

## **An oral history of Peoples' Global Action**

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When the Zapatistas rose up in 1994, social movements around the world took notice. Many activists travelled to Mexico to see what was happening or asked 'what can we do?'. In response the Zapatistas organised two "Intergalactic Encounters for Humanity and against Neoliberalism", the first one in Chiapas (1995) and the second in the Spanish state (1996). At the second of these, movements from the global South insisted on the need not just to reform neoliberalism but to defeat capitalism completely, and to produce a resistance as transnational as capital. Peoples' Global Action, founded at a conference in Geneva in 1998, evolved the following hallmarks:

1. A very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism; all trade agreements, institutions and governments that promote destructive globalisation;
2. We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds. We embrace the full dignity of all human beings.
3. A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organisations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker;
4. A call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements' struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples' rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism;
5. An organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy.

These principles underlaid the subsequent "global days of action" against capital, combining protests aiming to disrupt the summit meetings that mark the visible organisation of neoliberal capitalism with simultaneous actions around the world, bringing hundreds of thousands of people onto the streets in 60 countries. The best-known of these is probably the 1999 protest that derailed the World Trade Organisation in Seattle.

The PGA also organized a number of global conferences, regional conferences, and caravans, where activists from different grassroots movements built trust, relationships and shared strategy and knowledge.

This decentralized, networked model of organising reflected wider trends in the new wave of movements and fed back into it, to differing degrees. In some Andean countries the scale of popular unrest was such that PGA was just a small

part of a much wider process of mobilising and networking; in some European countries it was for a time the only game in town. As other processes (e.g. Indymedia, social forums), other political traditions (notably on the statist left) and other issues (most obviously the US’ “war on terror”) developed, PGA as an formation faded into the background. Its goal had always been to network between existing movements and communities in struggle; this, and radical opposition rather than polite lobbying, became very much the order of the day.

In 2014 a group of activists, most ex-PGA, started discussing the idea of doing an oral history together with a few academics with similar backgrounds. The idea was to collect people’s stories and find out what they thought of the PGA experience. We wanted to do this not just for the history books or people’s own autobiographies, but in a way that would be useful for today’s movements, perhaps particularly those which are consciously or unconsciously drawing on some of the approaches developed in PGA and other parts of the movement of movements, but also those which are struggling with some of the same challenges. Heading towards the G20 summit protests in Hamburg this July, that history is clearly anything other than exhausted – but equally clearly we didn’t win in the ways we’d hoped, and so the question of what movements can do better today is an important one.

The project is intended as primarily an activist one, and the goal is not a “professional” oral history but one done by activists, with and for activists. We are creating the infrastructure to enable activists to plan, carry out and archive interviews with one another and to use the process to reflect on movement struggles today. A Scholar-Activist Project Award from the Antipode Foundation and a SSHRC small grant are currently paying for small pilot projects activist researchers recording an initial batch of interviews in some selected countries, and we are already starting to see activists take on this project on their own behalf. Meanwhile we are setting up secure data storage to archive interviews and constructing a website as a front end for the project. In the end, our goal is to make these stories available for our own movements.

We are very much open to offers of interviews and can supply interview guidelines, consent forms and secure data storage. Activists wanting to run events using the project to reflect on today’s movements and lessons from the past are very welcome. For further information please see <http://pgaoralhistory.net/> or contact us at [pgaoralhistory AT tao.ca](mailto:pgaoralhistory@tao.ca)