The following roundtable discussion took place via email between September 2009 and January 2010. The participants were invited on the basis of each having a unique disciplinary background – history, sociology and political theory – but at the same time enough in common to debate both the analytic and normative dimensions of transnational militancy. Faisal Devji is currently Reader in Modern South Asian History at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford. His most recent book is The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics. Prof. Kevin McDonald is Marie Curie International Fellow in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His most recent book, Our Violent World: Terrorism in Society, is being published April, 2010. Saul Newman is Reader in Political Theory, also at Goldsmiths College. Saul is known for his work on ‘postanarchist’ theory, but also recently co-authored a book with the title Politics Most Unusual: Violence, Sovereignty and Democracy in the War on Terror. The roundtable was initiated and chaired by Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies co-editor Nathan Coombs.
1. Is transnational militancy imaginary?

**Nathan Coombs (NC):** Thank you Saul, Kevin and Faisal for agreeing to take part in this roundtable discussion on transnational militancy in the 21st century. Obviously our topic is enormous and invites almost an infinity of different angles and approaches, but to give us some sense of where to start I would like to begin from the supposition that philosophy always arrives too late to point to the future; that we can never, so to speak, ‘sneak up from behind’ on what is to come. Not that certain types of crystal ball gazing necessarily always turn out to be incorrect, but instead the relevant terms and emphases are always moving on, leaving behind our frame of analysis. In this way, all those theorists that speculate on the emergence of world society, cosmopolitanism, the de-centred capitalism of Empire and so forth, despite their rather elegant formalisms, can in my opinion sometimes seem a bit detached from reality. So instead of opening with elaborate speculation, what follows is my partly empirical, partly intuitively derived, sense of where we are at today, to help kick things off.

There seems to be a number of trends that we need to take account of when considering the global and its relationship to subjectivity: (1) as Saul has argued in his recent work there seems to be an ultra-libertarian moment in contemporary radical theory that sees freedom in stark anti-statist language, which may be connected to a growing globalist imaginary, and possibly the rejection of the nation-state as a political tool itself; (2) at the same time, there seems to be a broad based collapse in self-interested militancy, the kind that Karl Marx speculated led to the all-or-nothing potentiality of the proletariat, in favour of acting on behalf of the other, or the subordination of militant political subjectivity to indeterminate narratives such as the cause of the global South, or the environment etc.; (3) perhaps as a result of the interplay of the above two factors there seems to a simultaneous divergence of the political imaginary with reality: As there is the tendency for people disengage from democratic politics, sovereign identities, self-interested political mobilisation, and so on, there is also a general acquiescence to the regime of global norms determined for the most part by transnational elites: unelected UN officials and agencies, medical professionals, NGOs, charities, the police-military security complex, the political class etc. In broadly Hegelian terms, then, what I think we are witnessing is the opening up of a gap between the imaginary and reality: An ever more libertarian zero degree of theoretical radical politics, and possibly popular aspiration too, combined with the general acceptance of a world run more and more by unaccountable elites.

In this context, I would follow Faisal’s work in positioning al-Qaeda as a remarkably contemporaneous phenomenon, not just in the well documented sense
in which they utilise the technologies of global modernity to their own ends, but more in the way in which they operate fully within the aporias of what it means to be a transnational militant in the 21st century: the grand, indeterminate universalism of acting on behalf of humanity, the adoption of the languages and norms of the global sphere, etc. But above all, I suppose where I am heading with all of this is the question of whether al-Qaeda – as the most interesting, even if not progressive, phenomenon of the last decades – expresses a certain universal truth about globalisation?; and, to break the injunction against teleological thinking I laid out at the start, ask whether they present a kind of foreshadowing of the militancy to come: stateless, acting on behalf of the other, positioning themselves within the power-resistance dialectic of elite driven global norms? And here to also reference the themes of some of Kevin’s most recent studies: are the forms of militant violence associated with al-Qaeda – to be frank, terror for mass consumption – a reciprocal product of liberal norms of human rights, the collapse of the pursuit of ‘noble ideas’ in favour of the construction and defence of ‘bare life,’ and the sacrilization of victimhood, which separate our time from, say, the world even twenty or thirty years ago?

Aware of the enormity of these questions, I excuse my long opening remarks and questions, and ask you not to feel obliged to try to take on all of them, but pursue the general problematic in the direction you feel is most enlightening and productive.

Saul Newman (SN): Even if Al-Qaeda are a contemporary, postmodern phenomenon (rather than traditionally fundamentalist) that does not mean that they offer any sort of universal hope for emancipation, no matter how they dress up their politics in the language of environmentalism, Third Worldism, etc. These are merely cynical rhetorical manipulations. On the contrary, al-Qaeda is symptomatic of a certain collapse of the imaginary of emancipation – at least in its modern form: al-Qaeda takes the place, for instance, of now defunct movements and ideologies of national liberation and postcolonial struggles, using their language but utterly perverting their ends. Al-Qaeda is an example of the way that postmodernity is ultimately ambiguous, and can take a number of forms – from new forms of libertarian politics, to the worst kinds of obscurantism, nihilism and reaction. al-Qaeda is definitely an instance of the latter – it has nothing to offer radical politics but an empty nihilism, the will to destruction, and a fascistic and cynical violence.

Here, it is important to repudiate the association of al-Qaeda with anarchism: Tariq Ali has recently coined the term ‘Islamo-anarchism’, a term which would delight political elites in the West, who are doing their utmost to extend the ‘war on terror’ (now re-badged as the ‘struggle against violent extremism’) to all
forms of militancy and dissent such as radical environmentalists, animal rights protestors and anti-globalisation activists. The spectre of anarchism is once again looming large in the imaginations of our political masters. Anarchism – despite its occasional terrorist excesses – has never had any truck with this sort of quasi-religious nihilism. Indeed, the differences between them could not be more stark: on the one hand, a politics of egalitarian anti-authoritarianism which sought to realise the highest aspirations of a free humanity; and on the other, a conservative, ultra-authoritarian movement (even if opposed to the current state form, they seek a totalitarian religious state) which instrumentalises violence. Here by the way, I do not necessarily reject the emancipatory possibilities offered by Islam or any other religion – Islam has the resources to invent new articulations of socialism, feminism (in fact we are seeing this more and more) and even anarchism (based on mystical and heretical elements of Islamic thought and practice which have nothing to do with the politics of al-Qaeda). But these depend on drawing out the heretical and heterogeneous moments in Islam.

