

13 Peoples Global Action

(Truly) Global and (Truly) Grassroots Resistance



About the authors and their positions

Friederike Habermann travelled to the 1996 Intercontinental Gathering of the Zapatistas in Mexico, and from then on was involved in the development of the alter-globalisation movement. She served as the press coordinator in the initially crucial network *Peoples Global Action*, a now defunct worldwide network of grassroots movements. Today, the historian and economist works as an independent academic. In her work, she explores social movements, different economic models, and the intersectionality of power structures. She lives in a commons-based project near Berlin.

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1. What is the key idea of Peoples Global Action?

After the end of *history* is being made: Without capitalism, without dominance

We have reached the ‘end of history’, announced political scientist Francis Fukuyama after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when what passed for socialism was once again replaced by capitalism. On 1 January 1994, the date that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect, acceptance of neoliberalism was at its peak. On this date, a small, barely armed rebel movement from the jungles of the Mexican state of Chiapas mounted a rebellion: the *Zapatista Army of National Liberation EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional)*. Before long their spokesperson, Subcomandante Marcos, proclaimed that it was not about seizing power, but about recreating the world. In their autonomous zones, the Zapatistas began the process of building freedom, democracy and justice. In fact, it was actually the women of the *EZLN* who had begun this process during an internal rebellion a year earlier. And this is no trivial matter: the Zapatistas support the abolition of *all* relationships of dominance.

Through their *Intercontinental Gatherings for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism* in 1996 and 1997, the Zapatistas brought together movements characterised by a similar understanding of politics on a global scale for the first time. Inspired by their Second Declaration of La Realidad and their call for a network of resistance, representatives from (predominantly grassroots) movements in over seventy countries came together and founded the worldwide network, *Peoples Global Action (PGA)*. Yes: *peoples*, not *people's* –which is what most of the people who only *heard* the name thought–, because indigenous peoples were involved from the outset, guiding the way: whether they were Adivasis from India, Maoris from Aotearoa aka New Zealand, or the Ecuadorian *CONAIE* alliance.

The fact that I write *Peoples Global Action* incorrectly by omitting the apostrophe (the correct spelling would be: *Peoples'*), opens up the possibility of it also being read as *People's* –i.e. Global Action Network of People. I began

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writing the name this way when I was acting as press coordinator for the PGA, a role that I had occupied since the protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Geneva in May 1998. Though, while the protests were a success, our attempt to spread the news wasn't. Despite the fact that, after days and days of demonstrations and riots, Geneva's police chief was talking of a new 1968, and although coordinated campaigns were taking place worldwide –including 40,000 homeless and landless Brazilians marching on the national capital for a week, and the *Global Street Party*, which took place simultaneously on all continents– this new form of protest did not penetrate the consciousness of the global public.

When not a single news article appeared in the Western media after 200,000 farmers had demonstrated in India, the same farmers decided to send a few more emissaries to Europe at their earliest opportunity. In the spring of 1999, on the occasion of the EU and G8 double summit in Cologne, nearly 500 people from the global south travelled in buses through eleven countries for five weeks, campaigning and meeting local activists. From the *Global Street Parties*, the *Global Action Days* were born: simultaneously coordinated worldwide actions. However, 'this wall of silence that we are encountering', as M.D. Nanjundaswamy of Indian peasant movement *KRRS* expressed it in Geneva in 1998, was not even dented. When, in 1999 in Cologne, hundreds of *KRRS* members, dressed in white robes and green scarves, tried to take over public transport to go and laugh at the powers that be, they were rounded up and taken to a prison outside the city; the only newspaper that reported the event the next day published the headline: '300 autonomists occupy tram'.

At the Seattle protests against the WTO Conference in the autumn of the same year, this silence was partially broken: the successful blockade on the first day, which also contributed to the failure of the negotiations, combined with the euphoric mood of the 50,000 protesters who remained for days on end, electrified a global audience. *Peoples Global Action (PGA)* was insofar a driving force behind this, as the American *Direct Action Network* –organising the blockades in Seattle and leading to the strategic success of preventing the first day of the conference– had adopted *PGA's* fundamental principles. *PGA* was present as an international networking force solely through its five-week mini-caravan tour across the USA –although through this, we did contribute to the broad mobilisation of 50,000 demonstrators in Seattle. When the alter-globalisation movement returned to Europe to protest against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Prague in September 2000, this time it was again *PGA* structures which directly initiated the process. Although the atmosphere was perhaps not as euphoric, these days of campaigning were also successful, and the protests ultimately led to a social movement: After this, *PGA* had nothing to do with organising the demonstrations against the EU summit in Nice in December of the same year. And in the following months, it seemed that not even a meeting

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between trade ministers could take place without local blockades being planned.

