OFFSHORING DISSENT

Spaces of Resistance at the 2006 IMF/World Bank Meetings

Theresa Wong and Joel Wainwright

ABSTRACT: In September 2006, Singapore played host to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Annual Board of Governors’ Meetings, one of the principal stages for elite consensus building and also a magnet for networks of transnational activists. Through an examination of the spatiality of resistance and its regulation at the IMF and World Bank meetings, the authors of this article argue that regulation of capitalism on a global scale, which requires meetings among elites in countries like Singapore, produces tensions that congeal in the regulation of resistance around these meetings. The global institutions that have helped to forge neoliberal policies must touch down and meet in concrete places. Such meetings require territorial power to clear definite spaces, spaces within which the “global” can be constituted. The imperative to include civil society in the staging of these meetings becomes circumscribed within the nature and scale of such spaces that are cleared for the constitution of global neoliberal governance. The authors contend that concrete practices of spatial regulation contribute to producing spaces of resistance and that these regulations are in turn shaped by the historical geographies of the host state’s regulation of space and global norms governing multinational meetings. In this way, the making of the “global” as well as “anti-globalization” are local affairs.

For ten days in mid September 2006, much of downtown Singapore was sealed off from traffic, secured by police and military personnel, and readied for the world’s financial leaders. As host of the 2006 International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank Annual Board of Governors' Meetings, Singapore rolled out a red carpet out for 28,000 delegates to what is arguably the foremost summit in development policy and a central stage for elite consensus building.
The Board of Governors’ Meeting in 2006 was the largest and highest-profile international convention ever held in Singapore, and the state spared no efforts to demonstrate the country’s ability to host world-class events. The centerpiece of their preparations was the “Four Million Smiles” campaign, wherein Singaporeans were invited to submit photographs of themselves smiling for a welcome montage. The mosaic of smiling faces covered one entire side of the convention center where the meetings were held, forming “a four-million-strong team to welcome our guests,” in the words of Lee Hsien Loong, Singapore’s prime minister.

Yet “guests” who came to Singapore to challenge the policies of the World Bank and IMF were given a different welcome. Shortly after launching the Four Million Smiles campaign, the Singapore state announced that outdoor protests at the meetings would not be allowed. The state further banned the staging of the International People’s Forum (IPF), a parallel meeting that a coalition of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) had organized to provide space for a critical analysis of the Bank and Fund. Moreover, two days before the start of the meetings, the government of Singapore announced a blacklist of twenty-seven activists, banning them from the country altogether. Most of these banned activists had already passed through the Bank’s civil society accreditation processes months in advance of the meetings. Then the state detained and questioned (or deported outright) an additional sixty people not on the blacklist on the grounds that their very presence in Singapore posed “a threat to law and order.”

In a few strokes, the participation of civil society in the IMF/Bank meetings was undermined. Activists responded swiftly. One hundred and sixty NGOs signed a petition vowing to boycott the meetings in protest of the blacklist. The Bank and IMF were criticized for their implicit support of the Singapore state’s actions. More audaciously, faced with the ban on the civil society–organized IPF, organizers moved the forum from Singapore entirely and quickly arranged to “offshore” their protests and discussion to the island of Batam, a small Indonesian island forty-five minutes by ferry from Singapore. (See map p. 406.)

The sequence of state actions and civil society responses at an international summit such as this one calls attention to a number of issues. First, the Singa-
pore meetings may be seen as a many-layered arena of political and economic struggle. Inside, within the official spaces of global neoliberal development governance, the annual meetings of the Bank and the IMF were dominated by fraught debates over the merits of the Bank’s anticorruption campaign and the decline of the Doha Development Round trade agreement.\(^8\) Simultaneously, outside the conference center, networks of transnational activists were mobilizing in different spaces — in the streets, beyond the meetings zone, and “off-shore” — and attempting to call attention to their criticisms of the IMF and World Bank. We wish to go beyond Tim Bunnell’s description of how the different sites of protest at the meetings feature within the political economy of Singapore’s relationships with its neighboring trading partners.\(^9\) Our objective is to show how an analysis of the events occurring both “inside” and “outside” can illuminate the hegemony and influence of global neoliberal institutions and their policies, through an examination of the spaces of possibility for dissent and alternative views. We contend that at the intersection of these distinct practices lies the state, which is both the outcome of earlier political and economic struggles and a stage upon which these conflicts play out.\(^10\)

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Our article examines the geographies of resistance and regulation at the 2006 Singapore meetings. We ask: what lessons can the spatially charged relationship between resistance and regulation at the 2006 IMF/Bank meetings provide us? How do the dynamics of resistance and regulation inflect the processes of policy-making at the institutional scale? In brief, our argument goes as follows. The global institutions that have helped to forge neoliberal policies must touch down in concrete places, such as the Singapore International Convention and Exhibitions Center (or Suntec) in downtown Singapore. These meetings require territorial power to clear definite spaces — spaces within which the “global” can be constituted. The imperative to include “civil society” in the staging of these meetings becomes circumscribed within the nature and scale of such spaces that are cleared for the constitution of global neoliberal governance. The interaction of global neoliberal political agendas, resistance to them, and the local regulation of contentious politics produce unpredictable outcomes that may have tangible effects.

To build these claims, we examine these spatial acts of trespass, boycott, and repression together with the political agendas and policies discussed “inside” the meetings. Through an analysis of the policies of the IMF and Bank, sovereign state power centered on territorial control, and civil society agendas, we highlight some of these effects, notably, on the limits and possibilities that the
Singapore meetings bring for the future of anticorporate globalization resistance. Concretely, we draw upon a combination of a review of official documents, media reports, informal interviews, and participant observation by Theresa Wong at the IMF/Bank meeting and the various sites where civil society meetings were conducted in Singapore.

