

# Two views on recent anti-capitalist protests

## Nationalize this!

What next for anti-globalization protests?

**A**t a recent London meeting of the World Development Movement, a group campaigning for reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the state of things a year after the ‘anti-globalization’ protests in Seattle was summarized for the packed audience by Naomi Klein, one of the protests’ most conspicuously media-nominated representatives. We don’t need to invent a movement, she declared, but to recognize the movement we already have. Following the anatomization of the corrosive effect of transnational corporations and the institutions of neo-liberalism on our own ‘captive state’ by George Monbiot (another much publicized commentator), Klein made the case for bringing the protests home. As many activists and commentators agree, the time has come to start fighting globalization in our own back yards. Of course the clash between protesters and police will carry on in ‘world cities’ across the globe, but the ability of these actions to embarrass, harass and pressurize their targets will depend on building local resistance to the immediate impact of globalization in protestors’ home states. Massive campaigns of public education linked to ongoing direct action against all the forms of neo-liberal trespass will build this international movement, giving it the momentum it needs gradually to change the way capitalism operates.

It’s a popular narrative of the future trajectory for post-Seattle politics. There are many variants, but most agree that the numbers involved have to go on increasing for the protests to be perceived as a real threat. ‘Serial protest’, as Klein has called it, is not a problem in itself, as long as it does not ‘plateau’. While more left-wing pundits find the insistence on symbolic protest and direct action likely to achieve little without the ‘holy grail’ of trade-union involvement and recourse to the greater threat of organized strikes, they seem to agree with the basic prognosis. The original composition of the protests was heavy on anti-statist elements, with many participants espousing an anti-hierarchical, decentralized mode of organization. Nonetheless their ability to expand and to turn their agenda-setting achievements into concrete change is now more often predicated on a gradual concentration and unification of the movement, with a new emphasis on local interventions directed against the policies of governments who collaborate with big business by dismantling the nation-state’s more benign attributes.

On this account, the protests amount to a return of the repressed for ‘third way’ politics. The long-overdue backlash against neo-liberal free-trade policies, privatization and the dismantling of the welfare state goes hand in hand with demands for the reform or abolition of the multilateral institutions of globalization. Rather than simply disrupting and exposing the functioning of the latter, local efforts to restore traditional state controls and defences become the indispensable social and political bedrock of the movement. Although this is a project to reinvigorate the nation-state as a buffer against

corporate (largely US) imperialism, it is announced by a new level of international collaboration among its protagonists, from landless workers in Brazil to socialist farmers in France. While this may sound like an attempt to turn back the clock to an earlier order of the nation-state, it is, say its proponents, an internationalist nationalism, trans-local rather than parochial.

However, as Klein and Monbiot, with the customary anti-totalizing gestures, gave their views on the future direction of the protests, it nevertheless felt as though something had gone missing. This newly nominated movement, whose significance – or even existence – had at first seemed ambiguous and contradictory, resistant to definitive description, looked as though it was finally about to get clarified. Under the guise of answering the question ‘What next?’, the original and future potential of the protests was being redefined and domesticated. Perhaps this was just a part of their growing up. The anarchistic tendencies that were rife among their instigators must be put aside like childish things (Monbiot reiterated his excommunication of ‘the movement’s’ unruly elements – not necessarily a great loss, but a telling one). Direct action could be retained, but only as a technique for a kind of aggravated lobbying. Yet, more significantly, this new definition of the movement’s trajectory obscured the possibility of a global resistance to newly globalized capitalism that might exceed or escape the existing political institutions: the movement, it seemed, could evolve only by returning to them.

