

The “Battle of Seattle” and the Anti-globalization Movement

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Next November will mark the 20th anniversary since the so-called “Battle of Seattle.” It refers to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference held at Seattle, WA, in late 1999, which became the scene of widely-reported protest activity and civil unrest. That’s why it was subsequently called colloquially the “Battle of Seattle.”

I recently watched with interest and great sympathy the videotaped protests of the anti-globalization activists in a collection of five videos entitled *Showdown in Seattle* (1999). Tens of thousands of protesters demonstrated in the streets of Seattle from November 26 to December 1, 1999, for labor rights and against the abuses of the corporate state, including the government-sanctioned degradation of our environment in the name of capitalist greed and profit. I found myself fully agreeing with their views on how economic globalization and global trade should benefit everybody, especially the world’s poor (globalization’s “losers”), rather than just the rich and politically mighty (globalization’s “winners”). I was shocked to see how the peaceful protesters against the WTO were attacked and mauled by the Seattle police force—reinforced by two battalions of the Washington Army National Guard, the 81st Brigade of the Washington State Patrol, and many other local law-enforcement and paramilitary agents—in the same violent and brutal manner that the Occupy Wall Street movement would be assaulted and suppressed a decade later.

You can see from the five videos that what happened in Seattle was—as aptly described by many eyewitnesses—an officially-sponsored “police riot,” in which heavily-armed troopers covered from head to toe in black Darth Vader-like armor used the city Mayor-imposed “state of emergency” and “curfew” as an excuse to resort to brute force—using truncheons, beatings, attack dogs, plastic bullets, water cannon, tear-gas cannisters, pepper spray, tasers, stun grenades, even armored cars and helicopters. They made mass arrests in downtown Seattle’s 50-bloc “No-Protest Zone” in violation of the protesters’ constitutionally-guaranteed rights to peaceful assembly and free speech. *And what was the official justification for such excessive use of violent police-state tactics?* A few store windows had been smashed by roving gangs of masked “anarchists” who—as the local media (including the prestigious *Seattle Times*) reported only a few weeks later—turned out to have been plainclothes policemen acting as undercover agent-provocateurs. The corrupt big media gave very slanted coverage of the street protests—as several participants and one legal observer complain in the *Showdown in Seattle* videos.



The “turtles”: protestors in sea turtle costumes (CC BY 2.0)

The *New York Times* lied as usual, falsely accusing the marchers of throwing Molotov cocktails at the police (later its belatedly shamed editors officially retracted this fabricated news story). Instead of being a “voice of the people,” the corporate news media once again served as an obedient mouthpiece for the “Washington Consensus” free-marketeers and their Big Business paymasters. It is amazing that the Bill Clinton administration condoned this thuggish crackdown on peaceful protest, even though the anti-WTO “Big March” included a few prominent Democrats such as the late Senator Paul Wellstone (MN) and Representative Maxine Waters (CA)—both interviewed in one of the videos—as well as Representatives Dennis Kucinich (OH) and George Miller (CA). My favorite Republican, Congressman Ron Paul (TX), reportedly made only a brief appearance—probably deterred by police violence against the “trouble-makers.” A couple of protest leaders were, in fact, snatched death-squad style from the Seattle streets by plainclothes cops in unmarked cars.



Seattle police on Union Street, during the protests (CC BY 2.0)

Numerous participants in the unprecedentedly huge Seattle demonstrations—estimated to have included up to 60,000 people—are seen in the videos carrying placards with slogans like “Shut Down the WTO,” “Resist McDomination,” “Democracy—Not Globalization,” “Fair Trade—Not Free Trade,” and “Save the Family Farms!” *Why was corporate globalization so unpopular with so many different people? Why did so many protesters of divergent professional, educational, regional, ethnic, racial, religious, and ideological backgrounds stand united against the WTO?* The anti-WTO activists were opposed not to globalization *per se* but just to corporate globalization. They wanted anti-corporate globalization—the so-called “new internationalism”—because, according to *Showdown in Seattle*, in the age of capitalist globalization “the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.” They insisted that nobody was benefiting from corporate globalization except for the global corporations that “rule the world” and their corrupt “servants” in government, as one conservative Republican charged at that time in his now classic bestseller book (David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World*, Berrett-Koehler, 2nd edition, 2001). A Nobel Prize-winning former senior vice-president and chief economist of the World Bank (another major organizational force behind corporate globalization) complained in his bestseller book that the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” as well as between rich and poor countries was fast growing (Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, W.W. Norton: 2003). Nearly half of the world’s people lived on \$2.00 or less per day—and almost a quarter of them survived on as little as \$1.00 or even less per day.