The Geographies of Protest and Neoliberal Governance

Since the mid 1990s, the performance of resistance around international summits — including the IMF and Bank meetings, regional economic summits, and the biennial ministerials of the World Trade Organization (WTO) — has gained considerable attention from scholars analyzing the hegemony of neoliberalism and the political openings within this. In the late 1980s the Bank and IMF meetings began to face determined protest by international NGOs. Many of these NGOs were established specifically to monitor and resist Bank/Fund policies. Thus, the rise of these NGOs is directly linked to the Bank and the IMF. Not only have these organizations invested in substantial civil society initiatives, but by contributing to the very fragmentation of state development policies and deepening inequality, the organizations and their policies have arguably helped to create the conditions for the internationalization of development and human rights NGOs.

Johanna Siméant argues that the key factor explaining the internationalization of NGOs has been “the increasingly intense competition for the comparative advantages resulting from state fragmentation.” In this way, the economic globalization advocated by the Fund and IMF “has an indirect role on NGOs’ internationalization by the worldwide development of inequalities at the global level and the tendency for states and international organizations to subcontract social policies.”

With the recognition that these NGOs can neither be ignored nor wished away, and seizing the opportunity to allow these groups to transform and become subsumed within the agendas of the Bank and the IMF, the institutions have embarked on a policy of civil society inclusion. Both institutions — but especially the Bank — nominally place civil society at the center of their work today, not only via subcontracting but even in formulating development strategies. Moreover, in response to the emergence of the international “50 Years Is Enough” campaign in the early 1990s, the Bank/IMF annual meetings have added a civil society component, where groups can register and meet in a demonstration of apparent consensus building between the institutions and groups seen to be conventional dissenters. As befits the label “civil society,” these

14. Ibid.
events attract a wide spectrum of groups. Dissenting groups on the left — environmental and anticorporate globalization activists, labor and human rights campaigners, and the like — comprise only a small number of those with access to the meetings.

The majority of activists on the left who attempt to engage directly with these institutions are thus left outside the meetings, whether in meeting halls, public parks, or the streets. Recently, several geographers have studied the “geographies of resistance,” i.e., the spaces that emerge when different social groups organize demonstrations and other forms of political dissent. These scholars generally reject a view of “space” as a neutral container of social interactions in lieu of interpreting how particular spaces are produced through contested social relations. As Mike Zajko and Daniel Beland explain:

state officials and the protesters they face engage in spatial struggles…that have a direct impact on the politics of popular protest in contemporary democratic societies. The analysis of such spatial struggles explores the ways in which state power is used through the control of public spaces while exploring the enduring tension between the territorial nature of state sovereignty and democratic legitimacy, which partly stems from the recognition of the right to protest.

Unfortunately, by narrowing their focus to particular instances of local struggle (such as particular demonstrations), this literature could be criticized for de-emphasizing the ways that contested spaces are always already framed by national, statist, and territorial qualities that shape dissent. Consider again the events of 2006 in Singapore. In order to meet, the Bank and IMF needed to touch down in a particular space, one created through the Singapore state’s territorial power. While clearly hegemonic, this territorial power is not total: it is often resisted and always checked by the ideology of liberalism — which valorizes freedom of movement, civil society, and openness — that underwrites the very global agreements organized by the Bank and Fund.

This results in a paradox that must be negotiated through the different institutions and spaces that define the host state: on the one hand, the host state must regulate space in such a way that allows for a modicum of dissent; at the same time, the host state must secure a meeting site and facilitate favorable negotiations. Social movements that wish to intervene into these negotiations face their own challenge. They seek to stage effective dissent within highly circumscribed spaces for protest. The effectiveness of protests often depends on their touching down in spaces — plazas, streets, monuments — that contest the form and operation of power. Staging political protest typically requires the production of a particular sort of space — one that is, paradoxically, often produced by rending state spaces so as to allow protest against state power. These spaces

16. Limiting ourselves to only one journal, Society and Space, see Zajko and Beland 2008; Wainwright and Ortiz 2006; and Glassman 2001.
often become the very object of the protests. The resulting spaces of dissent are shaped not only by the historical geographies of host state–space regulation, global norms governing multinational meetings, and local strategies of urban policing, but also by the immediate and typically capricious responses of the different activist groups to spatial regulation.

The Singapore State and the Regulation of Dissent

“Another false opposition involves treating the state as a political force and globalization as an economic process, with the corollary that their relationship is zero-sum in nature. This ignores how states help to constitute the economy as an object of regulation and how far economic globalization continues to depend on politics.” — Bob Jessop, State Power

The state that hosts a meeting of the IMF and Bank is thus forced to create a stage for the elite gathering, and also to mediate engagements between the meeting and its discontents. This is generally conceived as a policing function, but it typically goes far beyond policing. True, the activists who gather to influence the IMF and the Bank invariably struggle with the local police forces of the host states over tightly regulated, territorial, and typically urban spaces. The increasing tendency of international summits to be staged in countries that place strong curbs on public protests attests to this. At the same time, hosting meetings in countries such as Singapore amplifies some of the key messages of institutions like the IMF and World Bank, eager to demonstrate the successes of market liberalization–led development. As Paul Wolfowitz, the head of the World Bank, said at the Singapore meetings: “Being here is symbolically important…. The success that we see around us in Singapore and more broadly in East Asia is a reminder that there is a path out of poverty, there is a path from poverty to prosperity.”

Singapore’s story is indeed exemplary: the rapid rise of the city-state’s economic fortunes and social and urban landscape from the time of independence from both Britain and the Federated States of Malaya (1959 and 1965, respectively) to the 1990s where it was one of the world’s most affluent countries has been regarded as nothing short of miraculous. But as numerous scholars of Singapore’s developmentalism have noted, the attribution of Singapore’s economic miracle to the successful strategies of export-oriented industrialization and market liberalization must be qualified. Given the country’s unique historical geographical conditions, including the consolidation of its position over more than a century as a vital trading outpost and entrepôt city as British colony, it has been argued that Singapore was well positioned to benefit from free market policies.

