

Eros and the Battle of Seattle

by George Katsiaficas*

In the months subsequent to the now legendary battle of Seattle, the leaders of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Trilateral Commission all defined the anti-globalization upsurge as having begun in that city—and therefore as following in the glorious tradition of Microsoft and Starbucks. No less an authority on world economic affairs than Alan Greenspan, chair of the Federal Reserve Board under four U.S. presidents, recently commented that: "...the arguments against the global trading system that emerged first in Seattle and then spread over the past year arguably touched a chord in many people..."¹

Did the current wave of anti-globalization protests begin in Seattle? No, the movement emerged first outside the United States—in Venezuela, South Korea, India, Germany and dozens of other countries. Even if we define the movement narrowly, as Greenspan has – i.e. as only being against the global *trading* system and not against the entirety of the capitalist world system controlled by a few hundred giant corporations-- it is hardly of American origin. In fact, the Seattle protests themselves involved some 1300 civic, social movement and trade union organizations from over 80 countries. And furthermore, on N30, there were major demonstrations in 14 US cities; 20,000 people marched in Paris, 8,000 in Manila, 3,000 in Seoul and thousands more around the world. (See the article by Mark Laskey in this book.) In Mexico City a few days later, 98 people were arrested and tortured for demanding the release of arrested Seattle demonstrators. Yet U.S. activists don't include those people as part of the "Seattle" action. The Mexicans who demonstrated in solidarity with the arrested protesters in Seattle acted because they felt it was the best thing to do. For us not to recognize that their actions as part of our movement is to fly in the face of the solidarity they demonstrated. Our blindness is conditioned by the media silence and a host of other conditions, so we need to make more of an effort to overcome the systematic fragmentation of our movement.

The anti-WTO protests in Seattle have had an immense impact on the anti-globalization movement around the world. Yet in our celebration of this action, several problems arise. I briefly touch on some in the following remarks: blindness to pre-Seattle forerunners; a failure to pose international solidarity as an alternative to globalization; underestimation of the efficacy of tactical diversity.

As a symbol for the hundreds of thousands of people around the world who have demonstrated against the neo-liberal agenda of the institutions of global capital, Seattle is vitally significant. But disregarding anti-globalization movements in other countries, particularly those at the periphery of the world system, reproduces the biases and

* Revised version of a talk and discussion at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington on November 17, 2000. Thanks to Billy Nessen and Eddie Yuen for their comments, and to Allison, Brian, Joe, David, EPICA and people in Olympia whose energy generated the Q&A. The questions and answers at the end of the talk have been left largely intact and appear later in this book.

¹ *The New York Times*, November 15, 2000, p. C2.

distortions of the very system being opposed. Such disregard slyly reinforces one of the world system's central ideas: the life of a human being in the United States or Europe is worth more than the life of a Third World person. For the IMF, World Bank and giant multinational corporations, an American life is far more valuable than the life say of a Venezuelan or a Vietnamese—hence in their view the protests against globalization began in Seattle. But progressive and radical history must be qualitatively different than the history of the neoliberalist champions and their corporate masters. Our history must reflect the notion that all human life is of equal value.

The best known of Seattle's precursors is the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, Mexico that began on January 1, 1994. The preponderant influence of the Zapatistas on the activists in Seattle was evident in the many protesters who carried their flag and their posters. (See the article by Manuel Callahan in this book). The Zapatistas have been key organizers of the People's Global Action Against "Free" Trade, an umbrella for movements on five continents including the Landless Peasants' Movement of Brazil and India's Karnataka State Farmer's Movement. Besides these organizations, anti-globalization uprisings in dozens of Third World countries predated the Seattle confrontation. Of these many popular responses to conditions of economic hardship dictated by global institutions, the Venezuelan uprising in 1989 was the most significant. In a few days beginning on February 27, thousands of people rose up against the imposition of IMF-ordered austerity measures. The police and army shot to death more than 300 people and wounded thousands of others. More than 2000 people were arrested. Because of its importance, let me take a closer look.

