

2001 Review of Amory Starr, Naming the enemy.
social-movements international forum for discussion and information on social
movements

Amory Starr, Naming the enemy: anti-corporate movements confront globalization.
London etc.: Zed / Pluto, 2000. ISBN 1-85649-765- 8

Something is happening, and we don't know what it is (though we might be a bit closer to it than Mister Jones). The protest events which have brought together so many movements in the North since Seattle in particular don't look quite the same as the kinds of connection which gave rise to the Zapatistas' Encuentros and more recently to Porto Alegre. Elsewhere in the world, many people (including I think most Irish movement activists) are delighted by what's happening, trying to make connections, but often still wondering a bit where we fit in, or what we can do to help.

Amory Starr has written a book which I don't expect to see being pushed in special stands in main street bookstores (as *No Logo* is at present - though that in itself is a great, and hopeful, sight to see). It's perhaps a bit too much of a challenge to read, a bit too far away from journalism and too close to theory on the one hand and politics on the other, and it's hardly surprising that the only place it seems to be stocked in Dublin is in the back of the Communist Party's bookstore.

This book does two things. One is to have a good look at the different movements opposing globalisation on their own terms, try to analyse them, and see where they connect or diverge. This is excellent political material, and a good tool in a range of ways (of which more anon). The other is to try to theorise both how agency works and what kind of a new world the movements are struggling towards. This is interesting, but not always convincing, theoretical fuel for certain kinds of thought. This split to some extent parallels the author's bio - Starr has been involved in anti-corporate movements for some time, but is also teaching sociology in Colorado State.

- looking at movements -

The core of the book is a survey of movements which could be said to be objectively against corporate globalisation (though their language and analysis in practice varies considerably). The author used the Internet to do a quick survey of "actually-existing movements", looking particularly at their own self- descriptions and analyses of the issues and solutions.

The result is sometimes a bit funny (probably most members of this list could have fun seeing how many times campaigns or organisations they're involved in are namechecked in the book), in one sense not entirely unrealistic but in another (as the author freely admits) a somewhat skewed view. The majority world is not well represented, though it's by no means absent; equally importantly, the movements which are represented are those which have achieved a certain level of articulation, self- awareness and international / Internet presence.

Starr breaks them up into 3 types based on relationship to corporate globalisation: those which aim at forcing regulation of corporations (by direct action or via state

agency), those which are about creating an alternative "globalisation from below", and those which aim at "short-circuiting" globalisation from a localist point of view. Of the first, she chooses movements against structural adjustment; peace and human rights movements; land reform; explicitly anti-corporate movements; and cyberpunk. Of the second (globalisation from below), she looks at the environmental, labour, socialist, anti-FTA and Zapatista movements. Of the third (localist), she looks at anarchism, sustainable development, small business, sovereignty and religious-nationalist movements.

- thinking about movements -

This section of the book is largely descriptive, but is in itself no small feat. While most of the material will be familiar to anyone who follows the non-sectarian alternative or left press, it is rare (at least in what I've seen written up to now) to stop and analyse exactly which movements share the goal of opposing neo-liberal globalisation, and to look closely at the similarities and divergences.

This Starr does, in some detail, and the result is perhaps the most interesting part of the book: what exactly do movements see themselves as being against, and how do they conceptualise it? What are their ideological strategies, and what are the main links between them? [Unsurprisingly, linkages are widespread, and in particular anti-corporate and anti-FTA activism are good at alliance-building.] What kinds of action do they engage in? [A wide range, for most of the movements studied.] What are their economic strategies?

This is exactly the kind of stuff participants in these and related movements - and "movement intellectuals" of different kinds - are likely to find themselves tackling unless the whole thing collapses in the very near future. Building movements always involves political agency: making choices, forming some alliances, avoiding others, developing a language, finding useful analyses, working out strategies. The result need not be unitary, but it has on some level to *work*. What Starr gives here, in a few very valuable pages, is in a sense the raw material of where "we" are right now as activists, together with the question of where we might take this.

- the spectre of communism -

So where is that? Here I found Starr's intellectual assumptions rather more problematic, as she moves away from a kind of analytic phenomenology of movements (though that sounds a bit grand) to the somewhat scholastic waters of a particular type of American Theory. One of the main difficulties is that social movements theory from her perspective appears to be largely RMT, supplemented by Melucci, which pushes her towards a more literary kind of critical theory (which is in a sense particularly problematic for these purposes because it represents historically the move of political theory into the academy and its transformation into academic cultural capital).