So for me, the only answer to the false seductions of al-Qaeda lies in the invention of a new radical political imaginary – one that draws on elements of anarchism, which is broadly libertarian in its orientations and which, I believe, is already being invented in the form of social movements and struggles that are going on around us today, that take place on and around the horizon of globalisation: from alter-globalisation activism, to autonomous movements of indigenous and poor people in the Third World. Al-Qaeda, by contrast – even if paradoxically it takes a hyper-politicised form – is nevertheless a non-politics; it shifts the ground from politics and economics to questions of religion, identity, the clash of civilisations. In this it mirrored precisely the evangelising ideology of the neo-conservatives under Bush, and more broadly, is only the violent obverse (and therefore symptom) of the capitalist, biopolitical and security project of the West; there is a deep structural complicity between the two, signified by the intimate relationship between terrorism and counter-terrorism. The only alternative to this violent and destructive binary is, as I have said, movements and forms of resistance that genuinely problematise capitalism and the state (rather than just being shadowy, murky reflections of them: doesn’t the violence of al-Qaeda, for instance, simply reaffirm and re-legitimations the sovereign state as being the only guarantor of security?). I prefer to see the figure of the transnational militant that we seek today not in the al-Qaeda operative, but in, for instance, the indigenous peasant in Brazil, India, the Niger Delta or Mexico, struggling against the incursions of corporations and the devastation of his/her local environment and livelihood. The transnational and global is refracted through the local, and vice versa.
Faisal Devji (FD): Since at least the age of empire in the nineteenth century it has been customary for scholars to define the African or Asian present by reference to a European past—but never the reverse. To assign praise as much as blame, in other words, political phenomena in the world outside Europe can only be compared to liberalism or fascism, totalitarianism or democracy. Whether or not these comparisons are appropriate, and they might well be so, a scholarship that proceeds by invoking them can only be conservative, unable to recognize what is new in the world. Such has been the unsurprising fate of much writing on al-Qaeda, which makes reference to nihilism, anarchism and much else that is thoroughly familiar, as if in an effort to deny novelty to anything outside Europe, or so goes the argument Dipesh Chakrabarty has been making for many years now.

Despite such attempts to colonise even figures of monstrosity like al-Qaeda, however, what has become clear is that its form of Islamic militancy represents the contradictions of a global arena more clearly than anything else. Planetary in its imagination and reach, disdainful of traditional political categories and deprived of institutional grounding, al-Qaeda evades conventional classification, not least by refusing to pose some “alternative” to an established order. Instead it inhabits such an order and destroys it from the inside, as if in an act of intellectual suicide bombing. As a practice of this kind militancy has become impossible to assimilate because it doesn’t even exist properly speaking. Let us pause to examine one aspect of this practice in more detail.

In a video released after the invasion of Iraq, Osama bin Laden pointed out that the massive anti-war demonstrations preceding it, the largest known to history, did not deter America, Britain and their allies. For whatever future lessons these global protests might teach us, they made no difference to the killing and dying in Iraq. From this he drew the lesson that no matter how enormous, such democratic manifestations no longer possessed any political effect, at least when it came to the serious matter of war. The only kind of dissent possible, Bin Laden suggested, was that which broke the law and with it the parliamentary sanctity of democracy itself. In saying this, of course, al-Qaeda’s founding father was only adding his voice to the recommendations of figures as different as Lenin and Gandhi, the question being one of determining what form such a violation of the law might take.

For his part the Mahatma had recognized that as long as violence of some kind was legitimate, determining its limits was merely a relative issue and did not distinguish one kind of resistance from another in any principled way. This is why criticizing al-Qaeda’s violence is mainly an adjectival matter, since what is being rejected is not violence as such but merely “irrational”, “excessive” or even “immoral” violence, to which Osama bin Laden can always respond by claiming that the
violence exercised by his enemies is even more immoral, excessive and irrational. If it is not an outright rejection of violence, therefore, such a critique remains ineffectual, a line drawn in the rhetorical sand unless sheltered by the very law that has brought an unwanted war into being. Despite the presence of Christianity, however, non-violence has never been taken seriously or even fully conceptualized as a principle in European politics.

Opting for non-violence means more than tolerating another’s violence, for it even invites such violence in the hope that this toleration will convert him. Non-violence presupposes, in other words, an ethics of sacrifice that paradoxically resonates more powerfully with al-Qaeda’s style of sacrificial militancy than with law-bound liberalism and democracy, both of which are after all devoted to the preservation of life and the sanctity of the individual. What brings Gandhian non-violence together with militant Islam and other sacrificial movements is their rejection of life as the zero-point of politics. But this is also a rejection of the liberal-democratic order itself, whose sovereignty is premised not only upon the promise to give life, but also the threat to take it. Only by rejecting this focus on life, though in diametrically opposed ways, do Gandhi and Bin Laden accede to a genuine subversion of the established order.

For this subversion to occur, however, sacrifice cannot be conceived as a temporary or transitional measure on the road to some utopia. Such an instrumental view is characteristic of inherited forms of political order, from communism to liberalism and despotism to democracy. Sacrifice must instead be a trans-historical practice, one that is not a means to some end because it has abandoned the metaphysics of presence from which such utopias take their meaning. In this sense both Gandhi’s Hinduism and Bin Laden’s Islam may be described as nihilistic, because these men do not think that morality is possible without a practice of sacrifice that continually denies the reality and thus inevitability of the world as it exists in favour of a kind of moral praxis that itself has no political form. For both men, the moral actor is always and only a martyr, not the self-interested figure claimed by communists as much as liberals.

Perhaps the term nihilism itself needs to be rescued from the accusation it has become, one we should remind ourselves derives its historical charge from the battle against anarchism at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. However today the word seems to possess a limitless applicability, so that the Pope recently felt quite comfortable describing Buddhism and Hinduism as nihilistic religions. Though he probably did not mean this description as a compliment, there is no reason why we should not take it as one, seeing the possibility of a new politics in their rejection of metaphysics as presence. Is this why even the ideal of freedom seems not to have played a significant role in the
thought of men like Gandhi compared to that of duty as part of an ethics of sacrifice?

If al-Qaeda has demonstrated one thing in its brief history, it is that sacrifice can indeed become an operative ideal without any ideological coercion from the family, civil society or the state, all of which according to the Mahatma actually suppressed it. And without sacrifice, of course, no politics of dissent is possible. The great problem today is that by colonizing the language and practice of sacrifice in the most egregious way, al-Qaeda has captured the very spirit of dissent, leaving its other forms looking like pale shadows condemned to vanish before the noonday sun. The fact that Osama bin Laden has no real plan to set up an alternative order and will not succeed in defeating his enemies is neither here nor there, because he does not seem to want either of these things, only the “nihilistic” and in that sense purely moral struggle of right and wrong that might achieve a number of political results without being bound by any of them. He is happy as long as Muslims are willing to sacrifice their lives out of a sense of duty and not for any mess of pottage.

If faced with by this kind of militancy, I think Gandhi’s aim would be to separate its sacrificial aspect from the practice of murder, to make of it a weapon in the hands of non-violence. For as he pointed out, arguments about greater and lesser violence could maintain no principled distance from the murderous nature of militancy, and were therefore unable to claim any oppositional legitimacy for themselves. Osama bin Laden is of course fully conscious of this, which is why he claims kinship with his enemies (saying that he does only what they do) while at the same time accusing them of hypocrisy. Whether or not it aims to be Gandhian, then, the task of dissent is to recapture the language and practice of sacrifice from al-Qaeda by abandoning the focus on life that ties resistance to oppression.

Kevin McDonald (KM): We are in a period profoundly shaped by the gap pointed to in Nathan’s opening remarks, between experience and the categories we use to make sense of it. As suggested, this is always the case, this is central to the incompleteness that makes us human. But today the issues at stake are so important that we are confronted with urgent intellectual and ethical imperatives – not to render the world transparent (this is the basis of authoritarianism), but to find new ways of living incompleteness in a globalizing world. I’d like to intervene in relation to two areas that have been raised thus far.

The first of these is the question of ‘militancy’ as a concept to explore action and commitment. The origins of the term underline its association with a military conception of action, one where action is driven by intention, and where the collective acts through the individual: whether that be the army, the party, the class, the union, the social movement. This leads to particular forms of organization, which again emphasise the primacy of the totality, manifest in the primacy of vertical
relationships within organizations, the primacy of function over experience, and distrust of horizontal forms of organization. This manifests an ethical grammar of action, one that attaches moral primacy to the collective, and was most evident during the twentieth century in the structure and forms of solidarity of trade unions. I think today we are witnessing a profound transformation of this grammar of action, evident in particular in the alterglobalisation movement that emerged during the 1990s and is still present, in different forms, today. This is not driven by network technologies or middle class personalism, but points to a radical, but fragile, shift in culture, action and ethics.