But many grassroots movements from the global south were unhappy with the concept of 'summit hopping'. To them, this form of action seemed too short-lived, and they were also often unable to participate due to problems with visas and plane tickets; individuals from the global north, however, could afford the travel more easily, and were granted visas. For this reason, *Peoples Global Action* decided to hold a meeting of delegates at the same time as the Prague protests. Thus, at the very moment that the alter-globalisation movement became a real force, *PGA* decided to focus on longer-term campaigns, the first being against Plan Colombia.¹ While the 'movement of movements' (Naomi Klein 2003) continued to grow, *PGA's* relevance faded in the wake of its departure from the summit protests.

The alter-globalisation movement experienced a massive setback at the G8 summit in Genoa in 2001, where members were faced with repressive tactics. In events later referred to as the 'Chilean night', activists were pulled out of demonstrations or attacked in their sleep. Many of them were detained in police stations for days and beaten. To cap it all, just a month and a half later, 9/11 happened. A week later, the third major *Peoples Global Action* international conference took place, this time in Cochabamba, Bolivia.² Arriving delegates and organisers were subjected to massive legal repression. For the first time, topics included the commons, and alternatives to the dominant economic system. It was also the last time, as no further conferences followed. This enormous strength, that had made it possible to carry out major events almost out of nowhere, did not repeat itself.

Many individual activists (from the north) were also suffering burnout as a result of their intense commitment, or were no longer able to devote themselves so intensively to *PGA*; many movements (from the south) had their hands full with their own local struggles. Simply put, *PGA's* decentralised structure hampered its continuity. It is also likely that the foundation of the World Social Forum in 2001 contributed to the *PGA's* loss of protagonism; from then on, the forum provided an annual opportunity for tens of thousands to well over one hundred thousand people to meet and discuss alternatives.

2. Who is part of Peoples Global Action, what do they do?

'If you have only come to help me...'

To date, the prevailing belief is still, wrongly, that the protests against the

- ¹ *In the summer of 2000, the US Congress granted a financial injection of \$ 1.3 billion to the Colombian regime. Allegedly this was to fund the fight against the drugs mafia, but the real reason was to secure control of this geopolitically and strategically important region, and to ensure the implementation of a neoliberal development agenda.*
- ² *The second international conference had taken place in Bangalore, India, in August 1999.*

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exponents of neoliberalism (the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) were essentially initiated by organisations from the global north. *Attac* is regarded by many as being synonymous with ‘the alter-globalisation movement’. In reality, the impetus came fundamentally from the Zapatistas, Indian farmers, and various indigenous movements, and thus from those who are truly marginalised in the globalised world.

In *PGA* nobody spoke of being ‘globalisation-critical’ like *Attac*, or of an ‘anti-globalisation movement’; it was not a question of ‘improving the design’ of neoliberal globalisation or of national solutions, but of coordinating grassroots resistance globally, and through it an emancipatory form of globalisation. In order to avoid the entrenched hierarchies which can accompany the easy access to funding of those in the global north, no continuous funding system was set up. Instead, donations were collected for each campaign. Instead of a board of directors, one movement in each world region (Western and Eastern Europe, North, Central and South America, the Middle East, South-Eastern Pacific, etc.) functioned as a ‘conveners’ group’. This group was responsible for ensuring that the process continued. Every time there was an international conference, the conveners’ changed. From the outset, attention was paid to ensuring gender equality between speakers at the conferences, as well as to equitable North-South representation.

PGA’s five fundamental principles or hallmarks are:

1. A very clear rejection of capitalism, imperialism and feudalism; all trade agreements, institutions and governments that promote destructive globalisation.
2. We reject all forms and systems of domination and discrimination including, but not limited to, patriarchy, racism and religious fundamentalism of all creeds.
We embrace the full dignity of all human beings.
3. A confrontational attitude, since we do not think that lobbying can have a major impact in such biased and undemocratic organisations, in which transnational capital is the only real policy-maker;
4. A call to direct action and civil disobedience, support for social movements’ struggles, advocating forms of resistance which maximize respect for life and oppressed peoples’ rights, as well as the construction of local alternatives to global capitalism.
5. An organisational philosophy based on decentralisation and autonomy.

