

Toward a Postmodern Prince? The Battle in Seattle as a Moment in the New Politics of Globalisation

Stephen Gill

The modern prince, the myth-prince, cannot be a real person, a concrete individual. It can only be an organism, a complex element of society in which a collective will, which has already been recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action, begins to take concrete form.¹

This essay analyses recent protests against aspects of neoliberal globalisation, as for example at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Meeting in Seattle in late 1999 and in Washington, DC in spring 2000 to coincide with the IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings. I first examine the reasons for the failure of the Seattle talks, and secondly, evaluate the protests and their political significance. Finally, I analyse some emerging forms of political agency associated with struggles over the nature and direction of globalisation that I call the 'the postmodern Prince'. This concept is elaborated in the final section of this essay. It is important to stress at the outset, however, that in this essay the term 'postmodern' does not refer, as it often does, to a discursive or aesthetic moment. In my usage, 'postmodern' refers to a set of conditions, particularly political, material, and ecological that are giving rise to new forms of political agency whose defining myths are associated with the quest to ensure human and intergenerational security on and for the planet, as well as democratic human development and human rights. As such, the multiple and diverse political forces that form the postmodern Prince combine both defensive and forward-looking strategies. Rather than engaging in deconstruction, they seek to develop a global and universal politics of radical (re)construction.

The battle in Seattle took place both inside and outside the conference centre in which the meetings took place; the collapse of the discussions was partly caused by the greater visibility of trade issues in the everyday lives of citizens and the

I would like to thank Cemal Acikgoz, Isabella Bakker, Adam Harnes, and Ahmed Hashi for their comments and help in preparing this essay.

1. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 129.

increasing concern over how international trade and investment agreements are undermining important aspects of national sovereignty and policy autonomy, especially in ways that strengthen corporate power. These concerns—expressed through various forms of political mobilisation—have put pressure upon political leaders throughout the world to re-examine some of the premises and contradictions of neoliberal globalisation.

Why the Talks Failed

Why specifically did the Seattle talks fail? The first and most obvious reason was US intransigence, principally in defence of the status quo against demands for reform by other nations concerned at the repercussions of the liberalisation framework (the built-in agenda) put in place by the GATT Uruguay Round.² The GATT Uruguay Round was a ‘Single Undertaking’, a generic all-or-nothing type of agreement that meant signatories had to agree to all its commitments and disciplines, as well as to the institutionalisation of the WTO. The wider juridical-political framework for locking in such commitments can be called the new constitutionalism of disciplinary neoliberalism. This encompasses not only trade and investment, but also private property rights more generally (and not just intellectual property rights). It also involves macroeconomic policies and institutions (for example independent central banks and balanced budget amendments) in ways that minimise, or even ‘lock out’ democratic controls over key economic institutions and policy frameworks in the long-term.³

In this context, the US mainly wanted to sustain commitments to existing protections for intellectual property rights and investment and stop any attempts to weaken the capacity of existing agreements to open new markets for American corporations. The US position was based on intelligence work by government agencies, academics, and corporate strategists co-ordinated by the CIA.⁴

So it would be easy to say that protests outside the Seattle Convention Centre and confronted by the Seattle riot police, the FBI, and the CIA had little or no effect on the failure of the talks, other than the fact that many delegates could not get into the building because of the disruptions outside. However, this would be to misunderstand the link between public concern and the negotiating positions of states in the WTO. Indeed, it is becoming clear that the central reasons for the failure of the Seattle Ministerial were linked to the fact that the establishment of the WTO has gone well beyond the traditional role of the GATT in ways that have begun not only increasingly to encroach on crucial domestic policy areas and national sovereignty, but which also have repercussions for international law. In addition, key areas of concern to the public such as food safety, biotechnology, the

2. Scott Sinclair, ‘The WTO: What Happened in Seattle? What’s Next in Geneva?’, *Briefing Paper Series: Trade and Investment* 1, no. 2 (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2000), 6.

3. Stephen Gill, ‘Globalisation, Market Civilisation, and Disciplinary Neoliberalism’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 23, no. 3 (1994): 399-423.

4. See ‘CIA Spies Swap Cold War for Trade Wars’, *Financial Times*, 14 August 1999, 1.

environment, labour standards, and broader questions of economic development add to the popular disquiet and mobilisation over cultural, social, and ethical questions linked to the globalisation project.

