

SEATTLE, PRAGUE, NICE AND BEYOND¹

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1. Nothing is the same after Seattle 1999. The explosive mobilization that shut down the WTO initiated a real global movement against the global institutions of finance capital and transnational corporations: Washington on April 2000, Melbourne and Prague on September 2000, Nice on December 2000, Davos on January 2001 all became scenes of powerful confrontations with the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, the WEF, the European Union and the forces of repression mobilized to protect them.

Even if there were previous mobilizations and struggles against the IMF/WB's 'Structural Adjustment Programs' and, from the mid 1990s, struggles directed against the effects of capitalist globalization (Chiapas 1994, France 1995), Seattle represents a qualitative leap. It marks the emergence of a movement on a world scale that has already shown its continuity and scope.

Despite both the confusing diversity and confusions of this movement, there are some common essential characteristics: the conscious recognition of the international nature of the adversary; the awareness of the necessity of a global action against it; the extensive and intense use of the new means of global communication and of the Internet developed by capitalist globalization but in a spirit of a digital counter-culture.

Traditions of workers democracy are combined with new sensibilities on universal emancipation and an anti-authoritarian internationalist political culture, which goes beyond the simple 'tolerance of different opinions' towards a unity of a multitude of different political subjects in common anti-capitalist action. The distinction and opposition between freedom and formal democracy emerges in the consciousness and actions of the left wing in this growing global resistance to Global capitalism.

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2. The heterogeneity of the social and political composition of this international movement is often misleading. Labour unions and NGOs, environmental and other 'affinity' groups, traditional and new radical political formations, left wing workers' organizations and petty bourgeois protest groups, revolutionaries and liberal reformists, can all be found in the same general movement against capitalist globalization.

This apparently chaotic picture leads many people on the Left either to disregard it as 'petty bourgeois', or to ignore its contradictions and implications producing an idealized artificial image. The criteria used to 'classify' this new phenomenon are hopelessly mechanistic. Manifestations of imagination and grassroots autonomy are characterized as 'petty bourgeois'. The quantity of workers and, above all, of trade unions present in a mobilization becomes the 'acid test' for its so-called 'proletarian' character. So Seattle is acceptable for most workerists, except the 'purist' sectarians, because of the presence of John Sweeny's AFL-CIO, despite the nationalist protectionism and class collaborationist line of the American trade union bureaucracy. Prague is rejected because of the absence of a big number of Czech and West European trade unions (the latter have just boycotted the mobilization). Nice is 'wonderful' for every impressionist because nearly 100,000 workers mobilized by the CGT and the other labour confederations were present at the demonstration on 6 December (but absent immediately after and during the confrontations of the radical wing with the state repression forces). Davos is considered nearly null because of the absence of the unions. The presence of small youth groups and some NGOs, etc, is considered irrelevant.

To the other side (those who consider the working class to be a Stone Age entity) the 'anti-globalization movement' is the triumph of 'civil society' and its new agency – the NGOs. For the more 'traditionalists' (like the post-Cliff SWP) it is the upsurge of a vague broad 'anti-capitalist' movement in which the proletariat and some social movements, alias NGOs such as ATTAC, can be put on an equal footing.

Superficial thinking and formal logic prevent one from grasping the social-historical content behind a very contradictory political ideological form. The main question remains unanswered: what historical material contradictions are driving the current movement against capitalist globalization?

Economicism, as Trotsky remarked at an early stage of disputes inside the Russian workers' movement, is unable to see that the class struggle of the proletariat does not start simply at the point of production but arises out of the *general conditions of social existence*:

...the conditions which impel the proletariat into concerted collective struggle are not to be found in the factory, but in the general social conditions of its existence.²

The driving forces behind the emerging international movements after Seattle have to be traced back to the changes in the 'general conditions of social existence' brought on a world scale by the processes of Capitalist Globalization, and which have led to a real globalization of social resistances.

3. The worried representatives of capital themselves are obliged to call this upsurge of global actions 'the backlash against globalization'. But Globalization, as a concept, cannot be accepted in its 'mainstream' bourgeois sense, nor rejected as a simple ideological construct of imperialism. It has to be clarified and re-formulated in Marxian terms. The 'tendency to universality' (inherent in capital as self-expanding value, as Marx analyses it in *The Grundrisse*) comes to its climax and into an ever increasing conflict with capital itself, when capitalism establishes a world division of labour, a world economy and market, and enters into its historical epoch of decline: imperialism.