At meetings of the World Social Forum and at climate protests, many former *PGA* activists, specifically those representing grassroots movements from the global south, express regret that a network similar to *Peoples Global Ac-*

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tion no longer exists. What is missing is a network which gives voice to the ‘subaltern’, as postcolonial theorists (2008 [1988]) refer to the most marginalised population groups in the world: including, for example, textile workers from Bangladesh, fishermen from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, and domestic workers from Bolivia, in addition to the indigenous movements or the black communities of Colombia. Not as flagship attractions for non-governmental organisations from the global north, but hand in hand with, for example, autonomous movements from Europe or the Canadian postal workers. While the *PGA* manifesto was never completed, and never gained greater importance, the above quote from ‘an Australian Aboriginal woman’ was crucial: ‘If you have only come to help me, then you can go back home. But if you consider my struggle as part of your struggle for survival, then maybe we can work together.’³

3. How do you see the relationship between Peoples Global Action and Degrowth?

Peoples Global Action was creating commons

At degrowth events these days, it is not uncommon for me to hear the question from people coming across the idea for the first time: ‘How can we spread these insights in the global south?’ The concept of post-development, that is to say the rejection of the growth path imposed on us by worldwide economic institutions, was being discussed as early as the 1980s –and was largely shaped in the south. It is thanks to Wolfgang Sachs in particular that these ideas were disseminated throughout Germany in the 1990s, thus laying a significant foundation for post-growth in the country.

Post-development is an enigmatic term which includes a variety of very different approaches (see the post on post-development⁴). Degrowth is another such catch-all definition; it includes not only Niko Paech’s concept of the post-growth economy, but also non-capitalist economies right through to the economy of contribution, or demonetisation (see the post on [demonetised networks](#)) or, using my term, ecommony. The ‘movement of movements’ born from the protests in Seattle was, and is, equally diverse. What all these currents have in common is that we are, in various ways, searching for an alternative to the dominant economic system. Whereas post-development had a predominantly theoretical base, and *PGA* was a network for action, degrowth has the potential to drive both: theory and prac-

³ *The original quote, by the way, is somewhat different: ‘If you have only come to help me, then you’re wasting your time. But if you come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let’s work together’. The quote comes from a woman who has made quite a name for herself: Lilla Watson, an (educational) activist from Brisbane. However, she herself points out that attributing the quote to her is not the full story, as it was born out of the collective process of a group of Aboriginal activists. But isn’t it always the case that insights are attributed to individuals, even though new ideas only emerge when we are together?*

⁴ *The German text on Post Development is available here: www.degrowth.de/de/dib/degrowth-in-bewegungen/post-development/. A translation is not planned so far.*

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tice.

In this respect, today it comes as no surprise that former *PGA* activists, and consistently dissident grassroots movements from the global south –for example against the Narmada Valley dam in India, or the Kuna of Panama movement– have established contact with or are part of conceptually similar parts of the degrowth movement.

In addition to the question of substantive agreement, the type of organisation is crucial –and here we come to the commons as a concept which was self-evidently practised in *PGA*, and which plays a decisive theoretical role in the degrowth movement today. *PGA* was organised as a gift economy: money was at most available in the form of pocket money –for example, one hundred German marks per month for non-stop campaigning in the weeks leading up to an event, if dumpster diving wasn't enough. Accommodation, computers; everything was organised as a gift economy, that is to say, provided voluntarily by various individuals, often simply by third parties who had been asked to provide support. A conscious decision was made to have no paid staff, no office structures, and no financial resources beyond those required for the events themselves. Prior to such events, money was 'collected' –today we would probably call it crowdfunding.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that former *PGA* activists can now be found in the commons movement. This is true of Massimo de Angelis, who I first came across in an economics working group in the Chiapas jungle in 1996. At the beginning of the new millennium, he founded the web journal [The Commoner](#), the first platform for transnational debate on commons. What I myself had not realised at the time had struck him: While the struggles falling under the *PGA* umbrella initially appeared very different, the majority in fact involved commons, that is to say land or resources belonging to and/or affecting the whole community. For example, the Narmada Valley in India was a commons which allowed people to live well, instead of vegetating in a slum in the nearest big city. The struggles in Cochabamba focused on water as a commons.

As stressed by de Angelis (2002), commons often arise in the first place out of struggles against their negation: struggles against land grabs raise the question of land for those who cultivate it; struggles against intellectual property rights lead to the question of the knowledge commons; struggles against environmental degradation draw attention to the question of the natural commons; struggles against the privatisation of water, education and health lead to demands for water, education and health as commons.