In this regard—and this is very relevant to the concerns of the protesters as well as many governments—the new services negotiations that will occur in Geneva as a result of the Single Undertaking have a wide mandate and the new trade disciplines will have potentially vast impact across major social institutions and programs, such as health, education, social services, and cultural issues. This will allow for wider privatisation and commercialisation of the public sector and indirectly, of the public sphere itself, for example in social programs and education.⁵ The logic of the negotiations will likely inhibit many government programs that could be justified as being in the public interest, unless governments are able to convince WTO panels that these programs are not substantially in restraint of trade and investment on the part of private enterprise. Indeed, because the built-in agenda will proceed in Geneva, many divisions among governments, especially between North and South, are emerging. The North-South divisions also revolve around dissatisfaction on the South's part at concessions made in the earlier GATT Uruguay Round, coupled with their frustration in failing to open Northern markets for their manufactured and agricultural exports.

With this agenda in mind, the protesters—although drawn from a very diverse range of organisations and political tendencies—believe there is centralisation and concentration of power under corporate control in neoliberal globalisation, with much of the policy agenda for this project orchestrated by international organisations such as the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank. Thus, it was not surprising that the battle in Seattle moved to Washington, DC in mid-April where the same set of progressive and environmental activists and organisations, including trade unions, protested the role of the IMF, World Bank, and the G-7.

What is significant here is that the new counter-movements seek to preserve ecological and cultural diversity against what they see as the encroachment of political, social, and ecological mono-cultures associated with the supremacy of corporate rule. At the time of writing, the protests were set to move on to lay siege to the headquarters of Citicorp, the world's biggest financial conglomerate.

The Contradictions of Neoliberal Globalisation and the Seattle Protests

Implicitly or explicitly, the failure of the talks and indeed much of the backlash against neoliberal globalisation is linked to the way that people in diverse contexts are experiencing the problems and contradictions linked to the power of capital and more specifically the projects of disciplinary neoliberalism and new constitutionalism. So what are these contradictions and how do they relate to the Seattle protests?

5. Editorial, 'New Trade Rules Target Education', *Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin*, 7 September 1999, 1. The *Bulletin* added that Educational International representing 294 educational unions and associations world wide expressed great concern about how WTO initiatives would undermine public education.

The first is the contradiction between big capital and democracy. Central here is the extension of binding legal mechanisms of trade and investment agreements, such as the GATT Uruguay Round and regional agreements, such as NAFTA. A counter-example, which pointed the way towards Seattle in terms of much of its counter-hegemonic political form was the failed OECD effort to create a Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The MAI was also partly undermined by grass-root mobilisation against corporate globalisation, as well as by more conventional political concerns about sovereignty. The protesters viewed agreements such as NAFTA and organisations such as the WTO as seeking to institutionalise ever-more extensive charters of rights and freedoms for corporations, allowing for greater freedom of enterprise and world-wide protection for private property rights. The protesters perceived that deregulation, privatisation, and liberalisation are a means to strengthen a particular set of class interests, principally the power of private investors and large shareholders. They are opposed to greater legal and market constraints on democracy.

Put differently, the issue was therefore how far and in what ways trade and investment agreements 'lock in' commitments to liberalisation, whilst 'locking out' popular-democratic and parliamentary forces from control over crucial economic, social, and ecological policies.

The second set of contradictions are both economic and social. Disciplinary neoliberalism proceeds with an intensification of discipline on labour and a rising rate of exploitation, partly reflected in booming stock markets during the past decade, whilst at the same time persistent economic and financial crises have impoverished many millions of people and caused significant economic dislocations. This explains the growing role of organised labour—for example American based trade unions such as the Teamsters—in the protests, as well as organisations representing feminists, other workers, peasants, and smaller producers world-wide. In this regard, the numbers do not lie: despite what has been the longest boom in the history of Western capitalism, the real incomes of average people have been falling. So if this happens in a boom, what happens in a bust? This question has been answered already in the East Asia crisis when millions were impoverished.

Third, for a number of years now, discipline of capital has become linked to the intensification of a crisis of social reproduction. Feminist political economy has shown how a disproportionate burden of (structural) adjustment to the harsher more competitive circumstances over the past twenty years has fallen on the shoulders of the less well-paid, on women and children, and the weaker members of society, the old and the disabled. In an era of fiscal stringency, in many states social welfare, health, and educational provisions have been reduced and the socialisation of risk has been reduced for a growing proportion of the world's population. This has generated a crisis of social reproduction as burdens of adjustment are displaced into families

and communities that are already under pressure to simply survive in economic terms and risk becomes privatised, redistributed, and generalised in new forms.⁶

