Notes on the Antiwar Movement

BARBARA EPSTEIN

The movement against the war in Iraq was the largest antiwar movement that has ever taken place. Even in the United States, where opposition to the war was not as large as in many other parts of the world, demonstrations against the war grew with astonishing rapidity. Before the war began demonstrations had reached sizes that, during the war in Vietnam, took years of organizing to mobilize. The antiwar movement, in the United States as elsewhere, was also in many respects quite broad. It included not only people on the left, antiglobalization activists and peace organizations, but also churches, other religious organizations, trade unions, and many other organizations not associated with the left. And it included very large numbers of people who came to demonstrations as individuals, rather than as members of organizations, and who had never before participated in a political protest.

The movement against the war in Iraq was also international to a degree that no other antiwar movement has ever been. Opposition to the war in Vietnam took place in many countries, but it was centered in the United States; the antiwar movement in the United States tended to overshadow antiwar movements elsewhere. This time not only was the opposition to the war outside the United States of extraordinary proportions, but the movement as a whole understood itself as an international movement, to the extent that protests came to be internationally coordinated. The international character of the antiwar movement helps to account for one of the differences between the movement against the war in Iraq and the movement against the first Gulf War, in 1991. At that time there was strong protest until the war began; when public opinion in the United States turned decisively in favor of the war, the antiwar movement collapsed. This time protest was sustained well into the war. The strength of international protest was no doubt an important factor in sustaining protest inside the United States, even as the media and public opinion were shifting toward unquestioning support of the war.

Barbara Epstein teaches in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Along with Marcy Darnovsky and Richard Flacks, she is editor of Cultural Politics and Social Movements (Temple University Press, 1995). She is a director of the Monthly Review Foundation.
Another strength of the antiwar movement was the sophistication of its perspective, especially in comparison to earlier antiwar movements. Those who opposed the war in Vietnam were divided over its causes. Many who opposed the war believed that it was an aberration, a mistake on the part of a particular group in power. Even on the left, among those who argued that the war was part of a social system, those who were willing to call that system imperialism were in a small minority. The concept of imperialism was so identified with the far left that many who believed that the war grew out of an imperialist system avoided using the word. After the war in Vietnam the use of the word “imperialism” remained very unpopular even on the left. But in the current antiwar movement, understanding of the war in Iraq as imperialist has been very widespread. This is partly because there are some on the right who are now openly defending a policy of imperialism. But it also reflects a widespread understanding in the antiwar movement that the attack on Iraq was one component of a larger agenda of world domination.

Antiwar organizers point out that protest against the war was based on people’s understanding of the broad implications of the war. Paul George of the Peninsula Coalition for Peace and Justice brought church and other religious groups together to oppose the war, in the largely middle-class suburbs south of San Francisco. I asked him what drove the people he works with to oppose the war: was it concern about the war’s impact on the domestic economy, or fear of terrorist attacks in the United States, or fear of the erosion of democratic rights? He said that the people he worked with opposed the war for all of these reasons and more. The war, he said, went against their basic values. They saw it as a grab for world power, an attack on democratic rights in the United States and abroad, and a danger to the United Nations, to international order and to world peace. The people he worked with, George said, saw the war in Iraq as the first step in a plan for a widening of U.S. international dominance, which they found frightening and morally abhorrent.

Paul George’s account of why people in the antiwar movement opposed the war coincided with the impressions of other antiwar organizers with whom I spoke. Jackie Cabasso, of the People’s Non-Violent Response Network, a coalition of mostly faith-based antiwar organizations in the Bay Area, and Amy Newell, chair of U.S. Labor against the War, gave me similar accounts of why their constituents opposed the war. These organizers and others argued that most of the people who became involved in the antiwar movement did so out of their conviction that the international ambitions of the Bush administration endanger peace, democratic rights,
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and prosperity in the United States and abroad. It is taken for granted, in
the antiwar movement, that the Bush administration wants both oil and
power, and that the close relationship between the Bush administration
and the oil companies is a factor in the administration's actions. There are
some in the antiwar movement who would avoid the word "imperialism,"
but few would quarrel with the view that the Bush administration wants
U.S. world dominance, both economic and political.