### **Return of the same?**

Seattle has been celebrated for bringing together ‘turtles’ and trade unionists, adding the networked ingenuity, pluralism and inventiveness of the new social movements and collectives like the Global Action Network to the muscle and influence of the institutionalized Left. But although theorists like Fredric Jameson have described the anti-World Bank and WTO demonstrations as ‘a promising new departure for a politics of resistance to globalization *within the US*’ (my stress), even at Seattle national institutions like the American Federation of Labour–Congress of Industrial Organizations were encountering a new pressure to ‘globalize’ their outlook: the traffic between national institutions and tendentially global networks was never one way. Against the emerging consensus, one might recall that the new conjunction of forces also suggested the possibility of new forms of struggle predicated on the identification and also the construction of new supranational institutions. If, as Jameson argues, ‘the nation state remains the only concrete terrain and framework for political struggle’, then perhaps the idea of a novel kind of post-national internationalism is naive. Nevertheless, when commentators like Monbiot invoke a renewed state capable of intervening against the transnational corporations on our behalf, stepping in once again to ‘regulate our needs’, the more radical potential of Seattle’s reply to technocratic post-politics congeals into a return of the social-democratic same.

Looked at from this perspective, Klein’s injunction that we recognize the movement we already have looks more like a betrayal of the utopian political event we *had*. After a moment of indeterminacy, plurality, shock and potential, the significance of the protests has gradually been simplified, ventriloquized and to some extent defused by influential interpreters, groups and self-appointed spokespersons. Perhaps the vaunted ‘anti-capitalism’ of the protests, notwithstanding their often very strong anarchist elements, was always reformist in tendency and only the ambiguity and incoherence of positions created the appearance of some surplus potential. In that case, it wasn’t the stated views and demands of the protestors but their sudden aggregation that opened up new possibilities. Seattle saw the maturation of 1990s’ identity politics into a renewed economic mode of analysis pinning the blame on neo-liberal institutions rather than ‘representations’, on corporations and sweatshop labour practices rather than (or prior

to) simple ‘intolerance of the Other’. This was a big advance in its own right, but it was not the limit of the protests’ significance. More importance should be given to the utopian tendency of the protests to bring many different acts of refusal together, to create a chain of demands where there had been only isolated issues, and in the process to articulate some potentially unmanageable contradictions.

On this account the protests’ hard kernel, their moment of truth, continues to lie in the non-integrable element within their call for a ‘fairer’ globalization. While this proposition admittedly assumes that neo-liberalism is merely a policy mistake that may, with pressure, be rectified, rather than a structural response to capitalist crisis, this reformist demand for justice nonetheless opens up the space for its own supersession. Whether it be the demand for ‘fair trade’, the cancellation (or even reparation) of Third World debt, or an end to sweatshop labour practices, something intractable is addressed by the recent protests, even if the protestors are not themselves aware of it.

If this is the case, then it may be less important to define what Seattle actually was, what its protagonists felt it was about, than to imagine what it could come to mean. As Slavoj Žižek has recently put it:

The long honeymoon of triumphant global capitalism is over, the long-overdue ‘seven year itch’ is here – witness the panicky reactions of the big media, which – from *Time Magazine* to CNN – all of a sudden started to warn about Marxists manipulating the crowd of ‘honest’ protesters. The problem is now the strictly Leninist one – how to *actualize* the media’s accusations: how to invent the organizational structure which will confer on this unrest the *form* of the universal political demand. Otherwise, the momentum will be lost, and what will remain is the marginal disturbance, perhaps organized as a new Greenpeace, with a certain efficiency, but also strictly limited goals, marketing strategy, etc.

To identify this potential of ‘the movement we have’ to outgrow its own reformist infancy is not to say that the appropriate institutions for channelling and building it already exist. If the protests mark a watershed in the evolution of an anti-globalist resistance, mirroring in their form and content the new social, economic and technological conditions of life, they are simultaneously critical of, or even hostile to, the old institutions of leftist politics – up to and including the vanguard party.