24. See, for example, Rodan 1989; Perry, Kong, and Yeoh 1997.
In the context of the 2006 meetings, even more critical for Singapore’s economic success is the state-led development program predicated on the curtailment of dissent and the strong involvement of state institutions in the everyday life of its citizens. For Garry Rodan, the “fundamental strategies and power relations defining the developmental state in Singapore” have been consistent since the 1960s, when the economy has shifted from export-orientation to import-substitution, from manufacturing to services and “quaternary” industries. Large-scale public education campaigns since the 1970s have encouraged people to mobilize themselves in tandem with state economic development imperatives and to discipline themselves with respect to family planning, hygiene, public behavior, and civic consciousness. Such reforms have ensured the state’s political legitimacy, fashioned a stable climate for investment, and created an economically competitive workforce. Maintaining social stability also involved the suppression of labor unions and political activity, including the preemptive punishment of political opposition members that appear too vocal and effective in challenging government policies and the bankrupting and defamation of such leaders.

Like other East Asian developmental states, Singapore’s economic rise was not accompanied by a parallel florescence of civil-political liberties. Cherian George’s characterization of Singapore as an “air-conditioned nation” points to the inextricable links between the micromanagement of economic competitiveness and the careful adjustment of the political climate of non-dissent. Singapore’s historical geographies of development as it relates to the regulation of political activity, therefore, interrupt the narrative of the Bank and Fund as they label Singapore an exemplary, democratic nation-state whose success is often attributed to neoliberal reforms. These geographies also produce a multiple circumscribed space both for conducting the business of international development summits, as well as for speaking out. These spaces of political activity will now be considered in more detail.

Geographies of Dissent at the 2006 IMF/World Bank Meetings

The 2006 meetings in Singapore came at an inauspicious time for the Bank and Fund. In the choppy wake of the breakdown in the WTO’s Doha negotiations, the Bank and Fund faced tough questions about their structure and powers. Two issues dominated the substance of the meetings, which the New York Times called “one of the most contentious sessions in years.” First, the rise of Asian economies — especially China, but also India and Korea — has forced the question of U.S. and European domination in the governance of the two organizations. All parties agreed that some Asian states would be awarded a stronger

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28. For a summary of the range of restrictions and controls on political opposition by the state since the 1960s, from revoking the powers of unions to housing and formation of societies, see Rodan 2006.
29. Weisman 2006b.
role in management as they transitioned from major borrowers to major donors, but details of such an agreement threaten to break open the existing elite consensus over the role of the IMF, in particular, which suffered a major loss of credibility in Asia after the 1997 financial crisis. As the *Times* explains, this tension was especially piqued after the collapse of the Doha agreement negotiations:

> The American fear of a fracturing of the International Monetary Fund is an echo of the administration’s concern over the failure of the recent round of global trade talks, which collapsed over the summer.... [U.S.] administration officials say plainly that they cannot afford to have another debacle involving another global economic institution.  

The tension over the Fund was equaled by the second major topic of discussion, namely, the Bank’s newfound emphasis on policing corruption in the developing world. The watchword of Bank president Paul Wolfowitz’s tenure, “corruption,” had proven divisive, since it implied that the Bank would cut off loans to “corrupt” states. It is in the context of this legitimacy challenge that we find the Bank and IMF conducting their biannual meetings amidst the unfolding of protest in four discrete spaces, beginning “offshore” on Batam Island, and then moving into three sites in the heart of Singapore.
The International People’s Forum on Batam

The “offshoring” of dissent came in response to the Singapore state’s ban on outdoor protests and to the IPF, which planned to hold meetings parallel to those of the Bank and IMF. The IPF, which convened in Batam, Indonesia, from 15 to 17 September, was organized “in the spirit of resistance to neoliberal policies and in keeping with the history of people’s struggles worldwide against economic domination.” Asserting a need for greater cooperation between pan-Asian and international movements, the forum was to “articulate critiques, express protest and assert alternatives to the role, policies and operations of these institutions.” The forum was open to the public and walk-in registrations, with a participation fee of US$18. More than two hundred members of NGOs, social movements, and journalists traveled to the island via a 45-minute ferry ride from southern Singapore.

But Batam is no ordinary extraterritorial sanctuary. The staging of the IPF on this Indonesian island less than an hour from Singapore needs to be situated within broader geographies of its relationship with Singapore and Singaporean capital. As a far-flung group of islands closer to Malaysia and Singapore than the Indonesian capital, Jakarta, Batam and the Riau islands have developed closer economic ties with their neighboring polities. Since the early 1990s, Batam was more formally “reterritorialized” as part of the Singapore-Johor-Riau Islands Growth Triangle, to take advantage of different endowments of capital, land, and labor. This move cemented Batam’s emphasis as an export-oriented manufacturing zone. As Tim Bunnell et al. point out in their intervention on the IMF/World Bank meetings, as well as in work on the Growth Triangle, Batam was a place where Singapore capital and manufacturing was “offshored.” Batam’s incorporation within the Growth Triangle forms a part of a regional “spatial fix” and addresses the problem of Singapore’s lack of physical space for manufacturing development. With this was also “offshored” the undesirable elements of Singapore’s economic push: the land-intensive industrial infrastructure and the large pool of unskilled labor required. Matthew Sparke et al. explain that this economic complementarity and offshoring of capital and labor do not account for the consequences of the offshoring. Batam absorbs the negative consequences of uneven development: the sprawl of shanty housing, prostitution, and crime have accompanied the influx of labor to the island.

