Globalization and the "Place" of Politics in Contemporary Theory: A Commentary

THE TENDENCY TO UNDERSTAND the impact of globalization on political activism through such binary oppositions as "global" versus "local" and "space" versus "place" elides the processes through which these spatial categories and discourses are politically constructed and contested. By contrast, the political significance of place, far from being settled in the evolving global economy, is a hotly contested stake in contemporary struggles over the built environment. Through an ethnographic study of community activism in New York City, this paper demonstrates how elite claims about the global imperatives of capital accumulation are being challenged in so-called "local places."

BEGIN BY MAKING brief reference to a political conflict that I studied in New York City in 1994. The struggle was between activists in a working and middle-class African-American community and the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (PANYNJ). The Port Authority is a quasi-public agency which has far-reaching authority over the development and operation of transportation and commerce-related facilities, such as airports and bus terminals, in the bi-state region. At issue in the conflict was the Port Authority’s plan to build a $2.6 billion rail system or "people mover" that would provide a direct rail connection between the city’s two major airports in Queens, JFK and LaGuardia, and a passenger terminal that would be located in midtown Manhattan. For many travelers who have spent untold hours getting to and from airports around the country, this seemed to be a good idea. But for the people of East Elmhurst, Queens, where I worked, it was not a good idea. They opposed the people mover for three main reasons: First, the construction of the rail system in densely populated Queens would result in the disruption of daily life for years—traffic would be disrupted, construction materials would be stored in public places, and so on; second, once built, residents felt that the people mover would present...
not only an eyesore but also an environmental hazard, leading to a drop in property values; and third, due to a peculiar mechanism in the project’s funding, use of the people mover would be restricted to airport passengers. For example, Queens residents would not be allowed to use the people mover to travel to Manhattan. I’ll return to these issues below.

A Good Business Climate

To overcome this opposition in East Elmhurst and nearby neighborhoods, the Port Authority embarked on a public relations campaign to win political support for the system, a campaign that appealed to an all too familiar argument: New York City, officials contended, must today compete with other world cities in a “global economy.” And if the city is to compete successfully for capital investment and jobs, it must provide a “good business climate.” In a public relations newsletter, the Executive Director of the Port Authority sketched out this argument:

An executive from a national architectural firm was complaining to me the other day about the traffic-clogged highways around New York’s airports. Her single biggest complaint and source of stress is that travel time to and from the airport is completely unpredictable. She has missed flights, costing her company business. So she now schedules twice as much time to get to the airport as she thinks should be necessary. She doesn’t miss flights, but she wastes valuable time in a slow boil of irritation. Such frustrations can be an important force in persuading businesses to leave the area and keeping away businesses considering a move. Firms that have relocated from the New York area have said that poor access to airports is the second most important reason for leaving. The ripple effect from such losses hurts hotels, restaurants, shops and, in the end, virtually everyone who lives and works here (PANYNJ 1994).

This psycho-economic theory of capital flight, publicized through the media and parroted by elected officials, was used by the Port Authority to delegitimize opposition to the people mover. When local activists warned of the project’s environmental hazards, they were told that they were being short sighted and provincial, and not thinking globally. “You have to look at the bigger picture,” a Port Authority official told activists at one neighborhood meeting, gesturing with a sweep of her arm at an aerial photograph of New York City. When they argued that their exclusion from the people mover was unjust, they were threatened with the specter of widespread job losses. And when they presented the Port Authority
with alternative plans to address the problem of airport access—for example, plans that would make use of already existing mass transit lines—they were told that there just wasn’t time.

I begin with this all too abbreviated story to underscore a key argument of this paper, namely, that the interdependent discourses about globalization, the fiscal and regulatory weaknesses of the state and of the provincial bias of community based or, better, place-based forms of political activism are less descriptions of the way things really are, than strategic arguments for how capital would like them to be (see Fox Piven this volume). They are, within the context of land use politics in New York City, key components of a well-coordinated and potent political campaign that is being waged by capital and its allies to secure acquiescence, if not support for certain economic strategies and goals. At stake in this political campaign is a world view concerning the relationship of capital and people to space.

