In recent years, there has been a lot of talk about a movement against neoliberal globalisation, made up of actors from diverse backgrounds and with different reasons for engaging in it. This movement has been given several names, but it is perhaps best known as the anti-globalisation movement, the global justice movement, or – increasingly – the alter-globalisation movement. Although the movement has been a central player in contemporary contentious politics for more than a decade, there has been a notable lack of academic literature that has engaged with the internal make up and dynamics of the movement, and which has dealt with the tensions and challenges it faces in fighting against neoliberal globalisation. Geoffrey Pleyers’s new book on the alter-globalisation movement thus fills a long-standing gap in the sociological literature on contemporary social movements. His book, which is the result of years spent in close and critical engagement with actors from all sectors of the movement, not only provides much-needed in-depth description, but also engages in an intriguing evaluation and problematisation of the movement. Of special interest is Pleyers’s view that the movement failed to respond effectively to the financial crisis of the late 2000s, and his discussion of what the future holds for alter-globalisation.

One movement, two paths

According to Pleyers, the unity of the alter-globalisation movement is dependent on the shared social meanings of its actors and on their shared goal of “asserting the importance of social agency in the face of global challenges and against the neoliberal ideology” (11). Apart from this, the movement is by nature highly diverse – and it celebrates this diversity. But there are some overall characteristics that the movement possesses which make it distinct. Pleyers describes the actors within the alter-globalisation movement as possessing some post-materialist values, but importantly, these are combined with a renewed interest in economic inequality and social justice. In general, the movement calls for a renewal of political activism and thus distances itself from traditional politics and political parties. The movement is also different from many other radical doctrines, in that it rejects the classical idea of revolution and seeks to reconfigure conventional conceptualisations of
social change.

These similarities aside, Pleyers argues that many features of the alter-globalisation movement only become intelligible once the movement is conceived of “not as a homogeneous movement but as an uneasy convergence of two tendencies, one centred on subjectivity, the other on reason, and both asserting the will to be an actor within and in the face of globalization and against neoliberalism” (22-23, Pleyer’s emphasis). According to Pleyers, this explains the existence of the diversity of practices that characterise the movement, from street parties to very 'boring' social forum lectures. Moreover, it helps explain the opposing opinions that can be found within the movement, even in the same meetings, on topics such as leadership roles and relations with political actors (21-22). Pleyers argues that the repetition of these paradoxes in vastly different contexts indicates that they should not be seen as insignificant incoherencies of a disparate movement, but that rather they should be seen as expressions of two tendencies, or paths, which shape the movement, one which focuses on subjectivity, and another which focuses on reason. These two paths will now be discussed in more detail.

The ‘way of subjectivity’

In Pleyer's analysis, the path he calls 'the way of subjectivity' refers to those tendencies in the movement which emphasise experiences, feelings and subjectivity. By defending the autonomy of their lived experience, activists of the way of subjectivity protest against the infiltration of neoliberal capitalism into all spheres of their lives and against “the manipulation of needs and information [according to] the logics of power and of production, consumption and mass media” (37). In practice, they take a prefigurative approach to activism which emphasises a consistency between personal life, political activities, and the end-goal of a more open and truly democratic form of globalisation. In their everyday lives they seek to overcome personal traits and social relations that they believe grow out of the market logic. They do this by creating so-called 'spaces of experience’ that are “sufficiently autonomous and distanced from capitalist society [to] permit actors to live according to their own principles, to knit different social relations and to express their subjectivity” (39, Pleyers’s emphasis). These are spaces where imagination, self-fulfilment and pleasure are embraced as integral to political engagement, and the main idea is to allow activists to experience the 'other world' that they are striving towards. The emphasis on prefiguration also has an important impact on the organisational
tendencies of activists in the way of subjectivity; they stress horizontality instead of hierarchies, strong participation ahead of delegation and representation, and a rotation of tasks ahead of specialisation (43). Moreover, since they believe that social and political change must be *lived* and *created* rather than calculated, they refuse preconceived models and instead advocate 'creative experimentation' and accept a process of trial and error (37-38).

A main source of inspiration for the way of subjectivity is the Mexican Zapatista movement, which seeks to engender long-term cultural and social transformation by creating new forms of sociability and by fostering autonomy and dignity for its members. These features have become particularly prominent in a section of the global alter-globalisation movement that Pleyers calls ‘alter-activist youth’ or ‘young alter-activists’ (76). Pleyers distinguishes this group from other categories of youth activists involved in the alter-globalisation movement, such as 'young revolutionaries', who are committed to state-oriented strategies of change and more traditional forms of membership, and 'libertarian youth', who engage in militant direct action and reject all forms of hierarchy, organisational structures, and representative institutions (75-76).