The offshoring of the IPF was similar to the offshoring of the unwanted elements of the meeting. Banned from Singapore territory, the IPF found itself on what appeared to be a more liberal, less authoritarian setting. But even off-

34. Ibid.
38. For more on the Singapore state’s policies of keeping unskilled labor within its territory at arm’s length, from citizens and the possibility of citizenship, see Yeoh and Huang 1999.
shore, the IPF faced obstructions. Eighteen Indonesian NGOs took out a half-page advertisement in a Batam newspaper opposing the forum. The groups argued that the forum would disrupt business and hurt Batam’s reputation as a safe shopping and recreational haven for Singaporeans and an apolitical special economic zone for Singaporean firms. They argued that a gathering of activists and NGOs would affect the attractiveness of the island for future investment. Around the same time, Batam authorities sent a letter to the organizers announcing that both the forum and the protest march, planned for the last day of the forum, would be outlawed. This notice was later rescinded, yet Batam authorities warned that they could not provide police protection or guarantee the safety of attendees. On 15 September, the first day of the IPF, a group of men appeared in front of the venue, the Asrama Haji Batam Center, protesting against the forum. On 11 September, the day before the start of the official IMF/Bank meetings, the Singapore state put out a blacklist of activists. Nine activists from the Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID), the NGO that organized the IPF were on the list. It was only after the IMF and Bank voiced their displeasure to the Singapore state that most of the banned activists were allowed into Singapore.

The announcement of the blacklist precipitated the circulation of a petition calling for a boycott of the meetings on account of the Singapore state’s “draconian security measures.” The petition further declared that the Bank and Fund “cannot escape responsibility” for this repression, since their reason for selecting the Singapore site was “to avoid the legitimate and peaceful street protests that have been staged at earlier World Bank/IMF and World Trade Organization meetings.” A representative of a North American NGO explained that he supported the boycott because the World Bank had allowed a “repressive regime” to dictate the terms of civil society involvement in meetings. By 13 September, 163 organizations had signed on to support the boycott. In the days to come, their absence became palpable.

These events remind us that Batam, far from being an extraterritorial space, was subject to the same kinds of regulation as in Singapore. Bunnell has pointed out that these impediments to protest were the “extension of Singapore’s limited interpretation of acceptable ‘protest’ to Batam.” By virtue of its inferior position with respect to Singapore capital within the Growth Triangle, Batam’s territoriality is blurred and undermined by the inextricable links of its economy with Singapore’s. Ironically, one is reminded that the very fact that the IPF could go to Batam at all can be attributed to the conditions brought about by

41. According to the Bank Information Center (2006), the protesters admitted being been paid by Singaporean businessmen to disrupt the IPF.
42. Few of these twenty-two actually made it to Singapore, due no doubt to the logistical complications involved in changing travel plans.
43. FOCUS on the Global South 2006.
44. Ibid.
45. Bunnell 2007, 496.
the island’s incorporation into this special economic zone, which brought about regular ferry services and the construction of conference facilities.

**Inside the Meetings: Authorized Demonstration Space**

Onshore, the meetings appeared to run like clockwork. The Suntec venue — a sprawling 100,000 square meter (24 acre) site — was secured and primed for the arrival of 28,000 guests from all over the world. The Bank/IMF meetings brought out an unprecedented number of security forces, reflecting the importance of the event to the state’s vision of Singapore as a secure and efficient hub for business. Some 80 percent of Singapore police reservists were recalled to duty for the meetings, and an estimated 10,000–strong military and security force was deployed. This portrayal of Singapore as a world city, fit for the staging of meetings of global significance, echoes long-standing efforts by the state to make Singapore an affluent global hub. The staging of the Fund and Bank meetings allowed for the re-imaging of Singapore through the procurement of “cultural capital” and the creation of monumental spaces, like Suntec.

Entering Suntec, delegates gathered in a large lobby with escalators taking them up to the different meeting rooms. The lobby contained information booths, a “civil society center,” and a space designated for protest. Entry to Suntec and the adjoining Pan-Pacific Hotel was restricted to meeting participants and registered delegates. The normal entry points into these areas (walkways connected to adjacent shopping malls) were sealed off by security checkpoints with police armed with scanners for passes, bodies, and bags. Delegates were put up in hotels near Suntec and ferried by a convoy of buses to the meetings site. Road closures went into effect four or five days from the start of the meetings, leading to the hollowing out of a usually busy downtown area for two weeks.

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46. The state was quick to stress its concerns about the safety of the delegates and the smooth running of the meetings in the post–September 11 era (Wong 2006). Activism against the financial and social policies of the Bank and Fund frequently slipped into the same category of potentially disruptive and chaotic elements that posed as great a threat as “terrorists.”

47. Wong 2006.

Although the Singapore state banned outdoor protests at the Bank/IMF meetings, not all protests were banned. The state offered an alternative space inside Suntec: 104 square meters (about 1,120 square feet) of the main lobby were cordoned off especially for demonstrations. Tucked in the lobby of the convention center, the site permitted access only to accredited delegates. Delegates alone could demonstrate or witness demonstrations. The protest space was not only carefully located, it was also tightly regulated. Those wishing to protest would scan their passes at the entrance of the cordoned-off demonstration area and proceed through a narrow walkway to the registration desk. To protest, one needed to register and agree to the “rules of protest”: no eating; no drinking; no burning anything; no behavior that would “provoke a breach of the peace, cause alarm or distress, offend religious or racial/ethnic sensitivities, or be prejudicial to the security of Singapore.” An additional guideline required that protestors keep noise at an “acceptable level.” Amplification was prohibited.

Such demonstration spaces are hardly unique to Singapore. In 2000, the state announced, for the first time in the forty-one years of the ruling party’s ad-

49. While most of the shops around the convention center remained open, the malls within walking distance from the convention center reported a drop in sales, as the hoped-for clientele of the thousands of delegates could not make up for the loss of local Singaporean customers, many of whom found it too inconvenient to commute to these sites given the roadblocks.

