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Seattle was about getting the world to spin the right way. Whether it becomes a sustainable global movement with the power to remake the world—global Seattle—remains to be seen. The honchos at the WTO will not be convinced of their geographical malfeasance as easily as the CBS executives. But the immediate post-Seattle momentum is high. The first serious test of the new millennium comes in the second week of April 2000 when the annual joint meeting of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund takes place in the belly of the beast: Washington, DC. See you there.

Neil Smith

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### **The battles in Seattle: microgeographies of resistance and the challenge of building alternative futures**

“[W]hat is free trade under the present condition of society? It is freedom of capital. When you have overthrown the few national barriers which still restrict the progress of capital, you will merely have given it the complete freedom of action. So long as you let the relation of wage labor exist, it does not matter how favourable the conditions under which the exchange of commodities takes place, there will always be a class which will exploit and a class which will be exploited. It is really difficult to understand the claim of the free-traders who imagine that the more advantageous application of capital will abolish the antagonism between industrial capitalists and wage workers. On the contrary, the only result will be that the antagonism of these two classes will stand out more sharply. Do not allow yourselves to be deluded by the abstract word freedom. Whose freedom? It is not the freedom of one individual in relation to another, but the freedom of capital to crush the worker.”

Karl Marx (1848)

“We are winning/don’t forget”

Graffiti from Seattle, 30 November 1999

Since 30 November 1999, many left writers have celebrated the ‘events of Seattle’, especially the closing of the first day of the World Trade Organization’s (WTO’s) Third Ministerial and the nascent ‘Teamster–turtle alliance’ which opposes neoliberal ‘free trade’. But before we draw any simple conclusions from these brief anti-WTO successes—especially the conclusion that “we are winning”, inscribed along Pike Street during the melee of 30 November—we should ask: what strategies were adopted in Seattle? Precisely where, and to what political effects? And, in what senses can the mobilization in Seattle (and the aftermath) be considered successful?

In attempting to answer these questions, we find it useful to unpack the events through an analysis that pays close attention to sociospatial aspects of the different strategies employed in Seattle—as well as to the implicit and explicit geography of alliance building which became manifest there. Although the strategies of labor and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), direct action participants, and Third World delegates overlapped in space and time, they reflected different, and sometimes competing, ways of attending to the political struggle against the WTO and ‘corporate globalization’.<sup>(1)</sup>

<sup>(1)</sup> The heterogeneity of protesters in Seattle produced a mixed set of slogans, but this phrase often served as a shorthand for “what we oppose”.

We therefore offer a quick reading of the microgeographies of resistance in order to understand the contingencies and limitations of these strategies as means to building alternative futures, limiting ourselves to the events taking place in downtown Seattle between 30 November and 2 December 1999. In brief, we suggest that three different spaces of resistance to the WTO could be distinguished within Seattle. In each space different groups mobilized around particular strategies and claims. Consequently, there was not one ‘battle in Seattle’: there were (at least) three battles, and thus three Seattles.

In appealing to this ‘trifurcation’ of spatial strategies, our intention is not to essentialize or concretize resistance into neat divisions, nor to commit sectarian surgery by identifying difference for its own sake. Rather, as partisan scholars and participants in the events in question, we are interested in critically assessing the success of Seattle in order to identify tensions and contradictions between these spatial-strategic assemblages—which must be addressed as part of the construction of a broad-based political movement capable of seriously challenging and providing an alternative to the hegemony of global capitalism.

**Outside: turtles and Teamsters, together at last?**

“WTO: FIX IT or NIX IT!” Text of an AFL–CIO sign, 30 November 1999

On the morning of 30 November, tens of thousands of people—representing an impressive array of international unions, and environmental and agricultural NGOs—gathered for a ‘People’s Rally’ at Memorial Stadium, about one mile northwest of Seattle’s CBD. They listened to a host of speeches that criticized the WTO for its lack of transparency and democratic principles.<sup>(2)</sup> The four-hour rally was followed by a ‘People’s March’ towards downtown. These acts, intended to show the solidarity of labor, environmental, and farmer voices, constituted the signature political expression of a broad ‘Teamster–turtle alliance’, organized under the first sociospatial strategy. The very fact that labor, environmental, and farming groups were capable of marching together was rightly celebrated as an important breakthrough in progressive organizing. Specifically, the discourses mobilizing this coalition reflected growth of a broader vision of struggle on questions of nationalism, labor–environment linkages, and democracy.