One of the most important of these is a shift away from models of instrumental action, driven by goals and ends, to forms of action and organization that are more structured as narratives. Here action is not grounded in a paradigm of autonomy, but in spaces of experience shaped by the tension between autonomy and vulnerability – perhaps captured by the fragility of the puppets that played an important role in this period, and by the importance of embodied experience and the senses – all or which open up the question of the place of human vulnerability in action and the encounter with the other. This opens out as well the question of the place of religious experience and subjectivities – not as an expression of contemporary multiculturalism, but pointing, as Talal Asad suggests, to the limits of a paradigm of action understood as a linear movement to increasing autonomy and self-empowerment. My sense is we have witnessed very important transformations of ‘militancy’, but which have not yet been strongly integrated into the ways we think about the political.

The second question relates to thinking about contemporary violence, and the significance of al-Qaeda. I have researched globalizing movements and to some extent contemporary violence, but much less al-Qaeda as such, so what I have to say may be less clear. The question of contemporary violence is a major issue confronting us when thinking about the translational and the global, but I tend to think that framing this in terms of ‘al-Qaeda’ is probably not the most helpful way to do it. Researchers like Olivier Roy argue that al-Qaeda is not significant in strategic terms, and I have the impression he is right. Specialists in Afghanistan argue that the international brigades that were there played no significant role in the outcome of the war; the eventual defeat of the Soviet-backed regime the result of other actors. Bin Laden of course claims that his brigades not only brought down the Afghan government, but also the Soviet Union. This is rubbish.

What specialists do point to, however, was the emergence of a mystique of armed struggle that was produced in the camps (most people who passed through them did little or no fighting), and as the strategic irrelevance of the international forces became clearer, their violence began to mutate into what we would now call
extreme violence, where killing is less a means to some other goal than an objective itself. Such extreme violence typically involves manipulation of the corpse or attempts to make the body of the victim 'speak'.

I’m not convinced that contemporary violence is best approached within a theory of sacrifice. A number of sociologists and political scientists have attempted to analyse this in terms of ‘frustration’ and ‘strain theory’, locating it within older theories of ‘the fanatic’, locating it within a framework of the rational versus the irrational. More recent theories link such violence to identity, arguing that contemporary war and violence aim at killing all those who are different. This paradigm emerged in relation to the Balkan wars, but it seems to me that it is not adequate to make sense of the kinds of violence that are globalizing today. On the one hand, it seems clear that violence is significantly dependent upon the imaginary of the actor it opposes: the Red Brigades mirrored the bureaucracy of the Italian state, while the practice of massacres in Algeria undertaken by Islamists in the 1990s clearly mirrored the scorched earth policy pursued by the French during the liberation war. If we explore the contemporary Palestinian experience, we see profound changes in grammars of violence, obvious in terms of the decline of the older fedayeen or the civil violence of the first Intifada, and in the emergence of forms of violence in the second Intifida where change can only be brought about by dying. This sort of violence collapses temporality into the moment of the explosion, and is highly personalised – as is also evident in the types of risk engaged in by militias. The problem of violence is also posed where violence becomes directed inwards in the attempt to purify the actor and remove traitors: in the 1970s most obvious in Japan in the United Red Army, a group that killed over half its own members in attempts to purify itself, or today in the extent to which Palestinian violence is directed inwards, from torture and summary execution to attempts to root out isquat.

Something is happening today that is perhaps outside older categories such as identity and imagined community that we have long used to think about action. Some analysts point to the importance of the unimaginable and the inexperiencable in contemporary violence, and this may help us understand contemporary mutations and the increasing importance of extreme violence in contemporary global flows. Understanding and responding to such violence is an intellectual and ethical imperative, above all within the ‘securitization’ of contemporary social life. Over the past decade global military expenditure has increased an extraordinary 47%, while war is becoming increasingly demilitarized, with states of peace and states of war blurring into a new chronic condition that we have yet to name.

SN: I think that despite our differences, we can agree that there is the need to
reinvent some sort of alternative radical political horizon through new practices of transnational militancy. And this means contesting the logic of biopolitics that forms the current horizons of global capitalism – the principle whereby the biological capacities of the individual body and the population (to say nothing about the natural environment) must be infinitely regulated, controlled and instrumentalised, in the name of life, for the purposes of productive exploitation. However, does resistance to the principle of biopolitical life (which finds its ultimate realisation in the figure of homo sacer, as Agamben would contend) mean a fetishization of death and suicide, a cynical sacrifice of young bodies? Or is this simply the other side of biopolitics – something which legitimises its inexorable security project? Other ways must be sought – and this requires the patient elaboration of collective projects of freedom, autonomy and equality in which new ways of living beyond biopolitics are experimented with. The sacrificial destruction of life is not any sort of answer, in my view, to life’s instrumentalisation. Rather it is life itself that needs to be rediscovered.

2. Militancy and organisational forms

NC: Thank you all for your thoughts on the topic. I think Kevin picked up something very important for our discussion with his questioning of the word ‘militancy’, which he links to the military and hierarchical forms of organisation. However, I think we should also acknowledge the other sense in which the term is used. For instance, a union that consistently strikes and holds management to account is considered militant more because of their actions than the decision making structure of the organisation (ironically, it is actually the most democratic organisations which are most likely to strike). Militancy, then, should also be thought as a form of collective self-assertion, and a direct battle for power involving the willingness to take responsibility for governing and/or self-determination. Thought as such, I think it is entirely right to counterpoise militancy and the dispersed, horizontal forms of political organisation that seem to dominate the imaginary of what a radical 21st century politics should look like. At the same time, this antinomy points to the gap I indicated in the opening remarks: a libertarian zero degree of the radical politics, combined with a reality in which active political subjectivity appears weaker than ever, and in which power is increasingly willingly handed over to a bureaucratic, transnational elite.

If the connection is not altogether clear, let me provide an example from very recent history. After the elections in Iran, the protest movement – ‘Where’s my vote?’ – was characterised by employing all the technologies associated with horizontal organisation: blogs, Twitter, de-centred organisation of street protests etc. Yet what also characterised the protest movement was the fact that it did not
fundamentally seek to challenge the Islamic Republic, but rather threw its weight behind regime-insider Mir Hossein Mousavi in an attempt to gain moderate liberalisations. Despite the fights between some of the bravest protesters and the heavily armed Basij militia-men (apparently recently merged with the Revolutionary Guards) it is hard to see how this form of political organization could be considered militant when it lacks the fundamental capacity for political change: that is, self-determination and the willingness to take power. Positioning a mass movement behind the cynical figure of Mousavi seems to exemplify the reality of these de-centred organisational models – which often absolve responsibility for figuring change to the establishment itself. It is almost a form of exchange: we provide the protests; you take care of the business of government and actually effecting change in some responsible manner. It also reminds me of the UK’s energy secretary, Ed Miliband’s plea for popular mobilisation to force the government’s hands on climate change!