Previous antiwar movements have been based mostly on opposition to
particular wars. Every antiwar movement in the United States in the twen-
tieth century has included small numbers of pacifists who have opposed
all war, and, in many cases, larger numbers of socialists, who have opposed
capitalism and/or imperialism. But every antiwar movement has been com-
posed mostly of people whose concern was limited to stopping that war.
The fact that so many of those who opposed the war in Iraq saw it in
broader terms is an enormous advance, and it gives reason to hope that the
antiwar movement will be sustained beyond the U.S. victory in Iraq.

Along with these strengths the antiwar movement also had some weak-
nesses, which need to be examined if we want to sustain opposition to the
Bush administration and its ambitions. The most glaring weakness of the
movement against the war in Iraq was the limited involvement of people
of color, especially African Americans. According to many polls, blacks
opposed the war in roughly the percentages in which whites supported it.
At one point approximately two-thirds of whites supported the war, and
approximately two-thirds of blacks opposed it. At other points African-
American opposition to the war was even higher than this. There were
African Americans in the antiwar movement, and in its leadership; the
same was true of other groups of color. But there was a striking contradic-
tion between the racial composition of the antiwar movement and the
racial breakdown of opposition to the war.

The whiteness of the antiwar movement is a result of the racial divi-
sions in U.S. society, which are particularly deep between blacks and
whites. The depth of these divisions makes it unlikely that large numbers
of blacks will be willing to join any predominately white movement, even
if they support its aims. Progressive movements with predominantly white
membership/leadership should do whatever they can to reach out to
African Americans and other groups of color and to align themselves with
progressive organizations led by people of color. Predominantly white
organizations should also examine the internal culture of their movements
to see if there are obstacles to the participation of people of color. Efforts
along these lines will improve the racial balance of the movement but will
not produce miracles. In Oakland, California, a coalition of groups, affiliated with the national organization, United for Peace and Justice, organized an antiwar march. Determined that their march would at least to some degree reflect the racial composition of Oakland, they put a great deal of effort into reaching out to local activists of color, publicizing the march in local neighborhoods, and inviting local activists to speak at the rally. These efforts had results: the march included a higher proportion of people of color than the larger, nationally sponsored demonstrations in San Francisco. But if the Oakland march had accurately reflected antiwar sentiment in Oakland, it would have been predominately African American. It was not.

It is also important to remember that communities of color have been differentially affected by the increased police repression of the last thirty years. A much smaller proportion of white youth are under correctional supervision on probation or parole. The consequences of a misdemeanor arrest at a demonstration for someone on probation or parole could well be immediate imprisonment.

One of the dangers posed by the racial imbalance of the antiwar movement, and of the movements that are likely to follow it, is that activists will try to address this problem by slinging charges of racism at each other. Among progressives, charges of racism have enormous power; nothing is as likely to destroy an organization, or drain the energy out of a campaign, than a debate conducted in these terms. The racial imbalance of the antiwar movement is more likely to improve as a result of attention to outreach and to creating an environment within the movement in which people of color as well as whites will feel welcomed and will be treated with respect. Because such efforts are not likely to transform the racial composition of the antiwar movement, it is also important to support autonomous initiatives from communities of color. The self-organization of people of color around anti-imperialist struggles will also enhance opportunities for broader coalitions, in which people of color will play leading roles.

The antiwar movement was lopsided not only in relation to race but also in relation to age. There were significant numbers of young people in the movement; they brought verve and creativity to demonstrations, and they took the lead in civil disobedience. But the young people in the antiwar movement represented a small minority of their generation. This contrasted sharply with the movement against the war in Vietnam: the majority of activists were young, and the movement was based on the campuses. During the protests against the war in Iraq, U.S. campuses were relatively quiet. The Vietnam antiwar movement was limited by its
identification with youth culture. At that time, many older people who opposed the war had a difficult time finding a place in the movement. The recent antiwar movement was strengthened by the diversity of generations participating in it. But young people play a particularly important role in social movements, and if there had been more of them in the recent antiwar movement, the movement and its prospects would have been strengthened.

