



## Book Review

# Expose, Oppose, Propose: Alternative Policy Groups and the Struggle for Global Justice

Carroll, William K. (2016). Black Point, NS: Fernwood Publishing. ISBN 9781552668344 (paper) CA\$25.00; ISBN 9781552668351 (e-book) CA\$25.99. 224 pages.

RAWAN ABDELBAKI

York University, Canada

In an era where terms like “alternative facts” and “post-truths” have become prosaic, William K. Carroll’s book, *Expose, Oppose, Propose: Alternative Policy Groups and the Struggle for Global Justice*, is a timely intervention in a plethora of debates on the politics of knowledge production *vis-à-vis* transformative and sustainable praxis. The book is comprised of eight chapters, three of which are co-authored: chapter 2 (with Elaine Coburn) and chapters 3 and 5 (with J. P. Sapinski). Written for scholars, students, and activists, the book offers a strong theoretical and empirical account of Transnational Alternative Policy Groups (TAPGs) as new epistemic agents of change in the current transnational neoliberal historical bloc. In essence, this work can be read as a defiant conversation against the spectres of the infamous Thatcherite maxim, *there is no alternative*, through which she had declared the eternal victory of neoliberal capitalism. Carroll posits that while much scholarly production has revolved around recent waves of episodic popular resistances, little attention has been paid to the actual work that is being done within global civil society to both produce and mobilize alternative knowledge and policy. It is precisely this gap that Carroll sets out to address in his book, as well as the extent to which TAPGs are able to unite an incipient global left. The text straddles a number of themes that have occupied multi-disciplinary social scientific research, including transnationalism, social movements and solidarity, critical development studies, civil society, and the politics and social organization of knowledge. The book addresses these themes by distinguishing the work done by TAPGs

*Correspondence Address:* Rawan Abdelbaki, Department of Sociology, York University, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3; Email: rawan88@yorku.ca

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from the activism of social movements, right wing think-tanks' alternative knowledge production in service of the state, the master-frames used by various states, and NGOs' counter-hegemonic engagements with various issues across North-South divides.

Theoretically, the book is firmly grounded in the political thought of scholar-activist and Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, whose key concepts are creatively woven through the whole of Carroll's analysis. Empirically, the book is based on rigorous data collected over four years of field research, and comprised of interviews with 91 participants who serve as the protagonists in Carroll's expansive study. Carroll's investigation focuses on 16 TAPGs from across the world.<sup>1</sup> Selected from a larger sample, these 16 groups fit three overarching criteria. First, their primary mandate is to *expose* existing injustices and contradictions within global neoliberal capitalism, *oppose* its legitimating narratives and *propose* viable alternatives to it. Second, they all take up transnational issues and seek to address transnational counterpublics. Third, they engage with a wide range of issues rather than specializing in a niche problem.

As important civil society actors, TAPGs are "groups that, in dialogue with transnational publics and movements, produce evidence-based knowledge that critiques hegemonic practices and perspectives, and promotes alternatives" (p. 7). They are collective organic intellectuals and interlocutors of an emergent counter-hegemonic bloc against the dual crises of global neoliberal capitalism and rapid ecological degradation. In reference to these mutually constitutive crises, Carroll asserts that the "left" has failed to seize capitalism's moment of crisis, particularly in light of the Great Recession of 2008. Capitalism triumphs in a socio-cultural and political vacuum that is devoid of sustained and persuasive alternatives, a historical moment of stasis and paralysis of a truly *global* resistance. Although not concerned with identifying the specific weaknesses of today's left, Carroll argues that TAPGs' promise for resisting neoliberal capitalism lies in their ability to