But to return to Iran, when probed on the lack of any credible revolutionary organisation in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), most Iranians I have spoken to here in London point to the level of oppression in Iran as a reason why such an organization would be impossible today. Yet considering the scale of the executions and the thousands of prisoners who languished in the Shah’s torture chambers before 1979, it is not obvious that the IRI is actually any more brutal a police state than the country was under monarchical rule. No – something else seems to have changed between then and now. We could of course point to the collapse of really existing socialism and the global revolutionary movement, and the entrance into a purported era of the ‘end of ideology,’ as a reason why militancy has waned. There is certainly truth in this explanation. More interesting, perhaps, would be to consider whether the global, or globalism, is also responsible for this collapse in militancy? Or to put it another way, with the devaluing of the capture of the nation state as a revolutionary target, what if there just is no obvious political goal in the global era? What if the aspiring militant is torn asunder by the triviality of the local, but unable to meaningfully engage at any global level? To borrow an expression of Alain Badiou’s: is our world in the era of globalisation simply “atonal” – in that it provides no obvious points around which the concatenation of clear militant yes or no decisions can enter the political? What if there is a paradox between the ‘transnational’ and ‘militancy’ on a strict formal level? As Faisal observed with regard to al-Qaeda: “As a practice of this kind militancy has become impossible to assimilate because it doesn’t even exist properly speaking.” I would thus like to ask you all whether or not you agree that there is a contradiction in the idea of transnational militancy – particularly at the political conjunction of the early 21st century?
SN: What is perhaps needed is a new conception of militancy which is no longer based around the desire to seize and utilise state power, but rather around the desire for its transcendence and abolition. I reject the neo-Leninist position adopted by people like Žižek, in which the revolutionary seizure of the apparatuses of the state and the willingness to exert power ruthlessly against one’s opponents becomes the sign of revolutionary authenticity – a sign of a real political Act, in Žižek’s terms. This sort of position, whose perils we have witnessed over the course of the 20th century, is now outmoded and defunct, and basically amounts in Žižek’s hands to a kind of stylised fetishization of vanguardism and state violence. If the Leninist model is the only possible model of militancy, then I think we should reject this term and seek a new one. However, I would suggest that the same sort of militant commitment to a certain political cause or ethical position can be articulated in different and less authoritarian ways. Movements and struggles associated with the alter-globalisation movement – fragmented and sometimes tentative and fragile as they are – would be an example of this. What we are seeing today are forms of politics that are decentralised rather than hierarchically organised, and which have as their aim – and indeed embody in their very form – the desire for autonomy from state power rather than its seizure and control. A sort of politics of anti-politics that I see as being essentially anarchist in orientation. We can see this in transnational movements against global capitalism and war, as well as in various struggles for local autonomy and self-determination – for instance in indigenous groups like the Zapatistas in Chiapas. It is difficult to measure the success of these movements in the sort of concrete terms that Nathan suggests, precisely because this sort of strategic, means-ends approach is no longer appropriate to this new forms of politics. Nevertheless, they often have a substantial impact in both a symbolic sense – look at the way that the alter-globalisation movement has politicised globalisation and disrupted the assumed consensus surrounding the neoliberal agenda – as well as at a more local level: the way that, for instance, indigenous and poor people in Latin American and African countries have reasserted control over water and other resources. I do not see any real gap here between the transnational and the local – one is refracted through the other – and the effects of capitalist globalisation can be contested and disrupted at a local level.

Nor should we imagine that the nation state can any longer operate as a sort of bulwark against globalisation, so that the central aspiration of militant politics must remain the revolutionary (or democratic) capture of nation state power. This is the nostalgic dream of certain people on the Left. Despite important experiments such as Chavez’s Venezuela, the radical nature of militancy today lies in a break with both statism and nationalism. Once again, the alter-globalisation movement, as well as for instance, activist networks that aim to disrupt draconian border control,
security and anti-immigrant measures, thus problematising the very idea of national sovereignty in the name of an alternative globalisation – that which presupposes the free movement of people and the abolition of borders – are paradigmatic here.

FD: Admirably horizontal in form, Iran’s ‘green revolution’ serves as an example of globalisation’s soul in search of a body. Transnational movements are forever being depoliticized because they occupy an arena with no institutions of its own, only an administrative network with little political authority. And so by grounding itself in the opposition party led by Mir Hossein Mousavi, the green movement attaches itself to a political “reality” at the same time as it evokes another one more congruent with its own form but that is yet to come. For trans-national movements are sometimes puzzlingly conventional in their intent precisely because they have been deprived of politics in a planetary arena where none exists. This absence of politics at the supra-state level, however, is due not to the reduction of individual or collective agency there but rather to its generalization, so that everything becomes and nothing remains “political”.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Carl Schmitt was perhaps the first to recognize that once it could no longer be confined to a juridical or institutional category like the state, but had become a bit of flotsam in a world dominated by phenomena like class conflict seen as a global civil war, politics required another kind of foundation. This he thought could be provided, at least conceptually, by the famous friend-enemy distinction, which made of politics both the most minimal and excessive of practices, dispensing as it did with an institutional framework to foreground the possibility of death and killing in every political relationship. While Iranian protesters and others who operate within horizontal movements are unable to actuate this friend-enemy distinction, and therefore to accede to the political, because dying and killing remain merely utilitarian exigencies for them, militants like those who act in the name of al-Qaeda appear to have recognized Schmitt’s predicament, trying hard to create such distinctions in a depoliticized world by a use of violence that is so egregious as to possess little instrumentality of a traditional kind. In this way they want to make Islam or the global Muslim community, something that doesn’t have an institutional existence, into a political actor, if only by turning it into a global victim. This is a desire impossible of fulfilment, though one that does achieve some kind of reality every now and then in the media-led mobilization of multitudes across the planet, generally in response to some apparently arcane insult buried in a papal speech or Danish newspaper. Though they may be dismissed as epiphenomenal, such mobilizations tell us that the old vocabulary of political interest, which once united capitalists and communists, will probably not form the language of tomorrow’s activism, within whose planetary dimensions this category is
annihilated. However much of a failure the militant enterprise, in other words, it has produced the most innovative if temporary forms of collective consolidation and action on a global scale outside the instrumental logic of a dying politics.

**KM:** It is clear that we agree that an older form of politics is dying, and with it older models of political organization and action. I think productive disagreements lie in how to interpret what is emerging, from the alterglobalization movement, the events in Iran, or the type of movement and action referred to as al-Qaeda. Nathan insists on the importance of self-assertion and a willingness to take power, and regards a movement like that which emerged in Iran around Mousavi as exemplifying the limits of de-centred organizational models, proposing that the alterglobalization movement and the events in Iran suggest a ‘collapse in militancy’. Certainly provocative animation of our debate!

I’d like to respond in terms of two themes. As is well known, the birth of modern political culture was shaped by transcendent religious monotheism, with power shifting from God to the King and ultimately to the state or the people – as Tocqueville observes in the United States, we have a model of sovereignty where the American people is God. The act of representation, that of creating a group through the act of representing it, as Bourdieu notes, has its origins in the religious dimensions of modern law, and we see this radicalised in Hobbes’ assertion that the multitude becomes one through the act of being represented by its leader. There is a grammar of modern political action here, radicalised by the French revolution and its model of citizenship that extended through Europe over the 19th Century. It is still being globalized in often surprising ways: Hizb ut-Tahrir, for example, insists that one can only live as a Muslim within a Muslim state, drawing on Mawdudi’s appropriation of the model of citizenship and sovereignty constructed by the French Revolution, with its assertion that citizenship is constituted by the relation to the state – a model that remains very alive in France today, in different revolutionary traditions as well as groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir.