VENEZUELA

Consider the following: the structural imperatives of the existing world system have resulted in poor Latin American countries paying billions of dollars in interest *each year* to rich countries' banks (to whom they are indebted for hundreds of billions of dollars--total indebtedness of the region was approximately 420 billion dollars in 1989). Of all the countries of Latin America, Venezuela had long enjoyed one of the highest standards of living, no doubt because of the exploitation of its vast oil reserves. When president Carlos Andres Perez, a longtime social democrat, came peacefully to power, few suspected he would preside over a bloody imposition of IMF-dictated austerity measures. Yet in order for the IMF to grant his government the power to avoid an economic meltdown (i.e. \$1.5 billion in badly needed credit so he could lift the ceilings on interest rates and let the currency float), they required him to raise prices for food, gasoline and bus fares. On February 16, the new austerity program was announced and on February 27, it was to take effect. That day, however, rather than peacefully submitting to hardship and misery, poor people in the shantytowns that ring Caracas's modern center rose up to smash the imposition of the IMF's orders.

All at once, everywhere there was resistance. In the eastern shantytown of Petare, 17 people were killed in pitched battles with the forces of order. Shotguns and even machine guns were used by the government against rocks and an occasional sniper—not much of a match but a heavily contested one. Snipers in the El Valle neighborhood south of Caracas killed an army major; in response, at least 20 people were shot and killed. In at least 16 other Venezuelan cities, including Maracaibo, San Cristobal, Valencia, Puerto LaCruz,

Barquisimeto, Carora, Merida, Puerto Ordaz, and Guarenas, the poor rose up. For days they refused to submit. On March 3, troops were still looking for snipers, and on the 9th, *The New York Times* reported up to 375 deaths. The Venezuelan media counted more than 600 throughout the country. Even after calm had apparently been restored, the insurgency reappeared in other forms. In April thousands of high school and university students protested against the withdrawal of government subsidies. In May, the first national strike in 31 years erupted. In the wake of the uprising, Venezuelans reconfigured their country's political system and swept Hugo Chavez into power.

The rulers of the world economy can hardly plead ignorance of the Venezuela events. Greenspan had already begun his tenure in office and world financial institutions were directly involved. Indeed, within days of the fighting, on March 9, the U.S. government began to shift its policy, easing repayment provisions on the debt. In concert with the IMF, World Bank and a cluster of other governments and global institutions, the U.S. loaned more than the amount Venezuela needed (some \$2 billion in emergency loans).

Although protests in the periphery are mounted against specific grievances in their own national territory, their character is clearly anti-globalization as much as protests in Seattle. They arise against the global system and their institutional masters—economic dictators who make slaves of entire countries and regions. The free market model imposed on Venezuela in the 1980s and 1990s left 80% of the population living in slums and on the threshold of utter poverty. They turned to Hugo Chavez to pull them out of their collective misery, and in 1998, his newly formed party won 56% of the vote.

Why is this international precursor of Seattle unknown to North Americans? In the US, we pride ourselves on our free press. How could such an uprising occur and leader after leader profess to know nothing about it? Similarly, food riots in the Dominican Republic in 1985, Brazil in 1986 and dozens of countries have been wiped from memory. What of the 75,000 people who marched in Berlin in 1988 when the World Bank and International Monetary Fund held their meetings?² Protesters there were very powerfully influenced by the outbreak of earlier riots in the Third World, and their massive and militant presence compelled thousands of bankers and monetary experts to depart Berlin a day earlier than planned.

The attempt to depict the anti-globalization movement as a US phenomenon is the other side of the more general invisibility of the rest of the world for many Americans. Setting Seattle as the starting point of a new global upsurge is part of the system's counteroffensive launched against its opponents. Instead of seeking simply to repress and condemn the movement, leaders of the world's major financial institutions are seeking to turn the protests into socially acceptable and even systemically beneficial avenues of action. Paying attention to the protests of young people in the capitalist metropolis while rendering invisible activists in other countries is one way of maintaining the superiority of the wealthy countries of the world. Maintaining the hegemony of the USA is also critical to the

² See my book, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Humanities Press, 1997).

maintenance of the existing order. For a long time now, defining social movements along national lines is one way in which historians and world leaders have stripped activists of their radical anti-systemic politics.³ Our alternative to the top-down globalization of huge multinational corporations and their militarized nation-states is an internationalism founded upon autonomous nuclei of popular participation. Protests against the meetings of the leaders of globalization concretely enunciate our critique of their policies. Their response includes the long used tactic of divide and rule—in this case isolating us by national and cultural boundaries. Clarifying the internationalism of autonomously organized revolts helps develop the self-conscious formulation of a planetary alternative to globalization.