An epoch of decline is characterized by the increasing inability of the dominant mode of production to mediate its own contradictions.³ An epoch is not a homogeneous continuum; we can distinguish in its different phases of development. A distinct phase within an epoch of decline is determined by the mode of mediation of the contradictions, which emerges as the previous mode of mediation collapses.⁴ Between these two phases, when the old mode of mediation is in ruins and the new one has not yet appeared (or

2 Trotsky, L., (1980) *Our Political Tasks*, New Park Publications, p102-103.

3 Ticktin, H.H. (1994), 'The nature of an epoch of declining Capitalism', *Critique* 26.

4 Michael-Matsas, S. (2000), 'Prague 2000 and beyond: the globalization of social resistances'. *Rencontre Internationale de la Villeite, Paris*: 30 November 30–2 December 2000.

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appears only in an embryonic form), there is an interregnum of generalized de-stabilization where all kinds of historical catastrophes are possible: wars, revolutionary upturns, reactionary downturns, rebellions of the oppressed, and counter-revolutions of the oppressors.

Such was the period between 1917 and 1945: between the first phase of globalization in the imperialist epoch which ended with WWI and the second phase following the Bretton Woods Agreement after WWII. And, in another scale and form, the period between 1968 and 1975 after the collapse of the post-war settlement.

We are again at an interregnum. The liberalization of the movement of capitals, and the globalization of financial markets, accompanied by the turn to so-called neo-liberal policies in the 1980s and 1990s, was an attempt to find a way out of the crisis of the unprecedented overproduction of capital. The unprecedented post-war boom had been brought to an end in order to defuse the revolutionary threats and to re-impose mass control on the working class and the mass popular movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. This phase of finance globalization has definitely reached its limits. Its exhaustion is manifested in the interconnected levels of the world economy and of social struggle through a series of economic spasms and social explosions: the 'Tequila crisis' in Mexico in 1994; the Crash in Asia-Pacific region in 1997; Russia's default in 1998; Brazil's turmoil in 1999; the fall of the so-called American 'new economy' and of NASDAQ; the new downturn in the United States. On the social level there's the Zapatista revolt, Albania 1997, the Indonesian 1998 revolutionary overthrow of the anti-Communist dictatorship, Seattle 1999, Ecuador, Bolivia, Washington, Melbourne and Prague in 2000, the new Palestinian Intifada, and so on.

Despite all its political weaknesses the global movement against capitalist globalization from Seattle onwards is the clear manifestation, the product, and a new powerful factor of the exhaustion of the third phase of finance globalization in the imperialist epoch of capitalist decline.

4. In the early 1990s the collapse of the Soviet Union and of the misnamed 'actually existing socialism' was presented as the final and complete triumph of capitalism in the era of globalization. But now the whole picture is reversed. The collapse of Stalinism did not lead to the re-invigoration of a senile and decadent world system. Instead it has led to a different world situation: when the contradictions of the system explode and cannot be

mediated in the 'old way', the new radicalization cannot be stopped by the 'old' bureaucratic means. In other words, the Stalinist and reformist apparatuses, given their present stage of disintegration, cannot be used as a form of control.

Without considering the collapse of Stalinism, these unprecedented social battles at the centre of the American metropolis and in the advanced post of Eastern Europe – Seattle and Prague – cannot be readily understood.

The dialectic of globalization and class struggle can now be seen from another angle. When the previous 'Keynesian' post-war phase of internationalization of the economy was collapsing, the international wave of radicalization of youth and workers had unified, for a short period, a great variety of movements, challenging both the capitalist social order and the Stalinist bureaucracy. The bureaucracy at that period was still able to betray May 1968, to invade Prague, thus helping capitalism to restore its social order.

In the next period control was restored, the revolutionary tide retreated, and finance globalization flourished. As a result the unity in diversity, including the unity of culture and revolution, of imagination and communism, (essential characteristics of the May 1968 legacy), was lost. During the period of the retreats of the 1980s and 1990s, fragmentation reigned with 'identity politics', with so-called 'new social movements' substituting themselves for the working class as agency of historical change and transition. These movements finally shipwrecked in the tempest of neo-liberalism.

Now, with the exhaustion of finance globalization, with the expanded reproduction of all the contradictions of capital in a global scale exploding, we have a new movement which goes beyond single issues, beyond fragmentation, and is fighting for global anti-capitalist issues. It is forming a new revolutionary unity in diversity. This time Stalinism is absent and cannot blow its kiss of Judas. The battle against the IMF and global capital in Prague on September 2000 is the revenge of May 1968 against August 1968.

5. What is the social base of the movement against capitalist globalization? Undoubtedly, finance globalization spread social devastation and monstrous inequalities both in the centres and peripheries, creating a Third World

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inside the mega-cities of the North, and a Fourth World in marginalized vast areas of the South, destroying the environment, tearing apart the social fabric, and now mobilizing the most disparate social strata. It deepened the crisis of overproduction, and it exacerbated chronic mass unemployment and social exclusion. The introduction of new technologies and flexibility of labour relations served to increase the relative surplus value. It also extended the real labour time, increasing absolute surplus value as well, which raised the rate of exploitation to new highs. The misery in the South and the Eastern ex-Soviet space has forced millions of marginalized people to emigrate and to accept the slavery of cheap labour in the West. As a consequence, xenophobia, racism and far-right currents are growing.