‘Young alter-activists’ are described as primarily middle class, educated and globalised young people, who can be found in major cities across the world. They draw on the tactics of creative direct action (occupations and active non-violence), their way of communication is highly internet-based, and their structure is networked. In general, they are more critical than the ‘young revolutionaries’ of socialist political doctrines, and more open than the ‘young libertarians’ to forming alliances, participating in local-global networks, and co-operating with actors from diverse positions. In this sense, they can be characterised as keeping 'one foot in, one foot out', in that they co-operate with larger structures and the more organised networks in the alter-globalisation movement, but they also keep a critical distance, emphasising “horizontal coordination, direct democracy and contingent, flexible forms of commitment” (76). Pleyers thus refers to ‘alter-activist youth’ as prime exemplars of the way of subjectivity, since they are particularly devoted to resisting corporate globalisation in a prefigurative, locally grounded way which is in congruence with the alternative values that they promote.

**The ‘way of reason’**

The second path that Pleyers identifies in his analysis is one that he calls 'the way of
reason’. Pleyers argues that actors within the way of reason generally see themselves more as active citizens than activists. This is because instead of challenging the status quo through direct actions, they prefer to pursue their goals through existing structures, attempting to change these structures 'from the inside'. In this path, emphasis is on expertise rather than experience, and its practitioners appeal to knowing what needs to change and how it needs to change rather than experimenting with change and feeling one's way forward. The knowledge produced by actors within the way of reason comes from a range of 'spaces of expertise', from organisations with international recognition, made up of intellectuals and scholars, to groups of citizen activists who have acquired knowledge of a particular issue. Pleyers traces the origin of the way of reason to scholarly circles where academics and public intellectuals used their positions of social authority to shine light on the negative consequences of neoliberal globalisation. They went on to set up alter-globalisation organisations and events, for example the French Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens (ATTAC) and the World Social Forums. Both of these grew to become central forums for mobilisations against neo-liberal globalisation, and are today more dominated by alter-globalisation expert citizens than by academics and established intellectuals.

According to Pleyers, ‘expertise’ in the way of reason can be defined as “knowledge of an abstract, theoretical and generally universal character” (112), mainly drawing on the discipline of economics, but also such areas as environmental science and law (113). In more concrete terms, it is usually knowledge on a precise subject area which has direct relevance to the pragmatic, policy-oriented goals of the movement, such as the cancellation of third world debt, the implementation of the Tobin-Spahn tax, food sovereignty, or preservation of biodiversity (112 and 172-173).

Actors in the way of reason set out to produce objective, quantifiable and technical expertise, which they acquire and share through engaged training and education. The aim is to challenge the monopoly of expertise enjoyed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank by subjecting them to “the objectives and criteria of success established by these same institutions: namely, poverty reduction, macro-economic and financial stability, and economic growth” (159). In doing so, actors in the way of reason critique the neoliberal tendency to prioritise profits over people and challenge the doctrine of economic growth, arguing that what is needed is a better redistribution of the wealth that already exists. Pleyers describes the actors in the
way of reason as performing a range of different functions, including investigative (analysing policies and current debates) and educative (establishing spaces for popular education and dispersing knowledge). Moreover, they seek to attain a mobilising function on civil society in that they alert, orient and provoke public debate on the issues that they raise. Finally, they confront opposing experts with their counter-expertise, and they argue for the relevance and feasibility of the alternatives that they suggest on basis of a 'rational analysis of the situation'.

Compared to actors in the way of subjectivity, actors in the way of reason are more willing to work with elite political actors. Nevertheless, they still stand in an ambiguous position to these elite actors, who they see as “simultaneously adversaries, objects of pressure, mediators and partners” (168), and thus their relations with them are marked interchangeably by confrontation, lobbying, cooperation, and instrumentalisation. This ambiguous position is also manifest in their relations to international bodies. While alter-globalisation citizens normally support the creation of international bodies to regulate economic globalisation, impose social and environmental standards, and implement a more equitable global democracy, they do not recognise the legitimacy of institutions like the World Economic Forum and the G8, which they see as controlled 'by the rich, for the rich'.

**Tensions and combinations**

While the two paths share an emphasis on the value of participation, a questioning of the traditional concept of revolution, and a pragmatist idealistic rather than revolutionary approach, the paths generally have diverging approaches to many central questions within the movement. Pleyers identifies three particularly sensitive issues on which they differ.

