Alter-Globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age, by Geoffrey Pleyers

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What is This?
Possibilities for inclusion exist. Mary Kelly, described as ‘instrumental in second-wave feminism’ (Grant, 2011: 278), addressed the juxtaposition of her own history with that of her art students in *Love Songs*, an installation that first took place at the Documenta XII art fair in Kassel in 2007. At its centre was *Multi-Story House* (created in conjunction with Ray Barrie), a walk-in space that emanated light. On the inside of the house were snippets of text originating with second-wave feminists; on the outside, their progeny voiced notions about their foremothers. The house metaphor is encompassing and traditionally representative of women; and the back-to-back texts suggest proximity and interrelationship. The beauty of *Multi-Story House* lies in its interior glow, indicative of the past that ‘sheds light’ on the present and future – Grant (2011: 283) suggests that this is ‘perhaps the lost centre that the younger generation is trying to create’. What seems equally relevant is the personal engagement between Mary Kelly and her students. This positive rubbing-up against each other and visual analogy provide me with more optimism than the exhortation to join the high seas of a purported ‘new’ F movement.

References

Author biography
D Wood is a doctoral candidate in design studies at the University of Otago, New Zealand. She has an MFA in furniture design from the Rhode Island School of Design, and her profiles of craft practitioners and reviews of exhibitions have appeared in an international roster of publications including *American Craft*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *Ceramic Review*, *Fiberarts*, *Fine Woodworking*, *Gastronomica*, *Metalsmith*, and *Textile Forum*. Her last book review appeared in *Capital & Class* 34(2) (June 2010).

Geoffrey Pleyers

Reviewed by Cemal Burak Tansel, University of Nottingham, UK

The alternative globalisation movement has long lost its once impressive media exposure, and has seen many of its prominent Western actors fragment or even entirely vanish from the agenda of social movement politics in the past few years. Yet the movement has survived and become increasingly active in numerous other geographies and venues of struggle, where its silent development has led to and maintained a healthy scholarly interest. Following important recent contributions to the literature by Graham Chesters and Ian Welsh (2006), and Paul Routledge and Andrew Cumbers (2009), in *Alter-Globalization*, Geoffrey Pleyers offers a new analysis of the movement that aims to grasp its unique composition on a conceptual level.
In *Alter-Globalization*, Pleyers undertakes a difficult challenge, attempting to capture the specificities of the movement by constructing a dyadic framework. The theoretical contribution is built on an impressive research design, which, in Pleyers's own words, was produced by collecting material in ‘250 activist meetings, over 800 lectures and numerous actions’, and through ‘152 semi-directed interviews’ (p. 31). Pleyers’s 11-year journey to witness the maturation of a multifaceted global movement becomes the backbone of the book, in which a plethora of activist voices, on-site analyses of the social forum processes and individual narratives from all over the world come together to form an engaging oral history of the movement.

As challenging as it may be in terms of its scope and its subject matter, Pleyers’s theorisation of the movement rests on a simple categorisation between two poles. Pleyers argues that the movement should be conceived of as the amalgamation of two distinct modes of organisation and conceptualisation of social change. He defines these two approaches as the ‘way of subjectivity’ and the ‘way of reason’. The former is understood as the approach adopted by mostly non-affiliated activists or autonomous groups that prioritise transformation in everyday life through radical reconsideration of social relations. The latter, on the other hand, captures a form of ‘institutional activism’ which brings intellectuals, ‘ordinary citizens’ and issue-oriented NGOs to challenge established channels of policy-making by means of lobbying, campaigning and debunking the orthodoxies of global governance. According to Pleyers, these two poles are based on different visions of ‘another world’, and they produce distinct methodologies and forms of action. While the way of subjectivity is taken up by those who are disillusioned with traditional social movement politics, and by activists who attempt to create ‘spaces of experience’ by building non-hierarchical, horizontal networks, the way of reason provides ‘spaces of expertise’ which ‘aim to produce rational arguments in order to reinforce active citizenship’ (p. 178). Put simply, Pleyers’s framework is an elaborate reconstruction of the horizontalism/verticalism debate (see De Angelis, 2004; Nunes, 2005), but it also enhances the boundaries of contention by bringing other questions into the equation.

The book is divided into four parts in which Pleyers unpacks his formula by dissecting various manifestations of the movement around the world. The main contribution of the book is offered in parts 2, 3 and 4 where detailed analyses of the aforementioned approaches and their convergence within the movement are presented. Starting with the way of subjectivity, Pleyers carefully builds his narrative by entering into a dialogue with Zapatistas, *piqueteros* and various other autonomous struggles, which aim to organise ‘places sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society’ (p. 39, emphasis in original). While, unsurprisingly, Zapatismo is portrayed as a major influence for the activists of the way of subjectivity, Pleyers refrains from romanticisation, and remains sensitive to the shortcomings and limitations of ‘spaces of experience’.

