations between actors with already constituted identities or interests. Their work is also significant through positioning political identities as formed through the ongoing negotiation of power relations and through the negotiation of multiple antagonisms (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1993, 2000). I dislocate their understanding of the formation of political identities however, in three key ways through combining insights drawn from spatial thinking and actor network theory.

Firstly, I challenge the human-centred account of the political adopted by Laclau and Mouffe. Their radical democratic project remains embedded within the terms of what Latour has described as the 'modern constitution', where the social and natural are viewed as constitutively separate and purified domains (Braun and Disch, 2002; see Latour, 1993, 1999a, 2004). Their account of the political views the political as bearing merely on the 'organization of human coexistence' (Mouffe, 1998: 16; see also Laclau,

2005a; Mouffe, 2005). There are, thus, important limits to their attempts to think the political in 'relational' terms. In their relational account of the political it is the purified human subject that remains central (Featherstone, 2004; Whatmore, 2002). In contrast I am concerned with understanding the formation of political identities as ongoing interventions in social and material relations. This is an account of the political that bears on the negotiation of heterogeneous associations, associations that bring together humans and non-humans through different strategic arrangements (Latour, 1998). This opens up important ways of accounting for the forms of agency and identity constituted through subaltern political activity.

Secondly, I contest Laclau and Mouffe's tendency to view political identities as always constituted negatively in relation to a 'constitutive outside' (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1996). I also question Chantal Mouffe's tendency to reify conflict as *the* foundational characteristic of the political (Mouffe, 1999a, 1999b, 2005). I think her assertion of the importance of antagonism and conflict to the political is significant. I argue, however, that it is necessary to see the spaces of the political as defined by a radical openness. I assert that the political can be productive of diverse and multiple outcomes, and that theorizing the political in explicitly spatial ways can help foreground such outcomes. Rather than negativity being the deciding factor in the constitution of political identities, this stresses the generative character of other attributes such as friendship, solidarity and association in shaping the formation of political identities (see also Massey, 2005; Hinchliffe et al., 2005).

Finally, in opposition to Laclau's stress on the radical emptiness of political activity (Laclau, 1996: 36-46), I insist on the significance of the 'relational contexts' of political activity (Thrift, 1996: 2). Laclau's stress on radical

emptiness positions political activity as in process and becoming, but obscures the constitutive character of particular histories and geographies on political activity. It is paradoxical that one of the consequences of the lack of attention to these histories and geographies of political activity is an unproblematic nation-state framing of politics in Laclau and Mouffe's work (see Sparke, 2005: 176). My concern is not to argue that such relational contexts determine the character of political identities. Rather, it is to recognize that histories and geographies exert pressure, set limits and constitute possibilities for the construction of political identities (Williams, 1977: 85).

This final point is central to the account of subaltern political agency developed here. It is necessary to situate political activity in relation to spatial and temporal relations to understand how subaltern political activity brings into contestation, reworks and generates geographies of power. In *Justice Nature and the Geography of Difference* David Harvey argues that 'anti-capitalist agency is everywhere and in everyone' (Harvey, 1996: 430). These comments about agency 'lack specificity even at the theoretical, never mind empirical level' (Castree, 2006: 264). Further, Harvey quickly circumscribes this agency and views it as restrictively localized. For Harvey, it is capital that is dynamic and 'anti-capitalist agency', 'though militant, often remains particularist (sometimes extremely so), often unable to see beyond its own particular form of uneven geographical development' (Harvey, 1996: 430). One of the key aims of this book is to provide a different set of cartographies of subaltern agency and identities.

To generate accounts of subaltern political agency, which are both more situated and more generous, I mobilize the relational account of the political outlined above. This permits an account of agency that is ongoing and in process. I view agency as constructed through the ongoing

negotiation of cross-cutting relations of power (see Moore, 1998). Subaltern groups construct agency through specific negotiations of power relations and through reconstituting spatial relations. This position draws on accounts of agency as the 'relational effects' generated between different human and non-human actors (see Law, 1986, 1994, Latour, 1993, 2004). I also argue, however, that one of the central ways in which agency is constituted is through the construction of geographies of power in antagonistic ways.

Refusing to see subaltern political activity as the settled other of (neoliberal) globalization allows a more generous assessment of subaltern political agency. I foreground such forms of agency through interrogating various forms of spatially stretched resistances. These have generated agency through specific and dynamic spatial practices, including mobility, the translation of repertoires of activity between different struggles, the constitution of solidarities and bringing networked power relations into contestation. They have also generated particular forms of political subjectivity, such as subaltern cosmopolitanism (see de Sousa Santos, 2002: 465-467). Tracing these spatial practices is fundamental to delineating dynamic cartographies of subaltern forms of agency.

This does not necessarily construct the 'big' globalized forms of political agency prescribed by Harvey or Hardt and Negri; indeed, it unsettles them (see Woodward et al., 2007: 1-2). Neither does it necessarily produce restrictively localized accounts of agency. Rather, it situates forms of subaltern agency as generated through ongoing negotiations in the constitution of particular networked social relations and relations between places. That these forms of agency are situated and partial does not mean that they should be ignored, marginalized or dismissed. One of the central arguments of the book is that there are important histories of spatially stretched forms of resistance

to dominant globalizing practices that have been ignored and downplayed. The next section justifies the engagement with both historical and contemporary counter-global networks here and sets out the political and theoretical project which structures this choice.

Spatial Politics of Past and Present

Debates about globalization have been structured by a remorseless presentism. There has been a pervasive tendency to position current forms of transnational political activity as a radical break with past forms of political practice (see Amin, 2002, 2004; Harvey, 1996; Vertovec and Cohen, 2002). Thus Byron Miller has argued that there has been a 'fundamental shift away from place-based forms of political organizing and towards transnational mobilization networks' (Miller, 2004: 224). This counterposition of the spatial politics of the past and present contributes to the dispossession of subaltern agency. In contrast I explore what is at stake in both political and theoretical terms in asserting that the spatial politics of past struggles were the products of various relations. Recovering the relationships between past subaltern political identities and practices and spatially stretched relations can foreground forms of subaltern identity and agency which have often been marginalized. Further, asserting that there have been spatially stretched forms of resistance to globalizing processes in the past has the potential to revitalize contemporary political imaginaries. These past forms of resistance can resonate in interesting, unexpected and provocative ways with the forms of political activity being crafted through transnational opposition to neo-liberal globalization. The book seeks also to be alive to the specific identities and