

‘With their bodies on the line’: activist space and sexuality in the Australian alter-globalisation movement

Elizabeth Humphrys

University of Technology Sydney

ABSTRACT

When the alter-globalisation movement arrived on the world stage at Seattle in 1999, few knew that less than a year later it would effectively coalesce in Australia at a blockade of the World Economic Forum in Melbourne at Crown Casino. The protest was called s11 and saw 20 000 people participate in blockading the conference to try and stop the meeting. It was in the organising of a physical barrier to conference participants accessing the venue that three anti-capitalist queer organisations formed. Gays and Lesbians Against Multinationals formed in Sydney (GLAM), Queers United to Eradicate Economic Rationalism in Melbourne (QUEER) and Queers United Against Capitalist Exploitation in Brisbane (QuACE). This paper analyses the involvement of three queer groups in the Australian alter-globalisation movement and explores the centre/periphery dynamic within anti-systemic campaigning.

INTRODUCTION

New social movement theory has tended to give primacy to social struggles around questions of injustice and oppression in a way that is largely divorced from an analysis of the capitalist system and class based society. These struggles are seen as being pursued by social actors grouped around a putative new middle class and lacking a specifically anti-systemic dynamic. One of the new struggles frequently analysed was that of gays and lesbians – whether in its early phase as a battle for equal rights or its later stages as a claim over identity.

However, social movement researchers and activists have found new terrain to explore with the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement, which exploded into global view during the great Seattle protests of 1999. Post-Seattle developments have, in many ways, undermined the certitudes of a previous

generation of inquiry into the anatomy of the new social movements. The alter-globalisation movement challenges the orthodoxy in a number of ways: it links struggles of the oppressed in the north and south (the core and periphery), it articulates an anti-systemic critique, and it unites questions of economic (class) injustice with social oppression.

In this paper I intend to chart the development of the alter-globalisation movement and the specifically queer current that emerged within its Australian section. I will argue that the logic of these developments is of a double movement, from periphery to centre. That is, the dynamic of alter-globalisation increasingly led activists to shift from contesting marginal social spaces to launching battles contesting the legitimacy of the system at its heart. This generated an increasing focus on metropolitan urban spaces as the site of struggles, the same space that capitalism and its elites claim for themselves.

However, in a second movement, there has been a theoretical re-imagining of the concept of struggle, running in parallel with the practical shift from peripheral to core spaces of contestation. Here, the queer activists and thinkers eschewed a focus on identity and otherness in order to draw the link between the construction and oppression of sexuality with the operations of the economic and social system.

Finally, I chart the decline of the queer groups current in the context of setbacks for the wider alter-globalisation movement in Australia, while maintaining that the practical and political advances it engendered remain a rich resource on which activists can draw.

METHODOLOGY

This paper analyses the activities of GLAM, QUEER and QuACE (*pronounced quake*), as well as the activity of their members prior to the formation of these groups. Interviews, the observations of the author, and a review of campaign material and political tracts produced by the three organisations form the basis of the analysis that follows.

Interviews were conducted in late 2005 and throughout 2006. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their experience and involvement in these organisations and formations. The interviewees represent a small selection of the activists involved and their contributions are not intended to be exhaustive of all opinions in these groups, but reflect the diversity of activists involved. Semi-structured interviews of about 40 minutes were conducted with each of the participants. Full transcripts of the audio recordings were then used in the analysis.

Material from the various campaigns was analysed.

The author's own observations have played a part in the development of this paper. The author was an organiser of the s11 protest (although not involved in the Queer Bloc or the activities of QUEER at that time) and an active member of QUEER throughout 2001.

This paper will use the term 'alter-globalisation movement' to locate the broader movement in which these groups were situated. 'Alter-globalisation' (after the French *altermondialiste*) is one name for the international social movement often referred to as the 'global justice' or 'anti-globalisation movement'. This movement is not against globalisation *per se*, but for 'another' globalisation. The movement's concerns include the erosion of democratic values, economic justice, the destruction of the environment and human rights. The movement advocates for these matters to be placed ahead of purely economic concerns.