Notwithstanding these positive effects, the approach of this Teamster–turtle alliance was marked by some notable limitations—symbolized by its spatial concentration outside of the CBD, and its distancing both from the Ministerial itself and from other forms of resistance in Seattle. The great majority of these marchers never reached the areas of the CBD where rubber bullets, tear gas, and pepper spray were being used to drive protesters away from the convention center. Organized AFL–CIO parade marshals attempted, with considerable success, to steer all of the People’s Marchers away from downtown by linking arms in a line at the corner of 4th Avenue and Pine Street. This separation, negotiated with the state by labor and environmental NGOs, enabled the coalition to avoid ‘mixing’ with more radical downtown protests. But by agreeing to a division of the physical space of resistance, labor and environmental groups also solidified a political and ideological distancing from the downtown crowd, thereby losing their capacity to support—and build face-to-face alliances with—those protesters who adopted a more confrontational position. Any hope of the sort of mass mobilization and shutdown witnessed in the Seattle general strike of 1919 died at the bargaining table before the protest began, when the space of resistance was carved into divisions.

<sup>(2)</sup> The speeches were made by labor and NGO leaders from the USA, Canada, and a handful of developing countries, including South Africa (COSATU), Mexico, the Philippines, and India, among others.

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There were other ways in which the Teamster–turtle alliance failed to overcome physical and political separation in Seattle. We take seriously criticisms from the developing world that US-based farmer, environmental, and labor arguments against the WTO often legitimize export subsidies, protectionist measures, and antidemocratic negotiation tactics by First World countries. Consider, for example, the fact that the Clinton administration (and presidential candidate Al Gore) cynically attempted to buy labor support with an opportunistic pronouncement against child labor. While the AFL–CIO leadership leaped at the opportunity to declare this pronouncement a victory for labor, the measure is a cheap one (who could be officially in favor of ‘child labor?’), at best ineffectual (how can countries with weak labor unions and capital-friendly states be expected to impose it successfully?), and at worst a crude protectionist instrument for OECD governments. Significantly, it is not clear that most labor activists and unionists from developing countries would actually have supported such a measure—had they been consulted. As one such activist told one of us a few years ago, imposing child labor prohibitions in contexts where there are many poor rural families who need their children to work and where governments do not provide adequate education or opportunity for economic advancement is counterproductive. What are needed first and foremost are measures to improve livelihood chances—something a ban on child labor by itself does nothing to facilitate. The politics of this issue speak to divisions within US labor on the subject of free trade, and specifically what Fair Trade should look like. It would be cynical and wrong to blame organized labor for the destruction and division that corporate globalization—championed by the WTO—has wreaked on workers the world over. But at the same time, Seattle showed again the need for greater solidarity among labor groups the world over on the subject of trade, a potential that is limited every day that US labor remains beholden to center-right Democrats.

Differences between First World and developing country labor organizations are only one aspect of the conflicted geography of anti-WTO labor politics. Impressive mobilization by the Canadian labor movement, and particularly by the British Columbia Federation of Labor, highlighted pervasive differences in labor’s fortunes as a political force across the US–Canada border. For the Tuesday rally and march, about forty busloads of labor (perhaps we should say laboUr, eh?) activists made the trip from Vancouver, BC. They formed a vocal and visible block in the stadium and along the route. Political differences between Canadian and US labor notwithstanding (for example, the softwood lumber dispute), the presence of these activists pointed to enduring territorial differences in labor fortunes and political cultures the world over. Whereas overall union density in the USA has fallen to 11%, in Canada it remains high; in BC, union density is a relatively robust 35% of the workforce. Two of us are recent transplants to BC, and have been duly impressed with both labor’s voice and its audience. Higher union density, a commitment to speaking on a broad range of social justice issues, and representation by a major political party (the New Democratic Party) create a markedly different political culture and discourse. In Seattle, Canuck labor served as a reminder that such territorial differences persist even within OECD nations—even after assaults on the welfare state and, specifically, on protections for workers (including union rights) throughout the industrialized world. This brings home the fact that, contrary to neoliberal rhetoric propagated by a corporate mass media, the US ‘model’ is not the only model for nation-states to follow as part of the development of international trading regimes. Strong protections for labor rights and the environment can be compatible with robust macroeconomic performance and with freer trade, if such interests are represented in the social regulation of international trade.