The next part, on the way of reason, offers a rather amorphous exposition, in which a vast array of actors are brought together and presented as the representatives of a cohesive modus operandi. Throughout the book, Pleyers is extremely successful in recognising the heterogeneity of the movement; yet his conceptualisation of ‘spaces of expertise’, which includes prominent movement actors like ATTAC and the World Social Forum as well as ‘international elite activists’ (p. 142), fails to differentiate some of its features from the way of subjectivity. An attempt to resolve this problem of demarcation is provided in
the succeeding part on the ‘confluence of the two paths’; but nonetheless, it is not quite clear to as to why, for example, popular education is presented as a component of the way of reason, while its significance is less visible in the discussion of the way of subjectivity. The answer can be found in the way in which Pleyers designs his theory. He suggests that the ‘distinction … between the way of subjectivity and that of reason should be considered an analytical tool’, thus the differences are operationally ‘heuristic’ (p. 184). As the author himself recognises, such a clear-cut distinction between modalities of movement organisation can only be feasible on a higher level of abstraction; while in reality, the alter-globalisation movement has effectively ‘cross-fertilised’ many of these seemingly clashing methods of mobilisation (pp. 193–200; see also Waterman, 2005).

There is also something particularly nebulous about the way in which Pleyers identifies the adversary of the movement. Throughout the text, neoliberalism is put forward as the common enemy to which the movement activists have been opposed, and yet the absence of a specific examination of neoliberalism results in an interchangeable usage of neoliberalism and capitalism. It then becomes all too easy to detach neoliberalism from the capitalist base on which it functions and to perceive it as the problem, as if it were a composition of ideology and policy prescription independent from capitalism. While Pleyers directly addresses capitalism on several points (see pp. 49, 98, 157), his perspective leads him to overemphasise the domination of public life by market principles without proposing any attempt to grasp the way in which the market functions and how people interact with the market under capitalism (see Wood, 1997: 6). Accordingly, Pleyers maintains:

What is at stake is the end of the domination of finance, of profit as the central value, and of rising inequalities, as well as a profound transformation of the relations between the economic and the political; whether or not this different society is qualified as capitalist is, for most activists, of little interest. (p. 177)

There is, however, no discussion of how, for example, the continuation of the structural profit motive or the subordination of political agency to the economic premises is engendered and sustained by capitalism. While Pleyers is keen on moving beyond the obsolete ‘reform or revolution’ distinction (p. 176), he evades, in the process, a vast selection of the Marxist tradition that has underpinned the alter-globalisation movement by exclusively aiming for transformational politics beyond archaic dichotomies and against the pensée unique. Pleyers, unfortunately, associates Marxism with ‘old schematics’, thereby losing a crucial vantage point from which to advance his analysis. A possible route to rectify this problem presents itself when the author alludes to a Gramscian understanding of neoliberal hegemony. However, his very brief encounter with the Italian communist ends up resurrecting the ghost of Croce, as hegemony is presented strictly as the domination of a set of particular ideas, devoid of a reciprocal link between the conditions which give rise to, and in turn, are fundamentally altered by those ideas themselves (pp. 156, 221, 259).

The aforementioned considerations aside, Alter-Globalization provides an excellent overview of the main debates within the movement through a meticulously constructed research programme. While Pleyers’s ambitious framework suffers from an explicit lack of engagement with Marxism and the influence of Marxist currents in the movement, his
thorough and balanced account of the development of alter-globalisation offers an immensely valuable resource for both researchers and activists.

References


Author biography

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**Harry Shutt**


**Reviewed by** David Layfield, *University of Maryland*  
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In this contribution to the critical financial histories of our times, Harry Shutt explains why he thinks the current crisis may be the end for capitalism as we know it. The book opens with brief chapters sketching the history of capitalism up to the Second World War, followed by a sketch of the workings of the western economies since 1945. Later chapters offer more detailed analyses of current economic difficulties and policy responses. The historical narrative is similar to others in this increasingly crowded field, such as John Bellamy Foster and Fred Magdoff (2009) or Robert Brenner (2003).

The principal reason why the current recession may be the final crisis of capitalism is the capital glut thesis. This is similar to the tendency to overaccumulation identified by Marx, then developed by David Harvey, Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, John Bellamy Foster and other Marxists. Capitalist industry generates too much profit searching for too few investment outlets, with the bourgeoisie chasing around the world in their search for new markets and new investments, only to end up back where they started, facing an even bigger crisis. The next reason why the current crisis may prove terminal is that, according to Shutt, both Keynesian and neoclassical/neoliberal economics have failed.