From the standpoint of people living in communities such as East Elmhurst, Queens it goes something like this:

1) We live in a global economy where capital has freed itself from the constraints of space by developing and utilizing new production processes and technologies; 2) As a result, cities, regions and nation-states are increasingly unable to regulate these processes; 3) And since these territorially-based political formations are weak, those who inhabit them are relatively powerless to resist globalization. We should therefore let capital do what it wants to do and somehow make the best of it. Unemployed workers should retrain and relocate; women with children should be removed from the welfare rolls, despite the absence of jobs and daycare; and people living in places such as East Elmhurst should let capital and its political cronies build or destroy whatever they want to for fear of losing a competitive edge in what Eric Hobsbawn has coined the “breathless transnationalism” of the global economy (1996).

In New York City and elsewhere, this hi-tech Malthusian argument has been used to win support and legitimacy for corporate tax breaks, the weakening of public authority over urban development, the dismantling of the social welfare system, as well as an intensification of policing directed at those very segments of the population who do not appear to be on the move in the new global economy—homeless people, the unemployed, black and Latino youth, and others. This discourse of globalization is also a deeply gendered and racialized one. For if the global economy is the space where capital, information, and people circulate with increasing speed and freedom, then the “inner-city” is it’s polar opposite. In this spatial imaginary of capital accumulation, the inner-city is a place where productive labor is locked up, or perhaps better stated immobilized by the so-called “cycle of welfare dependency.” We know this story all too well. Female-headed households lack male wage earners to provide income and, more important, patriarchal authority necessary for the social reproduction of disciplined labor. Lacking this domestic discipline, ghetto households...
produce women who have out-of-wedlock babies and men who commit crimes that feed off of and disrupt the "free" circulation of capital and goods.

Whereas the global economy is constructed as a space of productive movement, the inner city is imagined as a place of unproductive and, indeed, criminal stasis. At one end of the spectrum in this spatial imaginary is the figure of Bill Gates, a white man on the move, and, at the other, is the trope of the anonymous welfare mother, a black woman going nowhere. This is not to say that globalization is not occurring, or that people who live in places such as Southcentral L.A. or the South Bronx are not being locked out of these increasingly global circuits of labor, capital and commodities. What I do want to stress here is that globalization is being secured through a politics that relies on eminently ideological claims about the interrelation of capital, people and space.

The Global and the Local

Let me pause here to state, in a more programmatic way, the three related issues that I raise in this essay. First, I would like to take a critical look at how the concepts of the "global" and the "local" are being developed in contemporary social theory, particularly with respect to how theorists are imagining possibilities for political activism in the new world order. Specifically, I direct attention to what I read as a disturbing tendency to view myriad forms of resistance to global restructuring as "local," "place-bound," "reactive" and, perhaps even more damning today, as "identity-based." I argue that the tendency to imagine the politics of globalization through the binary oppositions, global vs. local, space vs. place, or the cosmopolitan vs. national or statist, obscures the processes through which these spatial categories and discourses are politically constructed and contested. Further, I suggest that this uneven geography of political agency is deeply racialized and gendered insofar as it typically constructs the global as an unmarked if not universal force of history. By contrast, the local is imagined as the space of the particular, of stasis, and of the racialized, gendered or otherwise marked subjects of identity politics. Second, I argue that the political significance of place, far from being settled in the evolving global economy, is a hotly contested stake in contemporary struggles over urban land use. I want to stress the interested and ideological quality of discourses about globalization and to demonstrate, from the perspective of grassroots activism, how claims about the global imperatives of flexible accumulation are being challenged in so-called local places. And here, in contrast to those who view globalization as inciting primordial attachments to place and particularist modes of identity politics, I examine some of the ways in which residents
of urban neighborhoods are reworking territorially-based constructions of political identity and interest. Finally, I conclude by saying something about the concept of hegemony and how it might be used to illuminate the political struggles associated with changing relations among people, space and power in the new world order.

Many contemporary assessments of the impact of globalization on collective action rest on two binary oppositions: the "global" and the "local" on the one hand, and "space" and "place" on the other. In these accounts, the global is constructed as the space of postindustrial or Post-Fordist capital accumulation where people, information and capital circulate, increasingly unfettered by the contingencies of locality—a "space of flows," as Manuel Castells (1989) put it. The local, by contrast, is imagined as a space of particularity and difference, where social groups react to and resist what David Harvey has called "the terror of time-space compression" (1989). They do this by investing space with meaning and by producing affective loyalties to particular places—in short, by constructing place-bound identities. "Oppositional movements," Harvey writes, "are generally better at organizing in and dominating place than they are at commanding space" (1993:24).

