

NO BERKELEY, NO WOODSTOCK

Everybody should have demonstrated some time in their life; not doing so surely amounts to unbearable conformism. The trouble just now, of course, is the sheer absence of a good issue. The old ones warmed up once more are stale; they are already the agenda of some ministry. The good new ones ("free Napster"?) are hard to find and the rest might make you feel positively weird. Is that the problem with the anti-globalization protests? protests that now have become routine wherever the IMF and World Bank hold their meetings -- Seattle, Washington, Prague. On the surface these are sit-ins against globalization and big corporations, but is there more to it, perhaps even some deep moral message that should be a wake-up call to us all?

Monsieur Jove Bove, a French farmer (both parents are apparently U. of Berkeley graduates), made headlines when he hitched his tractor to the bright red roof of a McDonald establishment and drove off, roof included. He has since become an icon of the anti-globalization movement in France, a hero standing up against the one-haircut-fits-all view of globalization, against "malbouffe", against Americanization plain and simple. Condemned to 3 months of jail, he is on appeal and to judge from his sense for drama, he is sure to be heard of soon. Who does not chuckle at the gesture, particularly in the case of Big Macs?

Protests against globalization have become routine, but they have much less of a claim to message or importance than Mr. Bove's appeal. There was London where protesters took on the financial establishment which found itself barricaded in their offices but had the good humor to rain fake sterling bills on the occupation forces. There was Seattle, amazingly successful because of the formidably incompetent local police. And then there was Washington where the police had learned their lesson and gracefully offered protesters courtesy arrests for those activists who wished to build activists' credentials. Now we have had Prague, on more rounds of rioting against globalization and all its ills. On a day without rain, 10,000 will come and chain up in protest, just protest. They are a motley group with one thing in common: no to the status quo, no to those in power, no especially to big and greedy corporations.

There are environmentalists, anti-vivisectionists, anti-war activists, women's rights promoters, free-Tibet champions, gender advocates, anti-cheap labor practices volunteers, the save-the-Indians crowd. Animal rights promoters, and many more, including anarchists of course. Anti-globalization and anti-corporation is the tenuous common platform. (Start with www.Gatt.org and let yourself be carried on from there). It all comes in one great mass of protest without even an effort at coherence and message except this: we don't like what is going on and we want you to know. If it were not for the anarchists that organize the violence against Nike and McDonalds, who would mind? On the contrary, a world without protest and demonstrations would be frightening; how could we be sure we are not braindead?

There is nothing new in protest and demonstration, in going to the streets to be heard and to change the course of events. Certainly in the US, both the civil rights demonstrations

and the anti-war activities in the 1960s, starting with Berkeley's Freedom Park, were formidably important. They must be looked upon, by the participants and by anyone looking back, as a great moral crusade. The same has been true of the "Peace Now" demonstrations in Israel that carried a profound message and brought change. But, of course, not every demonstration is remembered as particularly useful.

What, after all, was the point of the Paris uprisings of 1968-- one remembers the authorities' "Tais-toi and sois jeune" and not exactly what it was all about. If it had anything to do so with the education system, it certainly did not change the ways of France; the system was useless then and it still is. And there was the glorious Woodstock, a mass gathering to do all the things you were taught not to do, things that would your parents' hair stand up, counterculture in the mud for 500,000 who soon graduated from hippies to corporate leaders, senators and judges. They succeeded loosening up America and give it a great lift; "if it works for you,..." is now the mind set and it surely was not before. Does the current round of demonstrations carry the seeds of anything wonderful like that?

For the rest, first and foremost, these demonstrations do not carry an agenda -- they carry a thousand and none. What does women's rights in Iran have to do with the IMF or the World Bank, what is the link between Mr. Kohler at the IMF and the practice of vivisection in medical research? Beyond their cafeteria, what does the IMF have to do with animal rights? Wasn't it US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers who put women's rights on the World Bank agenda ages ago? The grouping of a mass of issues in a single demonstration is new and powerful and that it is where it ends, a spectacle to watch but leave it at that. The activists want to be heard and seen, it is not nearly as important to actually accomplish a result. Indeed, beyond CNN coverage and a report on the website, possibly the good luck of an arrest, what might the result be? But they do have a vague coherence in their objection to globalization and corporations; that theme just keeps coming up over and over again. Is there something we should heed? First a word apart about the environmentalists.

The environmentalists' concerns today have wide resonance, far beyond a narrow green fringe. Yes, they are still there at the rallies, yes they are vocal. But they now have a big dilemma. They have succeeded beyond their wildest dream, their concerns have become the corporate agenda, and they are quite mainline to the point of being embarrassed about their fellow demonstrators from the fringe. Much of their time is occupied affirming that they are different, not extreme, not opposed to capitalism per se or even corporations for the most part. Without the environmental protests of two decades we would not have gotten there. Having become main line and corporate agenda, what to do next? Indeed, where is the corporation risking to be caught on a major environmental blunder -- bad for stockholder value, bad for management? Maybe the time has come for environmentalists to now change sides, leave Green Peace behind with the skinheads and anarchists and get a corporate job in environmental communications. The hippies of the 60s made the transition; just the same, the environmentalists might as well declare victory and move on.

Here is, of course, the area of deep, profound ignorance. Could it be that long after China concluded that markets do miracles and WTO as well as foreign corporations are good for jobs, the protesters are not getting the message? Could it be that their boredom with progress and prosperity in the world translates into an ignorant rebellion against those institutions and practices that, indeed, are creating gradually better conditions in all those countries that chose to play the globalization game? The World Bank, (www.worldbank.com) reluctantly-- because it would love to be totally eclectic--, has to confess: "globalization is good for the poor, growth is good for the poor, foreign direct investment is good for the poor."). They just missed one extra credo, this one a bit harder to swallow but still true: " the IMF is good for the poor."

Forever, young people have rebelled against a too-settled truth. As governments buy fully into the globalization agenda, the protesters are sending the message that prosperity alone is not enough of an agenda or, indeed, the wrong way. If they are so eager to do good, why are they not out there doing good? Why don't they join a Peace Corps, why are they not working in hospitals or in the slums of Peru or India? Why do they drop their beer cans and litter? If they love peace, why do they organize or accept violence? If they hate Nike, how come they wear them? Why don't they use their computer and organizational skills, so obvious from their websites, to target them to something other than useless protest? More likely than not, they are weekend activists and protesting is a past-time, a way of being connected, part of a movement, a little different from a Bologna Ducati Festival because of the moral pretense but in the end also less fun.

Protests without an agenda will run their course. Keep listening because, sometimes, there is an important message. In the meantime, the anti-corporation and anti-globalization diatribes are just ignorance. They are best overcome by a career job and some good economics. (In the authoritarian old days one would have said "have a hair cut and move on" but that is no longer the case since Harrison ford sports haircuts, Bill Gates is down on excessive hygiene, jeans and ponytails are *de rigueur* in first class on United Airlines to San Francisco.)

This is no Berkeley all about peace, no Woodstock where the young rebel against a stale culture and seek more freedom and a kind of fulfillment different from the past straightlaced and uptight mode of their parents. It is just dumb. Above all we must encourage our leadership not to elevate all this to the status of a meaningful partner in dialogue. Protest is an important force, sometimes it is all-important; much and most of this one, however, is just eccentric or worse. Lets just look the other way, schedule the IMF/World Bank meetings always in dull and rainy places, and above all move on.