

Book Review: Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism edited by Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron

*How can political activism make more of an impact? In **Protest Inc.**, Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron argue that the corporatization of protest has left us today with little more than an illusion of activism; one that serves citizens' restless desire to do something (albeit on their own terms), but one that ultimately fails to get to the root cause of most global problems. This is an angry, frustrated and pessimistic attack on the current state of protest and activism, writes Alex Hensby, but what we are to do about it, nobody seems to know. Provocative reading for readers interested in protest politics and the future of NGOs and social movements.*



Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism. Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron (eds.). Polity Press. February 2014.

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The past few years have been an interesting time to be studying social movements. Between 2010 and 2012 we saw the Arab Spring, anti-austerity protests in Greece and Spain, student protests in Chile, Canada and the UK, and the rise (and fall) of Wikileaks, not to mention the global Occupy Movement. This upsurge has inspired many scholars to study the new tools of dissent at activists' disposal. Recent publications by Manuel Castells and Paul Mason, among others, have emphasised the power of fast and fluid organizational and communication networks aided by open source communications technologies. Although these authors are usually reluctant to try and write the recipes for the kitchens of the future, they at least find cause for optimism in activists' ongoing struggles against state repression, and the neoliberal mantra of 'there is no alternative'.



Given this context, it might seem a surprise that in their assessment of the contemporary health of global social movements, Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron should produce such a relentlessly gloomy and pessimistic book. In *Protest Inc.: The Corporatization of Activism*, the authors posit that that we are seeing not only a trend towards the corporatization of state politics, but also the corporatization of protest. This can be most clearly seen in the way advocacy groups, NGOs, and social movement organizations (SMOs) increasingly pursue partnerships with the very corporations they are supposed to be opposing. At the same time, grassroots movements have come under renewed pressure from what the authors call the 'securitization of dissent', with states authorising militarized police tactics against protesters. In this sense, *Protest Inc.* reflects global capitalism at its most pernicious – pressurising activists to fall within its slipstream by providing benign remedies to the world's problems. Of course, the authors argue that such remedies do not challenge what has become a crucial blind-spot in the corporatized activist purview, namely global capitalism itself.



The book draws on a mixture of old and new themes. For many political scientists, discussions of individualization and declining social capital (chapter 4), and the institutionalization of activism organizations (chapter 5) will already be familiar, even if certain key studies – most notably Jordan and Maloney's similarly-titled *The Protest Business?* – are oddly absent. Certainly, the book brings these discussions up to date: whilst NGOs and SMOs are traditionally mindful of accepting direct funding from corporations, the authors show how intermediary initiatives and foundations (such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS) allow funds to be transferred more covertly. Much is also made of the increasing number of corporate executives on NGO boards. Perhaps most controversially, Fair Trade logos have started to appear on a range of unlikely brands such as Nestlé and Starbucks. Whilst some might see this as reflecting a shift in corporate practices towards ethical trade and

sustainability, the authors contend that in awarding these moral kite-marks Fair Trade's capacity to publicly criticise these corporations' more nefarious practices has been fatally compromised.



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Although the authors' critique of NGOs and SMOs is generally convincing, its framing can sometimes be problematic. It is implied throughout the book that the deepening relationship between corporations and global civil society effectively represents the co-optation of the latter by the former. Although many activists feel queasy about the way certain corporations express their ethical credentials (such as the vomitous claim by one that investing in the poor 'isn't a social issue; it's smart economics'), I would dispute the implication that all NGOs or SMOs are guiltily compromising their ideals by linking up with corporations. In fact, many have always seen capitalism as part of the solution rather than the problem, and would see no cognitive dissonance in, say, KFC supporting awareness campaigns to fight breast cancer (p.45). Many would also defend the real, tangible gains made through fair trade and eco-labelling policies. So rather than being simply a question of co-optation, I would argue that this instead reflects longstanding differences between liberal and leftist voices within global civil society about what this sphere *is* and *should be*.

Consequently, this book poses a serious question to the reader: do we want NGOs and SMOs working with corporations to pressurise them into changing their values and practices, or should these groups retain a critical independence? The authors argue in favour of the latter, reflecting this book's quietly radical politics. Of course, the authors might argue that claiming a critique of global capitalism as 'radical' is symptomatic of the very problem we presently face. Such a critique was at the core of the global Occupy Movement, but Dauvergne and LeBaron do not share the optimism of many authors on this subject. As they argue in chapter 3, grassroots movements have been increasingly trampled into the dirt by securitized policing policies. The authors trace the securitization of dissent back to 2001, finding that states have made use of anti-terrorist legislation to crack down on protest

through 'command and control' policing. This has led us to a deeply alarming present situation where the head of Russia's presidential administration can cite European and North American governments' use of water cannons, crowd kettling, group surveillance, and pre-emptive arrests as examples of 'best world practices' for policing protest today (p.69). Depressing though it is to read, this topic perhaps represents the book's strongest contribution.

Aside from its subjugation at the hands of securitized policing, the Occupy Movement is afforded relatively little detailed analysis in this book. This is surprising given that for many activists Occupy represented a real organisational alternative to the corporatization of NGOs and SMOs. Admittedly, references are made to the movement's 'drifting priorities' since 2012, with its constantly-evolving network structure considered too fragmentary to sustain any real influence. This raises the question of whether the authors believe that some level of institutionalization can be a good thing, not least because they argue that corporatized NGOs and SMOs are otherwise left largely unopposed in claiming to speak on behalf of global civil society as a whole.

Although Dauvergne and LeBaron are keen not to dismiss the piecemeal gains of NGO and SMO campaigns, they conclude this book by arguing that we are left today with little more than an illusion of activism, one that serves citizens' restless desire to do something (albeit on their own terms), but one that ultimately fails to get to the root cause of most global problems. For this reason, this book should perhaps be read as a polemic – an angry, frustrated and pessimistic attack on the current state of protest and activism, especially the corporatized institutions of global civil society. One suspects the authors would like their anger to inspire greater critical reasoning, research, and protest action from its readers. This is no ignoble aim, though having read this book I am left wondering where on earth this should take us.

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