One of the reasons for the relatively low level of involvement of young people is the absence of a draft. But beyond this it is also the case that many young people are reluctant to become involved in political activity. There are practical factors: today's college students have less free time than college students of the sixties and seventies did. But time is a problem for virtually everyone who wants to engage in political activity. Today's young people grew up in the conservative culture of the last two decades which has promoted individual material success, and in which collective action for a better world has often seemed like a faint memory, or a far-off dream. The young people in the antiglobalization (or anti-neoliberal) movement reject these values and hold out different ones, but most young people absorb the prevailing values at least to some degree; in today's fiercely competitive environment rejecting these values has a cost. The student and other youth organizations against war that exist should be supported; the antiwar movement, or whatever evolves out of it, should encourage young people to find their own forms of protest and resistance.

In addition to its problems in reaching people of color and young people, the antiwar movement has been organizationally fragile. The fragility has to do with the fact that this antiwar movement emerged out of a near vacuum in the U.S. peace movement and left. The peace movement was badly demoralized by the first Gulf War. There was considerable public opposition to that war before it began, but as soon as war was declared much of that opposition evaporated, and within two weeks the antiwar movement had largely collapsed. Over the decade that followed the peace movement languished. On the left, democratic socialist organizations continued a decline that had been taking place for decades. The collapse of the Soviet Union, initially seen by some as opening up a space for a more positive version of socialism, in fact further discouraged the left by removing the only major obstacle to the expansion of U.S. corporate power. The major sign of hope for the left came at the end of the decade, with the emergence of an anarchist-oriented antiglobalization (or more correctly the anticorporate or anti-neoliberal globalization) movement among young people, which became visible to the public in Seattle in November 1999.
This movement, which flourished for more than a year in the United States, suffered a setback as a result of the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Out of concern that any demonstrations could provoke official repression and public hostility, anti-corporate-globalization activists refrained from mobilizing major protests against the Bush Administration’s attack on Afghanistan.

The organization that stepped into this vacuum was International ANSWER, Act Now to Stop War and End Racism, formed shortly after September 11 by the International Action Center, in which the Workers’ World Party played a central role. ANSWER skillfully mobilized demonstrations against the war on Afghanistan, and when the Bush administration began warming up for an attack on Iraq, it was ANSWER that stepped in to mobilize protest. ANSWER was able to do this because it had experience in doing such work and the necessary organizational structure. Members of the Workers’ World Party had played a similar role during the first Gulf War. An alternative antiwar coalition, United for Peace and Justice, was formed out of the concern that ANSWER failed to appeal to a broad enough constituency. Both Leslie Cagan, the chair of United for Peace and Justice, and Bill Fletcher Jr., a vice-chair, publicly identified themselves as socialists. These and other socialists in leading positions in the antiwar movement worked with nonsocialists to build a broader movement. Some two hundred religious, labor, and other organizations joined in the coalition formed by United for Peace and Justice, giving it the broad base that ANSWER lacked. On the East Coast, especially in New York, United for Peace and Justice became at least as important a force in the antiwar movement.

The movement against the war in Iraq functioned in an atmosphere of unremitting crisis; this contributed to the structural fragility. The movement had two tiers. There were the national coalitions, including in addition to ANSWER and United for Peace and Justice, Not in Our Name, MoveOn which mobilized against the war over the internet, and Win Without War, which appealed to a predominantly liberal constituency to the right of the other major national coalitions. Alongside the national coalitions were massive numbers of local organizations that opposed the war. These included peace centers and other peace organizations revived by the ferment of activity against the war in Iraq, and groups formed to oppose a war in Iraq. The groups and organizations opposing the war also included innumerable organizations of other types, churches and other religious organizations, trade unions, and social justice organizations of all kinds that turned at least some of their efforts toward opposing the war.
The churches, especially white middle-class churches, probably made up the largest component of this grassroots antiwar movement. The massive participation of such mainstream organizations, especially the participation of so many church groups, in the antiwar movement, gave it enormous credibility.