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<sup>1</sup> These 16 TAPGs include the following: *Transnational Institute* (TNI), established in 1974 and based in Amsterdam; *Third World Forum* (TWF) founded in Dakar in 1975; *Tricontinental Centre* (CETRI) which was created in 1976 and based in Belgium; *Centre de Recherche et d'Information pour le Développement* (CRID) initiated in 1976 and headquartered in Paris; Delhi-based *Participatory Action Research in Asia* (PRIA) which was started in 1982; *Third World Network* (TWN) born in 1984 in Penang, Malaysia; *Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era* (DAWN) also created in 1984, initially in Bangladesh but now based in Manila; *Third World Institute/Social Watch* (ITeM/SW) which started in 1989 and based in Montevideo, Uruguay; *Rosa Luxemburg Foundation* (RosaLux) established in Berlin in 1990, now with several international offices; *International Forum on Globalization* (IFG) formed in 1994 and based in San Francisco; *Focus on the Global South* (Focus) founded in Bangkok in 1995; *Network Institute for Global Democratization* (NIGD) formed in Helsinki, Finland in 1997; also established in 1997 is *People's Plan Study Group* (PPSG) in Tokyo; *Centre for Civil Society* (CCS), created in 2001 in Durban, South Africa; *Alternative International* (Alter-Inter) born in Montreal in 2005; *India Institute for Critical Action: Centre in Movement* (CACIM) formed in 2005 in New Delhi.

propose global and plausible alternatives to destabilize its hegemony in an increasingly recalcitrant social, economic, and political milieu.

Although not entirely dismissive of recent modes of popular resistance, the author is critical of the omnipresence of anarchist currents of episodic, small-scale, single-issue movements, arguing that such anarchist stances misconstrue “the state as simply an instrument of oppression, rather than a complex terrain of struggle” (p. 24). Disparaging in his views on localism and the “politics of exit” – a vision of a new emergent society “blossoming from a decentralized counterculture created by those who have escaped capitalism” (p. 26) – Carroll does manage persuasively to assert that such modes of organizing and their revolutionary momentum could not reverberate globally. Localized forms of resistance are limited in their reach because they fail to counteract the dispossession and displacement of communities who lack the resources to combat the very power structures that manufacture subalternity.

In this critique of anarchism, Carroll nonetheless eschews overly state-centric approaches to social change, and instead argues that the state is only one of many terrains of struggle and transformation. Resistant protest politics are significant, for they reveal localized grievances, but counter-hegemonic politics elaborate on those articulations by “clarifying what is at stake” within them (p. 211). Following Gramsci, Carroll conveys that it is precisely within the co-constitutive fields of both civil society and the political state (which together form the *integral state*, or the “state” as we know it) that TAPGs work to realize a vision of *justice globalism*. Here, justice globalism is conceptualized as restorative and redistributive social justice, equality and equity, universal economic, social, and cultural rights, global solidarity of social movements, participatory democracy, transnational transformative change “from below,” and sustainable ecologies.

Contra conventional (right-wing) think tanks whose role it is to advise political and corporate entities, TAPGs engage in strategic, long-term construction of a counter-hegemonic vision supported by viable, persuasive alternative policies. As political agents that move beyond the centre-left position in the *war of position*, TAPGs can thus be conceived of as “think tanks of the left” (p. 8). Unlike transnational social movements whose tactical knowledge production practices emerge in tandem with their collective action, TAPGs operate dialogically within networks of critical social movements and subaltern peoples and communities, and at a distance from states and corporate elites (p. 8). The counter-hegemonic work and translation of theory into practice by TAPGs is what Carroll refers to as *alternative knowledge production and mobilization* (alt KMP) or cognitive praxis.

Yet, the distance that TAPGs maintain from the state is not absolute, as Carroll and Elaine Coburn elucidate in the second chapter of the text. TAPGs must rely on “master frames” that shape the ways in which they work with social movements, counterpublics, subaltern communities and general publics, as well as their communicative strategies with “targets” such as the mainstream media, the state, and intergovernmental bodies. This is especially

the case for TAPGs that tend to be heavily involved with existing hegemonic institutions (such as UN-sponsored and intergovernmental initiatives), and thus have to operate within what Carroll refers to as the “critical liberal” frame. In this discursive frame, abstinence from offering a critique of capitalist relations enables some TAPGs to speak the language of the mainstream while retaining a deep connection to grassroots movements; they remain critical, however, as they expose the differential distribution of supposedly universal human rights. Conversely, those that operate with a frame that lies “to the left of liberalism” engage in a direct critique of capitalism, with some confining their radical political economic critique to a national scope, and others taking on the inherent injustice of global transnational capitalism. Carroll’s discussion of framing is particularly compelling as it reveals the challenges that TAPGs must confront when they engage in alt KPM which must necessarily entail a “double address” to both counterpublics and the mainstream general public; that is, they are “intermediary dialogical spaces” (p. 45). Through the use of master frames, TAPGs can thus begin to build ideological convergence towards the realization of justice globalism, which can then enhance their ability to form a “movement of movements” within a global civil society network.