50. The location of the demonstration area within the meetings site sparked contention as well. In a reversal of a promise to allow demonstrations to be held in a prominent spot in the lobby, meeting organizers decided, on the first day of the meetings, to move the demonstration space from the planned site at the center of the lobby to a corner below a set of escalators. This decision was met with protests from activists (Channel News Asia 2006b).

administration, that it would allow for public speaking — under certain conditions.  A small public park in the central city enclave of Chinatown, Hong Lim Green, would be given over to Singapore citizens who wished to make public speeches, which, under normal circumstances, was prohibited by the 1979 Public Entertainment and Licensing Act. In the 1950s and 1960s, Hong Lim Green was one of the key spaces where anticolonial rallies could take place, calling for independence and the end of British colonial rule. Speakers’ Corner was explicitly modeled after the famous northeast corner of Hyde Park, London, which evolved into a site for airing grievances and for demonstrations and the exercise of “free speech” through a century of struggles by groups who “subverted the rationality of an emerging capitalist state and laid the basis for a nascent proletarian public sphere.” Speakers’ Corner in Singapore could not be more different, however. Anyone who wishes to air his or her views in the prescribed space is subject to rules and conditions: the speaker has to be a Singapore citizen and has to avoid issues of religion and race. The meanings appropriated by the Singapore state in the creation of Speaker’s Corner in Hong Lim Green are instructive of the similar creation of the demonstration space at Suntec. First, it ignored the history of political struggles that constitute a space for speaking. Second, such an act, conditioned by rules that ironically limit free speech, sediments over the dynamic history of the Hong Lim Green and indeed postindependence struggles in Singapore that were predicated on vocalizing and speaking out against imperialism.

The subsequent failure of Speakers’ Corner at Hong Lim’s needs to be read in its instrumental terms, as part of the state’s strategies for negotiating expectations for democracy particular to the specific conditions of state–civil society relations in Singapore, rather than simply as the failure of the state to persuade individuals and groups to be reined in. Likewise, we should not interpret the official protest space at the Bank/IMF meetings as a success story for Singapore’s civil society. In prescribing a delimited, official space for protest, the demonstration corner at the meetings not only separated this space from the ordinary spaces of the city but also prevented demonstrators from protesting in a way that involved transgressing official boundaries and controlled spaces. The very act of demarcating a single legitimate space for protests suggests the threat represented by open demonstrations. The “free speech zones,” both in Hong Lim Green and within the lobby of the Suntec Convention Center, cannot but be read against the setting apart and suppression of resistance everywhere else in Singapore. In fact, the zones illuminate the fact that Singapore’s very identity as a vibrant world city is predicated on a careful policing of dissent.

53. Ibid.
55. A comment on its failure by the Minister for Communication and Development points to the ambivalence of setting up the Speakers’ Corner in the first place: “Why has it failed? Because Singaporeans are sensible people and have decided that there’s not much point going up there standing on a soapbox yelling at the mosquitoes and the flies.” (The New Paper 2006).
Civil society participants did not let the attempted silencing of resistance, both by the Singapore state and by the Bank and the Fund, go unnoticed. Activists took advantage of the indoor space to stage a number of protests over the days of the meetings, but they also acted to protest and subvert the artifice of a demarcated “protest space.” On the first day of the meetings (15 September), thirty activists registered themselves by scanning their meeting passes at the entrance of the demonstration site. One by one they filed into the area, put gags over their mouths, and stood in silence behind the barrier. They wore white T-shirts that read “NO VOICE.” This gesture was said to protest the silencing of Third World peoples in IMF and World Bank policies and the banning of fellow activists. But it was also clearly a demonstration against not being allowed to demonstrate effectively.56

Town Hall Meeting

The World Bank claims that the 2006 meetings saw the largest attendance of civil society delegates in the history of the annual meetings.57 The Civil Society Forum (CSF) was expected to host forty sessions over the seven-day period, involving an estimated 250 civil society delegates whose badges clearly differentiated them from other delegates. Yet this civil society was a plural, divided group. Some of the more radical NGOs included the Bank and IMF “watch” groups such as FOCUS on the Global South and 50 Years Is Enough, whose members reg-
ularly attend these meetings. These groups were hardest hit by the blacklist, and at the same time, were active coordinators and participants of the IPF that had been offshored to Batam. The groups that met in the space provided for protests at the official meetings tended to be nonactivist groups like philanthropic organizations, business forums, think-tanks, and other local, regional, and international NGOs. The blacklist had the effect of intensifying this rough distinction between the “onshore” CSF and the “offshored” IPF, especially given the ban on a number of activists from the more radical anticorporate globalization elements of civil society. The civil society component of the meetings was clearly eviscerated by the restrictions that the state levied and by subsequent reactions to these restrictions leading up to the meetings, namely, a call from a coalition of NGOs to boycott the meetings altogether. The numerous session cancellations and the NGO boycott had a visible impact on the CSF. On 16 September, for example, while the IPF was going on in Batam, only two meetings were scheduled at the Civil Society Center; other sessions that day were cancelled.

The highlight of the CSF was a town hall meeting on Thursday, 22 September. There, 180 NGO representatives were to engage with Rodrigo de Rato and Paul Wolfowitz, heads of the IMF and World Bank respectively. At the outset of the meeting, delegates from accredited NGOs forcefully confronted de Rato and Wolfowitz about the activist ban. Roberto Bissio of the NGO Social Watch recounted deportations, detentions, and other forms of harassment suffered by journalists and activists. Accusing the Bank and Fund of complicity, he demanded:

> [How] can we talk about corruption and governance…when the basic rules of the host country agreement are being blatantly violated?… [W]e think the integrity of the whole meeting is being jeopardized…. I mean, it’s the whole principle. How can international organizations function when the host country rules?\(^{58}\)

In their defense, de Rato and Wolfowitz described their efforts to persuade the Singapore state to curtail its repression. They also underscored their agreement with Bissio that Singapore had violated the host country agreement. Notably, Wolfowitz posited that the negative repercussions of these errors would accrue to the Singapore state:

> I guess unfortunately accreditation requires the approval of the representative of that government on our board. Enormous damage has been done. The one thing I think I would say is a lot of that damage is done to Singapore, and it’s self-inflicted. This could have been an opportunity for them to showcase to the world their development process.\(^{59}\)

Asked then if the Bank and Fund would move their meetings to another place that was more amenable to NGO involvement, Wolfowitz replied that this would “not be feasible.” In response, more than a dozen NGO representatives stood and left the meeting.