Now at first glance, this sounds reasonable, resonating as it does with the well-worn political aphorism, "Think globally and act locally." But Harvey's observation is more than a call to coalition-building, more than a suggestion that we coordinate our politics at the local level with global issues. For Harvey constructs an important analytic distinction between "place" and "space." Harvey, places are locations in space that have been invested with meaning and significance, whether by social groups fighting for lost jobs or by capitalists calculating labor costs within the global division of labor. However, since capital has overcome the barriers of specific places through technologies of time-space compression, capital accumulation is now occurring in, what might be described as a non-contingent or universalizing space; that is, in the long run, any place is as good as any other from the standpoint of capital. Capital can follow cheap labor around the globe from Manhattan to Tijuana, to Manila, and then back again to sub-legal sweatshops in Brooklyn.

Noting the concentration of power in multinational corporations and financial institutions, Harvey describes the impact of capital's mastery of space:

The exercise of this latter power has meant the destruction, invasion and restructuring of places on an unprecedented scale. The viability of actual places has been powerfully threatened through changing material practices of production, consumption, information flow and communication, coupled with the radical reorganization of space relations and of time horizons within capitalist development (1993:24).
According to Harvey, social groups react to this invasion and restructuring of places by re-investing them with meaning through practices of symbolic representation. This process of place construction empowers a sense of collective identity and rekindles “affective loyalties.” However, since capital accumulation is no longer bound by or accountable to any specific place, these place-bound loyalties and identities are not only politically ineffective, they are also largely defensive, exclusionary, and constitutive of what Harvey and others have called “communitarian politics.”

Manuel Castells, in his recent three-volume study, The Information Age, is even more explicit about the defensive and communalist tendencies of place-based politics. “For those social actors excluded from or resisting the individualization of identity attached to life in the global networks of power and wealth, cultural communes of religious, national, or territorial foundation seem to provide the main alternative for the construction of meaning in our society” (1997, II:65). Castells goes on to describe these cultural communes as “defensive reactions,” rather than “pro-active” movements, that function to provide “refuge and solidarity” in the midst of a “hostile, outside world.” This characterization of place-based politics as “defensive reactions” that provide “refuge” and “solidarity” strikes me as not only an under-theorized and simplistic way of representing the myriad forms of politics that are taking place in the world today, but also as a rather gendered and racialized way of speaking about political agency. For example, the juxtaposition of place as refuge, where affective loyalties are constructed, with space as a “hostile, outside world” that has been mastered by the logic of capital accumulation mimics the more familiar binary opposition between the “public” and “domestic” that has served to elide the political agency of women.

Geographer Doreen Massey, for one, has noted this symmetry. “The construction of ‘home’ as a woman’s place,” she writes, “has carried through into those views of place itself as a source of stability, reliability and authenticity. Such views of place, which reverberate with nostalgia for something lost, are coded female” (1994:180). After all, could we imagine for a moment calling the very place-bound efforts of developers in New York City to get tax breaks “communitarian politics”? or the LAPD’s campaign of brutality and intimidation a defensive reaction to globalization? Nonetheless, both Harvey and Castells appear oddly disposed to interpret the place-based response of social groups to global restructuring as defensive reactions. “Place-bound politics appeals,” Harvey concludes, “even though such a politics is doomed to failure” (1993:24).

It is not clear to me why identities and forms of politics that are articulated in places, whether they be nation-states, cities, or to use the “C” word, communities, should be so readily dismissed as defensive, reactive, communal and ultimately doomed. This interpretation appears to rest on two assumptions. The first is that capital has indeed freed itself
from particular places such that we can speak of place-based politics as a
defensive reaction to an “outside, hostile world.” The second assumption,
suggested by the curiously psychological language used to describe this
reaction, is that the political economy of globalization is somehow
illegible to people who are attached to specific places—illegible to such a
degree that their reactions take the form of communal yearnings for refuge
and solidarity.