Carroll’s book illustrates that the constitution of a global counter-hegemonic bloc hinges on the degree to which TAPGs are embedded within the global civil society network, and their ability to spatially mediate between global North and global South. Carroll and Sapinski’s network analysis in the third chapter of the book reveals that while TAPGs are not yet central actors within a geographically-dispersed global civil society (which includes international NGOs), they serve a key *integrative* role. This mapping of global civil society actors also reveals that Northern-based TAPGs tend to be more regionally “introverted” and less likely to create North-South linkages (with the exception of TNI and RosaLux). Conversely, Southern TAPGs are both extroverted when they work towards bridging the North-South divide, and introverted when they actively solidify South-South connections. This latter move, Carroll avers, is “integral to any postcolonial global left” (p. 82). Within this global network, TAPGs must also work to avoid the risk of NGOization and take preventative measures to keep from becoming subsumed by and within hegemonic institutions when confronted with the precarity of funding for their counter-hegemonic praxis. The taming effect of the professionalization of activism that takes place particularly within mainstream “service-NGOs” – whose work is delimited by what funders deem to be the most popular at a given time – is something many of Carroll’s protagonists reject. One way some of them attempt to overcome the facile binary between NGO/movement is by viewing the global network of civil society as a *mosaic left* “composed of many movements and organizational forms” (p. 132). In so doing, TAPGs may choose to align with “citizen-based” NGOs that take on stronger political stances and analyses.

One of the most compelling findings of Carroll's analysis is how TAPGs serve as vehicles of cultural diffusion or spaces of encounter that link otherwise unacquainted sets of subaltern principles across various communities in variegated geographical spaces. One such example is the principle of *beun vivir*, which enshrines a commitment to harmony with nature, and that originates in Latin America, but finds a counterpart in Indigenous communities in the Philippines (p. 160), a discovery that TAPGs activist-scholars are able to mobilize in order to create a healthy degree of convergence around common goals. Not to be confused with homogenization, Carroll relays TAPG protagonists' commitment to *subsidiarity* wherein the contents (or the *what*) of a movement need not to engulf the *how* (or the form) through which transformation may occur.

Implicit within Carroll's analysis is a subtle and potentially controversial critique of the ways in which subalternity has been taken up within postcolonial literature, asserting that the simple inversion of the colonial epistemic hierarchy that uncritically valorizes non-Western knowledges ultimately fails to capture the concrete reality of TAPGs' cognitive praxis, and more importantly, the injustices and exploitation that the excluded and the repressed continue to endure (p. 210). Thus, as TAPGs create new conditions of possibility that genuinely incorporate local subjugated knowledges, the subaltern can and does speak. A close reading of Carroll's text also reveals that the heavy reliance of TAPGs on Indigenous epistemologies – including aforementioned *buen vivir* and *ubuntu* (a South African ethic of mutual reciprocity) – form a formidable part of a counter-hegemonic politics that necessarily entails a decolonization of knowledge.

Though written with a cautious optimism and a realistic idealism, what remains wanting in Carroll's analysis is the role of the state – a terrain of struggle that he rightly refuses to cede – and its contemporary technologies of surveillance and other forms of violence that target the subalterns, including the multiplicity of the vulnerable as well as the activists with whom TAPGs dialogical practices take place. The violence of labour, citizenship, and border regimes, as well as the rise of the carceral state and its subsequent expansion of immigration detention centres that confine bodies (specifically those of migrant workers) to zones of permanent precarity, immiseration, and unfreedom are some examples of the state's ability to effectively eviscerate the communities with which TAPGs' operate dialogically. Ultimately, it will be up to the reader to decide whether and how the *war of position* that is waged by TAPGs can protect their own existence and shield their constituents and grassroots partners from the potential of the state's *war of manoeuvre*.