The first is which scale to privilege for action. While the subjectivity path prefers locally grounded activism, the way of reason takes a more global approach. There are dangers with both of these approaches, since locally grounded activism can end up retreating to 'localism' and losing grip on global cooperation, while a global approach runs the risk of turning the activists involved into a 'cosmopolitan activist elite' which is “in close contact with political and international governance actors but distant from its base, at times even adopting an elitist vanguard's logic” (127). This problem is perhaps made even more serious when considering the fact that the 'experts' in the alter-globalisation movement tend to come from middle class backgrounds and have university educations (131), which is in congruence with the fact that acquiring knowledge on highly technical issues requires
certain resources, especially relating to cultural capital. This structural problem remains a challenge to the movement.

A second issue arises from the disagreement between the paths on whether to organise horizontally, which is strongly preferred by the way of subjectivity since it allows for better participation for all, or to have more vertical networks, which the way of reason sees as crucial to effectiveness. Pleyers finds that the delegation of tasks to experts in the way of reason poses a crucial hindrance to the alter-globalisation value of active participation in decision making. However, he also finds that activists within this path justify specialisation by making the knowledge they produce as anti-technocratic and accessible to the wider public as possible. Expertise is thus seen as an instrument for the long-term goal of active citizenship and more participatory democratic governance (123).

In fact, Pleyers finds more problems with the firm emphasis on participation in the way of subjectivity. Here participation can turn into a hindrance to efficiency, and “the lack of representation, rejection of delegation and reluctance to build more structured organizations make it difficult [for the way of subjectivity] to communicate demands to policy makers” (103). Pleyers is also very critical of the anti-power logic of the way of subjectivity, arguing that the idea of a space purified of all power relations and freed of structure and exclusion is “clearly utopian” and that activists should avoid romanticising horizontal networks and autonomous spaces, since even in seemingly non-hierarchical alter-globalisation gatherings “the influence of each participant varies according to their vocal leadership, social capital and ability to participate in previous meetings” (97).

This is related to the third issue on which the paths differ, which is in their concepts of social change. The subjectivity path prefers an anti-power logic inspired by Michel Foucault, which aims to create spaces of experience and alternative social relations that are devoid of power relations, while the way of reason prefers a counter-power logic, which is about counter-balancing the influence that other actors, with whom they disagree, have on politics and the course of globalisation. Pleyers argues that the permanent tension between these two power logics “holds alter-globalization in a critical distance from political actors [and] enables alter-globalization activists to combine a will to engage in the political sphere with a rejection of traditional forms of political engagement” (222).

In a sense, many of the shortcomings of one path of the movement are complemented by the emphases of the other path. The interplay between these paths has thus resulted in several highly successful moments, such as the Zapatista uprisings, the
Seattle mobilisations, and the first Social Forums – moments which are now seen as central to the establishment of the alter-globalisation movement. However, the two paths do not always combine immaculately and evenly. According to Pleyers, the way of reason dominates the global workings of the alter-globalisation movement because it is “more compatible with formal organisation, which in turn facilitates greater access to material resources, media coverage and influence in alter-globalization international bodies” (200). Nevertheless, he adds that the history of the alter-globalisation movement is characterised by the constant tension between the two paths of the movement, and thus abrupt events and struggles could change its shape completely (200).

**The financial crisis and the future of alter-globalisation**

In addition to the description and discussion of the two paths, Pleyers's book provides a valuable commentary on the current state of the alter-globalisation movement. He points out that there has been an increase in the cross-fertilisation between the two paths. This has made the movement more decentralised and networked, and it has reinforced the importance of participation. Pleyers also discusses the decline of the movement in former strongholds like Western Europe and North America, and its geographical expansion into areas such as Eastern Europe, Africa, and South-East Asia. While this expansion has made the movement more global and diverse, Pleyers argues that there is a downside too, since it has increased the difficulties of coordination and agreeing on common guidelines.