Starr does to her credit struggle to get out of this particular straightjacket, and it is refreshing to hear an author declare that this or that perspective is simply "silly", as well as taking a look at how few movements - despite some interest in alternative epistemologies and discourse more generally - have any time for "multiple truths":

their alternative epistemologies, in practice, are political alternatives, not simply academic lifestyle choices. The first chapter in particular, theorising structure, culture and agency, would make a good class handout in terms of its attempt to get past words to substance, and its irreverent approach to Theory.

At the same time, "the spectre of communism" looms large in its scholastic form - the use of a particular version of "socialism" which has probably never been dominant within living memory as a reference point for making theoretical statements (as in "Marxists said this, but then theorist X made this great leap forward", etc.) The nearest analogy I can think of is the way East Asian Buddhist theory starts from an opposition to schools (Sarvastivadin and Sautrantika) whose last living exponents probably died somewhere around the start of the *last* millennium. Scholastic teaching methods (there theological debate, here textbooks on cultural theory) need straw-men opponents to beat about the head as a means of teaching students about their own systems of thought. All of which is fair enough, but it can become problematic when applied to what contemporaries think: I doubt if I could lay my hands on a single Irish "leftist" who holds what are apparently our unquestioned common beliefs.

This scholastic approach also underlies her impassioned defence of "relocalisation" as the best solution (incidentally reproducing much of what passed for common sense in the ecology movement in the 1980s - debates in which Marxists played an important and creative role, a fact which seems to have passed Starr by). Much of this argument is made on an entirely ideological level, in a sense defending the radical credentials of the idea by showing that "Marxists" are wrong in objecting to nation, religion, community, movements of small property- owners, etc. (Perhaps Starr should read Raymond Williams.)

In fact it wouldn't be very hard, even without moving to minority forms of socialism, to show that between them social democracy in western Europe, Stalinism in the East and Maoism in the Third World routinely made alliances with one or another of these. But the difficulty is that Starr sees these as *ideological* objections, when they aren't. They're historical ones.

For any sane Marxist, the reason to be nervous of a suggestion that we should make alliances with American far-right groups, religious fundamentalists, movements in defence of small property or movements in favour of traditional community is not some sense of ideological purity. It's historical memory - in particular, the memory of what happened in the last century when movements like these gained power in most of Europe, and in particular the memory of what happened to left-wing intellectuals when those movements came to power.

Sane people generally avoid making alliances with people they cannot trust not to try and kill them; and the real issue in relation to religion, nationalism, community or small property owners is not that label but what people are actually doing with it; not the theory but the practice. These languages can be used in ways that liberate and dismantle economic power; or they can be used in ways that imprison, literally and socially. That price may even be worth paying on occasion; but activists' caution is perhaps more justifiable, in real people's lives, than Starr seems to think.

- where are movements going? -

The sense that social movement theory is basically RMT with a bit of Melucci, and that RMT has said the last word on *how* movements organise (admittedly a theory favoured by "synthesisers" both sides of the Atlantic), leaves Starr to avoid that most practical level of analysis: not what do movements *say*, but how do movements do what they do?

This is a particularly important gap at a time like the present: if, as I hope, Starr is right and these movements do matter, they will matter by becoming transformed by the involvement of many millions, and tens of millions, of people. It is entirely possible that, like some East European dissident groups, many of these movements could become completely sidelined by this; others (and here Marxism has perhaps a specific contribution to make) may be less surprised and in some cases at least more able to engage with the process.

If so, we can expect ideas and goals to change rapidly in the process, as they usually do, and in all probability blueprints for an ideal future, such as Starr's conclusion, will be overtaken by the practical efforts of large numbers of people pulling in directions they are not yet able to articulate.

Until it bogs down in the Russian Winter of that conclusion, though, this is a lively, intelligent and above all useful book, both for activists trying to get a sense of "where are we now?" and "what can we do with the situation we're in?", and for teachers trying to get their students to think about the world they're living in, or (better yet) get involved in it. Well worth a read, but take the ghost stories with a pinch of salt.