In this context, it is important to note that Seattle bore witness to important inroads in closing the distance between labor and environmental groups. People and nature share in being treated as nothing more than life-support systems for commodities by global capital and, to this point, by the WTO. Place-based embeddedness is the basis of what Karl Polanyi (1944) identified as the underlying fictitiousness of labor and nature as commodities, a tension leading to political conflict during the last round of world trade liberalization. If Seattle is any indication, such opposition is again on the rise. Mobilization around ‘the organic’ under the Teamster–turtle alliance represented a step forward in attempts to bring social justice and environmental issues into coalitional embrace, but it is also clear that there is still much to be done in this respect. The challenge on the environment front is to strengthen commitment to environmental protections as a social justice issue. Failure to develop a sufficiently humanistic environmental movement divides environmental NGOs from labor groups in the North, and from social justice and environmental groups in the South.

Thus, one of the remaining challenges for the Teamster–turtle alliance is to resolve how social justice and environmental concerns may be represented in the social regulation of international trade and, specifically, how groups speaking in these interests are disposed toward the WTO itself as a body capable of being reformed. One of the differences creating space between the Teamster–turtle alliance and other spaces of protest in Seattle was what might most charitably be called an ambivalence about the WTO itself. More cynically, it appeared at times that leaders of many of the progressive organizations seemed narrowly focused on ‘getting there’ (that is, to the table)—by maintaining a respectable distance from trouble. Medea Benjamin of Global Exchange epitomized this stance: having earlier breached the security of the Ministerial to deliver a few uninvited sentences to the delegates, she then turned her organization to providing support for transnational capital and the Seattle police as the latter ‘rioted’ against direct action groups in the CBD. Benjamin told the corporate media, “Here we are protecting Nike, McDonalds, and the GAP and all the while I’m thinking, ‘Where are the police?’ These anarchists should have been arrested” (*New York Times*, 1 December 1999). By remaining outside of the main spaces of direct confrontation, the tactics of the Teamster–turtle alliance betrayed a willingness to gain access by trading solidarity with organizations that oppose the existence of the WTO and consider it unreformable. As we discuss below, however, there is a convincing case to be made, and one that is being made by other voices of dissent, that the WTO is in fact ill-equipped and poorly suited to dealing with exactly the issues the Teamster–turtle alliance—and many other groups—seek to address.

#### **Direct action: getting the goods?**

“Jam the WTO”

Graffiti from the anti-WTO direct action demonstrators,  
30 November 1999

A second spatial–strategic approach at work in Seattle was that of the Direct Action Network (DAN).<sup>(3)</sup> This network, organized in a radically democratic, non-hierarchical fashion, attracted protesters who were less interested in reforming the WTO than in shutting down the Ministerial by taking action within the CBD. The DAN’s major strategy, spelled out on the Internet months before enactment, was to prevent the WTO conference from opening by stopping the flow of delegates into the conference center and closing down major roads in downtown Seattle. This plan was organized through the affinity groups by spatially dividing downtown Seattle into thirteen areas,

<sup>(3)</sup> The Direct Action Network is a network of local grassroots groups from Los Angeles to Vancouver, formed in early 1999 to mobilize communities for resistance to the WTO and to organize large-scale street theater and mass nonviolent direct action at the WTO Ministerial.

