



Continental Drift: Activist Research, From Geopolitics to Geopoetics

Brian Holmes

How does a world come together? How does a world fall apart? Neoliberal globalization made those opposite questions into one – before September 11 showed that the answer cannot be a perfect synthesis. Locating yourself against the horizons of disaster, then finding the modes and scales of intervention into lived experience, are the pathways for intellectual activism in the contemporary world-system.

Neolib goes neocon

A double dynamic is at work today which destroys what it constructs, dissolves what it unifies. And that is exactly what we all have to deal with. One prime example is the enlargement of the European Union, right up to the fiasco of the ultraliberal constitution. The end of the historic split with the East now appears as the beginning of the Core Europe/New Europe divide, with the social-democratic bastions of the West seeking shelter from the global market, while post-Communist states refuse any speed checks on the road to riches. But the absence of a democratic constitution only favors corporate lobbies and bigpower deals, leaving national parliaments as a smokescreen over the real decisions.

An even more striking case is the self-eclipsing rise of the WTO, which just yesterday seemed fated for the role of world government. No sooner was the international trading regime consolidated than tariff wars sprang up between the US and the EU, protests flared around the globe and the process of bloc formation gathered steam, with negotiations for both the FTAA and a renewed Mercosur in Latin America, moves toward an expanded ASEAN system (joined by China, Japan and South Korea) and finally the Venezuelan proposal of ALBA, calling for a leftist ‘dawn’ after the sundown of free trade. But as any historian remembers, trading-bloc formation was the prelude to the global conflicts of the 1940s.

For the strangest embrace of contradictory forces in the world today, consider the symbiotic tie between industrialized China and the financialized United States. China constantly struggles to produce what the US constantly struggles to consume – at an

ecological risk that no one can even measure. To make the wheel of fortune go on spinning, the Chinese lend their manufacturing profits back to the US, so as to prop up speculation on the almighty dollar and keep the world's largest market soluble. What will happen if the Chinese pipeline to the US Treasury stops flowing is anybody's guess; but as New Orleans floodwaters recede into a domestic quagmire that can only recall the international disaster in Iraq, America's attempts to save its fading hegemony look increasingly desperate and uncertain. Levels of conflict are rising all across the globe, and the problem of how to intervene as a world citizen becomes more complex and daunting than ever.

The counter-globalization movements marked the first attempt at a widespread, meshworked response to the chaos of the post-'89 world system. These movements were an uneasy mix between democratic sovereignists, no-border libertarians (David Graeber's 'new anarchists') and traditional, union-oriented Keynesians. They could all critique the failures of neoliberal governance, but they all diverged and faltered before its cultural consequences. And the latter wasted no time coming. By undercutting social solidarities and destroying ecological equilibriums, the neoliberal program of accelerated capital expansion immediately spawned its neoconservative shadow, in the form of a military, moral and religious return to order. Nothing could have made better cover for the denial of democratic critique, the clampdown on civil liberties and the continuing budgetary shift from social welfare to corporate security. The backlash against globalization became a powerful new tool of manipulation for the elites who launched the whole process in the first place.

The current scramble to consolidate regional blocs reflects the search for a compromise between global reach and territorial stability. Beyond or before the 'clash of civilizations,' a feasible scale of contemporary social relations is the leading question. From this perspective, the free-market policy of the Bush administration in Latin America is comparable to Al Qaeda's dreams of an Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East. The networked production system forming around Japan and China, or the EU's continuous diplomatic courtship of Russia despite flagrant atrocities in Chechnya, give similar insights into this quest for a workable scale, which is essentially that of a 'continent,' however elastic or imprecise the term may be. Paradoxically, continentalization is not countered but is driven ahead by global unification. Behind the tectonic shifts at the turn of the millennium lies the accumulated violence of a thirty-year neoliberal push toward a borderless world, wide open to the biggest and most predatory corporations.

Disorienting compass

The extraordinary breadth and speed of the current metamorphosis – a veritable phase-change in the world system – leaves activist-researchers facing a double challenge, or a double opportunity. On the one hand, they must remap the cultural and political parameters that have been transformed by the neoconservative overlay, while, on the other, remaining keenly aware of the neoliberal principles that remain active beneath the surface. In this effort, the social sciences are the key. Economic geography is crucial for

tracing the global division of labor, and grasping the wider frameworks of what European activists now call ‘precarity.’ The sociology of organizations reveals who is in control, how power is distributed and maintained in a chaotic world. The study of technics charts out the future in advance, and shows how it operates. And the toolkits of social psychology offer insights into the structures of willful blindness and confused consent that uphold the reigning hegemonies. This kind of analysis is critically important for activist initiatives, which can stumble all too easily into the programmed dead-ends of manipulated ideologies.