The final set of contradictions are linked to how socio-cultural and biological diversity are being replaced by a social and biological mono-culture under corporate domination, and how this is linked to a loss of food security and new forms of generalised health risks. Thus, the protesters argued that if parts of the Seattle draft agenda were ratified, it would allow for a liberalisation of trade in genetically modified crops, provisions to allow world water supplies to be privatised, and the patenting of virtually all forms of life including genetic material that had been widely used across cultures for thousands of years. The protesters also felt particularly strongly about the patenting of seeds and bio-engineering by companies like Novartis and Enron, and other firms seen to be trying to monopolise control over food and undermine local livelihood and food security.⁷

Hence protesters opposed the control of the global food order by corporate interests linked to new constitutionalism. These interests have begun to institutionalise their right 'to source food and food inputs, to prospect for genetic patents, and to gain access to local and national food markets' established through the GATT Uruguay Round and WTO.⁸ Transnational corporations have managed to redefine food security in terms of the reduction of national barriers to agricultural trade, ensuring market rule in the global food order. The effect is the intensification of the centralisation of control by 'agri-food capital via global sourcing and global trading', in ways that intensify world food production and consumption relations through

unsustainable monocultures, terminator genes, and class-based diets [in ways] premised on the elimination of the diversity of natural resources, farm cultures and food cultures, and the decline of local food self-sufficiency and food security mechanisms.⁹

Together, these contradictions contribute to what might be called a global or 'organic crisis' that links together diverse forces across and within nations, specifically to oppose the ideas, institutions, and material power of disciplinary neoliberalism. Much of the opposition to corporate globalisation was summed up by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, who alongside President Clinton, was addressing the heads of the 1000 biggest transnational corporations at the annual meeting of the self-appointed and unelected World Economic Forum in Davos in February 2000. Sweeney stated that the protests from North and South represented

6. See the essays in Isabella Bakker, ed., *The Strategic Silence: Gender And Economic Policy*. (London: Zed Books, 1994).

7. Paul Hawken, 'The WTO: Inside, Outside, All Around The World', [<http://www.co-intelligence.org/WTOHawken.html>] (26 April 2000).

8. Philip McMichael, 'The Crisis of Market Rule in the Global Food Order' (paper presented at the British International Studies Association Annual Meeting, Manchester, 20-22 December 1999).

9. *Ibid.*, 2.

‘a call for new global rules, democratically developed’ to constrain ‘growing inequality, environmental destruction, and a race to the bottom for working people’, warning that if such rules were not forthcoming ‘it will generate an increasingly volatile reaction that will make Seattle look tame’.¹⁰ Indeed Clinton’s remarks made at Davos

seemed designed as a reminder that these fears—even expressed in unwelcome and sometimes violent ways, as they were in Seattle—have a legitimacy that deserves attention in the world’s executive suites and government ministries.¹¹

We know by now, of course, that the violence in Seattle was almost completely carried out by the heavily armed police militias who took the battle to the protesters. In Washington in April 2000, police pre-emptively arrested hundreds of demonstrators, in actions justified by the local police chief as a matter of prudence. Another example of this was the repression of peaceful protests at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Vancouver in 1998. The protests focused on the contradiction of separating free trade from political democracy, dramatised by the presence of the Indonesian dictator, President Suharto. In sum, state authorities will quickly act to restrict basic political rights and freedoms of opposition by alternative members of civil society—rights supposedly underpinned by the rule of law in a liberal constitutional framework—when business interests are threatened. At Seattle, the anonymous, unaccountable, and intimidating police actions seemed almost absurd in light of the fact that the protests involved children dressed as turtles, peaceful activists for social justice, union members, faith groups, accompanied by teachers, scientists, and assorted ‘tree huggers’ all of whom were non-violent. Indeed, with the possible exception of a small number of anarchists, virtually none of the protesters was in any way violent. In Washington, the police protected the meetings wearing heavy armour from behind metal barricades, in face of protesters carrying puppets and signs that read ‘spank the Bank’. Moments such as these, however, illustrate not only a comedy of the absurd but also the broader dialectic between a supremacist set of forces and an ethico-political alternative involved in a new inclusive politics of diversity.

Indeed, since the Seattle debacle the protesters have been able to extend their critique of what they see as the political mono-culture by showing how one of its key components, the ‘quality press’ and TV media, reported what occurred. In the US, for example, the mainstream media found it impossible to represent the violence as being caused by the authorities in order to provoke and discredit the opposition as being Luddite, anti-science, and unlawful. Seen from the vantage point of the protesters, ‘the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* are the

10. John Sweeney, ‘Remember Seattle’, *Washington Post*, 30 January 2000, B7.

11. Ann Swardson, ‘Clinton Appeals for Compassion in Global Trade; World Forum Told Don’t Leave “Little Guys” Out’, *Washington Post*, 30 January 2000, A18.

keepers of “official reality,” and in official reality it is always the protesters who are violent’.¹²

Toward a Postmodern Prince?