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each area in effect a slice radiating out from the conference center. On the morning of 30 November, two concurrent streams of people emerged from Steinbreck Park and Seattle Central Community College; these met at the Paramount Theatre, across from the Washington Convention Center. Demonstrating impressive discipline and adept use of cellular communications, the DAN closed off roughly twenty blocks of traffic in less than one hour; most delegates were unable to enter the conference center. This ‘nonviolent’ act was enabled by placing bodies directly in the way of delegates.

As is well documented, the DAN soon faced what some alternative media began calling a “police riot”. In the face of repeated police attempts to clear blocks using a variety of ‘nonlethal’ weapons, the DAN responded by performing a diverse array of public acts of resistance—‘locking down’ in intersections, breaking windows, arguing with police, taking pictures, burning trash, writing graffiti, dancing, performing street theater—in celebratory and defensive fashion. Some of these tactics were seen as ‘violent’ by the mass of people in downtown Seattle, producing chants of “no violence”, “shame”, and some physical confrontations between young window-smashers and the “peace police”.<sup>(4)</sup> The corporate media focus was directed extensively (and at first exclusively) towards playing up the ‘violence’ of the DAN demonstrators, so that media efforts quickly became complicit in police efforts at establishing a geography of fear in the CBD through confrontation with the DAN activists.

While successful at delaying the beginning of the Ministerial, direct action strategies were also marked by clear limitations. Attempts to close the conference projected in some sense an ambivalent message. Without a clearly defined critique of the WTO and a movement through which to articulate the success of the direct action, the DAN won an important symbolic victory with no clear direction to follow. The question “where do we go from here?” drifted through the crowd on Tuesday night even as direct actors were driven from downtown Seattle by the police. That same question was repeated on the cover of most left magazines in January 2000. The absence from the DAN’s rhetoric of a well-articulated alternative to ‘corporate globalization’ made it all the easier for the corporate media to declare spuriously that the ‘losers’ in Seattle were the poor in developing countries, who they characterized as victims of the US left (*The Economist*, 11–17 December 1999). This perception was and is in some sense exacerbated by the overwhelming concentration of DAN activists from western cities of Canada and the USA, suggesting real problems in the ability of this group to speak to broader concerns vis-à-vis globalization, and to extend their tactics and rhetoric toward global solidarity against ‘corporate globalization’. A clear challenge for the direct action approach is to ‘jump scales’ and contribute to the construction of alternative futures.

Despite the lack of an agenda for ‘globalization from below’, by taking a confrontational approach to authoritarian attempts to control dissent and to the WTO’s complete lack of democratic representation, the DAN succeeded in raising critical issues that need to be addressed in the aftermath of Seattle. These issues have strong micro-geographic dimensions themselves, inasmuch as they speak to the privatization of public space and to the elevation of property rights (a form of spatial exclusion) above democratic rights. Window-smashing and other forms of ‘vandalism’ served as one of a set of tactics aimed at marking spaces of resistance. Similarly, other emphatically public strategies employed by the DAN—street theater, filling urban space with bodies, writing graffiti—articulated a critique of and resistance to the privatization of public space. The need for such resistance was clearly demonstrated by the instant creation of a corporate space in the heart of downtown around the conference center, and was made more pressing when Seattle mayor Paul Schell closed the entire downtown to

<sup>(4)</sup> The term “peace police” comes from the anarchist Black Bloc, which released a statement criticizing those who stood in the way of window-smashing.

all forms of meaningful resistance on Tuesday at 5pm, declaring a state of emergency, and suspending civil rights for the remainder of the week.

In this context, what characterized most public discussion of direct action (at least in the US and Canadian media) was a concern about the direct action tactics themselves, and a particular tendency to label these tactics as violent and dangerous. But if the petty destruction of corporate property (most of it symbolic icons such as the Nike logo) really constituted 'violence' (an insidious discursive slip), then the 'violence' was apparently necessary, given the apparent impossibility of resistance in the contemporary space economy. As one demonstrator shouted to a television camera, "This is what democracy looks like!" Moreover, while window-smashing might be tactically criticized, the direct action crowd effectively endorsed other space-taking, property-threatening acts, such as street-dancing, fire-burning, and writing graffiti. What is at stake in the negotiation of these public acts? Nothing less than the right to express dissent. Thus, DAN tactics highlighted the erosion of democratic rights, and the perverse fascination in the corporate media with property over and above issues of democracy.