Yet the disciplines also have to be overcome, dissolved into experimentation. Autonomous inquiry demands a rupture from the dominant cartographies. Both compass and coordinates must be reinvented if you really want to transform the dynamics of a changing world-system. Only by disorienting the self and uprooting epistemic certainties can anyone hope to inject a positive difference into the unconscious dynamics of the geopolitical order.

How then can activist-researchers move to disorient the reigning maps, to transform the dominant cartographies, without falling into the nevernever lands of aesthetic extrapolation? The problem of activist research is inseparable from its embodiment, from its social elaboration. Just try this experiment in public presence: literally tracing out the flows of capital, the currents of warfare and the rise and fall of transnational organizations since 1945, using hand-drawn lines and arrows on a conventional Mercator projection. The effect is to build a cartographic frame-narrative of the emergence, complexification and crisis of US hegemony since 1945; but at the same time, through gesture and movement, to act out the ways that geopolitical flows traverse living bodies and become part of tactile consciousness, entering what might be termed ‘felt public space.’ Intellectual work becomes intensive when it is unmoored from normalizing frameworks, acted out as a social experiment in a self-organized seminar, in a squat or an occupied building, at a counter-summit, on a train hurtling through Siberia... As supranational regions engulf ever-larger populations and the passage of shifting borders becomes an ever-more common activity, geopolitics is increasingly experienced in the flesh and in the imaginary, it is traced out on the collective skin. This is when geopoetics becomes a vital activity, a promise of liberation.

How to interpret artworks and artistic-activist interventions so as to highlight the forms taken by the geopoetic imaginary? Through analytical work on the dynamics of form and the efficacy of symbolic ruptures, one can try to approach the diagrammatic level where the cartography of sensation is reconfigured through experimentation. This level comes constantly into play whenever it is a matter of translating analysis back into intervention. Because of the transverse nature of global flows, it is possible to draw on the experiences of far-away acts of resistance in the midst of one’s own confrontations with power, both in its brute objective forms, and in its subtle interiorizations. The relation between the Argentine pot-banging *cacerolazos* and the almost continuous urban mobilizations in Spain, from February 15, 2003, all the way up to the ouster of the mendacious and powerhungry Aznar government in March of last year, is a large-scale example of this process of transfiguration. And this is the generative side of the contemporary continental drift. To sense the dynamics of resistance and creation across

the interlinked world space is to start taking part in the solidarities and modes of co-operation that have been emerging across the planet since the late 1990s.

Just doing it

If you want to accomplish anything like this kind of research, don't expect much help from the existing institutions. Most are still busy adapting to the dictates of neoliberal management; and the best we could do for the first big round of meshworked critique was to hijack a few of their people, to divert a few of their resources. What is more, the open windows that do subsist are likely to close down with the neoconservative turn. Self-organized groups will have to generate a collective learning process about the effects of social atomization and economic subjugation – essentially, a new understanding of the forms of contemporary alienation – and they will have to explore the reactions to these trends, whether intensely negative (the fascist and racist closure of formerly democratic societies) or positive and forward-looking (activist interventions, the invention of new modes of social self-management, cultural reorientations, ecologically viable forms of development). Another goal of the critique is to raise the level of debate and engagement in the cultural and artistic sectors – the vital media of social expression – where a narcissistic blindness to the violence of current conditions is still the norm. But the most important aim is to help relaunch the activist mobilizations that were so promising around the turn of the millennium. 'Help' is the right word here, because there is no intellectual privilege in the activist domain. Activist-researchers can contribute to a short, middle and long-term analysis of the crisis, by examining and inventing new modes of intervention at the micropolitical scales where the even largest social movements begin.

Who can play this great game?

Whoever is able to join or form a meshwork of independent researchers. What are the pieces, the terrains, the wagers and rules? Whichever ones your group finds most productive and contagious. How does the game continue, when the ball goes out of your field? Through shared meetings in a meshwork of meshworks, through collective actions, positions, projects and publications. And most importantly, who wins? Whoever can provoke some effective resistance to the downward spiral of human coexistence at the outset of the twenty-first century.

the author

Brian Holmes is a writer and activist-researcher, a member of Tangent University and an initiator of the networked seminar Continental Drift. For documentation, see www.u-tangente.org.