

Copenhagen: Seattle Grows Up

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The other day I received a pre-publication copy of [The Battle of the Story of the Battle of Seattle](#), by David Solnit and Rebecca Solnit. It's set to come out ten years after a historic coalition of activists shut down the World Trade Organization summit in Seattle, the spark that ignited a global anticorporate movement.

The book is a fascinating account of what really happened in Seattle, but when I spoke to David Solnit, the direct-action guru who helped engineer the shutdown, I found him less interested in reminiscing about 1999 than in talking about the upcoming United Nations climate change summit in Copenhagen and the "climate justice" actions he is helping to organize across the United States on [November 30](#). "This is definitely a Seattle-type moment," Solnit told me. "People are ready to throw down."

There is certainly a Seattle quality to the Copenhagen mobilization: the [huge range of groups](#) that will be there; the [diverse tactics](#) that will be on display; and the developing-country governments ready to bring activist demands into the summit. But Copenhagen is not merely a Seattle do-over. It feels, instead, as though the progressive tectonic plates are shifting, creating a movement that builds on the strengths of an earlier era but also learns from its mistakes.

The big criticism of the movement the media insisted on calling "antiglobalization" was always that it had a laundry list of grievances and few concrete alternatives. The movement converging on Copenhagen, in contrast, is about a single issue—climate change—but it weaves a coherent narrative about its cause, and its cures, that incorporates virtually every issue on the planet. In this narrative, our climate is changing not simply because of particular polluting practices but because of the underlying logic of capitalism, which values short-term profit and perpetual growth above all else. Our governments would have us believe that the same logic can now be harnessed to solve the climate crisis—by creating a tradable commodity called "carbon" and by transforming forests and farmland into "sinks" that will supposedly offset our runaway emissions.

Climate-justice activists in Copenhagen will argue that, far from solving the climate crisis, carbon-trading represents an unprecedented privatization of the atmosphere, and that offsets and sinks threaten to become a resource grab of colonial proportions. Not only will these "market-based solutions" fail to solve the climate crisis, but this failure will dramatically deepen poverty and inequality, because the poorest and most vulnerable people are the primary victims of climate change—as well as the primary guinea pigs for these emissions-trading schemes.

But activists in Copenhagen won't simply say no to all this. They will aggressively advance

solutions that simultaneously reduce emissions and narrow inequality. Unlike at previous summits, where alternatives seemed like an afterthought, in Copenhagen the alternatives will take center stage. For instance, the direct-action coalition [Climate Justice Action](#) has called on activists to storm the conference center on [December 16](#). Many will do this as part of the “[bike bloc](#),” riding together on an as yet unrevealed “irresistible new machine of resistance” made up of hundreds of old bicycles. The goal of the action is not to shut down the summit, Seattle-style, but to open it up, transforming it into “a space to talk about *our* agenda, an agenda from below, an agenda of climate justice, of real solutions against their false ones.... This day will be ours.”

Some of the solutions on offer from the activist camp are the same ones the global justice movement has been championing for years: local, sustainable agriculture; smaller, decentralized power projects; respect for indigenous land rights; leaving fossil fuels in the ground; loosening protections on green technology; and paying for these transformations by taxing financial transactions and canceling foreign debts. Some solutions are new, like the mounting demand that rich countries pay “[climate debt](#)” [reparations](#) to the poor. These are tall orders, but we have all just seen the kind of resources our governments can marshal when it comes to saving the elites. As one pre-Copenhagen slogan puts it: “If the climate were a bank, it would have been saved”—not abandoned to the brutality of the market.

In addition to the coherent narrative and the focus on alternatives, there are plenty of other changes too: a more thoughtful approach to direct action, one that recognizes the urgency to do more than just talk but is determined not to play into the tired scripts of cops-versus-protesters. “Our action is one of civil disobedience,” say the organizers of the December 16 action. “We will overcome any physical barriers that stand in our way—but we will not respond with violence if the police [try] to escalate the situation.” (That said, there is no way the two-week summit will not include a few running battles between cops and kids in black; this is Europe, after all.)

A decade ago, in an op-ed in the *New York Times* published after Seattle was shut down, I wrote that a new movement advocating a radically different form of globalization “just had its coming-out party.” What will be the significance of Copenhagen? I put that question to John Jordan, whose prediction of what eventually happened in Seattle I quoted in my book [No Logo](#). He replied: “If Seattle was the movement of movements’ coming-out party, then maybe Copenhagen will be a celebration of our coming of age.”

He cautions, however, that growing up doesn’t mean playing it safe, eschewing civil disobedience in favor of staid meetings. “I hope we have grown up to become much more disobedient,” Jordan said, “because life on this world of ours may well be terminated because of too many acts of obedience.”

An updated tenth-anniversary edition of Naomi Klein’s [No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies](#) comes out in November.

Naomi Klein is an award-winning journalist and syndicated columnist and the author of the international and New York Times bestseller [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism](#), now out in paperback. Her earlier books include the international best-seller, [No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies](#); and the collection [Fences and Windows: Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Globalization Debate](#) (2002). To read all her latest writing visit www.naomiklein.org

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