### **Or a new organizational form?**

The attachment of the protestors to ‘decentralized’, ‘non-hierarchical’ forms of organization could be said to constitute both the main reason for their success thus far and the chief obstacle to their further development (everyone from Naomi Klein to the Socialist Workers Party points out that a degree of centralized organization is essential if the movement is going to grow). The American journalist Doug Henwood has spoken recently about the mixed response of members of the anti-sweatshop movement on US campuses to the attentions of the International Socialist Organization (the American subsidiary of the SWP):

the kids are grateful to hear a coherent analysis of how the parts of the system fit together, but they’re extremely wary of furtive takeover attempts.... That’s not very helpful, and it will give Marxism a very bad name at a moment when its prospects look better than they have in a very long time. Much better, it seems, would be for Marxist intellectuals to talk with the protestors, to engage them in conversation with some modesty and even a touch of awe.

If this new anti-capitalist politics is to have revolutionary organizations at all, I would suggest, they will have to take new forms. There is clearly an appetite for a better analysis of globalization among protestors, and the possibility of ‘politicizing the economic’ as Žižek bracingly but unconcretely advocates, remains open, but there are huge questions about the way this might or should occur.

Even among the established revolutionary organizations in this country there is an acknowledgement, for example, that the unions remain hamstrung by their attach-

ment to New Labour, not to mention their submissive relationship to big business. The suspicion of the predominantly young protestors for established 'anti-capitalist' institutions is hardly surprising when their own members (rightfully) display a similar lack of faith. Union members, too, often find themselves fighting both their employers and their unions when they try to challenge the consequences of globalization 'in their own back yards'. If activists' declared resistance to centralization, hierarchy and rigid organization in part mirrors the pseudo-individualist rhetoric of contemporary capitalism, nonetheless, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued, this vocabulary itself emerges from an earlier generation of authentic anti-disciplinary struggle. Should it be dismissed as ideological, a resistance to organization *per se*, or reactivated as an element in the formulation of a new kind of politics appropriate to a new era? Seattle placed the question of tactics and organization on the agenda again, even if the Old Left are trying to avoid the theorization the new situation demands.

Perhaps the protests' very strength still lies in their *not* constituting a movement, or at least in resisting the drive to consolidate their achievements in the time-honoured fashion. Do they not open up the possibility of a new kind of movement which would lead to an exodus from the existing institutions of global and state power rather than simply coalescing into a movement for their reform? Both proponents of a renewed citizens' state and traditionalist Marxists set on integrating the movement with the unions would tend to rule out this possibility in advance, or at best defer the question to some later date. But will this potential, present in the initial rupture of Seattle, still be there by the time 'the movement' has been processed by nostalgic state-socialist interpreters and contemporary social-democratic institutions? To quote Negri, 'The problem is not to try to make these institutions democratic, but to construct democracy otherwise.'

**Benedict Seymour**

## The golden straightjacket

### Moving on from Seattle

**T**he myriad anti-corporate campaigns of the kind brilliantly chronicled in Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, the opposition to the ill-fated Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), the Jubilee 2000 campaign for the cancellation of Third World debt, the 'battle' of Seattle at the November 1999 meeting of the WTO, and the similar actions around meetings of the IMF, the World Bank and the Davos forum clearly represent new forms of popular protest and political activity. To be sure, as with similar protests in the past – whether the popular (and populist) opposition to the oligarchies of big business and financiers, or the campaigns that developed out of the protest movements and radicalization of the 1960s and the changing global agendas relating to debt, gender, the environment and human rights that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s – the diverse elements of the contemporary mobilizations often lack any lasting strategic connection with one another or any programmatic unity beyond their opposition to the existing state of affairs. This much is obvious.

But the obvious notwithstanding, might not the protests, movements and organizations of the 1990s represent a new departure in other respects? Taking on many of the characteristics of the 'new' social movements identified by Castells, Melucci, Touraine and others, these initiatives have often mobilized an impressively diverse range of constituencies, developing innovative forms of organization as well as identifying and creating new arenas of cultural and political engagement. At the same time, while their targets have often been the symbolic and institutional embodiments of the increasingly

global presence of capitalist power, these campaigns and movements have emerged for the most part outside and independently of the traditional organizations and procedures of the Left. Indeed, faced with the evident decline of party-political ideological contestation between Left and Right within the industrialized capitalist democracies, as well as the apparent consensus among the Northern ruling classes and political elites on a neo-liberal project of economic globalization, these multifaceted forms of protest are already being claimed by one or another of the different political positions that seek to define a new radical politics.