For all its problems (which we can’t explore here), I think that present in the alterglobalisation movement is a model of action that breaks with transcendent understandings of sovereignty and representation. To that extent, this movement breaks free not only of the borders and temporality of the nation; it also involves a refusal to embrace a model of representation where the imagined community becomes sovereign. This shift in grammars of action is perhaps not unrelated to wider social and cultural transformations, something that sociologists of religion suggest involves a shift from transcendent to immanent forms of religious experience. In this shift ‘the other’ is not the transcendent, but increasingly ‘within’. This is evident in the extraordinary growth of religious movements such as Pentecostalism,
and the development of movements centred on healing, from qigong movements in China (responding to the trauma of the cultural revolution) to the transnationalisation of religious movements responding to possession, from Africa to Brazil.

These movements express and respond to contemporary forms of social suffering. They are one of the most important expressions of contemporary globalization. Body practice is central, where we encounter pleasure and violence, fear and death, madness and the extraordinary importance of ‘elsewhere’. From the perspective of 19th century secularism, which seems to be experiencing something of a rebirth in Britain as a response to multiculturalism, these movements are an expression of social strain. But if we explore what is happening here we encounter the distance between contemporary expressions of social suffering and an older political language grounded in the transcendent.

I know little more than the average person about the events in Iran, but they clearly are relevant to the questions we are exploring. The Iranian sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar argues that that what distinguishes the movement that emerged before and after the election is its rejection of both violence and holist utopias, constituting a break with traditional Iranian leftism and also contemporary forms of Iranian Islamism. Over the past few years power in Iran has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Revolutionary Guard and the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad’s rule involving a systematic attempt to liquidate any republican dimensions of the IRI, through brutal oppression of opposition movements of women (in particular the imprisonment of the women involved in the ‘campaign for a million signatures’), students and journalists, combined with populist measures such as financial handouts to potential supporters. Despite the brutality of this strategy, its failure became evident in the election.

The events that followed do suggest something about forms of action today. The mobilization around Mousavi (one of only four permitted candidates) emerged in the period of television debates leading up to the election, at a time when politics once again was allowed. The movement that emerged after the massive electoral fraud was not a movement seeking to overthrow the regime, but to democratise it. It did not build an organization, but was constructed around a media personality. And despite the Regime’s measures such as slowing or disconnecting internet services and the expulsion of foreign journalists, the circulation of images and stories within and beyond national borders mirrors the extraordinary presence of digital cameras at the G20 in London.

These types of action do not solve the question of what meaningful forms of political mediation might look like. For some analysts the shift from building organizations to creating events is a cultural sideshow of little importance. But in the
case of Iran, it is clear that the regime finds itself isolated, not only from society, but from the majority of the clerical class that originally came to power through the Revolution. Khosrokhavar suggests that the kind of self-limiting movement we see today in Iran has important parallels with Solidarnosc in Poland, with the regime no longer simply isolated, but no longer believable. What will happen now is unclear, but the current attempts in Iran to construct an Internet archive of millions of photos and short films of the events point to something quite different to ‘a collapse in militancy’.

3. Militant demands – a transnational (im)possibility?

NC: Thank you all. We have already dealt with issues of the state and the transnational, and organizational models of militant groups, I now want to move on to the question of making demands (none, some, infinitely many?), which has been the subject of contention around certain activist and student groups lately. Here I am drawing on my own interests and areas of research, but please feel free to bring in whichever examples you like to address this problematic.

To begin, I want to draw your attention to one of the more interesting analyses of the Greek December uprising 2008/09: the fact that despite the protesting, riots, and running street battles with the police there was little effort to attempt to articulate anything like a set of demands. At the same time, neither was there any attempt to take the state and seize power in the revolutionary sense. It was almost like a replay of May 1968, except this time failure was preordained from the start. There was nothing inevitable about this – immigrants were protesting, the unions were threatening to hold a general strike, and too late, after typical institutional communist party procrastination, the Greek Communist Party (KKE) came out in support of the movement. At the very least there was a large potential leverage on the state, but instead nothing more than a diffuse dissatisfaction was exhibited. Students and young people occupied public buildings, universities, and held them for only a short time. In any normal political analysis it would be hard to read the uprising as anything other than simply a momentary emancipatory opening (following Fanon, I don’t think we should deny the proximity of a certain destructive violence to emancipatory movements) leading into something akin to political disaster – a sharp cultural swing to the right wing, the siege of the semi-autonomous Exarchia district of Athens, and the election of a principleless centre-left political dynasty. In terms of concrete results – whether redressing police brutality, or measures to change the situation of the 700 Euro generation – the uprising has basically nothing to show for its efforts.

Of course, it would be easy to inscribe this into an analysis of the lack of
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realism inherent to anarchism (the ‘vanguard’ of the movement were generally the more militant types from Greece’s multifarious anarchist collectives) but perhaps there is a more general problematic here? In any case, it was not long before governments in Western Europe were fretting about a repeat of the uprising. In France this translated into the witchhunt against the tiny anarchist collective based in rural town of Tarnac, whose text, The Coming Insurrection, was supposed to herald and provoke a return to autonomist Baader-Meinhof style violence on the continent. In the UK ahead of the G20 the police seemed to be actively seeking to provoke some sort of street clashes, with talk of the ‘summer of rage’ and telling protesters to ‘bring it on!’ Needless to say, the December uprising remained essentially a Greek phenomenon grounded in the particularities of their political situation: decades of network building amongst anarchist networks, a large section of the population subscribed to what would in the UK be considered ‘old fashioned’ ideological paradigms, and so on. Yet considering the uprising somewhat inevitably failed to spread, it is surprising that various autonomist communist and anarchist movements have found inspiration in the events. For instance, the text of the burgeoning Occupy California movement in California, The Communiqué from an Absent Future, endorses this strategy of rejecting demands as the only way to instigate a full scale, longer lasting insurrectionary movement against the state and capitalism. In the large student occupation movement in Austria there is not quite the same absolutism in regard to making demands, and interestingly in an interview I recently conducted with one of the activists they admitted that they are beginning to see the limitations of making utopian demands. Obviously this could go either way – in the direction of making the kind of horse trading compromise with the establishment indicative of most single issue campaigns, or the far more risky, and potentially pointless, absolute rejection of all demands by the Occupy California movement.

From this analysis I think we return to the contours of the very public spat between Slavoj Žižek and Simon Critchley. As you probably know, Slavoj gave a very critical review of Critchley’s book Infinitely Demanding; foremost for its advocacy of making infinite demands upon the state – demands which the state cannot fulfil. In this Slavoj sees an endemic cynicism he associates with contemporary ‘radical’ movements, where the militant is locked in a tacit relationship with the establishment. Against this he advocates making “concrete demands” that the establishment is given no choice but to fulfil; and I think his recent wading into the healthcare debate in the United States shows the extent to which this streak of realism (in the absence of a revolutionary Leninist party) determines his rejection of idealistic autonomist movements. But the elephant in the room in this debate is surely this growing posture of making no demands – a purely nihilistic resistance and ground holding, which seems to characterise many radical movements today.
I would therefore be interested in your take on the question of making demands, and how, if at all, it relates to militancy in the 21st century? Is there really a transnational dimension which can elucidate this rejection of demands, or is it perhaps simply indicative of a return to nihilistic anarchism, which seems to have survived the end of the Cold War with a more loyal base than the communist movements?