Neo-liberalism, privatizations, and the destruction of the Welfare State produced a series of disasters. As a result there has been a growth of so-called Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in which many disappointed ex-members of the Left and Far Left have found refuge (as James Petras has shown)⁵ and have developed a 'non political politics'. Corporations and governments tried to find a counter-weight, and a means of control, to the development of the NGOs. The deepening of the crisis fuelled the growth of the NGOs, but it also increased the tensions between them and the real masters of the game – corporate capital, international finance and their governments. As the social contradictions started to lead to explosions and mobilizations, the NGOs came to the forefront. In the dominant 'post-modern' discourse, 'civil society', galvanized by the non political humanitarian NGOs, took charge of the social problem.

'Civil society' replaced the proletariat as agency of historical social change and the NGOs became the democratic substitute for the vanguard revolutionary party, now in disrepute.

6. The rejection of the role of the working class was not only due to the disillusion with 'socialism', particularly after Stalinism's debacle, but is also interrelated with the myth of the 'end of labour'. This myth is reinforced by the stagnation and decline in industry due to the over-accumulation crisis, by the fetishism of new technologies, and, above all, by finance speculation – the ultimate fetish, 'money generating money' – that apparently bypasses the exploitation of labour.

⁵ James Petras, 'The Metamorphosis of Latin America's Intellectuals', Critique 22, 1990, pp59-67.

A more sophisticated, left wing version of the 'end of labour' theory is the theory of the domination of 'immaterial' or 'affective labour' of the 'services sector in the valorization process', developed by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt.

In reality it is the reverse that is true.⁶ The latest phase of capitalist globalization, including the technological advances introduced by information technology, gave an impetus to the socialization of the labour process and, at the same time, exacerbated the contradiction within labour, between abstract and concrete labour.

There is a growing gap between concrete individual labour and abstract general labour through which concrete individual labour takes its social form under capitalism. The antagonism between the dominant abstract dead labour as abstract (finance) capital and concrete living labour is sharpening tremendously. There is an apparent autonomization of abstract dead labour producing the fetishistic illusion of a disappearing living labour. But in reality the internationalization of economic life advances socialized labour which negates both the individual character of concrete labour and the value form, abstract labour. These changes accelerate the decline of the law of value and the rhythms of the transitional epoch, creating conditions for the emergence of revolutionary subjectivity.

...the development of the productive power of socialized labour as opposed to the more or less isolated labour of individuals, etc, and with such development the application of science, of this universal product of social development to the immediate process of production, this all displays itself as productive power of capital, not as productive power of labour.⁷

This fetishistic reversal is behind the current misconception of the 'end of labour', etc. Globalized capital is inseparable from globalized labour. The development of the latter appears as its opposite, as its 'end', its 'immaterialization', as autonomization and triumph of a self-sufficient

6 As we have stressed in a paper on 'Globalization and Labour' presented at the International Seminar on Globalization and Revolution, organized by the Workers Revolutionary Party [EEK] of Greece. Athens, 22-23 January, 2001.

7 K. Marx, 'The results of the immediate process of production', unpublished Chapter of Das Kapital, in Value Studies by Marx, New Park Publications 1976, p.121. The emphasis is in the original.

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global capital, an empire without subjects. An upside down world is a most unstable one. The emperor – global capital – proved to be naked and very similar to Humpty Dumpty: vulnerable to a fall, or rather to an overthrow.

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.*

Globalized capital finds its limit to itself and confronts its proverbial gravedigger grown up as a globalized labour. In this advanced stage of capitalist decline, the working class has not vanished. More than ever before in history, it becomes a universal class. Above all, and in its deepest sense, this class cannot become revolutionary and emancipate itself without emancipating humanity, liberating all the oppressed, exploited, excluded and humiliated of the world. The universal class is central in a world revolution, together with the wretched of the earth, for universal human emancipation – Communism.

Behind the form of a heterogeneous multitude, this universality of socialized labour, powerfully developed by capitalist globalization, manifests itself in the international mobilizations following Seattle. To put in Hegelian terms, ‘substance’, socialized labour, emerges as a developing ‘subjectivity’ threatening global capital and shutting down its international institutions. In Seattle, in Prague:

*All the King's horses and all the King's men,
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.*

7. But there is no place for complacency. The most powerful and conscious sectors of the ruling class have a much deeper understanding of what this so-called ‘anti-globalization movement’ represents than the movement itself, or its supporters and critics on the Left. ‘*Addressing the backlash against globalization*’ was, quite consciously, a central topic during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2001.