Sometimes the arrogance and bombast involved in attempts to capture these protests for a particular, if ill-defined, agenda is staggering. Describing the Seattle protests as 'Five Days That Shook the World', the *New Left Review* spoke of the 'deepening disarray amongst the servants of globalization' as the century 'ended with a stunning debacle for free-trade capitalism' (*NLR* 238, November–December 1999, p. 1). Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair's book of the same title, a heroic account of the Seattle days and after, imperiously and without irony proclaimed that 'ours is a worldwide guerrilla war, of publicity, harassment, obstructionism.... Our anti-WTO movement opposes the very definition of capitalism as a 'market economy', which destroys human culture and community, exploits labour and degrades nature'. Whereas the *NLR* at least acknowledged that 'third-world delegates' played a role in the outcome at Seattle, Cockburn and St. Clair confine all their attention to the activity on the streets, contemptuously dismissing all that did and might go on within the WTO 'because capitalism only plays by the rules if it wrote those rules in the first place'. If this kind of febrile rejectionism really represented the spirit of 'Seattle and beyond', then the WTO and its supporters have little to fear.



For the truth is that while popular protests of the kind witnessed in Seattle and elsewhere are embarrassing and may even derail specific negotiations, as much by the massive, brutal and largely counterproductive overkill of the 'security' response as by the actions of the demonstrators themselves, a politics of rejectionism does not constitute a serious long-term challenge to the pattern of multilateral negotiations represented by the WTO. The timing of the Seattle talks was especially fortunate for the street protests since it coincided with the end of Clinton's presidency, when all the usual presidential authority to negotiate trade agreements had been exhausted and when his sole concern was to boost the chances of Al Gore in the forthcoming US presidential elections. Within the meeting itself, the arrogance and insensitivity of the chair and US trade representative, Charlene Barshefsky, only served to compound Clinton's antics.

Seattle failed primarily because of substantive differences between the United States, on the one side, and the European Union and Japan, on the other, over the further reform of agricultural trade and between broadly the 'North' and the 'South' over what are known as the 'implementation' issues stemming from the Uruguay Round. On agriculture, the EU wanted 'compensation' for honouring its Marrakesh commitments to liberalize in the form of the South further opening its markets to investment; the US wanted further reform (as well as more liberalization of services); and Japan simply refused to countenance any more market opening. The 'implementation' issues covered virtually all the new trade issues broached by the Uruguay Round – property rights, investment measures, subsidies and anti-dumping rules, agriculture, textiles, balance-of-payments protection – and many Southern states were seeking to operationalize the

'best endeavour' (i.e. non-obligatory good intention) clauses on 'Special and Differential Treatment' for developing countries. Southern states were also increasingly angry with what they saw as the ways in which the major trading nations and the WTO secretariat itself disregarded the 'rules' whenever it suited them.

In this respect, perhaps the main lesson of Seattle is that the overwhelming power of the only remaining superpower cannot easily be translated into a predatory hegemony in the field of trade that would override the interests of its major economic competitors in the North, nor unify these 'partners' against the refusal of the Southern states to be pushed around in an ostensibly law-based, multilateral organization. Here the contrast with the acceptance of the Uruguay Round is instructive. Although conflicts between the EU and the USA over agriculture came close to sinking the Uruguay Round, in the end a deal was forged and the resulting unity among Northern states left the South with little option but to go along with what was on offer. Both of these conditions were absent in Seattle. Moreover, as Chakravarthi Raghavan put it, 'The Uruguay Round and the WTO entered the developing world like a thief in the night, without much awareness or discussions – either in parliaments or among the public or among domestic enterprises and sectors. Now, with the obligations kicking and biting, the WTO as an "animal" has been identified and has become well known' (*Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 7, no. 3, Autumn 2000, pp. 495–504).



