



ROGER BURBACH

Globalization and Postmodern Politics

From Zapatistas to
High-Tech Robber Barons

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Roger Burbach

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List of Abbreviations

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Confederation of Industrial Organizations
ANCIEZ	Spanish acronym for National Independent Campesino Alliance Emiliano Zapata
ASEA	Association for Social and Economic Analysis
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CIOAC	Spanish acronym for Independent Center for Agricultural Workers and Peasants
CNC	Spanish acronym for National Confederation of Campesinos
CONAIE	Spanish acronym for Indigenous Nationalities Confederation of Ecuador
ESOP	Employee Stock Ownership Plan
EZLN	Spanish acronym for Zapatista National Liberation Army
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FPEI	Foreign Portfolio Equity Investment
GOP	Grand Old Party (US Republican Party)
ILO	International Labor Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IWW	International Workers of the World
NACLA	North American Congress on Latin America
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PGA	People's Global Action
PRI	Institutional Revolutionary Party
SAPs	Structural Adjustment Policies
SPD	German acronym for Social Democratic Party
UCLA	University of California at Los Angeles
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Introduction: Globalization, New Resistances and the Postmodern Age

In the waning days of the old millennium, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered in the city of Seattle to protest the meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO). They held workshops and forums, staged marches, occupied the streets of downtown Seattle and blockaded the entrances to the WTO gatherings. The demonstrators called for “fair trade, not free trade,” and an end to the “new tyranny” of the WTO, an organization they denounced as a front for multinational corporations and “profits uber alles.” As a French farmer in Seattle who had previously pulled off the roof of a McDonald’s restaurant in France with his tractor proclaimed, “resistance, resistance, and resistance, that is the only way to stop this global machine from consuming and destroying our ways of life.”

Why did the WTO, an organization barely five years old, provoke the Battle of Seattle? For many from around the world the WTO had come to symbolize the tremendous damage being done by globalization. In Seattle, U.S. and Canadian farmers along with South Korean rice growers and Caribbean banana farmers demanded an end to a trade regime that squeezes out small producers while favoring large agribusiness firms. Environmentalists of all stripes were also present in Seattle, adamantly opposing the big resource extraction companies that are destroying the world’s old growth and rain forests while drastically reducing or killing off thousands of species ranging from turtles and dolphins to the spotted owl and the Monarch butterfly. Marching with environmentalists and farmers in Seattle were trade unionists from such divergent U.S. organizations as the Teamsters, the American Federation of Teachers and the old International Workers of the World (IWW), along with union representatives from Canada, Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. They demanded an end to a trade system that allows corporations to scour the world for cheap labor, driving down living standards and undermining hard won social victories in rich and poor countries alike.

The Battle of Seattle reflects the core issues that are taken up in this book—globalization, the crisis of the left and postmodernism. Globalization, meaning the internationalization of economies and societies, has integrated the planet as never before under the dominance of multinational corporations. Simultaneously, globalization has adversely impacted living standards around the world, shattering local cultures and societies, fomenting a new type of oppositional politics. As Dan Seligman of the Sierra Club commented in Seattle: “The things people believe in are less secure. Their communities are more fragile ... And people are beginning to connect that to corporate power, media control, and politics stacked against them.”¹

It is this fragmentation, insecurity and dramatic upheaval caused by globalization that have eviscerated the traditional left and created what can be called a postmodern political age. The established political parties were largely absent in the streets of Seattle. Present was a potpourri of organizations with no singular political platform or philosophy. The political ideologies, or metanarratives, that drove the politics of the twentieth century were largely irrelevant, as organizations as diverse as the Sierra Club, the Direct Action Network, the National Family Farm Coalition, the Humane Society, the AFL-CIO, Earth First and Global Action cooperated in organizing many of the marches and demonstrations that challenged the WTO. Politics in the postmodern age is “de-centered,” with a wide variety of groups coming together on any given issue to challenge the established order.

William Greider, drawing on the imagery of environmentalists dressed as turtles marching with trade unionists, commented on the sea change in politics that emerged in Seattle:

The corporate-political establishment doesn't get it yet, but sea turtles and Teamsters (with their myriad friends) can change the world. This popular mobilization, disparaged as “Luddite wackos” by the prestige press, is still inventing itself, still vulnerable to the usual forces that can derail new social movements. But its moment is here, a rare opportunity to educate and agitate on behalf of common human values.²

THE LONG AND BLOODY MARCH OF GLOBALIZATION

To understand globalization, the crisis of the old political order and the new postmodern age it is necessary to take a step back into the

past, to see how the triumph of globalization and its ideological talon, neo-liberalism, occurred only after years of conflict, violence and economic aggression. Much of the twentieth century is dominated by the clash between the ideologies of capitalism and socialism. While this was a conflict between two metanarratives with their roots in the Enlightenment, the socialist orientation, at least in its quest for change before taking power, tended to identify with the struggle to liberate societies and nations from oppression. It is this liberating tendency that the capitalist world, led principally by the United States, continually tried to repress and destroy in order to impose its model on the rest of the world.

It is often forgotten that just a short time ago socialism and third world revolutionary movements, rather than Western capitalism, had an air of inevitability.³ In the 1960s and 1970s the consolidation of the Cuban revolution, the rise of revolutionary struggles in much of Latin America, the stunning defeat of the United States in southeast Asia, the installation of national liberation governments in the Portuguese colonies of Africa, the overthrow of the Shah in Iran, and the victory of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua numbered among the more critical setbacks experienced by the United States and its allies.

But the empire struck back with violence and impunity. Even where it did not achieve outright victory, it so weakened the revolutionary societies through military and economic aggression that by the 1990s they effectively ceased to be viable alternatives. In South America, the victory of the U.S. against all major challenges was already complete by the mid-1970s. The elected Socialist government of Salvador Allende in Chile was violently overthrown in 1973, and by 1976 nationalist governments and revolutionary movements throughout the southern cone had been crushed as three-quarters of the continent's population fell under the rule of U.S.-backed military regimes.

With the victory of the Sandinistas in 1979, Central America became the new battleground. With hindsight it is little short of astounding that this region, so historically dominated by the United States and with a population of only about 20 million, became a critical arena of revolutionary struggle in the 1980s. In an effort to crush these movements, U.S.-supported regimes, particularly in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, along with the CIA-backed contra army in Nicaragua, waged a brutal war against the revolutionary movements, killing well over 100,000 innocent civilians.