BACKGROUND

The origins of the alter-globalisation movement can be found in the struggles of the marginalised at the periphery of society. It is generally accepted that the movement experienced its infancy with the Zapatista struggle in Mexico. The Zapatistas are an armed, indigenous guerrilla movement struggling against imperialism in Chiapas, one of the poorest of the Mexican states.

In Australia, the most notable political precursor to the alter-

globalisation movement was the 1998 campaign to stop a Rio Tinto uranium mine on Aboriginal land at Jabiluka in the Northern Territory. In the Jabiluka campaign, sections of the environment movement, the indigenous justice movement and the student movement began to draw links between the agenda of multinationals, the culpability of the Australian government and the long-term oppression of the indigenous community.

Other early 'alter-globalisation' Australian protests – against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, J18¹, and the urban-based solidarity activities for Jabiluka and the Zapatistas – all involved activists who were seen as entirely marginal to politics as usual. Their public actions were marked by visual symbols of their otherness *vis-à-vis* mainstream politics: street theatre, puppetry, and papier-mâché props. Indeed, they were often rebuked by more established activists concerned about the same issues for their non-conforming image and approach.

DOUBLE MOVEMENT: PERIPHERY TO CENTRE

The Seattle protests in 1999 changed everything. These sections of the movement seen as peripheral walked, often literally, to the centre of political debate. Perhaps the most enduring articulation from the Seattle protest was the political sign 'Turtles and Teamsters: together at last'. Young students dressed up as sea turtles and monarch butterflies protested alongside members of the Teamsters Union². It was in that moment it became clear the movement had a distinctly urban face and had moved to the centre.

This urban character was underlined by the use of urban street-scapes as fields of contestation with chants such as 'Whose Streets? Our Streets?' and 'This is what democracy looks like'. These same Seattle slogans would be heard and seen on the s11 demonstration ten months later in Melbourne. The physical blockading of conference venues and physical structures was employed as a tactic to halt meetings of bodies such as the WTO and the WEF, as well as to deny the elite its right to traverse geography at will.

Because the logic of the alter-globalisation movement is to move towards challenging the system at its heart (by challenging financial institutions, multinational corporations and global governance structures) it has increasingly encroached on urban space. Even the Zapatistas marched on Mexico City, bringing their movement of the marginalised to the centre of Mexican capitalism.

The movement also moved from periphery to centre in ways that are not strictly geographical. Politically it shifted from being a marginal force to one that commanded attention at the centre of the system. Even when numerically small, its fundamentally anti-systemic quality propelled it onto the front pages of newspapers, influencing millions who were not directly involved.

The movement's themes did not just find a voice in the media and on the street, but filtered into the debates taking place inside institutions such as the WTO and the World Bank themselves. Peripherality for the movement had ended. By the time Seattle and s11 occurred, the concerns of the movement were 'out in the open'.

IDENTITY AND CAPITALISM

Queer movements in Australia also have a historically urban character. The first Mardi Gras was an attempt by the marginalised to claim a right to the streets of the Sydney CBD. This was both a geographic assertion ('we can march here') and a political one ('we no longer have to hide at the margins'). But with the growth of the gay and lesbian liberation movement and its increasingly mainstream character, it was granted official support to take over large swathes of the inner city each year. It was not only 'allowed' to occupy the streets of a major capitalist conurbation, but was effectively backed by a series of corporate sponsors. At the same time, the politics of gay and lesbian liberation were pulled towards an almost exclusive focus on the celebration of a marketable identity. Suddenly liberation was reduced to reveling in a socially and commercially constructed otherness, in the very periphery of the queer identity.

For the activists involved in GLAM, QUEER and QuACE, their activity emerged out of the recognition that sexual identity was inextricably linked to the broader structure of capitalist social relations. Posited at the heart of queer organising in the alter-globalisation movement was the contradiction inherent in capitalism, where the system proffers a 'freedom' to choose how people live their lives but constrains living in fundamental ways for the majority of the planet's citizens. In this vein Rosemary Hennessey states in 'Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism':

Under capitalism, most people's lives are laced with contradictions. For most of us, the contradiction of being 'free' to work yet barred from reaping the full value of our labor is a very basic one, but it may not be the contradiction we experience as the most distressing. In fact, what we experience more painfully may be the ways this contradiction is both compounded and played out in racist institutional practice, in the shaming effects of homophobia, or in any of the other oppressive ways difference is made intelligible and translated into strategies of exclusion and abjection³.