### **International capitalist agendas**

There is another aspect of the WTO agenda and that of the other Bretton Woods institutions, especially the IMF, which goes some way to explain why they have become a lightning rod for resistance to aspects of the global power of capital. It also suggests that a politics aiming to engage with and transform their agendas might yet hold out prospects for progressive change. The original Bretton Woods settlement was based on

a compromise around what has been variously characterized as 'embedded liberalism', 'shallow integration' or 'co-operative competition'. In essence, the monetary, financial and trading arrangements sought to balance a degree of national autonomy to decide domestic economic policy and the form of engagement with the international economy against reciprocal commitments to remove 'at-the-border' barriers to trade and to establish a non-discriminatory (national) treatment of foreign goods and services. Contrary to the expectations of many on the Left and the Right, the erosion of the US economic lead over its capitalist allies, the increasing political independence of the South and the fall of the West's communist adversary did not undermine these institutions. If anything, their role in the regulation of the world economy increased through the 1990s, such that by the end of the decade both their critics and their defenders rightly saw them as crucial to the future direction of the world economy. In fact, the evolution of international economic governance has witnessed an expansion of the scope and depth of multilateral regulation, with regional trade and investment agreements thus far staying broadly within the Bretton Woods order. There has been a marked decrease in the ability of the United States to 'link' its military power to bargaining over economic issues, while new forms of linkage (to the environment and to human rights, for example) have been pushed onto the agenda; and the role of 'private' actors – located in the market and civil society – in shaping international governance has increased.

Two features of these changes are particularly important. On the one hand, the 'reach' of multilaterally negotiated measures into the fabric of national cultures, social

arrangements and so forth is much greater now that their scope has extended beyond 'at-the-border' measures to include a wide range of 'behind-the-border' policies. This massively raises the visibility and salience of 'trade' as a public, political issue. On the other hand, international economic governance is increasingly framed in the context of international economic law, but this creates a conflict over the principles governing the content of that law and the means by which it can be legitimated. Should the law serve the interests of the market and market actors as conceived in neo-liberal terms (the 'comparative advantage' model of international economic law strongly promoted by the United States) or do states have the right to impose non-market outcomes? And are the provisions of such law to be legitimated by a technocratic invocation of neo-liberal certainties or by means of some form of democratic representation? Elements of both the dictates of the market and the interests of states, of the technocratic and the properly political, can be found in contemporary international economic law, but at present the principal subjects and objects of international law continue to be states, notwithstanding the growth of legal rights for 'private' market actors, and their consent remains the cornerstone of the system.

It is these latter questions which lie at the heart of the future of the Bretton Woods system. The extent to which states properly reflect national preferences at an international level is a difficult question, as is the role of NGOs in increasing such accountability. Even more difficult is the question of how to develop purpose-built forms of representation for multilateral institutions such as the WTO and the IMF. Do transnational NGOs have a legitimate role to play, or is there the need for something more akin to the democratic elements of the EU polity, or both? If the system is to move forward these issues will have to be addressed, since the international trade agenda under the WTO has now moved well beyond its original, limited GATT framework and there is widespread resistance to a predominantly US-led attempt to refashion the content of international economic law around a liberal, comparative advantage model in which the only form of democratic legitimation is the consent of the participating state executives. (Parallel developments in the field of international money and finance have been pursued in the IMF.)

Under the US model, as Dani Rodrik has pointed out, the 'price of maintaining national jurisdictional sovereignty is that politics have to be exercised over a much narrower domain'. Thomas Friedman has called this the 'golden straightjacket', because it involves constraining national policy choices within a range that is acceptable to international or global market forces (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, HarperCollins, London, 1999). The view on the streets in Seattle, that the current agenda of the WTO (and the IMF) represents a United States-inspired version of the golden straightjacket complementary to the invasion of the public sphere by corporate rule, is shared by many governments in Europe and most Southern states. In part, the development of international economic governance within the EU can be understood as an attempt to escape this golden straightjacket by resort to federalism not on a global but on a *regional* basis. Within the economic space of the EU international economic governance has gone far beyond non-discriminatory national treatment to embrace mutual recognition and common standards and policies, organized under a quasi-federal political and legal order. Moreover, despite the free-market orientation of the single market, EU governance also serves wider social objectives relating to welfare and environmental concerns. The content of European economic law therefore bears the imprint of state interests reflecting national preferences as well as the dictates of comparative advantage. Moreover, the consolidation of international economic governance as *law* and the authority of that law has gone much *further and deeper* within the EU, in the framework of European economic law developed by the Community pillar, than in the wider multilateral institutions governing trade (the WTO) and finance (the