One striking feature about the growing body of literature on
globalization and the politics of place is the virtual absence of
ethnographically-grounded studies of political activism in, pardon the
expression, real places. For example, in Harvey’s work, a rather nebulous
notion of a fragmentary, postmodernist identity politics is frequently
called into service to represent the pitfalls of territorially-based forms of
political activism. More generally, there is often a slippage between the
discourses and debates about identity politics and post modernism that
occur within the academy, and the ways in which social groups actually
interpret, experience and act upon their place-based interests and
identities, as Edmund Leach (1970) put it, “on the ground.”

An Ethnographic Approach

Before returning to my ethnographic work, I would like to flag
some of the reasons why an ethnographic approach is critical to
understanding the impact of globalization on the politics of place
and on the future of progressive social movements. First off, what people
call globalization embraces a disparate set of political, economic and
technological processes that are producing uneven and unstable effects
across equally distinct localities. Leaving aside the question of the
“newness” of globalization, it is quite clear that the various sectors and
functions of capital accumulation relate to, and are invested in space in
very different and uneven ways. For example, Michael Mann has pointed
out that globalization has occurred in finance, much more so than in
industry and trade. “The national bases of production and trade,” he
writes, “seem undiminished. Ninety percent of global production remains
for the domestic market” (1995:117). William Keller, director of MIT’s
Center for International Studies, put it more bluntly in the New York
Times:

What we have is U.S., European and Japanese corporations
trying to dress in global clothing. But if you conceive of
globalization as being the rootlessness of corporations, that is a
paradox. You don’t have corporations without states attached to
them. When they need help, you find out who they really belong
to (8 April, 1998: D1).
Globalization is not only proceeding unevenly, it is also a process fraught with antagonisms and conflicts among capitalists themselves. In New York City, with which I am most familiar, these various sectors of capital—finance, real estate, services and manufacturing—are continually at odds, competing with each other for the favors of the state, each dressed in its own peculiar global outfit. So despite the near teleological status that the notions of globalization and transnationalism have achieved in contemporary theory building, capital’s relations to space remain uneven, often contradictory, and hotly contested. Consequently, if we are to understand the impact of globalization on politics, we will have to look much more carefully at particular places.

Finally, people inhabiting particular places produce and sustain variegated attachments to space, attachments that implicate them, wittingly or unwittingly, in political relations, discourses and struggles that occur at geographical scales stretching well beyond the local—the arena of face to face relations. For example, most of the community-based groups that I have worked with are entangled in relationships and struggles with a motley assortment of federal, state and local government agencies, as well as national and transnational corporations. There is nothing “local” about their politics.

To tease out these issues, let me return to my case study of East Elmhurst’s struggle with the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey over the airport people mover. As I noted above, the Port Authority based its argument for the people mover (formally called the “Automated Guideway Transit System” or AGT) on the rather dubious claim that the city’s global competitiveness depended on the business community’s speedy access to the city’s airports. Port Authority officials also maintained that poor airport access was a key factor contributing to capital flight from the region. I must pause here to say something about the Port Authority, for though it may look like a public agency as distinct from, let’s say, “global capital,” it is not. Created by a treaty between the states of New York and New Jersey in 1921, The Port Authority is actually a corporate subsidiary of government and, having a distinct legal identity, is not subject to the control of the city’s oversight agencies. Like other public authorities (for example, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority), the Port Authority is not subject to the city’s budget processes and can raise and spend money free of many of the city’s rules and laws governing personnel management, contracting, and project approvals (Danielson and Doig 1982). “For decades,” one researcher observed, “authorities have had considerably more influence over the physical and economic shape of the city than the City Planning Commission, the city council and the line departments of city government” (Hauck-Walsh 1990:197). The Port Authority is governed by twelve commissioners, appointed by the governors of New York and New Jersey. Though these commissioners are drawn from both the public and private sector, banking, finance and real estate interests are strongly represented by the
commission. For example, the current chairman of the Port Authority’s board of Commissioners is a former partner of Goldman Sachs & Co. and the founder of Granite Capital International Group, an investment management company based in New York City. Due to its peculiar legal identity and to the fact that the Port Authority does not depend on public tax revenues, it is virtually unaccountable to the public. Only the governors of New York and New Jersey, acting in concert, can veto Port Authority projects.