EROS AND INTERNATIONALISM

As is becoming increasingly clear, militant anti-systemic actions build upon one another, a phenomenon I have elsewhere described as the eros effect.⁴ Through the power of exemplary peoples' actions leading to involvement by others, small groups are able to detonate social explosions in which millions of ordinary people unexpectedly take the direction of society into their own hands and make long overdue changes. Ordinary people acting together can force a president of a country, even a brutal and long entrenched dictator, out of office. They can neutralize the armed forces. Last year, for example, a few days after the Serbian people overthrew Slobodan Milosevic, the people of the Ivory Coast overthrew their dictator, Robert Guei, when he attempted to stop the counting of votes in an election he was losing. Thousands of Ivorians took to the streets, and although Guei's presidential guard fired on them and killed hundreds of people, the crowd refused to disperse. Instead they continued marching on the presidential palace. Guei fled and "people power" (a term that originated in the Philippines in 1986 after the overthrow of Marcos by thousands of people who refused to leave the streets) won another victory. *The New York Times* quoted one student, Alfred Tohuri, saying: "The mistake Guei made was to let us watch scenes from Belgrade."⁵

Because of the power of the media and the global village character of the world today, the eros effect has become increasingly important. Social movements are less and less confined to one city, region or nation; they do not exist in isolation in distant corners of the globe; actions are often synchronically related. Social movements in one country are affected sometimes more by events and actions outside their own national context than they are by domestic dynamics. The international embeddedness of N30 is evident enough in the autonomously organized global wave of resistance events in the year after it. The protests in Seattle help define and motivate the anti-globalization movement. Inspired by N30, protests erupted in the streets of Bangkok in February 2000, Washington DC in April, and subsequently in Melbourne, Prague and Davos. In the Czech Republic, one of the most popular chants was "Prague, Seattle, Continue the Battle!" (Although it is not well known,

³ This opening from the institutions of power raises a complex series of questions for the movement like the articulation of "inside/outside strategies. See Jim Davis's article in this book.

⁴ I first developed this concept in relation to an understanding of the global imagination of 1968. See *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (South End Press, 1987).

⁵ *The New York Times*, October 26, 2000, p. 14.

activists in Prague were as successful as their Seattle predecessors in compelling leaders of the world's financial architecture to change their meeting plans.)

We speak so often of internationalism. But then why do we define anti-globalization struggles as nationalistic? Greenspan, Wolfenson, the Trilateral Commission, and the World Bank have characterized the upsurge against globalization as parochial, as nationalistic, while portraying themselves as progressive and global. Are progressives against globalization because we are nationalists? In Venezuela today, the answer might be yes. The Chavez government embodies the anti-globalization impulse but Chavez has to relate to his national context since he is president of a country. His activism has been global—he organized OPEC to raise world oil prices and thereby bring a greater share of the world's economic output to the oil producing countries. Ominously, US intervention in Colombia and the regionalization of that war loom on the horizon of globalization's future for Venezuela.

Should progressives in the US should also think and act nationalistically? Do we share anything with the Pat Buchanans and other US nationalists who oppose globalization? No, in opposition to the globalization of corporate control by the IMF, World Bank, WTO and their governments, our internationalism calls for grassroots, autonomous political participation and mutually agreed connections between people, not connections dictated by the market or political demands of those with power and money. The progressive anti-globalization movement is not against international ties, it wants to see ties that are fair and decent. It is against ties that force people off the land they and their ancestors have lived on for generations, against the kinds of global, economic relations that made it possible for the corporations to make great profits and for the tiny percentage of rich to increase their incomes while the rest of the world is environmentally degraded and otherwise compelled to work harder for less money. One billion people must struggle mightily and suffer daily simply to obtain the bare necessities of life.

Morris Dees, the Southern Poverty Law Center attorney who sued klansmen, neo-Nazis and right-wingers in the United States, wrote that the neo-Nazis and WTO protestors in Seattle are cut from the same cloth. Because the Seattle protests focused only on global institutions and not on the US government's role in all of this, the movement is open to that charge. So putting forth internationalism as our politics -- not just opposition to globalization -- is critical to differentiating us from the anti-globalization forces that are pro-US.