IMF). This is what makes the EU so distinctive as a system of international economic governance: it has developed a significant degree of quasi-federal shared economic sovereignty under a common legal order for its trade and monetary affairs (as well as for its common policies within the EU).

### **A European model?**

Extending this kind of logic to the global level is one possible future scenario, a move towards global federalism. States would give up national sovereignty in order to re-regulate the international economy at a higher level; autonomy in the field of policy-making could be re-established at the price of having to formulate and implement such regulations collectively with other states. Could the WTO and the IMF become the vehicles for such a development and, if so, what kinds of principles would organize decision-making? (Collectively, the member states of the EU have a larger voice in both the IMF and the WTO than the United States.) Or does the experience of the EU demonstrate that the regional level is a more appropriate site for this kind of substantive decision-making? In particular, if as seems likely the *sui generis* democratic features of the EU play an important role in legitimating its legally defined and regulated economic order, can these be replicated on a wider scale? Most problematically of all, can the EU make any common cause with Southern states against the US-led neoliberal drift?

There is, of course, a third alternative to the US-inspired golden straightjacket and an extension of EU-style governance on a wider stage: namely, the exercise of national sovereignty in a *less* collective fashion, a reassertion of national (or perhaps regional) autonomy that would seek to limit the scope of economic integration across borders. It is difficult to see how those currently most excluded from and marginal to the world market could benefit under such a scenario, since the abilities of most weak states to forge meaningful regional linkages are no stronger and probably less than their collective bargaining power within the multilateral institutions.

If this analysis is correct, it provides a useful complement to the case made by Naomi Klein about the potential to generate a broader politics from the ‘no-logo’ campaigns. At the centre of Klein’s analysis is the claim that the relentless commodification brought about by corporate rule is eroding the ‘three social pillars of employment, civil liberties and civic space’, thereby generating the anti-corporate ‘logo-forged global links’ that will enable us to ‘find sustainable solutions for this sold planet’. For Klein, then, it is this pressure from a global civil society protesting against the economic inequalities and cultural depredations of a globally networked form of corporate rule that holds the best hope for political solutions – that is, for democratically controlled, publicly enforceable laws. In this context, Klein suggests that logo-based corporations have ‘become metaphors for a global economic system gone awry, largely because, unlike the back-door wheeling and dealing in NAFTA, GATT, APEC, WTO, MAI, the EU, the IMF, the G-8 and the OECD, the methods and objectives of these companies are plain to see’. If what has been said above has any merit, some of these institutions are not as opaque as Klein perhaps suggests and might yet provide arenas in which the *political* solutions she calls for could be negotiated. For if the protests are, as Klein maintains, ultimately about a politics that ‘embraces globalization but seeks to wrest it from the multinationals’, then if it is not through such multilateral forums (in combination with political pressure at the national level), where is the social and democratic re-regulation of neo-liberal capitalism to be located? Rejectionists (and national protectionists) don’t need an answer to this question. But the Southern states and the peoples they represent, and those in the North who seek to make common cause with them, surely do.

**Simon Bromley**



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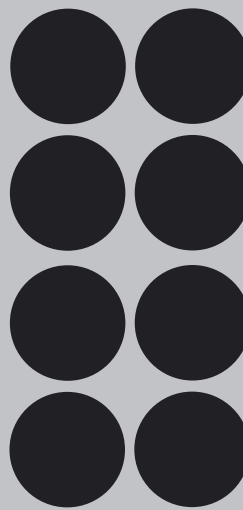
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