Now within, let’s call them, “local communities,” the AGT provoked stiff resistance. I worked primarily in East Elmhurst, a working- and middle-class African American neighborhood that borders on LaGuardia Airport, one of the two destinations of the people mover. In the Port Authority’s plan, the AGT would originate at a central terminal at 59th Street in Manhattan, cross a bridge into Queens, and continue “in an elevated condition” (as officials put it) east to LaGuardia Airport. For the East Elmhurst section of its route, the elevated tracks would follow the Grand Central Parkway along the shore of Flushing Bay. Resistance to the AGT in East Elmhurst was fluid and complex, and cannot be captured adequately by such notions as “place-bound,” “reactive,” or “communitarian.” This complexity is worth unpacking a bit here.

Much of the opposition to the AGT in East Elmhurst focussed on its expected environmental impact. Block and civic associations had earlier fought with the Port Authority over a number of airport-related issues, such as the expansion of airport parking lots and runways, and the scheduling and routing of airport traffic at LaGuardia Airport (see Gregory
In these struggles, activists in East Elmhurst had often worked in coalitions with white civic associations in nearby communities, such as Jackson Heights, stressing the shared environmental hazards posed by noise, jet exhausts, as well as the pollution of Flushing Bay. From this standpoint, activists argued that the construction of the AGT would enable the Port Authority to increase traffic at LaGuardia, thereby aggravating pollution problems.

Race also figured prominently in East Elmhurst’s response to the AGT. Residents felt that East Elmhurst had already accommodated a disproportionate share of undesirable facilities such as publicly-sponsored homeless shelters and group homes, as well as privately-owned hotels and topless bars. Drawing on a long history of civil rights activism around land-use issues, residents argued that the AGT proposal was but another attempt to “dump” a disagreeable and potentially hazardous land use project on an African-American community. They viewed the AGT proposal as an issue of racial justice. However, activists were well aware of the political limitations and pit-falls associated with mobilizing either on the basis of the local environment or on the basis of a race-based concept of justice. An environmental approach, focusing on neighborhood quality of life issues, would enable coalition-building with like-minded block and civic groups in nearby white communities. But such appeals to the proximate environment would not muster the political force necessary to challenge the Port Authority’s macroeconomic claims about the global economy. Alternatively, a racial justice approach would deepen opposition to the AGT within the African American community but risk alienating white civic groups. In practice, these alternatives were more complex than I am representing them here, and activists working through block and civic associations, and ad-hoc community alliances exercised multiple critiques of the AGT. But what I do want to emphasize is that this problem of organizing along multiple axes of difference and at various sociospatial scales was very much on their minds. For example, an African-American block association leader explained to me her early misgivings about adopting a reactive “not-in-my-back-yard” or NIMBY approach to resistance:

I heard this same rhetoric among my neighbors, over and over again: “We don’t need this; we don’t want this.” But nothing to support why the AGT shouldn’t be. I thought that we needed some hard evidence to fight the AGT, rather than simply taking an emotional stand. I felt that the Port Authority would listen to that more carefully than to neighborhoods just saying, “Not in my backyard” as an emotional stand. Because that’s how the Port Authority would like it to be. If we just say, “Hey, it’s our neighborhood, we don’t want this,” it becomes a NIMBY thing—that communities don’t want anything new in their neighborhoods. And that’s not true.
By hard evidence, the activist was referring to technical, economic and planning data about the AGT and, more generally, the city’s transportation and economic development needs. To address this need, block and civic associations in East Elmhurst contacted three city-wide, not-for-profit advocacy groups for technical assistance—the New York City Environmental Justice Coalition, the New York Public Information Research Group and the Advocates for Transportation Alternatives. This outreach to organizations that were addressing environmental and transportation issues within the wider context of the region’s political economy provided activists with resources to re-articulate “backyard” interests in the technical and systems-focussed discourse of urban planning and, equally important, as issues of regional, rather than local economic justice. Stressing the empowering quality of this regional overview, a civic association activist told me:

I know that the Port Authority wasn’t happy with us having those people in, our technical assistance. Because it escalated the issue. You know, it gave it a new dimension which I don’t think they were really expecting us to have. The Port Authority thought that it was going to be the same old N-I-M-B-Y.