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58. Roberto Bissio, cited in International Monetary Fund 2006.
Clearly this exchange demonstrates something of the limits of the Bank’s and Fund’s willingness to engage with NGOs. But it also clarifies a tension in the demands placed on the host state. Wolfowitz’s response was plainly intended to distance the Bank and Fund from the repression of civil society surrounding their meetings. He did not deny this repression, nor that it causes “a lot of…damage.” Instead, he suggests that this damage was done “to Singapore, and it’s self-inflicted.” Yet, as Bissio and others pointed out, his organization and the Fund were complicit in two direct ways. First, these institutions set the stage for repression by allowing a state that is notorious for curtailing dissent to host the meetings. The Singapore state did not act independently of norms and expectations. Second, the Bank and Fund did not entertain the request by the leaders of the accredited NGOs that the meetings be moved to a place where their involvement could be secured. The walkout by the NGO activists speaks to their refusal to absolve the institutions from responsibility.

Nevertheless, Wolfowitz’s framing of the repression succeeded in shaping press coverage of the meetings. A number of articles mentioned the efforts of the Bank to include civil society and blamed Singapore for repressing NGOs.60 To take one example, Marwaan Macan-Markar of Inter Press Service writes:

Singapore, the host country of the mid-September event, is sparing little to ensure that it lives up to its legacy as an affluent city state where universally accepted democratic principles…are banned…. The World Bank, however, has stepped in to assure activists that space for civil society is being negotiated to avoid what some critics of the international financial institutions says will undermine the credibility of the Bank’s claims to promote good governance, accountability, transparency and democracy. “We are working closely with the IMF and with the Singapore Government…to ensure that diverse civil society voices are very much heard before, during and after the Annual Meetings,” writes Peter Stephens of the Bank’s Singapore office in a letter to the non-governmental organizations. “We believe that meaningful civil society engagement is critical to the effectiveness of the meetings.” The letter also dismisses the argument made by the NGOs that the Bank and the IMF are trying to shut the door on the world’s poor by giving shape to a restrictive process. “Far from being a regulated or restricted process,….we are trying to enable a process that is open and led by civil society, and for the issues and means of addressing them to arise spontaneously, not through a formal process that we lead or try to manage,” adds Stephens.61

This narrative dominated the portrayal of the meetings, yet not completely. Some accounts suggested that Singapore’s actions were as much the fault of the Bank and Fund as of the state.62 The New York Times noted that “Wolfowitz…was

62. See de la Cruz 2006; Abbugao 2006.
especially embarrassed by the visa problem because he has repeatedly called on
developing countries to open their political processes to dissent.65

The “Breaking Free” Conference

On 17 September, as the offshored IPF in Batam came to a close, some of the in-
ternational NGOs that had helped to coordinate the Batam conference orga-
nized a one-day public meeting in a hotel on Singapore island, one that also
housed official delegates to the IMF/World Bank meetings. Organizers hoped
that this combined press conference and open forum, called “Breaking Free:
Conference on Shrinking or Replacing the International Monetary Fund,”
would promote discussion among members of local Singapore NGOs, meeting
delegates, and international NGO members, including those who boycotted the
official meetings, on the topic of alternatives to the IMF, especially for people
who could not or did not make it to Batam. Uncertainty had prevailed over the
eventual staging of the event. The coordinating organization, FOCUS on the
Global South, a prominent presence in past meetings, saw most of its represen-
tatives placed on the blacklist. As a result, the conference was nearly cancelled.
Although many activists refused to enter Singapore to protest the blacklist, “the
desire to reclaim some democratic space within Singapore was very strong”
among those present; thus the event was carried out.64 The legal license for the
event was obtained only the night before.

The “Breaking Free” conference unfolded within the liminal spaces arising
through the tensions between the meetings and the resistance to the two institu-
tions; here was a forum for debates on alternatives to the IMF and World Bank
that could not be discussed at the official meetings (in the light of the NGO boy-
cott). Yet it took place “onshore,” inside one of the hotels designated to host
delegates to the official meetings. According to FOCUS, the event was intended
to “make clear that civil society forces would not cede the space entirely to the
IFIs [international finance institutions], and indeed would launch a campaign
disempower or eliminate the IMF in full view of the press corps covering the
annual meetings.”65 To further complicate this spatial politics, organizers also
treated the “Breaking Free” event as one element of the IPF, so the forum consti-
tuted an “outpost” of an offshored event.66

As a press conference, the event was perceived as a success: the local press
turned up in full force and clips were shown on the national evening news. In
the light of the blacklist, the event was repackaged to confront the banning of
protest. Yet in other respects, the event failed to make ripples as the definitive
forum for critical debate that it had earlier hoped to be. After covering the press
conference, the media representatives left, leaving only thirty people — about
half from international NGOs and the other half Singaporean journalists, stu-
dents, leaders of local community and NGOs — attending the “Alternatives to

64. Bank Information Center 2006b.
66. Ibid.
the IMF and World Bank” component. One hundred and fifty people had been expected, as evidenced by the buffet luncheon prepared for the forum.

Why did “Breaking Free” fail in attracting an audience to debate the IMF and Bank? As an onshore version of the offshore IPF, the conference targeted a different audience: mainly local, Singaporean activists and representatives of NGOs who did not attend the Batam conference. But the absence of significant numbers of Singaporean representatives was indicative of a number of things: one, the possible disruption to the organization and publicity around this particular event by the events set in motion by the Singapore state’s efforts to repress dissent; two, the lack of a Singaporean civil society base that would form the audience for such messages. In other words, the effort to articulate with local social groups — which was so central to resistance in Seattle, Cancún, and Hong Kong — largely failed in Singapore. This failure signals the success of state hegemony in suppressing local dissent.  