And as Hennessey goes on to state, these exclusions are from both the physical basics of existence such as food, shelter and healthcare and those 'more amorphous but nonetheless vital array of material needs' such as the need to experience love, to live in safety and with dignity and respect.

GLAM, QUEER and QuACE sought to reposition the campaign for sexual liberation as a central political demand, rather than a celebration of otherness, thereby articulating the direct links between the capitalist system and the construction of sexual identity. These new politics rejected acceptance of the status quo in return for the 'right' to a marginalised identity.

RETHINKING QUEER ACTIVISM THROUGH S11

After observing the protests at Seattle and Davos, Australian activists began to plan a protest against the WEF meeting to be held from September 11-13, 2000, at the Crown Casino in Melbourne. For queer activists in Australia, the alter-globalisation movement presented an opportunity for a rethinking of queer

'politics' and activism. A theoretical re-imagining would come to parallel the practical movement from margins to core that the movement for liberation was passing through.

Prior to S11, as with social movements in Australia more generally, there was a level of nascent anti-systemic politics in various projects. Queer activity had sometimes been internationalist, anti-establishment and anti-capitalist⁴ although this had been sporadic and uneven across the country.

One recent example of this was the activity of a Sydney based organization, Community Action Against Homophobia (CAAH). A predecessor of the Sydney based GLAM, CAAH formed in Sydney in 1999 to protest against a conference of Christians organised to promote 'curing' people of their 'gayness'. Later that year, CAAH held a march along the original route of the 1978 Sydney Mardi Gras. This protest specifically criticised the corporate cooption of Mardi Gras, but it was a protest that was without the impact of Seattle. It had a flavour of 'let's return to '78' rather than being part of an attempt to create a new type of activist project.

The widespread acceptance of queer theory and postmodernism during the 1990s had also moved activity away from seeking involvement with other political movements, firmly establishing identity politics and cultural disruption as the key tenets of activism. The activists interviewed for this project argue that GLAM, QUEER and QuACE's formation can be located in both the emergence of the alter-globalisation movement and growing dissatisfaction with identity politics, queer theory and the conservativeness of campaigns around equal rights recognition for same sex relationships. In particular, the organization QUEER rejected the idea that an end to homophobia could be found solely in the autonomous organising of queers or the destabilisation of sexuality norms. One QUEER activist took this critique a step further to address the lack of a class perspective in queer, gay and lesbian activism:

QUEER was reacting to identity politics, which saw...the gay and lesbian movement not really connecting homophobia to any other form of oppression in society and ultimately having middle class values. [The] struggle against homophobic oppression [at that time] was just about gay and lesbian identity and didn't really have anything to do with economics or capitalism...QUEER was a bit of a correction to that. It drew in that kind of people and gave them a more generalised politics. I think it was kind of the first step in a really good correction. And I don't think the same kind of identity politics dominate in gay and lesbian politics or queer politics at the moment.⁵

Another activist argued:

It was quite refreshing to see students who didn't just want to fight homophobia but who were also sort of saying it is also important to have a class analysis of the world and [that was] why you had to fight to topple the system to eliminate homophobia. That was the cutting edge thing about the anti-capitalist⁶ movement.⁷

GLAM, QUEER and QuACE were small campaigning groups that met on a regular basis, responded to political issues and initiated a number of campaigns. In 2001 Mark Pendleton, the

then National Union of Students Queer Officer, wrote an article for the first issue of the (now defunct) online journal *Word Is Out*. The article 'Queers, Anti-capitalism and War' sought to reflect on the experience of GLAM, QUEER, and QuACE. Pendleton argued they were inspired by the radical action, direct confrontation of the church and state, and positive representation of queer people that was characteristic of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and AIDS treatment movement in the US and Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but that this was fused with 'an explicitly anti-capitalist and implicitly Marxist analysis of queer oppression...the core belief being that homophobia is perpetuated by the economic system of capitalism'.⁸

Elements of the movements of ACT UP and the GLF were recast within the framework of the new anti-systemic movement and a politics explicitly opposing exploitation. While not all activists interviewed agreed with such a cut and dried view of the origins of homophobia, and the Marxism many spoke of can only be described as eclectic, all agreed that the system of capitalism lay behind homophobia and that liberation could only be achieved by challenging that system at its core.