FD: Is it possible to say that making excessive demands is equivalent to making none? Al-Qaeda’s demands that the “West” immediately leave the “Muslim world”, for example, make a mockery of political realism, if only because they refer directly to the largest aspect of a problem, leaving barely any room for gradualism, mediation and the arts of negotiation. Like those student and other movements that appear nihilistic because they dispense with concrete demands and objectives, in other words, the impossibly large aims of militant Muslims can also be accused of lacking any sense of reality. On the other hand both such excessive and, if you will, recessive demands exit the “bourgeois” logic of bargaining and contract that characterize the more concrete objectives of traditional workers’ movements, themselves part of a vanished historical period. But if those who make too many demands, or too few, are not interested in making deals, can they be judged by the standards of tradesmen?

Perhaps a more instructive distinction is between those who make “reasonable” demands and “symbolic” ones, which allows us to link today’s “nihilists” with a very respectable history of protest indeed. Consider, for instance, the fact that Gandhi’s most important struggles had all to do with “symbolic” issues that were said even at the time to lack any tinge of political realism. Thus the Mahatma’s demand in 1920 that the Ottoman sultan, as caliph of the world’s Sunnis, should not be deprived of his claim to the holy cities of Arabia after Turkey’s defeat in the First World War. Or his great march in 1930 to protest, of all things, a fairly inconsequential tax on salt. And finally the demand Gandhi made in 1942 that Britain should “quit India” immediately. Though Osama bin Laden’s peremptory demand for the West to leave Arabia can be compared to the Quit India movement in some ways, closer to Ghandian methods are the Muslim protests against “symbolic” insults to the Prophet beginning with the Rushdie affair in 1989.

Like their unsophisticated Muslim descendants, the Mahatma’s mobilizations resulted in much disorder, many arrests and numbers of deaths, but we cannot think of India’s anti-colonial struggle without them. Yet it is only retrospectively, or by crediting Gandhi with the most cynical calculation, that they can be seen as “symbolic” gestures appealing to the politically befuddled sentiments of Indians in order to strike at imperialism. Such a view only brings us back to the themes of false consciousness and the cunning of reason. For while it is undoubtedly
true that these ostensibly irrational demands had the effect of delegitimizing an entire form of governance, their aim, as voiced by the Mahatma, was precisely to go beyond a politics of deal-making and contract, which he described as resulting in nothing more than an armed peace, and that too a temporary one. What Gandhi asked for was voluntary sacrifice, whether at an individual or mass level, whose purpose was to invite a change of heart among others. And for this only the most “irrational” demands, or indeed none at all, were the most appropriate, because delinked from the politics of bargaining.

I am not, of course, suggesting that militants, students and others who make “unreasonable” demands or none at all are to be identified as Gandhians, only that a history of protest does exist that, however fitfully, managed to exit the logic of deal-making without at the same time falling into the lap of revolution. Perhaps the nihilism of so many of today’s protesters is a consequence not only of the global challenges that face them, but also of the passing away of working class politics in its bourgeois form of bargaining. What remains is the language of sacrifice and invitation that once characterized the Mahatma’s mobilizations, though it is today separated from the nationalist cause that Gandhi willy-nilly supported. Whatever its future, however, this language has not yet perfected either its acts of sacrifice or its gestures of invitation.

**KM:** I very much agree with the last comment made by Faisal regarding action and communication, but possibly would frame the theme in another way. The action and creativity of social movements is both more complex and more fragile than the choice between ‘making demands’ versus ‘nihilistic anarchism’ suggests. While provocative, I think framing the question in this way traps us in a world that no longer exists.

Movement action and creativity is structured around a tension between multiple dimensions of experience. This is very clear in the labour movement, where historically two very different experiences of work converge: on the one hand that of skilled workers for whom work is an experience of creativity, and unskilled workers who experience work as subjection to the life-destroying demands of the assembly line or other systems they do not control. Separated, they action these workers engage in is very different: skilled workers creating corporatist defences of trades, unskilled workers involved in sabotage and other forms of rupture. Skilled workers will never, for example, destroy their tools, while there have been many cases of unskilled workers striking without making any demands, lacking any image of a transformed workplace and work experience. These two sides of identity, creative and defensive, come together in actual social conflicts and struggles, producing a labour movement that transformed industrial society. Historically the labour
movement changed the meaning of the word ‘exploit’ (giving an ethical meaning to a term that had previously been understood as making use of an object, while also locating it within a social relationship). The workers struggle created an imaginary of solidarity grounded in an ethic of work that sustained the moral basis of socialism. These movements were almost always led by skilled workers, as the shipyard workers who led Solidarnosc in Poland in 1981.

Over the 19th and 20th centuries a model emerged where social actors would seek to be represented by political parties, and seek to transform societies through the political system or more precisely the state. In the north of Europe, this model was largely realised, through social democracy. In other cases political parties and actors instrumentalized social actors, regarding them as ‘fronts’ – a view championed by Lenin’s well known contempt for what he called ‘trade unionism’, and evident in the negation of the very idea of social actors that is at the centre of the guerrilla groups that emerged in South America after 1968, or in European terrorism. One of the lessons we learnt in the 20th century is that revolutions only occur where social movements are weak, whether Russia in 1917 or Iran in 1979.

These various models are behind us. Societies are complex and disarticulated to the point where it is no longer possible to think of political systems as representing defined groups and their interests. At the moment politics seems to function through attempting to shape and steer public opinion, while democracy is less about representation of interests than the extent and way politics responds to that opinion. Creation of new forms of political mediation would appear to be a central challenge over the next decades, and these will extend beyond the borders of nation states.

But there is more at stake. Today not only are societies disarticulated, the state is disenchanted. Revolutionary politics regards the state as sacred, a reflection of its debt to monotheistic transcendence, where sovereignty passed from God to the King to the State or the People. Today we are experiencing a civilizational shift from transcendent to immanent forms of religious experience, evident across all major religions, and this not only signals the decline of religious authority but also the transcendent authority of the state and the redemptive imaginaries associated with revolutionary movements.

Clearly many forms of collective action are best understood as expressions of crisis and dysfunction more than attempts to transform the world. The past two years have seen more students on strike in France than during May 1968, above all in provincial universities and among social groups who are most vulnerable to the social concentration of risk on young people. A southern European educational model appears to be generalising, one where elite institutions guarantee access to economic success, while the rest of the education system seems aimed at managing an
increasing population of young people who find themselves experiencing a new socially produced insecurity. This crisis is amplified by modes of policing where the majority of police recruits come from rural areas and increasingly find themselves in paramilitary organizations engaged in a kind of postcolonial policing of new zones of exclusion.

One the other hand, when we look at social movements today, we find an extraordinary array of campaigns, mobilizations and action. What is striking is the shift from meetings, resolutions and organization building to the extraordinary importance of embodied experience and events. In these I think we encounter experiences that may be changing what we understand as constituting ‘the human’ in the world, a transformation more evident in cultural productions than political demands. What is at stake is the ability of actors to name forms of suffering and human possibility, and to locate these within social relationships. If ethical and moral imaginaries can produce other ways of being human, while struggling to name and contest forms of power, they have the potential to transform the political field.