The “Singapore Effect”?

“The World Bank and IMF preach ‘good governance’ but they refused to move their annual meetings out of Singapore despite news last week that the government had a blacklist…. [T]his highlights just how out of touch they are with the practice of genuine democracy. The ‘Singapore effect’ is likely to continue unless these global institutions get their house in order.
— Eric Gutierrez

The geographies of dissent at the meetings — offshoring and the unfolding of protest in multiple, discrete spaces onshore — provide three insights regarding the relationship between the spatiality of hegemony of neoliberal governance and resistance to it. First, we will discuss the role of the state in conducting the business of neoliberal governance and regulating the spatiality of resistance. Second, we will analyze the strategies of particular groups that persist in dissent, in spaces not always of their own choosing. Third, we consider the implications of local socio-spatial practices of resistance for the hegemony of what is usually characterized as global neoliberalism.

First, “the Singapore effect,” which activists like Eric Gutierrez characterize as a challenge for the future engagement of civil society with global institutions, points to the persistence of the state as a mediator of such relations. Yet we contend that the Singapore effect reflects more than one state’s unusually severe restrictions on protest. Rather, the meetings demonstrate that the state has not withered away, either for the persistence of global neoliberalism or for transnational social movements. To constitute global neoliberalism, transnational elites and ostensibly “global” institutions like the IMF and World Bank must touch down somewhere. These institutions tend to go to places like Singapore

67. Elsewhere it has been noted that NGOs in Singapore are remarkably apolitical and are kept constantly in check by state markers (see Mauzy and R.S. Milne 2002). That transnational networks are unable to forge alliances with local civil society could be taken as further evidence of this tendency.

Wong and Wainwright / Offshoring Dissent
that are seen as neo-liberal showcases yet are also able to ensure delegate security. (Of course, the state must also be willing to host the meetings.) The list of countries that meets these criteria seems to be shrinking. Global institutions have recently convened in Doha, Qatar (WTO 2001), Dubai, UAE (IMF/World Bank 2003), Cancún (WTO 2003), and Singapore (WTO 1995 and IMF/World Bank 2006). Activism and anti-globalization campaigning at all of these meetings were met by authoritarian state measures.

The restrictions on protest at the 2006 meetings bore a distinctively Singaporean imprint: daily policing of meeting activities and the imposition of measures to ban urban protest and activism within state territory. These restrictions mirror the contemporary geographies of dissent that reflect Singapore’s post-independence state practices of regulating the political environment. At the same time, state regulation of the spaces of resistance has unpredictable effects. While institutions attempt to put limits on dissent by meeting in territories like Singapore, it is impossible to predict how dissent will be regulated in the future. The interaction between regulation and resistance during the few days of such international meetings produces an impact on the future of anti-globalization movements. These outcomes are also contingent on historical geographies of the regulation of political life and the arrangement of urban space in which much of the activities of contemporary social movements are staged. In Singapore, these restrictions took on particular spatial forms — banning traditional downtown marches, containing protest within a circumscribed space away from public view, and preventing certain, known protestors from entering the country’s borders. The circumscription of a protest zone should not be interpreted apart from the way the Singapore state designates similar free speech zones. Such spatial limits on protest allowed the Singapore state to maintain the distance between its citizens and dissent at the level of the global public sphere — a distinction that some argue is central to the patriarchal state’s maintenance of hegemony and political power over its citizenry. In the case of the IMF/Bank meetings, this distance between the goals of foreign activists and public perception of resistance was kept in check by local press coverage of the event. International press coverage of the meetings, by contrast, was dominated by the characterization of Singapore state’s policies — from the onset of the blacklist
to the shift of the major civil society forum to Batam — as overzealous and repressive.

Second, the Singapore case displays the ability of groups to transcend some fairly severe and novel restrictions on protest. Resistance in the form of a mass march through the city was rendered impossible by the state. So too was any meaningful engagement between activists and citizens in public, urban space. In this view, the decision to offshore their protests could be read as a creative attempt to overcome the territorial powers of the Singapore state. Equally, offshoring could be read as a reflection of the Singapore state’s desire to expel dissent from its shores (a number of political dissenters have already been banished to the outer islands or abroad). Yet even departing from the territorial limits of Singapore did not end the difficulties faced by activists seeking to protest; the Indonesian authorities’ disapproval of the forum and the withdrawal of their support for the planned Batam protests were pre-emptive reactions to the possible disruption of business in a special economic zone and the extension of state interests beyond its formal, territorial boundaries.

The various forms of protest unfolding in multiple, discrete spaces onshore in and around the official meetings also testify to the ability of dissenting groups to overcome limits to their movements under difficult circumstances. The “Breaking Free” conference was only one example of how organizers attempted to present alternatives to the IMF and Bank among local Singaporean groups within Singapore’s territory while, at the same time, maintaining their boycott of the official meeting site. The protests that were performed at these various, differentially circumscribed sites were highly constrained yet effective in attracting media coverage. Even as the thirty protestors in the NO VOICE protest walked into the demonstration space, scanned their passes, and registered themselves to protest, the spectacle of their collective silence was noted by international media covering the event. The mere existence of media coverage does not necessarily mean that the protests were successful. The key point here, however, is that it was as much the absence of bodies — the notable lack of civil society activists — that articulated the criticism of the Fund and Bank’s politics. We therefore contend that the most important dissent was not in Singapore, but rather in the act of offshoring protest to Batam. This act unsettled the claim of the meeting organizers to have included civil society.

