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15. International and transnational interactions
Anti-systemic movements compared

Valentine M. Moghadam

In _Anti-Systemic Movements_, Arrighi et al (1989) argued that since 1968, new resistance movements had emerged that challenged the logic of the capitalist world-system even more centrally than the “old” ones did. Here I consider three such new movements—political Islam, global feminism, and global justice (Moghadam 2009). Each is a transnational social movement, as it connects people across borders around a common agenda and collective identity; mobilizes large numbers of supporters and activists, whether individuals or members of networks, groups, and organizations; and engages in sustained oppositional politics with powerholders. Each is a product of late capitalism even as it is historically rooted, and it targets both states and the global order, in part through cyber-activism.

There are, however, distinct features and differences. Although Islamist movements are varied, their grievances, methods, and goals differ from the non-violent radical democratic or socialist visions and methods of global feminism and the global justice movement. Many Islamist movements seek state power, and, like revolutionary movements, are willing to use violence to achieve this aim. In contrast, the feminist and the global justice movements are disinterested in state power, although they seek wide-ranging institutional and normative changes, and they eschew violence. Islamist movements are less interested in economic redistribution and global social justice than in promoting Sharia law, legislating public morality, and defending the rights of Muslims.

The Islamist movements that burst onto the international scene in the late 1970s were rooted in the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century revival movements (e.g., Salafiyeh, Mahdi, Wahhabi) that claimed to be following the path taken by Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE. Other inspirations were the writings of Abul Ala Mawdudi (who founded the Jamiat-e Islami in India in 1941), and the Egyptians Hasan al-Banna (who founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1929) and Seyyid Qutb, who took issue with modernity as it was proceeding in their countries and called for a return to strict implementation of Sharia law. To be sure, not all Islamist movements are jihadist. The “moderates,” however, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the ruling AKP party in Turkey, have no quarrel with capitalism.

Political Islam seeks to recuperate traditional patterns, including patriarchal gender relations, in reaction to the westernizing trends of globalization. Ironically, political Islam was once the beneficiary of US moral and military support, especially during the Afghan conflict of the 1980s and early 1990s. The US-sponsored war in Afghanistan had far-reaching world-historical consequences: the collapse of the Soviet Union and world communism; the expansion of militarized Islamist movements; and the emergence of a unipolar world allowing the United States to conduct military operations in Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq.
Here, hyper- or heroic-masculinities become salient. Given the role of the US military in economic and political expansion, and the foundational narratives of heroic masculinity in Islam, one can imagine a “clash of heroic-masculinities” between the American security state and Islamist networks such as al-Qaeda or the Taliban of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Hyper-masculinity is a central ideological pillar of both neoliberal capitalist globalization and some forms of “resistance”; and it is a causal factor in war as well as in women’s oppression. The rampant masculinity of radical Islam, its recourse to violence, patriarchal agenda, and disinterest in mobilizing against capitalism serve to separate it from the progressive agendas of the global feminist and justice movements.

The global justice movement echoes earlier movements of workers, socialists, communists, progressives, and anarchists. Many of the older activists in today’s global justice movement were once affiliated with left-wing organizations or solidarity movements; many of the younger activists are involved in labor and economic justice causes; and the writings of Karl Marx are well known to many activists. The movement’s loosely organized groups meet annually at the World Social Forum and regional forums to protest the downside of globalization and demand economic and social justice.

The global feminist movement has roots in first-wave feminism, with its focus on suffrage and justice, and second-wave feminism, with its demands for equality and cultural change. Scholars have identified moderate, socialist, and militant strands of both waves and described alliances with socialist and nationalist movements (Jayawardena 1984). Although feminists and leftists have not always agreed on priorities or strategies, there is a longstanding affinity that explains the involvement of feminists in the global justice movement.

The principal mobilizing structure of global feminism is the transnational feminist network, consisting of women from three or more countries engaged in research, lobbying, advocacy, and civil disobedience. Feminist international solidarity and humanitarianism are motivated by concern for women’s human rights and objection to neoliberal globalization, militarism, war, and patriarchal fundamentalisms. Feminist humanitarianism differs fundamentally from imperialistic humanitarianism, which justified the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 bombing of Serbia, and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—all of which TFNs opposed. Transnational feminist activism challenges the logic of the world-system.

Arrighi et al erred in considering all “new social movements” as anti-systemic, when in fact many were either identity-focused or comfortable with the capitalist world-system (notably those of Eastern Europe). In contrast, Boswell and Chase-Dunn (2002) and Chase-Dunn (2002) focused on progressive transformation. Late capitalism has produced identity-focused social movements; others opposed to the system’s inequalities; reactive movements; and deadly rebellions, martyrdom operations, and transnational networks of violent extremists. We need to either redefine “anti-systemic” or acknowledge that not all anti-systemic movements are interested in, or help bring about, an alternative, socialist world.

References