South Korea, the Power of Autonomy and the Dialectic of Social Movements

Diversity of tactics, organizations and beliefs is one of the great strengths of autonomous social movements. Using a creative variety of tactics—including militant street demonstrations--as apart of our arsenal, we can change societies in ways that parliamentary efforts or more established kinds of movements cannot. In South Korea, autonomous movements overthrew a repressive military dictatorship and established democracy. Autonomous trade unions not tied to the chaebols--the huge corporate concentrations--were also won, and both governments of Korea were pushed toward reunification.

The Kwangju uprising of 1980--an upheaval in which as many as 2,000 people were killed—was the pivot around which these movements ascended. After the brutal imposition of martial law by thousands of elite paratroopers and police, the people of Kwangju drove the military out of the city and held it for almost a week. Although many people were massacred when the Army retook the city, Kwangju has become a symbol motivating action in many other countries.⁶

South Korean social movements can teach us significant lessons. In the past few years, the IMF has intoned that South Korea will have lower economic growth if it won't break up the chaebols. Ironically, South Korean President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae Jung, once held on death row by the military dictatorship for his alleged role in the Kwangju uprising, is now leading the neo-liberalist penetration of the Korean economy. Winning democracy and getting Kim Dae Jung elected were amazing feats that we can attribute to the power of millions of ordinary people who took to the streets. Yet today with some kind of democratic structure in place and autonomous trade unions struggling for more rights for working people, the Kim government uses repression against its former allies, breaking up workers' protests with helicopters and police violence. When Kim Dae Jung, hero of the last phase of popular struggles in South Korea, turns into his opposite, history's dialectical character is revealed. No doubt, his opening to North Korea and defusing of the half-century state of war on the Korean peninsula are historic accomplishments; his government's more recent repression of workers' demonstrations speak to history's rapid pace and inner irony.

While in Korea force has been widely used for decades to maintain the status quo, in the US media manipulation and consumerism have largely been sufficient to assure corporate rule. Nonetheless, as in Korea, today's activists are often tomorrow's authorities. Both the mayor and police chief of Seattle were Sixties people. While the mayor prides himself on having been an anti-war activist during the Vietnam war, police chief Norm Stamper was a product of San Diego State University's humanistic police training program established years ago to humanize police community relations. The program distilled the '60s model of community policing, which came about in response to demands for community control of the police. Such cooptation of the 60s, i.e. its use to provide new ideas and leaders for the system, is very common in Europe. The Greens in Germany are but one example of leadership inside governments who are used to legitimize a new military role for Germany as well as to repress militant movements (because that's the role they are compelled legally to play as part of the government).

The aura of the Sixties is being used against the anti-globalization movement in another way. An exaggerated Sixties is used to diminish contemporary movements. Every movement today is written off as a shadow, imitation or lesser sibling. Seattle is recognized as highly significant, but movements between the Sixties and the present are

⁶ For an analysis of this vitally important event, news of which has largely failed to enter the consciousness of most Americans (activists included), the best source is *Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* by Lee Jae-eui (UCLA Asian-Pacific Monograph Series, 1999). Also see my article "Remembering the Kwangju Uprising," in *Socialism and Democracy*, Spring-Summer 2000 (Vol. 14 No. 1).

forgotten. Glorification of decades (or of great events and individuals) diminishes the importance of continuity and everyday activism in the life of social movements. As a social construction, the myth of the 60s functions thereby to discourage people from having authentic movement experiences now, in the present.

Finally, Sixties activists themselves, speaking as representatives of those halcyon days of yesteryear, intervene today as critics of militant popular struggles. Using their legitimacy as Sixties activists, they interject the authority of the Sixties into the current movement. Sixties veterans were valuable and significant parts of the Central American anti-intervention movement in the 1980s. Thirty years ago, we paid dearly for the absence of sufficient elders. However, when the legitimacy of the past is used as a weapon to argue for a particular position rather than to inform a discussion, the effect can be deleterious, often undermining creative exploration and fresh thinking. I think here of some of the post-Seattle debates around violence. (Some of the articles have been reprinted in this book.)

For me, Seattle was a chance to connect with people from different generations of activists. I was invited to come and talk during the protests by someone I had never met, whom I think of today as a friend. Ironically, my scheduled speech at Left Bank Books the night of N30 had to be cancelled because of the declaration of martial law. Thanks to the “No Protest Zone,” we had the space to go off and get acquainted, and as a result we decided to work together on this book.

Ho Chi Minh City
January 31, 2001