After the protest against the WEF in Melbourne, where queer activists formed a QueerBloc, GLAM, QUEER and QuACE not only initiated their own activities but also organised alongside other activists involved in the movement. The groups participated in the May Day MI⁹ protests where activists distributed information about the coming protest against Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), at which they were protesting in solidarity with gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe. The activists also took a leading role in organising weekly pickets outside the NIKE store in Melbourne, and both 'farewelled' and 'welcomed' Cardinal George Pell with street theatre concerning queer youth suicide when he moved from Melbourne to Sydney. In engaging with other movements and taking up issues not traditionally seen to be the purview of queer, gay and lesbian activists, these groups become an integral part of the alter-globalisation movement and a radical focus in the queer, gay and lesbian community.

While queer activists had previously used cultural disruption as a repertoire of action, GLAM, QUEER and QuACE expressly rejected this notion as a means for achieving change. In a direct comparison made by Pendleton, 'where Queer Nation wore co-opted GAP [GAY] shirts, these new groups are actively involved in the Fairwear campaign and other campaigns to eliminate sweatshops (a core basis of the GAP brand's success)'.¹⁰

Almost all activists interviewed agreed with the suggestion that:

such a project [of building queer struggle and wider social struggle] really could only exist within the context of a larger anti-capitalist movement or a very vibrant ongoing anti-capitalist movement, which currently isn't as visible. I think the sentiment is still there, the kind of coming out on the streets isn't. And as such having a group that is about intervening into the anti-capitalist movement and presenting a really visible queer presence, or queer analysis of capitalism, is something that could only happen in that context.¹¹

Rather than accept difference as the endpoint, some queer activists sought to drag their movement into the spotlight and fight the peripheral nature of their activity and the place allowed for their political lives. No longer would queer politics tolerate

being 'allowed' brief, geographic centrality, one Mardi Gras night a year, in exchange for accepting its marginal role relative to the system. Now there was a reclaiming of the struggle to be at the political centre.

Queers active in the alter-globalisation movement also would not accept being marginal players in a new movement challenging the system. They strove to be central, to make their assertion of leadership within the movement a template for the societal struggle for centrality. Rather than organise from their marginal place, and simply assert that there is no future without a future free of bigotry to social movement activists, activists sought to directly claim that central place for themselves. They also inspired other alter-globalisation activists with a model of organising that rejected a marginal place for people who dissent from the current capitalist system.

TENSIONS AND DECLINE

By late 2001 a number of debates had erupted in QUEER about its future and the future of alter-globalisation activity more generally. The key questions concerned the nature of leadership and how the movement should organise (e.g. summit blockades, as 'a movement of movements', or by centralised planning and coordination). With declining alter-globalisation activity in Australia, these groups also found themselves without a wider movement they could easily relate to. One interviewee noted the opposition expressed at s11 had not been translated into a strategy for how to go about fighting the system:

These groups came out of a few things like the corporatisation of the gay community; people saw that as symptomatic of capitalism. I think s11 bought people into the gay and lesbian movements and showed activists there was a broader group in society opposed to capitalism, or aspects of capitalism. Prior to this, opposition was more obscure. s11 was symbolic in that sense. The problem was that it didn't show how this could be done, it didn't show what could happen or what needed to happen to change the world. It just showed people were opposed.¹²

In GLAM, activists discussed how they might work with a broader audience in the queer community in Sydney, some of them deciding to reinvent CAAH.

In interviews for this project, some activists spoke of internal fracturing and political disagreement, viewing this as part of the process of the disintegration of the group. In the main, however, most activists saw these debates as somewhat symptomatic of the wider crisis that confronted the alter-globalisation movement in Australia – public protest had almost ceased and the vibrancy of the movement had declined.

The deterioration of these groups was ultimately entwined with the fate of the alter-globalisation movement in Australia. The show of force by the Italian state at Genoa in July 2001, ending with the death of a 23 year-old protester Carlo Giuliani and a violent assault on the Indymedia centre, was an important turning point. It heightened anxiety within some sections of the movement about violence at protests, particularly in light of the police violence at s11.