Equally disturbing statistics from the IMF (yet another major organizational driver of corporate globalization) showed that the annual per-capita GDP in what is sometimes called the “Fourth World”—two dozen or so severely underdeveloped nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia at the very bottom of the world’s economic hierarchy—was about \$500 or

less. At the annual World Economic Forums in Davos, Switzerland, attended by many of the world's richest and most powerful "decision-makers"—another telling video about globalization, *The Corporation* (2004), called them "globalization's high priests"—Oxfam, an international NGO fighting global poverty, revealed that the 85 richest people on the planet had as much wealth as the bottom half of the world's entire population. According to a *CNN Money* [article](#), the typical American CEO earns at least 354 times more than the average full-time American worker (in 1980, at the beginning of corporate globalization, the factor of inequality was "only" 42 times). A McDonald's executive earns \$8.75 million a year, but a McDonald's food-service worker earns just \$8.25 an hour (David Jamieson, *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2014). Along with Walmart, McDonald's is among the most notorious "welfare queens," who have been urging their poorly-paid employees to apply for food stamps and other welfare for the poor.

Reportedly, the richest 10% in the world own 86% of all global wealth, while the top 1% alone own fully 46% of all global assets ("Richest 1 Percent Hold 46 Percent of the World's Wealth," *Reuters*, September 10, 2013). According to David Stockman, President Reagan's Budget Office Director, while in 1985 the top 5% of U.S. households owned "only" \$9 trillion in private wealth, today that figure has jumped to well over \$40 trillion (interview with Stockman, "60 Minutes," CNBC, January 26, 2014). At the same time, the household incomes for the rest have stagnated in real terms (when adjusted for inflation), while for those at the bottom of the social pyramid—mostly service-sector and blue-collar employees with only high-school education (or less)—real household incomes have actually declined since 1973 (Joseph Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, by the 1%, and for the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, May 2011).

There are more impoverished people around the globe now—both percentage-wise and in sheer numbers—than fifty years ago, when Maggie Thatcher and Ronnie Reagan launched the corporate globalization revolution. When asked, older Americans still remember a pre-globalization time, when only Dad worked outside the home—usually in a well-paying blue-collar job—but earned enough money for his all-American family to buy a nice house, maybe a backyard pool, own a couple of cars, pay for the college education of the kids, go on expensive family vacations, and generally enjoy a comfortable middle-class life-style. Thanks largely to corporate globalization, the so-called "American Dream" is fading for the millions of chronically unemployed and underemployed, the working poor (the minimum-wage earners), and for many young people. As mentioned in one of the *Showdown in Seattle* videos, as workers everywhere are pitted against each other in a brutal "race to the bottom" competition designed to cut wages and "improve" worker productivity, well-paying American jobs (even high-tech jobs) are being "outsourced" and "off-shored" to poor Third World countries where the average worker pay is just a small fraction of our minimum wage. Despite Donald Trump's demagogic promises, this unfortunate economic trend has not changed.

Another controversial issue on the anti-globalization marchers' agenda in Seattle was protecting our environment from pillage, plunder and destruction by greedy and manipulative transnational corporations (which *The Corporation* video denounces as "Earth plunderers" and "monsters trying to devour as much profit as possible at anyone's expense"). Environmentalists from all over the world complain in the same video that the secretive and West-dominated WTO has turned their countries into "colonies," since their governments must now accept the binding rulings of anonymous WTO tribunals that can overturn any domestic environmental, labor or worker-safety law and regulation at the behest of litigating foreign corporations—or face crippling economic sanctions. Not only is

corporate globalization eroding important ecological protections by demanding and receiving corporate exemptions to the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act, it is also threatening ordinary people's livelihoods.