Sadly, such authoritarian responses to the spaces of dissent have a history, not least in Seattle and environs. Two useful points of comparison here are the events surrounding the Everett massacre of 1916 and the 1919 general strike in Seattle, both surrounding the free speech movement and Wobbly<sup>(5)</sup> organizing campaigns in the Northwest. In the aftermath of the massacre, the US Industrial Relations Commission offered the following sober and apparently prescient reflection on state-sponsored violence against citizens in the service of capital:

"In some cases this suppression of free speech seems to have been the result of sheer brutality and wanton mischief, but in the majority of cases it undoubtedly is the result of a belief by the police or their superiors that they were 'supporting and defending the Government' by such invasion of personal rights. There could be no greater error. Such action strikes at the very foundation of government. It is axiomatic that a government which can be maintained only by the suppression of criticism should not be maintained. Furthermore, it is the lesson of history that attempts to suppress ideas result only in their more rapid propagation" (cited in Smith, 1965, page 115).

With respect to the latter, efforts of the corporate media notwithstanding, we can only hope this is the case.

#### **Inside the conference center**

"[I]nside the Convention centre there is a state of emergency which has escaped media attention."

Aileen Kwa of the NGO, Focus of the Global South,  
30 November 1999

A third site of resistance, within the WTO Ministerial itself, is marked by a certain irony: while it has received the least media attention of any of these strategic areas, it may have produced the most significant resistance to the trade agenda pushed by the US government. Moreover, it was only at this site that there was a large and sustained developing country presence, which constituted in fact the core of the successful opposition.

Inside the conference, developing country delegates bridled at the duplicity of the United States and other OECD countries in arguing for tariff reduction by developing countries while insisting on maintaining subsidies for their own farmers and monopoly patents on genetic material obtained from Third World resources. According to the

<sup>(5)</sup> Industrial Workers of the World.

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Director of Focus on the Global South, Walden Bello, who attended the Ministerial, these substantive conflicts intersected with disagreements over decisionmaking powers and resulted in demands for greater openness within the WTO:

“While few developing country delegations shared the priority placed on environmental and workers’ rights by the thousands of demonstrators that had converged on this city, the show of anger on the streets emboldened many Third World country delegates to resist the non-transparent methods by which the US and European Union have traditionally tried to push their trade objectives. ‘Transparency’ was the demand that linked many delegates inside and the protesters outside” (*Focus on Trade* number 42, 3 December 1999).

Third World trade delegates in fact demanded greater democracy in the WTO, challenging the secretive Green Room meetings in which leading powers such as the OECD representatives negotiate the desired outcomes before presenting them to the Ministerial as a whole for ratification by ‘consensus’. Rebelling against this coercive method of ‘consensus’ building, Third World trade delegates indicated their unwillingness to be cowed into ratifying agreements crafted without their participation. Not surprisingly, this demand for more transparency in the WTO negotiation process prevented the OECD countries (and the USA in particular) from unilaterally achieving their goals, and consequently no overarching, new trade agreement was reached.

Yet, the success of Third World trade delegates in blocking the extension of an imperial vision of ‘free trade’, should not obscure the real differences between groups within the developing countries—symbolized in part by the very issue of who from the Third World was present inside the Ministerial. It is doubtful, for example, that most Third World trade ministers would have rejected any and every WTO agreement, given the commitment of the classes they represent to expanded participation in the process of ‘corporate globalization’. Yet among many Third World NGOs, a small number of them represented inside the Ministerial, the sentiment has been voiced that *any* comprehensive trade agreement of the sort mandated by the WTO is precisely what should be rejected.