Here I stress the fact that people inhabit and exercise heterogeneous and far from stable political identities, subject positions that are embedded in multiple spatial and temporal fields. Spatial, insofar as activists in East Elmhurst organized and exercised their political identities in relation to power arrangements and discourses operating at different spatial scales, ranging from block club politics, with its emphasis on property values, to city-wide environmental justice activism, stressing coalition-building in relation to the region’s spatial and political economy. And I stress temporal because, through social practices of memory, activists recollected and reworked the significance of earlier political struggles, modes of collective organizing and constructions of political identity.

During the course of East Elmhurst’s struggle with the Port Authority, it was precisely this spatial and temporal plasticity, the instability of these place-based identities, that was the target of the Port Authority’s attempt to disable resistance to the people mover; that is, whereas activists worked to build coalitions by stressing regional environmental and urban planning concerns, Port Authority officials and their boosters acted to fragment opposition and disable resistance by not only funneling resistance through local or “place bound” political venues, but also by inciting activists to formulate and pursue their wider and generalizable interests within the bureaucratically defined frontiers of “local community.” From the standpoint of activists in East Elmhurst, the struggle with the Port Authority was above all a struggle over the politics of identity; that is, a struggle that would be won or lost over the capacity to define or, better, articulate the sociospatial reach of opposition to the AGT.

I will present this struggle over political identity in a rather schematic
form, leaving out much of the thick description. Instead, I will highlight three “modalities” of hegemonic practice, that is, three distinctive configurations of practices, procedures and discourses that were used by the Port Authority and its boosters to secure public support for the AGT. What makes these modalities distinct is that they implicate different networks of power relations, operate at different spatiotemporal scales (real and imagined) and, importantly, they incite distinct forms of resistance and compliance. I focus on the practices of the Port Authority, rather than of activists, because I want to emphasize the role that capital, working through the state, plays in producing and disciplining “local identities.”

Mass-mediated Public Relations: Macroeconomic Authority

East Elmhurst first got wind of the Port Authority’s plan to build the airport AGT through newspaper reports. During the course of the struggle, Port Authority officials used the press to construct macroeconomic authority for the project by arguing that the AGT was key to ensuring the city’s competiveness in the increasingly “global economy.” Through a constant stream of press releases aimed at the city’s four major dailies, Port Authority officials shaped both the content and the narrative structure of the AGT story. For example, Port Authority officials and their allies attempted to present the AGT as an environment-friendly project by claiming that it would reduce airport-related vehicular traffic in Queens. Though these claims were later proved to be spurious, press accounts heralding an expected decline in traffic congestion and air pollution in Queens created the impression that there was widespread grassroots support for the AGT in Queens. This latter claim, endlessly repeated by elected officials, rendered Queens-based resistance to the people mover relatively invisible and undermined possibilities for coalition building among groups in Manhattan and Queens who opposed the project.

In other cases, the Port Authority manipulated the press in more blatant ways as part of this divide-and-conquer strategy. For example, while civic groups in East Elmhurst and surrounding communities were still in the process negotiating with officials, the Port Authority leaked a bombshell to the press. The press release, routed through the Queens Borough President’s office, announced that East Elmhurst and the Port Authority had reached a compromise agreement, despite the fact that negotiations were still in their infancy. Though blatant dis-information, the compromise story appeared in two newspapers and convinced many activists working in areas adjacent to East Elmhurst (Astoria, for example) that the latter had “sold out” to the Port Authority. This not only further
Community Outreach and Negotiation: Divide and Conquer

Key to the Port Authority's strategy of managing resistance was an aggressive policy of community outreach, conducted by the Port Authority's Airport Access Program—a team of so-called, neighborhood "specialists." During the project's planning phase, this Airport Access team held "scoping" meetings in each of the eight or so community boards that would be affected by the project. The purpose of these meetings, Port Authority officials claimed, was to keep residents informed about the project and solicit ongoing public comment. These scoping meetings and the Port Authority's broader strategy of community outreach served, in a number of ways, to fragment community opposition by encouraging or, perhaps better stated, inciting activists to experience their interests and identities in both local and depoliticized terms. First, these outreach meeting were held exclusively with community boards. These boards are government-sponsored, citizens' committees which exercise limited advisory power over zoning, land use and public service issues. The administrative boundaries of these local boards do not correspond with popularly accepted neighborhood boundaries (East Elmhurst, for example) or with the catchment areas of any of the local civic associations. By holding separate meetings and negotiations with each of the community boards, rather than with the community-based civic groups and coalitions that were opposing the AGT, the Port Authority worked to fragment opposition by encouraging activists to experience and act on their political identities through bureaucratically-defined, sociospatial units.