To illustrate its nefarious impact on Third World nations, *The Corporation* video shows ordinary Bolivians protesting *en mass* in the streets over their suddenly unaffordable water-use bills after their debt-ridden government (under heavy pressure from the IMF) had all of Bolivia's water utilities, including drinking water and even rainwater, privatized and sold to the San Francisco-based Bechtel Corporation. The resulting popular revolt brought down Bolivia's globalization-friendly conservative cabinet which was replaced by the populist government of President Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous Indian head of state (who went on to restore public ownership over the water-service utilities).

It is obvious that ordinary people around the globe don't want economic globalization to be at their expense. They are losing good, well-paying jobs and a middle-class standard of living, as foot-loose global corporations roam the world in search of maximum profits for their shareholders. Corporations are also increasingly turning to tax avoidance, financial shenanigans, and usury ("loan sharking"). Even General Motors is making most of its money nowadays not so much from selling cars assembled from parts manufactured in China, Mexico and Brazil, but from providing high-interest auto loans to its customers. John Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO, summarizes in one of the *Showdown in Seattle* videos the main demand of the anti-globalization protesters, namely the restructuring of global economic governance: "We don't want to reform globalization. We want to replace it with a new internationalism, driven by our mutual concern for dignity, fairness, and freedom."

Corporations seem to be very dear to the hearts of the Geneva-based WTO bureaucrats who apply strict WTO agreements and rules only to governments—local, provincial/state, or national—especially in Third World countries, but rarely to corporations, even though they account for much of global trade. The result: nearly every ecological, worker-safety and public-health law or regulation which corporations challenge at the WTO has been ruled illegal by the secretive and anonymous WTO tribunals. The WTO is so antagonistic to basic public-health laws and regulations that it has ruled against the landmark Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act of 2009, one of President Barak Obama's proudest domestic-policy achievements ("Public Citizen Condemns WTO Attack on U.S. Efforts to Reduce Teen Smoking," *Public Citizen*, April 4, 2012). The "free trade" philosophy of the WTO reflects the anti-government zeal of the so-called "Conservative Revolution"—from Republican President Reagan proclaiming in 1981 that "Government is the problem, not the solution," to the GOP's response to President Obama's last State of the Union address, in which the Republicans blamed the government for "inequality" and "poverty" in America!

The WTO is hardly promoting "free trade" (or so-called "trade liberalization"), let alone the world's "economic well-being." According to the World Bank's *World Development Report 2008*,

"A main critique of trade liberalization methods such as the WTO...is that the developed world demands trade liberalization from lesser developed countries without removing its own trade-distorting barriers. For example, the developing world must reduce tariffs on textiles and sensitive agricultural products, but the United States and the European Union maintain substantial subsidies on agriculture." (Rachel Denae Thrasher, "Free Trade," in *The Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability: The Business of Sustainability*, p. 241)

Nor is “increased consumer satisfaction” guaranteed by corporate globalization. I have already mentioned the instructive case of Bolivia where ordinary people rioted in the streets over the unaffordable water-use bills of Bechtel Corporation. The same outbursts of popular anger are taking place in other countries where foreign corporations have taken over the formerly public utilities. Take, for example, the case of post-Communist Bulgaria, a EU member located in southeastern Europe. Under overwhelming pressure from the IMF and the EU, successive governments privatized Bulgaria’s energy sector and began gradually to deactivate its only Soviet-built nuclear-power plant. In 2013, Bulgarians—many of them accustomed to paying virtually nothing for their electricity use under Communism—rioted in the streets over the unaffordable electric-power bills which, as local pensioners complained, were exceeding their meager incomes. Rioters trashed the local offices of the two electric-distribution corporations—one Austrian and the other Czech—and toppled the globalization-friendly conservative government of the day.