To confront this ‘backlash’ the leaders of world capitalism developed a twofold strategy.

First, the forces of state repression have been re-organized, especially after their fiasco in Seattle. They have ‘modernized’ their technique, their

apparatus, and repressive legislation. They coordinate their activities on an international and global scale.

The FBI, for example, sent a special detachment to Prague to supervise the 10,000 policemen and 5,000 Czech soldiers who were mobilized to protect the IMF/WB Summit on 26 September 2000.

Early in December 2000 a special three-day meeting took place in Bern, Switzerland, between representatives of the Swiss Federal Police, the American FBI, the Czech and Melbourne Police, to organize the repression of the planned grassroots anti-WEF protest in Davos on January 2001.

Both during the Prague IMF Summit and the Nice EU Summit, free circulation in Europe was proved to be a fraud as borders were closed to prevent the protestors attending the planned demonstrations.

In preparation for the Summit in Quebec, by-laws were being passed in Quebec City to permit police to arrest individuals who covered their faces.

In Chicago a notorious right-wing judge has made electronic surveillance and planting 'stool-pigeons' in 'subversive groups' participating in the 'anti-globalization movement' legal.

All the demonstrations, even if they are predominantly peaceful and non violent, have met with ruthless violence and hundreds of arrests – in Washington, Melbourne, Prague, Nice, Davos, Zurich. The most recent of this inconclusive list of examples of state repression is the attack the Mexican police force unleashed against the anti-WEF demonstrators. This took place immediately after the end of the speech of the President Fox on the 'democratization of the markets' during the WEF Summit in Cancun, on 27 February 2001.

The second and most dangerous of the two-fold strategy is the strategic effort to manipulate, integrate, and neutralize the movement against capitalist globalization.

It is not a coincidence that the special panel organized by the WEF in Davos early this year, '*Addressing the Backlash against Globalization*', was composed of top executive officers of big business, such as Marilyn C. Nelson, Chair and Chief Executive Officer, Carlson Companies, USA, and

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Charles Holliday Jr, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Dupont, USA; leaders of the global institutions of finance capital, such as James D. Wolfensohn, President of World Bank, Washington DC, together with leaders of the working class, such as John J. Sweeney, President of the AFL-CIO. Also included were NGO personalities, such as Vandana Shiva, Director of the Research Foundation for Science, technology and Ecology, India. And, last but not least, Thabo Mbeki, Mandela's heir and president of South Africa took his place in the panel.

All of them agreed that globalization must be 'humanized' through the collaboration of big business, the IMF, the World Bank, governments and their 'social partners' – the 'leading NGOs' first of all, as the chairman of Dupont stressed.

With the NGOs, usually using the more attractive name of 'social movements', the reformist and Stalinist Party and trade union bureaucracies, inseparable from their satellites in the so-called (not so) 'far left' offer their indispensable class collaboration.

It is not by chance that these forces, in Europe, boycotted Prague, where their presence was minimal (quasi-symbolic), tried to control and defuse the anger of the demonstrators in Nice, and imposed their political hegemony in the much publicized meetings in Porto Allegre, where popular movements and even some revolutionaries were mixed with bourgeois politicians and entrepreneurs, NGOs, social democrats, Stalinist bureaucrats and even ministers of the French Government. The so-called 'counter-Davos' was a bridge to Davos to discuss, for example with the finance tycoon and 'philanthropist', George Soros.

From Seattle onwards, the inner division between two wings of this movement became increasingly clear: the left wing is anti-capitalist, rejects any 'dialogue' or collaboration with the global institutions of capitalism, has as its goal the overthrow of both the institutions of capitalism, and of capitalism itself; the right-wing works increasingly openly as 'militant lobbyists' to 'correct the policies' of these institutions, to 'humanize' and 'regulate' (for example by the introduction of the Tobin tax) finance globalization.

There cannot be any doubt about the pernicious reactionary role of the reformist right wing that often uses 'radical' rhetoric to cover its true nature.

It is vital for the revolutionary forces in the movement to fight them, expose them, and politically defeat them. Otherwise there is no future for this promising movement.

The replacement of class by 'civil society' and 'citizenship', the substitution of revolutionary organizations of the working class by NGOs, the rejection of revolution as 'Marxist utopia', and the adoption of pragmatic alternative proposals for compromise and reforms within the capitalist system are not only worthless but recipes for disaster.

Class independence is vital if the working class is to act as the universal class, not to humanize the inhuman, nor to regulate the expropriation of the toilers, but to expropriate the expropriators.

To establish its political independence as the universal class for itself, particularly in this late period of capitalist globalization, the world working class does not need lobbies for capital but a Revolutionary International to finish off capital itself.