Introduction

In the middle and late 1990s, a trend toward ‘cross-border, cross-movement’ organizing, in many parts of the world, has become visible. Though what are arguably the strongest movements presently active around the globe – those of a religious or ‘ethnic’ nature – do not participate in these developments, these initiatives represent a new type of political action that has important implications. They are beginning to negotiate the limits created by national frontiers and the boundaries between social movements that have historically constrained their actions. More importantly, because many of the groups which participate in these initiatives do not share the epistemological bases of modernity, the existence of different worldviews must (or at least should) be confronted. In these situations, the dominance, or hegemony, of the modern epistemology can be brought into question.

What can be presently observed in the field of international organizing is an increased cross-movement co-ordination as well as a greater focus on regional and ‘global’ efforts that is a response to global economic restructuring and both the regionalization and the globalization of the world economy that this entails. These initiatives involve a number of interchanges between ‘advocacy movements’ led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), ‘livelihood movements’ and some strands of organized labour.

The principal reasons for this convergence are the marginalization of much of the world population through continued global neoliberal restructuring; an increasing frustration on the part of many NGOs regarding their new and contradictory roles; and the continued weak bargaining position of labour unions that organize alone and only on...
a national level. By the late 1990s, these three factors were already established facts and different forms of ‘cross-border, cross-movement’ organizing were being tested.

The newest factor to enter into these alliances is the presence of many diverse groups that do not necessarily subscribe to modern conceptions of ‘liberalism’, ‘Marxism’, ‘radical democracy’, or ‘civil society’. While these groups are active in the present forms of international organizing, they are marginalized within the new initiatives, recognized but still outside the mainstream of discussions. Thus while women, indigenous people and other ‘others’ are invited to participate, it is usually understood that they act as specific groups, with group-specific goals, not easily integrated into the ‘political’ and ‘economic’ issues which are almost always seen as most important and somehow separable from those of the ‘others’.

A key factor in the recent growth in the strength and capacity of these various organizations and networks is improved technology which permits more rapid transfer of information. This change could be observed in the solidarity and human rights movements during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s that used first fax and then e-mail both to pass information among themselves and as a means of putting immediate pressure on state and interstate actors regarding concrete and urgent actions. These technological innovations have vastly changed the possibilities for international organizing, particularly in situations where public outcry can have the effect of changing state policy. The quick passing of information among NGOs and other organizations also simplifies the definition of common positions for lobbying purposes (Lins Ribiero, 1998: 341). The new technologies also speed up the availability of counter-information which can be used to counteract false (or the absence of) reporting in mainstream news services.

Access to this new technology tends to reflect already existing relations of power, both internationally and within organizations – particularly in the poorer parts of the world (Lins Ribiero, 1998: 342). However, in those few contexts where all have relatively equal access to technology, it can make for a more horizontal sharing of information among organizers and movement members.

At the same time, the use of e-mail and the Internet reinforces the tendencies toward individualization within modern societies, allowing each person to take political action from his or her home or worksite, without the need for any ‘personal’, human interchange. This trend builds upon the already existing ‘membership organizations’ cum social movements developed in the US and expanded to Europe which consist