The protesters in Seattle demanded a fair, socially just and environmentally sustainable economic order. They wanted nobody among the world’s “have-nots” to be slaving their wretched lives away in sweatshops with horrible Dickensian working conditions and grueling 12-hour shifts a day just to provide food and shelter to their families—but, in fact, only making their modern slave-owners richer. The Seattle protesters opposed any return to the 1800s—in contrast to the misguided proponents of 19th century “liberalism” like ex-British Prime Minister Maggie Thatcher, who once boasted that “I was asked whether I was trying to restore 19th **century Victorian values. I said straight out I was. And I am.**”

But what did Thatcher want restored exactly?! *The “unfettered,” “dog-eat-dog” capitalism and William Blake’s “dark satanic mills” of the 19th century’s Industrial Revolution (vividly if painfully described by Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli and Emil Zola)? The age of mass-scale institutionalized slavery in America, Europe’s barbarous colonial empires in Africa and Asia, Mark Twain’s “Gilded Age” of the notorious robber barons with their “ostentatious,” untaxed wealth and arrogantly “conspicuous consumption” (sociologist Thorstein Veblen’s words, not mine)? Or the merciless exploitation of millions of wretched manual laborers, many of them starving pre-teenage kids, who worked 16-hour shifts a day, seven days a week, for a mere pittance and in most brutalizing working conditions—without any breaks, paid vacations, or sickness leave? Perhaps one needs to read False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism, a short polemic book published in 1998 by London School of Economics professor John Gray, once a champion of neo-liberalism turned implacable foe. Dr. Gray prophetically predicted that the neo-liberal laissez-faire experiment imposed on the world by the notorious “Iron Lady” Thatcher, her American pal Ronnie Reagan, and pro-corporate international organizations like the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO would be tragically disastrous for most of mankind.*

Nobody participating in the Seattle protests was willing to go back to the “good old days” of **laissez-faire capitalism**, because it would simply mean doing away with the 8-hour work day, the five-day work week, the minimum wage, old-age and disability pensions, anti-child labor laws, unemployment insurance, unionization and collective bargaining, worker-safety legislation, government welfare for the poor, the universal right to vote (including for women and minorities), and all the other political, social, and economic acquisitions of the 20th century. The anti-globalization activists in Seattle demanded globalization that benefits everyone on the planet—not just the few rich who already have more than enough to live on. The incomes and living standards of the “have-nots” have either stagnated or

even declined, according to economists such as Nobel Prize-winners Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, who attribute nearly all of globalization's "economic growth" to hidden inflation (especially from the uncounted "volatile" prices of food or energy), and to the dynamic statistical effects of the massive redistribution of wealth from the lower to the upper classes.

It is the right-wing conservatives who are longing for the "free-wheeling and dealing" capitalism of the 1800s. Elected conservatives (both Republican and Democrat) have already gutted President Teddy Roosevelt's anti-trust/anti-cartel legislation designed to rein in corporations: no anti-trust laws have been used since the late 1970s when the Bell Telephone Corporation was broken up. Instead, conservatives have approvingly suggested that "corporations are increasingly taking a role beside and equal with state actors." But governments—elected or not—are ultimately accountable to voters/citizens and can be removed—one way or another, sooner or later—from power, should they fail to meet public expectations. Whom are global corporations and the multinational organizations that favor them accountable to? Corporations are accountable only to their shareholders, while the IMF and the WTO are responsible only to their most generous and influential member states.

If corporations indeed rule the world with the help of international institutions like the WTO and the IMF—as David Korten claims in his bestseller book *When Corporations Rule the World*—then we live in a world which is even more unjust and authoritarian than the one that is ruled by undemocratic governments. Many public-interest NGOs complain that the WTO has undermined the right of sovereign states to enact and effectively enforce public-health, labor, worker-safety, and environmental standards. *For example, the WTO has sided with one foreign-based corporation in forcing the U.S. to scrap its cleaner-gasoline regulations and allow more polluting gasoline to be imported in violation of the Clean Air Act. But what right does the WTO or that particular foreign corporation have to interfere with our ecological legislation and, ultimately, with our way of life?* I don't remember ever voting for the WTO, nor have I ever cast my vote for the multinational corporations whose operations have a direct impact on our well-being. Because when the accusations of "unfair trade" come from the World Bank itself (World Bank, *World Development Report 2008*, Washington, D.C., 2007, p. 40)—the WTO's sister organization equally infamous for promoting corporate globalization and free trade—it's a sure sign that there is a lot of trouble in globalization paradise. Just ask the weekly *gilets jaunes* protesters in the streets of France....

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Featured image: WTO protests in Seattle, November 30, 1999 Pepper spray is applied to the crowd. (CC BY-SA 2.0)

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