Furthermore, Pleyers points out that the recent global financial crisis has had important consequences for the movement. The crisis itself vindicated much of what alter-globalisation activists had been saying was wrong with the Washington Consensus all along. But paradoxically, Pleyers argues, the movement had a hard time adapting to the new ideological, political and economic context that it helped to bring about (230). This made the alter-globalisation movement unable to respond effectively to the biggest crisis to neo-liberalism since the movement came about. This failure aside, Pleyers argues that the movement has undergone a deep, albeit subtle, transformation along three axes. First, it has become more focused on the local level and on implementing political beliefs into everyday life through alternative consumption. Second, alter-globalisation advocacy forums have increasingly moved from bigger meetings and events into smaller single-issue networks, more focused on achieving concrete outcomes. According to Pleyers, this approach has proved more effective, both because the quality of discussion and argument
has tended to improve, and because they have been less formalised and thus taken on a more pragmatic approach. Finally, the movement has become more decisive in supporting the efforts of progressive political leaders – for instance in Latin America – thus making its relationship with traditional politics less strained and more co-operative.

Pleyers discusses the implications of these transformations, and he argues that although it appears like the movement is going back to more traditional models of action and concepts of social change, these trends also offer opportunities for new alliances between the activists of each path. For instance, many activists from the 'Seattle generation' that used to be in the way of subjectivity are now working in professional occupations, where they play an influential professional role that is closer to the way of reason. Moreover, Pleyers argues that the ecological challenge has made cooperation between people from all spectra of the alter-globalisation movement and political actors indispensable, thus challenging the divisions between the spheres.

**Overlooked 'ways'?**

It has been noted that the strength and originality of Pleyers's analysis lies primarily in his insightful and dynamic characterisation of the movement as being influenced by two sometimes contradictory paths which, according to him, are its defining features. As has been shown, he provides a compelling description of how these paths are constituted and an in-depth discussion of their distinct repertoires and logics. Moreover, he provides a good justification for why these paths must be seen as part of the same movement, even though they are contradictory. These insights alone make his book an invaluable contribution to social movement scholarship. However, the dichotomous presentation of the movement also has its drawbacks. In particular, it could be argued that the almost exclusive focus on the ways of subjectivity and reason leads Pleyers to overlook or diminish the importance of other tendencies in the movement that do not fit neatly into either of these paths.

For instance, it is not clear whether groups of actors such as 'social democrats' or 'revolutionary socialists' can be positioned according to the reason-subjectivity dichotomy. In several instances, Pleyers makes it clear that the alter-globalisation movement is beyond the distinction normally made between 'reformist' and 'revolutionary' approaches (e.g. 23 and 176-177), and this raises the question of whether or not social democrats and revolutionary socialists should be seen as part of the movement at all. With regards to
social democrats, Pleyers provides an indirect answer when he says that many leftist parties support the alter-globalisation approach, but keep 'one foot in civil society and another in the state' (25). However, making sense of the position of revolutionary socialists is more difficult. It could be said that their preference for voting and representation instead of consensus decision making and non-hierarchical organisation makes them incompatible with the way of subjectivity, while their revolutionary and ideological nature make them incompatible with the pragmatic approach of the way of reason. Nevertheless, Pleyers identifies 'revolutionary socialists' as one of the categories of young people involved in the alter-globalisation movement, and this seems to indicate that they are at least part of the movement. However, in his discussion of the European Social Forum in 2004, the extreme left parties and groups that came to dominate the event (especially the revolutionary socialists of the British Socialist Workers' Party) are presented as opportunists, who used the event to pursue their own interest and who were disliked and criticised for this by other alter-globalisation activists, both from the way of subjectivity and the way of reason.

This seems to suggest that revolutionary socialists take on a problematic, unstable 'outsider' position in the alter-globalisation movement. If they can be considered a third 'way' altogether, their position challenges Pleyers's division of the movement into two paths. If not, it is definitely a position which needs further clarification, since Pleyers's lack of attention to this group of activists leaves the reader confused as to whether they are part of the movement at all and, if so, how they relate to the two paths. In general, however, the dynamism and originality of Pleyers's overall analysis compensate for these problems that arise from the division of the movement into two paths.

**Conclusion**

*Alter-globalization: Becoming Actors in the Global Age* is the kind of book that students of the alter-globalisation movement have been waiting for years for. It provides a carefully considered and convincing framework for analysing the alter-globalisation movement – a framework that because of its flexibility and breadth is likely to be applicable for several years to come. Moreover, the author skilfully manages the difficult task of mixing detailed, in-depth descriptions based on long-standing engagement with the movement with a critical scrutiny that does not shy away from highlighting the movement's faults and limitations. Finally, Pleyers provides a discerning and thought-provoking evaluation of the current state of the movement and what the near future holds for it. In conclusion, this
book is an indispensable read for anyone – students, academics, activists or politicians – who is looking for an elaborate and sophisticated discussion of some of the most crucial political issues of our time.

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