More profound was the impact of the attacks on the World

Trade Centre in New York later that year. The events of 9/11 had a number of consequences. There was immense confusion among movement activists about the US government's agenda in invading Afghanistan. Such confusion came about, in part, because of the general acceptance within the movement of the idea that the nation state had lost its relevance as a result of globalisation. Such a theoretical approach, while providing a general anti-systemic framework on the economic level, couldn't easily integrate the massive mobilisation of state power around *political* objectives by the Bush Administration (with Australia's support). For many activists, despite a gut-level opposition to war, there was no automatic connection between the two.

While the activists interviewed acknowledge that the concerns and anger that fuelled the protest at s11 remain, almost all stated they believe an alter-globalisation movement no longer exists in Australia. It is easy to appreciate why activists argue this, as the movement failed to build a sustainable network of campaigners out of s11 and was unable to maintain a significant public presence past 2001. However, such a view does not, in the author's opinion, reflect an understanding of the global nature of anti-systemic politics. Even in the absence of local networks, there is widespread anti-systemic sentiment, which infuses every progressive struggle and movement. This is perhaps best illustrated by the recent protests that occurred in Melbourne against the G20 meeting. From a seemingly absent alter-globalisation movement locally, a protest movement formed that again wanted to challenge the right of governments to meet and set global economic policy.

CONCLUSION: MOVING TO THE CENTRE/ESCHEWING DIFFERENCE

Such is the generalising and centralising logic of the alter-globalisation movement: the movement strengthens those who are marginal and different to become central, without requiring them to renounce their uniqueness. It unites without subsuming the periphery beneath the centre, and it allows peripheral actors to once again challenge for the core. The movement is often described as a movement of movements¹³. Diversity of participants and issues is the ultimate strength, with the movement finding common connection over key agreed aims.

For alter-globalisation movement activists, their activity comes from a reasoned conviction about the need to take purposive action over a political issue. But social movement activism is also a personal and emotional experience at the very heart of who activists are. Activists do not only do things, they live things. In this sense, the activists in QUEER, GLAM and QuACE not only sought to create for themselves a space in the alter-globalisation movement and wider society; they were seeking to create a place.

These activists began to respond to a rhetorical call posed by Hennessey:

We need a way of understanding visibility that acknowledges both the local situations in which sexuality is made intelligible and the ties that bind knowledge and power to commodity production, consumption and exchange.¹⁴

In a movement where those that were once marginal become

central, these activists found a place that challenged the peripheral status of sexuality activism inside the broader politically active community *and* society more generally.

¹ J18 was a protest that took place on June 18 1999 in various countries. It was described on the Australian website as a 'global carnival against corporate tyranny. Associated events included protests at the headquarters of various multinational corporations and an APEC meeting.

² The Teamsters are one of the largest trade unions in the USA.

³ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000: p.5.

⁴ Michael Schembri, 'Comment on Queers, Anti-Capitalism and War', *Word is Out*, 2 (2002): viewed 17 May 2005 at pandora.nla.gov.au.

⁵ 'Rebecca', participant in QUEER activities, 2000-2001.

⁶ Many activists in GLAM, QUEER and QuACE use the term anti-capitalist movement, almost interchangeably with terms such as alter-globalisation movement or global justice movement.

⁷ 'Sam', member of QUEER, 2000-2001

⁸ Mark Pendleton, 'Queers, Anti-Capitalism and War', *Word is Out*, p. 1, (2001): viewed 17 May 2005 at pandora.nla.gov.au.

⁹ The m1 protest occurred on May 1 2001 in most Australian capital cities, but was particularly large and vibrant in Sydney and Brisbane. Smaller protests also occurred on May 1 2002.

¹⁰ Mark Pendleton, 'Queers, Anti-Capitalism and War', *Word is Out*, p. 1, (2001): viewed 17 May 2005 at pandora.nla.gov.au.

¹¹ 'Rebecca', participant in QUEER activities, 2000-2001.

¹² 'Jamie', participant in QUEER activities, 2000-2001.

¹³ Naomi Klein, 'Reclaiming the Commons', *New Left Review*, 9 (May-June 2001): p. 81.

¹⁴ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, New York: Routledge, 2000: p.71.