People were well aware that the Port Authority was using a strategy of "divide and conquer." At a mass community meeting, an African-American civic activist warned representatives from neighboring civic associations:

What the Port Authority is doing is divide and conquer. One group gets one bit of information, which is not correct, or only half-baked. Another gets another bit of information. The Port Authority is hoping that we will not come together and that we won't understand what the other person is doing. This is their approach. All of us have to get together. This way we can make an impact. Otherwise, we're not gonna get anywhere.
In its meetings with individual community boards, Port Authority officials worked to govern deliberation and debate about the AGT's systemic impact by focusing discussion on micro-technical and environmental problems that would be encountered in each individual community board. For example, activists in East Elmhurst had raised concerns about vibration and noise pollution that the people mover would generate. While ignoring wider issues concerning the AGT's technical and economic feasibility, the Port Authority dispatched a team of engineering consultants who, supported by an arsenal of technical drawings, feasibility studies and scale models, scheduled endless meetings in East Elmhurst to discuss solutions to the AGT's noise and vibration problem, such as "the rubber wheel, noise suppression option" and the "electromagnetic field, train suspension option." A similar strategy was pursued by the Port Authority in other community boards. This narrow framing of the AGT's impact within a discourse of "techno-possibility" served to obscure or, better stated, displace regional environmental and social justice concerns that were shared by Queens communities across the boundaries of community. It also depoliticized debate about the AGT by taking, as Dreyfus and Rabinow put it, "what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science" (1983:196).

Public Review: Managing Dissent

The Port Authority's aggressive public relations campaign and community outreach strategy succeeded in both weakening and fragmenting resistance to the AGT. The PR campaign, carried out largely through the print media, constructed an imagined "global economy" within which New York's economic problems—unemployment, deindustrialization, capital flight and so on—could be solved by making it easier for corporate executives to get to the airport. Moreover, the campaign framed opposition to the AGT as "local," "community-based," "reactive" and as otherwise out of step with the imperatives of globalization. The Port Authority's community outreach team, on the other hand, went out looking for "local communities." And, when it did not find them, manufactured or interpellated them by compelling activists to negotiate through officially sanctioned political venues and by responding aggressively, and positively, to political demands expressed in the name of "local community." During the course of this process, the Port Authority negotiated separate agreements with each of the community boards in Queens that would be affected by the AGT, including East Elmhurst. The transneighborhood coalition fell apart. And since East Elmhurst had won a number of significant
concessions, including a commitment to bury the AGT in a tunnel for the East Elmhurst portion of its route, activists in surrounding areas were resentful. At a meeting of a white civic association in nearby Jackson Heights, for example, an enraged block association president charged, “This is affirmative action! If we were a black community we would get a tunnel too!”

With community agreements in hand, the Port Authority completed its plan for the AGT. Although broad-based resistance to the AGT had been disabled, its opponents remained optimistic. The Port Authority’s plan would still have to go through a process of state and federal review. By law, the AGT proposal would have to be subjected to an environmental impact review. The draft version of the review, or Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), would then be presented to the public for comment. Only on approval of the DEIS by the Federal Aviation Administration and by the New York State Department of Transportation would the Port Authority be allowed to proceed. Activists in East Elmhurst and elsewhere believed that a review of the proposal by state and federal authorities would afford them the opportunity to raise wider or regionally-based arguments about the AGT’s feasibility and environmental impact—issues that stretched beyond the local concerns that had been negotiated with the Port Authority’s “outreach team.”

To make a long story short, the FAA and the Department of Transportation did hold public hearings on the AGT’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement. Activists from all over Queens turned out in record numbers. However, their ability to be heard was severely compromised by the hearing process itself. First of all, the 1,550 page technical document was released to the public only one week before the hearing was to take place making it impossible for activists to prepare expert testimony. Second, public testimony was limited to five minutes per speaker, which made it impossible for speakers to situate the question of the AGT within a broader critique of the Port Authority’s claims about the global economy or about the feasibility of the plan. Finally, the format of the hearing disallowed the public questioning of Port Authority officials and technical consultants.