In conclusion, I advance the following hypothesis: the protests form part of a world-wide movement that can perhaps be understood in terms of new potentials and forms of global political agency. And following Machiavelli and Gramsci, I call this set of potentials ‘the postmodern Prince’ which I understand as something plural and differentiated, although linked to universalism and the construction of a new form of globalism, and of course, something that needs to be understood as a set of social and political forces in movement.

Let us place this hypothesis in some theoretical context. Machiavelli’s *The Prince* addressed the problem of the ethics of rule from the viewpoint of both the prince (the *palazzo*, the palace) and the people (the *piazza*, the town square). Machiavelli sought to theorise how to construct a form of rule that combined both *virtù* (ethics, responsibility, and consent) and fear (coercion) under conditions of *fortuna* (circumstances). *The Prince* was written in Florence, in the context of the political upheavals of Renaissance Italy. Both Machiavelli and later Gramsci linked their analyses and propositions to the reality of concrete historical circumstances as well as to potential for transformation. These included pressing contemporary issues associated with the problems of Italian unification, and the subordinate place of Italy in the structures of international relations. And it was in a similar national and international context that Gramsci’s *The Modern Prince* was written in a Fascist prison, a text that dealt with a central problem of politics: the constitution of power, authority, rule, rights, and responsibilities in the creation of an ethical political community. Nevertheless, what Gramsci saw in *The Prince* was that it was ‘not a systematic treatment, but a “live” work, in which political ideology and political science are fused in the dramatic form of a “myth”’.¹³ The myth for Machiavelli was that of the *condottiere*, who represents the collective will. By contrast, for Gramsci *The Modern Prince* proposed the myth of the democratic modern mass political party—the communist party—charged with the construction of a new form of state and society, and a new world order.

In the new strategic context (*fortuna*) of disciplinary neoliberalism and globalisation, then a central problem of political theory is how to imagine and to theorise the new forms of collective political identity and agency that might lead to the creation of new, ethical, and democratic political institutions and forms of practice (*virtù*). So in this context, let me again be clear that by ‘postmodern Prince’ I do *not* mean a form of political agency that is based on postmodern philosophy and the radical relativism it often entails. What I am intending to

12. Posted on [<http://www.peoples@post4.tele.dk>] (26 April 2000) on behalf of the NGO network ‘Mobilization for Global Justice’ that organised the Washington protests. Their website [<http://www.a16.org>] passed 250,000 visitors at the time of the protests.

13. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 125.

communicate is a shift in the forms of political agency that are going beyond earlier modernist political projects. So the 'postmodern Prince' involves tendencies that have begun to challenge some of the myths and the disciplines of modernist practices, and specifically resisting those that seek to consolidate the project of globalisation under the rule of capital.

Thus, the battles in Seattle may link to new patterns of political agency and a movement that goes well beyond the politics of identity and difference: it has gender, race, and class aspects. It is connected to issues of ecological and social reproduction, and of course, to the question of democracy. This is why more than 700 organisations and between 40,000 and 60,000 people—principally human rights activists, labour activists, indigenous people, representatives of churches, industrial workers, small farmers, forest activists, environmentalists, social justice workers, students, and teachers—all took part collectively in the protests against the WTO's Third Ministerial on 30 November 1999. The protesters seem aware of the nature and dynamics of their movement and have theorised a series of political links between different events so that they will become more than what James Rosenau called 'distant proximities' or simply isolated moments of resistance against globalisation.¹⁴

In sum, these movements are beginning to form what Gramsci called 'an organism, a complex element of society' that is beginning to point towards the realisation of a 'collective will'. This will is coming to be 'recognised and has to some extent asserted itself in action'. It is beginning to 'take concrete form'.¹⁵ Indeed the diverse organisations that are connected to the protests seek to go further to organise something akin to a postmodern transnational political party, that is one with no clear leadership structure as such. It is a party of movement that cannot be easily decapitated. This element puzzled mainstream press reporters at Seattle since they were unable to find, and thus to photograph or interview the 'leaders' of the protests. However, this emerging political form is not a signal of an end to universalism in politics as such, since many of the forces it entails are linked to democratisation and a search for collective solutions to common problems. It seeks to combine diversity with new forms of collective identity and solidarity in and across civil societies. Thus the organisers of the April 2000 Washington demonstrations stated that 'Sweeney's prediction' made at Davos was in fact a description of events that were going on right now, but that are largely ignored by the media:

The Zapatista uprising in Mexico, the recent coup in Ecuador, the civil war in the Congo, the turmoil in Indonesia, and the threat of the U'Wa people to commit mass suicide, are all expressions of the social explosion that has arisen from the desperation caused by the policies of the World Bank, IMF, and their

14. James Rosenau, 'Imposing Global Order: A Synthesised Ontology for a Turbulent Era', in *Innovation and Transformation in International Studies*, eds. Stephen Gill and James H. Mittelman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 220-35.

15. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 129 n. 1.

corporate directors...Fundamental change does not mean renaming their programs or other public relations scams. Fundamental reform means rules that empower the people of the world to make the decisions about how they live their lives—not the transnational CEO's or their purchased political leaders.¹⁶

In this regard, the effectiveness of the protest movements may well lie in a new confidence gained as particular struggles come to be understood in terms of a more general set of inter-connections between problems and movements world-wide. For instance, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety on genetically modified life forms was signed in late January 2000 in Montreal by representatives from 133 governments pursuant to the 1992 UN Convention on Biological Diversity for the trade and regulation of living modified organisms (LMOs). The draft Protocol ensures that sovereign governments have rights to decide on imports of LMOs provided this is based on environmental and health risk assessment data. The Protocol is founded on the 'precautionary principle', in effect meaning that where scientific uncertainty exists, governments can refuse or delay authorisation of trade in LMOs. Apart from pressure from NGOs, the negotiations were strongly influenced by scientists concerned at genetic and biological risks posed by the path of innovation. The process finally produced a protocol with significant controls over the freedoms of biotechnology and life sciences companies. Indeed, linkages and contradictions between environmental and trade and investment regulations and laws are becoming better understood by activists world-wide, for instance how the Biosafety Protocol and the rules and procedures of the WTO may be in conflict.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that, although they may represent a large proportion of the population of the world in terms of their concerns, in organised political terms the protest groups are only a relatively small part of an emerging global civil society that includes not only NGOs but also the activities of political parties, churches, media communications corporations, scientific and political associations, some progressive, others reactionary. Transnational civil society also involves activities of both transnational corporations, and also governments that are active in shaping a political terrain that is directly and indirectly outside the formal juridical purview of states. Indeed, as the UN Rio conference on the environment and its aftermath illustrated, corporate environmentalism is a crucial aspect of the emerging global civil society and it is linked to what Gramsci called *trasformismo* or co-optation of opposition. For example, 'sustainable development' is primarily defined in public policy as compatible with market forces and freedom of enterprise. When the global environmental movement was perceived as a real threat to corporate interests, companies changed tack from suggesting the environmentalists were either crackpots or misguided to accepting a real problem

16. Posted again by the NGO network 'Mobilization for Global Justice' on [<http://www.peoples@post4.tele.dk>] (26 April 2000).

existed and a compromise was necessary. Of course a compromise acceptable to capital was not one that would fundamentally challenge the dominant patterns of accumulation.

I have not used the term postmodern in its usual sense. Rather, I apply it to indicate a set of conditions and contradictions that give rise to novel forms of political agency that go beyond and are more complex than those imagined by Machiavelli's *The Prince* or Gramsci's *The Modern Prince*. Global democratic collective action today cannot, in my view, be understood as a singular form of collective agency, for example a single party with a single form of identity. It is more plural and differentiated, as well as being democratic and inclusive. The new forms of collective action contain innovative conceptions of social justice and solidarity, of social possibility, of knowledge, emancipation, and freedom. The content of their mobilising myths includes diversity, oneness of the planet and nature, democracy, and equity. What we are discussing is, therefore, a political party as well as an educational form and a cultural movement. However, it does not act in the old sense of an institutionalised and centralised structure of representation. Indeed this 'party' is not institutionalised as such, since it has a multiple and capillary form. Moreover, whilst many of the moments and movements of resistance noted above are at first glance 'local' in nature, there is broad recognition that local problems may require global solutions. Global networks and other mobilising capabilities are facilitated with new technologies of communication.

A new 'postmodern Prince' may prove to be the most effective political form for giving coherence to an open-ended, plural, inclusive, and flexible form of politics and thus create alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. So, whilst one can be pessimistic about globalisation in its current form, this is perhaps where some of the optimism for the future may lie: a new set of democratic identities that are global, but based on diversity and rooted in local conditions, problems, and opportunities.

*Stephen Gill is Professor in the Department of Political Science at York University,
Toronto*