There are many approaches and struggles around commons with which the degrowth movement should also show solidarity. Since capitalism is impossible without growth, it requires a radically different form of economic organisation. According to de Angelis (2002), freedom from the restrictions of ownership would cause cooperation, inventiveness and social innovations

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to be driven by needs and desires. This enables the development of diverse 'powers-to', which then seek to rid themselves of the 'powers-over'. This also results in links to today's degrowth movement: from a common negation of the existing economic model and the associated power structures, to a world in which the power of the many is able to develop creatively. It should not simply be about defensive battles, or disputes about how to design the economy, but about every struggle against every relationship of power that restricts people's freedom to develop.

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

It takes us all to save the world

My suggestions for the degrowth movement are derived from the above-mentioned points: if activists from the global north remain surrounded by their own kind, the consequence is the threat of climate colonialism and environmental racism. An example would be the 'Keep it up!' slogan propagated in the name of green growth. This type of green growth is made possible by switching to renewable energy also based on energy plants in the global south. This phenomenon now represents a major cause of land grabbing; not uncommonly of land that was being used as a commons. Also known by movements in the south as 'greed economy' (a pun on 'green economy'), the fact that this alignment is rejected by the degrowth movement shows that it provides an essential point of connection between north and south. In general, saving the world is not possible from the perspective of the 'omnipotent white eye', to use the phrasing of postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall (1989 [1981]: 159). Hall used this term to refer to the colonial mentality of knowing better about everything, because the Europeans always believed that they were 'further on'. This attitude is still widespread today, obviously not least in economic and environmental issues.

Thus, what we need is global networking. Selectively inviting specific intellectuals to events or to write articles is not enough. It's about being in exchange with the 'subalterns', the most marginalised groups, without reproducing hegemonies within these interactions. The World Social Forum has often been criticised of the latter, as the majority of those exchanging their views in the forum, even if they come from the global south, are academics, male, and *white*. But if it goes beyond the level of face-saving events, the north and south can learn a lot from each other.

Perhaps, through the struggles in the global south, the degrowth movement may begin to understand that post-growth does not have to be accompanied by sacrifice. When the Indian Adivasi fight for their right to live in the jungle instead of becoming IT experts —as per the explicit wishes of one government official—, this takes ideas about what constitutes wealth and what constitutes sacrifice, and turns them upside down. And as far as political

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mobilisation goes, there is another important lesson to be learned: it's not about money. For those who believe that the early stages of any movement necessarily involves a request for finance, this can be a crucial insight.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes Together!

For decades, the movements of the global south which remained, and remain, dissident, were those where a partially autonomous economic base secured the living conditions, yet also allowed for another way of living, and a different way of understanding the world. From this dynamic, spaces of another nature, 'peninsulas against the current' (Habermann 2009), are formed. Communities of this type enable potential alternatives to capitalism to be seen more clearly, as they can be tested through day-to-day living. Occasional Saturday demo supporters who otherwise live within a capitalist understanding of the world quickly forget how to think beyond this viewpoint. That is why it is important to create similar peninsulas in the north. These do not have to be stand-alone projects; they can be other ways of living and coexisting in the city, links to other people at work, or simply free-cycling networks on the Internet.

Although *Peoples Global Action* rejected lobbying, the struggle for political achievements on the legislative level might be useful. However, it will only become possible through a change in our common understanding. To this end, our efforts should not focus on demands, but on what David Graeber (who was active in *PGA* offshoots) defines as direct action: living in the here and now, the way we think is right.

My vision? A degrowth or post-development or buen-vivir or whatever-you-wanna-call-it movement, and an alter-globalisation or climate or whatever-you-wanna-call-it movement unite in the spirit of *Peoples Global Action* to create a new movement of movements which places both resistance and the reorganisation of day-to-day life at its heart. The caravans, the convergence centres (centres of activity) during the summit storms, the camps set up by *Occupy* and other such insurgent movements since 2010, and the current climate camps were, and are, examples of this. Without such subcultural 'peninsulas against the current', we cannot develop a broad-based movement. For this reason it is vitally important, not least for degrowth protagonists, to create areas of resistance where different experiences can be lived.

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Links and Literature

Links

Peoples Global Action (PGA; Acción Global de los Pueblos): www.agp.org

Applied as well as further literature

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