To summarize, the Port Authority’s practices of managing resistance were effective in shaping the terms and trajectories of neighborhood opposition, inciting the formation of local, place-bound constructions of identity and interests, and imbuing certain courses of action with macroeconomic authority and technical necessity. To these ends, the Port Authority and its allies exercised various modalities of hegemonic practice to command the multiple sites in the public sphere where social meanings are publicly elaborated, contested and communicated. I use the words hegemonic practice here not to stress the role played by these modalities in constituting a dominant “world view,” but rather to highlight their role in disabling the public articulation and exercise of alternative constructions of place-based collective identity.
The making of hegemony relies precisely on these diverse and multi-sited practices of governing public deliberation and dissent. What makes the hegemonic process effective is less its “taken for grantedness” or coherence as a belief system than its capacity to command the social processes through which meanings are publicly articulated, communicated and invested with contextual authority and social legitimacy. Hegemony works less on the hearts and minds of the disempowered than on their ability to articulate and exercise political identities that are able to muster the social force necessary to change the order of things. In short, hegemony is the power to make and remake political subjects. But no hegemonic bloc is seamless. Corona-East Elmhurst’s struggle against the Port Authority did not end in defeat. Over the longue durée, grassroots opposition took its toll, forcing the Port Authority to constantly remodel its plans, parry negative publicity and expend a great deal of political capital in assembling support for the project. Equally important, there were key disagreements among the forces of capital over how best to “be global.” The airline industry argued that the AGT money would better be spent renovating airport terminals. Real estate and corporate advocacy groups argued that the AGT’s Manhattan terminal was not located in the “real” Central Business District, although there was little agreement over where it actually was. And finally, the newly elected Republican governor of New York State, George Pataki, decided that the AGT project was too costly in an age of fiscal austerity.

To conclude, I have found it both curious and troubling that much of what is being said about globalization and about the political significance of place in the academy sounds disturbingly similar to what capital is saying about itself to people who live in communities such as East Elmhurst. They are told by corporations and public authorities that they must subordinate their concerns about the environment, about the loss of jobs, about the lack of revenue for public services and so on, because they live in a global economy where cities, regions and nation-states must compete for the favors of capital on the move. And when they do organize and resist, they are told by these same authorities that they are reacting from narrow, “backyard” interests, or “being divisive,” or merely reflecting “special interests.” I think that we as social scientists must be a great deal more critical about this story that capital is telling about itself; for it is a story that is both enabling and legitimizing a politics of globalization which we would do well to recognize is far from settled.

We have come too close to viewing globalization as an end of the millennium fait accompli, celebrated by some through the reading of postmodernity’s now tiresome ironies of dislocation, juxtaposition and hybridity, and trumpeted by others as the end of politics, at least in any recognizable form. At the level of theory, this fetishization of the global, of the “space of flows,” of “time-space compression” or whatever we want to call it smacks of structuralism, a standpoint from which the significance and transformative potential of what happens in any particular place is
already overdetermined by a universal and relatively contingent-free, elementary structure. And in the growing corpus of myths about the global economy, it is the bankers, the developers, the corporate CEOs and the web masters who have become the universal and unmarked subjects of history, and the masters of time and space. We should not let them get away with it.

Epilog

On June 1, 1995, George Marlin, the Port Authority's executive director, announced that the proposed twenty-two-mile AGT plan was “dead” (New York Times, 1 June, 1995:A1). Marlin, appointed by newly elected Governor George Pataki, cited soaring cost estimates for the AGT as a prime reason for scrapping the original plan. Port Authority officials feared that the AGT's cost, now estimated at $5 billion, could not be raised from the airport tax as first claimed and would require massive public subsidization. One year later, the Port Authority's board of directors approved a new, smaller scale plan for an elevated, light rail airport access system which would bypass LaGuardia Airport. Under the $1 billion plan, an 8.4-mile rail link would be built between Kennedy Airport and the Long Island Railroad's Jamaica Station in Queens (New York Times, 11 May, 1996:24). In this proposal, LaGuardia Airport would be served by a high speed ferry system departing from Manhattan’s East Side which would be developed through a separate project (FAA/NYSDOT 1996). “It is a first step,” George Marlin told Newsday. “There is minimal community opposition. The money is available. The technology is available. We have to focus in getting it off the drawing boards” [sic] (14 May, 1996:A5).

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