The problem with the two-tiered structure of the antiwar movement was that neither of the tiers was likely to outlast the crisis surrounding the attack on Iraq. The national coalitions were really committees of national organizers, who were able to mobilize huge numbers of people to attend demonstrations, or sign statements or contribute money, under conditions of crisis. The vast majority of the local organizations in the grassroots antiwar movement had been formed around issues other than war. Under conditions of crisis, they took time out from their usual concerns to oppose the war. Once the crisis receded, the tendency of these organizations was to return to their usual concerns. The sponsorship of antiwar protests by churches, trade unions, and other organizations with which large numbers of people identify no doubt drew people to demonstrations who might not have attended otherwise. But most people who participated in demonstrations went with family or friends, not as members of organized groups. Once the atmosphere of crisis dissipated, there were few avenues for continuing antiwar activity, or even arenas for discussion of what to do next. During the First World War, in the United States the Socialist Party served as a center for antiwar activity. During the War in Vietnam, the Students for a Democratic Society played the same role.

As antiwar activists have pointed out, the war in Iraq was only the first step in the Bush administration’s efforts to extend its power. The next steps may not involve hot wars. The leaders of other nations targeted by the United States as enemies may calculate that it is better to accommodate to U.S. demands before being attacked. It would be unfortunate if the antiwar movement in the United States were only capable of responding to war, or threats of war. In the past, antiwar protest was centered among particular groups (during the sixties, students and young people, for instance). There was no single group that played this role in relation to the war in Iraq. It is unlikely that any single organization will emerge as the center of ongoing opposition to U.S. imperial ambitions. But if there are no membership organizations for antiwar/anti-imperialist activists, the movement will lurch from crisis to crisis, responding to events of the moment but unable to develop or carry out any long-range strategy.

There was no effort to form ongoing antiwar organizations before or during the war partly because of the sense of impending crisis: at every
point it seemed as if war might begin within a week or two, leaving no time for anything but mobilizing the largest demonstrations possible. In a sense the war continues: the United States is now occupying Iraq and growing Iraqi protest will no doubt lead to unforeseen consequences for the United States. The Bush administration is making threatening noises in the direction of various other countries. This is nevertheless a moment of relative calm in which it might be possible to address issues such as the structure of an ongoing antiwar/anti-imperialist movement. It also might be a good idea to point to connections between war and, more broadly, the U.S. drive for empire and other issues.

One of these is the environment, which is endangered on a global scale, by the pace at which oil and other natural resources are being used up. Alternative, sustainable sources of energy need to be developed and promoted if we are to stave off an environmental crisis that could assume such proportions that war would look minor in comparison. A second, related, issue is the culture of consumerism in the United States. A host of institutional and social pressures push Americans toward expenditures that seem to hold out the promise of a happy family life, security, respect from one's community, but which in fact tie most Americans to the longer and longer working hours that undermine family and community. Entrapment in this culture promotes support for empire because it provides access to global resources. The young anarchists make a scathing critique of the culture of consumerism and some of them try to find ways of living outside it. This probably works better for young people, especially those with middle-class family resources to fall back upon when necessary, than for other sections of the population. The socialist left might not arrive at the same solutions, but it should begin to prioritize the issue, because it is connected to the widening gap of wealth and power between the United States and the rest of the world.

The antiwar movement, if it is to gain strength and momentum, needs to link up with the broader antiglobalization movement, and the antiglobalization movement needs to link its labor and environmental segments more effectively. To accomplish all of this it is necessary to draw out the connections between production and consumption under capitalism—by way of the critique of commodity fetishism. There should be no war for oil, but also no war for the auto-petroleum complex, and no war for the system of production and consumption that makes such patterns of accumulation necessary. Until such connections are drawn, the movement will lack staying power, the capacity for its different elements to coalesce, and a meaningful political praxis.