SN: The making of demands certainly has an ambiguous status in radical politics. On the one hand, it problematises the state, exposing its inadequacies, inconsistencies and injustices; on the other hand, it reaffirms the state as the agency to which demands are addressed and which responds to them. On the one hand, making demands can be a radical gesture of transcendence; on the other, it can often lead to the ‘pragmatist’ or ‘realist’ game of negotiations with power – negotiations which take place on the terms set by the state. Obviously, making demands – action on the environment, labour rights, human rights, equal access to resources, respecting the autonomy of minorities, ending draconian border policing etc – is still one of the basic gestures of radical politics. While I accept Kevin’s argument about new importance of embodied experiences, I still see the making of demands as important; perhaps demands are now experienced in a different way – no longer as concrete demands for reform which can be implemented by the state, but demands as ‘empty signifiers’ as Ernesto Laclau would put it, a kind of open-ended horizon which ‘quilts’ together a whole series of different interests, causes and struggles. There is also an important utopian element to radical demands which should be affirmed rather than disavowed – making demands which cannot be easily fulfilled or implemented without causing major dislocations in the system of power, already presupposes a kind of utopian moment of realisation. For instance, the demand for an end to the harassment of ‘illegal’ immigrants or of vicious border policing and securitization strategies is an impossible demand in which the whole principle of nation state sovereignty is called into question, and in which the inconsistency between border control and globalisation is highlighted. It is a demand in which is already
presupposed the vision of the free circulation and movement of people beyond the control and surveillance of the state; it already presupposes the idea of a post-national terrain, a transnational civil society. So for me there is no problem with making impossible demands – they not only have a powerful rhetorical impact, but they also prise open cracks and inconsistencies in the ideological edifice of power, contributing to its destabilisation and to the opening of a world beyond.

4. Gaze into your crystal balls! – on the future of transnational militancy

NC: Thank you everyone for your thoughts. Now, for the fourth and final round of this discussion I want to return to where we first began – but from the opposite perspective. In light of everything we have discussed, I want to ask you all to make a compromising gesture – to share not your analysis of the present; instead to gaze into your crystal balls and speculate about what the future of militancy (transnational, or otherwise) might look like for the rest of the 21st century? Making predictions is not generally thought of as a respectable academic approach – more associated with news-media punditry and the foreign policy analyst profession. At the same time, though, if we want these insights as have fleshed out in this discussion so far to have a use value beyond the analytic our conceptions must be guided by a certain anticipatory sense of what is to come. Often these can dissolve into flights of fancy; I think back to a talk I attended recently where one speaker claimed that he could ‘feel the coming revolution of the global South.’ Rather, I would take anticipatory sense in the way that Badiou discusses ‘conditions’ – what the possibility of possibilities might be. This could take structural path, or the tendential.

Feel free to approach this challenge in any way you might see fit, but the following questions might help guide your thoughts: Does the 21st century herald an era which, after the turbulent, ‘hot’ 20th century, might be a ‘cold’ era for militant politics, in which certain outfits like al-Qaeda are simply the last gasp of a modality of ideologically driven insurgency on the wane? With structural forms of political representation such as the party increasingly looking tired and unattractive, is the network (despite its many problems) able to step into its role and translate into a properly effective politics? And who and what causes might constitute the militancy and points of rupture in the future?

FD: Those who follow the web forums and other sites where militant conversations occur have noticed their steady diminution and even collapse over the past year. This is due not to the success of the “war on terror” so much as to the fact that radical Muslims seem to have lost interest in global militancy of the al-Qaeda variety. What worries security agencies around the world, of course, is whether this erstwhile
community of militants will reconstitute itself in some other incarnation. Vanishing as mysteriously as it had arisen, globalized militancy represents, I think, a transitional form in the emergence of a planetary politics, briefly occupying an arena that possesses as yet no institutions of its own. This does not mean that bombings and other terrorist attacks will go away, only that they will no longer mobilize a global community or indeed represent a politics of the future.

In places like Pakistan and Afghanistan we already see the decline of al-Qaeda as a rhetorical model and the rise of regional patterns of militancy, though even as they take up the inheritance of movements like the Taliban, such outfits are far from throwbacks to the past. If anything they follow a non-governmental model, calling for transparency and social justice, both of which they would deliver by managing bits of territory through implementing what legal theorists would name ADR, Alternative Dispute Resolution. This is neither a conceit on my part nor a far-fetched comparison, since militant outfits as distinct as the Pakistani Taliban and the Indian Maoists have both abandoned the old language of revolution and the ideological state to concentrate on the “alternative” management of territories within existing states, as if following the example of NGOs and Special Economic Zones, which might be seen as each others alter egos.

Militancy both Muslim and Maoist, then, has returned to the present and occupied a familiar vocabulary of improvement through privatization, though in a global arena where nationalisation seems to have returned as the defining mechanism for economic growth. This also allows us to suggest that if al-Qaeda’s collapse occurred at the same time as that of the financial system, it was perhaps because they were intertwined, with Osama bin Laden’s militancy informed by the same pattern of media-driven speculation as what Arjun Appadurai has recently called a “faith-based economy” with planetary ambitions. Indeed it is even possible to say that al-Qaeda represented in some way the political aspect of a financial system that had departed the “real” world for a vision of infinity. But rather than serving merely as an epiphenomenon of an economy that was itself nothing but epiphenomenal, al-Qaeda’s militancy revealed some of the possible future hidden within it, and in particular the possibility of a global politics that is able to break through the institutional carapace of states, parties and revolutions.

In this respect more interesting than al-Qaeda have been the great protests sweeping the Muslim world over a set of perceived insults to the Prophet. Temporary and resolutely “irrational” as they were in the abandonment of any conventional claims, these mass uprisings around the world not only dispensed with traditional forms of institutional mobilization, they also managed to evade assimilation into a conventional politics of bargains and deals. If militancy, then, is focussed on the individual as a potentially political actor, then such mass protests were all about the
collective as a future agent of politics. In both cases what you have is experimentation in the nature of a politics yet to come, comparable in this sense to what Marx and Engels saw in the Paris Commune. It is worth pointing out that these great upsurges in the Muslim world upstaged the protests of anti-globalization, anti-war or environmental activists by their sheer egregiousness, which exited all the bounds of ‘constitutional’ politics to create something quite new.

Having moved past a politics based on life, and liberated sacrifice from the logic of means to become, as it was for Gandhi, an end in itself, Muslim dissent has left behind the carnival as a form of protest, something seen most recently in the demonstrations at the climate summit in Copenhagen. Obsessed by life and therefore unwilling to engage in sacrifice as anything but a means to secure it, such protests have become dispensable and are only of concern to politicians if they influence voting patterns, thus illustrating their complete assimilation into the inherited structures of the state. But if those participating in ‘new social movements’ are unwilling to die, will Muslims involved in militancy be unwilling to kill? In some form it is this question, I think, that has come to the fore in the wake of al-Qaeda’s demise. It is a question that can be broken into two: what kind of politics is possible in a global arena with no institutions of its own? And how is it possible to develop political practices that are sacrificial because unattached to self-interest and life without resorting to violence? Of course it is not inevitable that answers to these questions will emerge from the Muslim world, but given its recent history they might well do so. What becomes of militancy after al-Qaeda is therefore of crucial interest, not only in order to see if its ability to mobilise individuals and collectives globally and without the help of institutions will survive, but also to see whether it takes the form of dying or killing. I opt for death.