Third, the geographies of dissent and regulation in this case point toward a number of contradictions and tensions in the maintenance of the hegemony of global institutions. World Bank and IMF policies cannot be instituted without a

69. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to conduct a thorough analysis of Singapore media coverage of the event, reports in the government-controlled Singapore press often appeared to defend the policies of the government, with articles tending to rationalize actions such as the banning and deportation of activists (see Channel News Asia 2006c and Channel News Asia 2006d) and the ban on outdoor protests (Channel News Asia 2006e), which contained a response to criticisms by the Wall Street Journal. This bias has also been noted in Harding 2006; and Abbugao 2006.

70. In 1996, Chia Thye Poh, a politics professor and activist was banished for life to nearby Sentosa Island, a few miles off the southern coast of Singapore. Chia spent thirty-three years on the island before being released from his prison in 1989.
balance of consent and coercion. Congruent with the recent open-door policy of the two institutions, civil society — a plural, divided, and political ensemble that defies simple characterization — was expected to be part of these meetings. The calibrated inclusion of NGOs within these institutions is a key part of building consent. Thus, the Bretton Woods institutions face a dilemma: ultimately, they cannot be completely open, democratic, and transparent, for they are comprised of states of uneven transparency and openness. Their failure to achieve transparent and democratic practices reflects power imbalances that are rooted in global political economy. In the face of resistance by transnational movements, they tend to conduct meetings at sites where effective forms of political resistance can be curbed. The novelty of this case was that Singapore went too far in this regard: the state’s actions breached the delicate balance between allowing for a modicum of dissent and placing limits on resistance. As a result, the IMF and World Bank censured the Singapore state for the very work it was expected to do.

Conclusion

“[T]he heterogeneity one is bound to find across the global spaces of resistance to global neoliberalism merely drives home further the point that globalization from below has not yet created a global opposition with enough strength and unity to challenge various neoliberal agendas on its own…. There may indeed be something like the beginnings of a broad, global opposition to neoliberal capitalism of a sort that can be imagined as a global civil society — but it is being formed unevenly and out of the disparate experiences of people being drawn together across global space by capitalist forces not of their own making.” — Jim Glassman

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The experiences of activists in Singapore leave us to conclude by asking a question that is inspired by Jim Glassman’s analysis of the complexities of transnational movements against neoliberal capitalism. Given the highly uneven geographies and difficulties that prevent subaltern groups from different regions from openly aligning and collaborating, what are the geographical conditions of possibility for opposition to neoliberal capitalism today? Is it possible that they may still be defined in terms of “global civil society”? How can we imagine that something like “global civil society” could take shape and link subaltern groups from across the Global South in a way that could effectively oppose global capitalism?

Groups all around the world oppose the policies advocated by the IMF and World Bank. Yet, any effort those groups make to confront these institutions must contend with a number of geographical barriers. As we have seen, activists in 2006 demanded that the Bank and IMF support the rights of blacklisted activists to enter Singapore. In so doing, we could say that these activists acceded to the mode of civil society inclusion encouraged by the Bank and Fund. Such in-
sistence on the right to travel is of course intended to overcome territorial barriers. Yet beyond formal international borders there are more borders: informal ones that prevent activists from confronting elites. Thus do activists seek to find ways to produce spaces for creative performance — often to call into question the boundaries of acceptable inclusion of “civil society.” For instance, at the end of the “Breaking Free” conference, many participants argued for a need to “recover the space.” But as one veteran activist explained, in light of state repression in Singapore, limiting protest to “official space” was unacceptable. The goal of activism could not, he said, be to accept the circumscribed space given to civil society organizations by the World Bank.

In sum, what is at stake is the production of spaces within which global norms may be constituted or contested. And here the state plays perhaps the critical role by regulating relations between transnational activists and ostensibly “global” institutions like the Bank and IMF. Some have argued that states are being refigured by the “emerging global power they tend to increasingly serve.” 73 Yet, to grasp the constitution of neoliberalism and its resistance today, one cannot ignore state power with its territorial dimensions. 74 Neoliberalism may well be a global phenomenon — that is, a form of hegemony that both emerges from and produces the global scale as such — but it must touch down within spaces cleared by territorial power. This gives rise to contingent, sometimes novel spatialities of regulation. Within such spaces, judging the effectiveness of resistance presupposes the use of criteria that are beyond the scope of this article to lay out. While some dissenting groups in Singapore successfully produced spaces within which to protest, the geographies of their performances suggest that state practices largely curtailed dissent. The threat of shutting down all forms of activism proved genuine. Activist groups were forced to contend with a web-like minuitae of barriers, circumscribed within the urban landscape and across territorial boundaries. In the struggles over the spatiality of dissent at these meetings, the coercive qualities of neoliberal policies were crystallized. Through these geographical miniatures of complex social formations, the coercive nature of regulating global neoliberalism can be found on display, writ small.

Thus, engagements between transnational resistance and global institutions will be refracted by local state practices. In Singapore, the capacity of the state to govern its territory was enrolled to reinforce the goals of global neoliberal institutions. At the same time, the IMF and World Bank found themselves in crisis when the state was found to be too vigorous in regulating dissent, banning urban protest, and deporting accredited activists.

There is little doubt that neoliberal hegemony will continue to shape the spatialities of resistance wherever globalization touches down. And in turn, activist groups will work to make the most of the geographies of dissent. The ef-

73. Hardt and Negri 2004, 163.
74. Nor the persistence of nationalism. Though activist groups rely on transnational networks to build alliances against the Bank and Fund, their struggles all too often continue to rely on discourses of nationalism and privileges of national citizenship. See Hilbert 1997.
forts of such groups to confront these difficulties in Singapore may well shape future engagements between global institutions and civil society. Yet, it is too soon to know the legacy of the Singapore protests. Except, perhaps, in one respect. When the Singapore state launched the “Four Million Smiles” campaign, they called for millions of photos to express a “collective desire to offer our guests a positive, unique and unforgettable ‘Singapore Experience.’” In years to come the “Singapore experience” should be remembered as a new chapter in the geography of struggles over global capitalism, for the fact that by offshoring their dissent, the protestors gave face to a different desire.

References