Beyond this, many Third World governments and some Third World NGOs—such as the Third World Network and Focus on the Global South—oppose bringing labor and environmental considerations into WTO deliberations. For example, Third World trade delegates opposed the development of a WTO working group on labor, probably for the most part out of general opposition to labor standards which would diminish their trade prospects. Third World NGOs have concurred in this opposition to a WTO working group on labor, but not because of general opposition to labor protection. Rather, the NGO’s argument is that the WTO is not an organization equipped to deal adequately with labor regulation, or with environmental regulation for that matter. Some Third World trade representatives and many NGOs instead favor addressing labor standards through the International Labor Organization (ILO), environmental standards through various appropriate United Nations agencies, and other trade-related issues through organizations such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development, which will be meeting during February in Bangkok.

But the positions taken in Seattle by these various Third World trade representatives and high-profile international NGOs leave in question what positions would be favored by the huge and heterogeneous groups of Third World labor, peasant, and environmental organizations—organizations which were largely absent from Seattle and which cannot be assumed to have been represented by the Third World NGOs in attendance. Would a broader coalition of agricultural, labor, and environmental organizations from developing countries systematically support alternatives such as working for regulation through UN agencies such as the ILO? Or will they prioritize

other approaches (for example, transnational, union-to-union networking) in order to generate improved international regulation? Moreover, might they find through such strategies bases for collaboration with agricultural, labor, and environmental activists in the First World? These questions point to some of the lacunae created by the specific presences and absences inside the WTO Ministerial.

### Conclusions

This microgeographic analysis could go much further. But already we can highlight several conclusions to which such an approach leads us. First, false triumphalism is counterproductive to mass mobilizing. While celebrating success is certainly understandable given the left's current position, to treat Seattle as a 'victory' threatens to distort our sense of political possibilities and of the work that must still be done. Seattle was not a victory—and neither is the struggle a game, to be definitively won or lost. Seattle was a crucial moment in a broad, ongoing struggle, and should be seen as a part of a process, not as an end.

Second, the different spaces and strategies of resistance in Seattle were clearly in tension, albeit a productive tension. For example, even though the Third World delegates did not share the DAN agenda, the disturbance produced by the protests created a space for the possibility of a serious challenge to the Green Room process. And what if the AFL–CIO or more member unions had decided to march downtown, bridging microgeographic barriers, and at the same time jumping scales to a broader international coalition?

Third, the different spaces of resistance in Seattle were not generally available to the majority of the world's people, who are denied the mobility necessary for participation in such 'high politics'. WTO opponents will not be fooled or rebuffed by hypocritical corporate media recourse to the claim that opposing neoliberal 'free trade' will hurt the world's poor; but these opponents do need to take seriously the fact that the voices and interests of the world's most marginalized are not automatically or necessarily well expressed in the agendas of First World activists, nor in those of the relatively privileged NGOs of the Third World able to express themselves in Seattle. This points more generally to the need for a coalitional message of mass appeal, requiring both rhetorical distinction and clarity, but also requiring reference to material and positional commonalities that speak to the direct interests of people (not capital) the world over. Such needs are clear in the areas of both labor and environment, but also in the arena of democratic rights. The assertion that resistance in Seattle was democracy helps to normalize dissent (thereby challenging nations of faces pressed against the glass), but in a very real sense, normalization must be accompanied by greater mobilization and inclusion, in both the global North and South. This highlights how much scale jumping remains to be done.

Finally, Seattle helped deliver a message of hope. What became more transparent through the expression of dissent and reaction to it is that the entire process of constructing a liberal trading regime, including the WTO, has been politically orchestrated by the world's elite, much like so many critical developments in the construction of global capitalism—not least the 'freeing' of labor, the commodification of nature, and the 'naturalization' of markets. This knowledge helps make the process contestable. After the Asian economic crisis and now Seattle, there are indications that discourses on globalization, trade, development, and the WTO are slightly more open than they used to be. The intersecting strategies of the heterogeneous WTO opposition have contributed to this shift. But, this opportunity must be seized. Moreover, there is no assurance that future resistance assemblages will be similarly productive. In order to provide the substantive intellectual and moral leadership—hegemony in Gramsci's



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sense—to build a broad-based global movement, we need to assess critically the effects of different strategies and link the lessons with preparations for ongoing struggles.

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