**SN:** Personally, I opt for life. While the idea of sacrifice and martyrdom might be aesthetically appealing, it has little to offer progressive politics; it is more like a renunciation to the seeming hopelessness of the situation we face today. Nihilism is always a temptation of militant politics, and indeed, I see self-sacrifice and martyrdom as simply the other side of the cynical sacrifice of the lives of others. On the other hand, the assertion of life does not mean, as might be suggested, that we are trapped in the mechanisms of biopolitical state capitalism, with its drive towards the total surveillance, control and exploitation of populations; nor does it mean the constraining of politics into narrow self-interest. Rather, it enjoins us to rethink life and, especially, political life, beyond this biopolitical paradigm. Here I do not believe that we have reached the point of the exhaustion of global social movements. On the contrary, with the structural inability or unwillingness of states to restructure global capitalism, or even to substantially ameliorate its effects, or to slow down and reverse
the process of environmental devastation (no one was surprised about the failure of the recent Copenhagen summit) it will be up to civil society networks to not only exert pressure on states through making demands, but primarily to create alternative sites of political and economic life.

I agree that this is an enormously difficult process, fraught with major obstacles; transnational movements and networks are usually fragmented and vulnerable. However, their persistence and their ability to adapt to new circumstances and experiment with different strategies, points to the inevitability of this shift I am talking from state-centric forms of political expression to more autonomous sites of politics. There is no other way.

Despite the challenges that face radical politics today, I believe that this is not a time for pessimism. We are in a moment where we can see the very limits of global capitalism, or at least of the neoliberal form that has been hegemonic over the past three decades. With the recent banking crisis, which is endemic and will shortly re-emerge, what seemed to be the eternal horizon of ‘free-market’ economics now looks like a contingent, temporary and historically limited form of economic organisation. Along with this is the crumbling credibility of Western democratic governments, who – regardless of whether they were left or right (an ideological distinction which has all but collapsed in any case) – were utterly complicit in the global neoliberal project, and who now have no answers to its failure. This crisis of legitimacy, characteristic of our post-democratic, post-political regimes, can be evidenced in the massive disengagement from party politics and electoral participation. However, as I have suggested, this signifies not so much an indifference to politics, but rather a shift to alternative forms of political activity – the movement rather than the party, the insurrection rather than the election, the construction of alternative forms of political life and collective sensibilities, rather than participation in the alienations of the establishment politico-media spectacle.

At the same time, we are faced with a looming environmental catastrophe, and, once again, the cynicism and self-interest of the governments of developed (and developing) capitalist countries has been highlighted. The sense of disempowerment that many activists feel about inaction over global warming, and the realisation that governments lack the will to make any real changes, will turn increasingly into a political rage and insurrectionary desire. Of course, the problem remains of trying to build links with and mobilise ordinary people, and activists have not always been successful at this. But as the world runs out of resources and small islands sink into the sea, people will be forced to radically transform their way of life and their patterns of consumption – the conditions which will, hopefully, foster a new ecological politics (and maybe a new political ecology).

The current conditions of a capitalist economic system, which will at some
point realise it is already dead, coupled with a rapidly deteriorating natural environment, with all the social effects that this will create – food and water shortages, high costs of resources, huge waves of migration, for example – will obviously produce massive upheavals. There will be new fascisms emerging – paranoid nationalism, increasingly vitriolic anti-immigrant racism, massive resentment, the selfish desire to protect the spoils of the rich world from the hungry desires of the poor; you can see this happening already. The state will try to manage these fascisms, as it always does, by essentially incorporating them in a more sanitised form - and therefore we’ll see a continuous elaboration of the security and surveillance state, and an intensification (and internalisation) of borders. At the same time, there will be a renewal of radical politics, which, as I have said, will most likely take the form of movements and networks rather than political parties (on this point I think there is little disagreement between us).

The challenge of these movements will be to form and expand links between the global North and South. The great nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin dreamt of an international mass organisation – not a political party, but something like an International (he described it as a ‘universal international social organisation’ which would smash state power). I think finally we have the conceptual language to properly articulate this aspiration: the transnational movement. The Global Justice Movement, who some say has come and gone (although I’m not convinced of this) was but a nascent, imperfect attempt to realise new forms of politics whose conditions of possibility are emerging all around us. However, the goal of smashing state power is perhaps too instrumental, and perhaps harder to imagine today, when compared with the crude apparatuses of power that confronted the militants of the nineteenth century.

Today, I believe, the breaking and transcendence of both the state and capitalism is more likely to take the form of a massive withdrawal from the mechanisms and practices of power. Hardt and Negri refer to this as the Exodus; while it may not take on such biblical dimensions, and while it is more likely to happen imperceptibly and take different forms, I see the future of militant action in the withdrawal of labour – or the invention of new forms of labour beyond the control of capitalism – acts of sabotage, forms of direct action, and the refusal of the everyday mechanisms and rituals, such as voting, by which political authority symbolically legitimates itself. The only way out of our voluntary servitude is through a micropolitics of refusal, and the invention of alternative political forms and, indeed, ways of life, through which our dependence on power is continually interrogated. There is nothing nihilistic or passive about this – it is rather an active, militant withdrawal and the invention of autonomous sites of the political.
KM: The 20th century was the century of the state and the model of sovereignty it inherited from monotheism, and perhaps more fundamentally of a model of human agency and morality where autonomy was understood as increasing self-determination and overcoming of limits, possibly reaching its final expression in the identity politics that dominated the last part of that century – identity, perhaps fittingly, being the product of post-war American social science. The 21st century confronts us with a new set of questions – in part evident in ecological movements, although we need to recognise the power of a new type of authoritarianism within these movements. I have the impression that the shift in grammars of religious experience that we are witnessing today, evident in the shift from transcendent to immanent religious experience, points to a similar transformation, with similar risks. To grapple with what militancy might look like over this century, I think we need to return to the question of ethics, and here I think some of the work of thinkers like Judith Butler is useful, in particular her argument that the source of ethical action lies not in our transparency to ourselves, but in our opacity to ourselves. I think new forms of militancy will be grounded in the shift from an ethics of autonomy to an ethics of vulnerability. How might we imagine what forms of solidarity could ground and sustain such ethics, in what way could this be conflictualized? What are the social spaces of such conflicts, what are the temporalities, who are the actors? Above I referred to the role of puppets in the alterglobalization movement. Such puppets are fragile, they may only last a day as opposed to the trade union banner that lasts a century. They combine beauty and grief, they are silent in spaces of noise, they are still in spaces of movement, they break down the binaries of self–other. They are part of new grammars of public experience. They might not mean much in the short term, just as the Paris Commune was a failure. But they may also signal a process of rupture and recomposition, as did the Commune.

The closer we get to social practice, as opposed to the purity of analysis, the more mixed and messy things become. Finally social science is beginning to recognize that this is a condition for the production of knowledge. Today we encounter what might first appear political zombies, corpses that have in some way become reanimated. Facile celebrations of revolution, the authoritarianism evident in a surprising number of political groups, and the way violence – in particular terror - still serves as a short-cut for actors to commune with a principle greater than themselves – all these seem to me to be the political equivalent of the zombie movie. But at the same time we are witnessing very significant recompositions of social and political life. The rise of the movements that would shape the 20th century was clearly linked with cultural shifts in music, art and temporalities. Today we encounter increasingly personalised actors and increasingly globalized systems. What defines new forms of militancy, I believe, are the forms of action that create mediation between the
personalised and the global, while constructing new spaces of experience between autonomy and vulnerability. Constructing languages to name and explore what is at stake here is urgent. But just as we have to feel and hear music, and cannot reduce this to a text, in our encounter with the conflicts and struggles shaping this century we need to construct new ways of experiencing.