

Toward a Literature of the New Unrest*
by Benjamin Shepard

Review of *The Battle of Seattle: The New Challenge to Capitalist Globalization*
edited by Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose and George Katsiaficas.
Soft Skull Press, 2002, Softcover, 393 Pages

A friend recently suggested that perhaps the most important thing social movements can do is help create and sustain joyful communities of resistance. Evidence of such spaces abound in *The Battle of Seattle: The New Challenge to Capitalist Globalization*, a collection of essays, edited by Eddie Yuen, Daniel Burton-Rose and George Katsiaficas. In the midst of continued hostility toward the global justice movement, the book's contributors outline both why the global justice movement matters and what else needs to be done to continue maintain its vitality. In addition to the first hand historical accounts of November 1999, the work offers ample detail of a culture of dissent and community building. Examples include work's cover by Seth Tobocman, who chronicled the plight of the Lower East Side squatter movement in a graphic novel, *War in the Neighborhood*. It also features the joyful poem "In Praise of the Seattle Coalition" by New York/ Jersey poet Eliot Katz. Recalling those heady days of late 1999 from the vantage point of his TV set, Katz ponders the whimsical and fantastical implications and convergences witnessed that magical, millennial week:

"After curfew, the skies lit up & birds flew across the continents to celebrate/
Ancient redwood trees shoot their leaves to prevent WTO delegates from being
received/
The town salmon agreed to wear union windbreakers for the week.

Yet in the days after 9/11, *The Battle of Seattle* was close to being scrapped. Its anarchist publisher, Soft Skull Press, an independent press then located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, struggled to stay afloat, barely getting it to press. Eddie Yuen's addresses the book's difficult journey in its gripping prologue:

"As this book was heading to press, the world came to a halt with the horrendous terrorist attacks of September 11th. The radical political space which had been opened up by the anti-globalization movement was instantly pulverized (especially in the US), and the world since then seemed enveloped in a new Cold War between a vengeful American empire and a vicious right wing fundamentalism. This project, which started out as a practical compendium of articles for use by a nascent movement, feels, as I write this prologue, like a work of history, depicting a long ago time. We can only hope the movement is able to regroup...."

Yuen's painfully honest words are the volume's bittersweet soul. Throughout the book's

release party in March of 2002, speaker after speaker passed out flyers calling for: “NYC Labor Solidarity with Immigrant Detainees,” imploring that movement activists respond and rally for those held without access to lawyers in Brooklyn, NY. Barely concealed in these pleas was a frustration that no one knew how to do much more than scream.

The work’s authors suggested that the question of illegal detainees should function as a litmus test for the movement. As of today, little progress has been made for their plight. Despite its limitations in the face of the War on Terrorism, many are not ready to let this new movement slide. For many months after the attack it was difficult to gauge the movement’s fate as the barrage of armchair historians and opinion makers wrote their premature autopsies. Few involved were ready to write off the radical social and cultural space opened up by the movement. That very space is what makes the essays within *The Battle of Seattle* so special. In their range of voices and opinions, they maintain a spirit of earnestness and possibility within countless stories.

Toward the end of his essay, “Seattle Was Not the Beginning,” George Katsiaficas, author of *The Subversion of Politics : European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, a member of the 1960s/ 70s anti-war group, Science for the People, and one of the volume’s editors, recalls being invited to speak at a Seattle bookstore called Left Bank Books on the night of November 30, 1999. The event was cancelled because of the declaration of martial law in the city. Instead of the talk, Katsiaficas ended up getting to know a young activist who had helped organize the event, “and as result we decided to work together on this book.” Such heartfelt connection between cohorts of activists is witnessed throughout the volume. Importantly, the condescending tone of veterans of the Golden 1960s era of activism has been replaced by one of cooperation and mutual respect. The result of this connection is a series of new openings, ways to conceive of and rewrite the activist history for a new generation— of activists, scholars, and followers.

As the North American global justice movement ebbs, flows, and ebbs again in a perpetual rope-a-dope with the ongoing 9/11 backlash, it’s worthwhile to pause and consider the movement’s compelling cultural contributions, which include a striking new narrative of unrest. The global justice movement has been highly influenced by the structure of e-mail discourse. A typical movement activist receives some 25-50 e-mails a day, especially during the build up to and follow up after actions. While much of the email amounts to rants, the writings of certain radical journalists, theorists and movement players rise up from the cacophony. In much the same way that merely standing up to make a proposal at an ACT UP meeting became trial by fire and training for activists in the early 1990s, the capacity to hold the attention of readers whose finger is one millisecond away from the shift-delete key has created a number of prolific movement bards. Their opinions shoot around the Net as their ideas and strategies became part of the movement’s public face and debate. When report backs from L.A. Kauffman’s “Mobilize New York” or “Free Radical” lists (of which this essay borrows its name) and dispatches of Starhawk’s travels to movement epicenters in Seattle, Genoa, and elsewhere are posted, they find their way through the virtual wasteland into the public sphere. Some find their way into e-columns and discussion boards; others such as those included in *The Battle of Seattle* find their way

into printed volumes. From this vantage point, a small handful of authors have established voices that deserve to be considered movement literature. I would propose that what makes these dispatches effective is their capacity to borrow from the Studs Terkel school of letters, utilizing stories instead of didactics to convey political points. The point of this style is that theory and strategy literally unfold from the narrative. Instead of the usual political tract in which the reader is hit on the head with the obvious in clichéd, reified prose, the effective literature of the new unrest utilizes the tools of participant/observer ethnography and new journalism to set the scene, history to contextualize the setting, and a pinch—but only a pinch—of political theory to help situate the movement’s open ended political wanderlust. Too much or heavy-handed theory bogs down an effective dispatch. There must be a premium on style for a report to rise to the level of effective movement literature.

A dynamic element of the writing on the new unrest is the way in which movement literature, especially accounts of actions, opens up spaces for movement histories – from ecology, to anarchism, to labor – and their rationale within the current activist response to neoliberalism. Stanley Aronowitz’ essay, “The Seeds of a Movement: From Seattle to Washington and Beyond,” in which he actually refers to L.A. Kauffman’s Free Radical Column, is an effective example. In it, Aronowitz begins with a story about feeling nervous as he walked to join the labor contingent at the Ellipse during the A16 anti-IMF protests in Washington DC. “From the moment we stepped out of the Metro and began walking toward the demonstration I had the feeling that organizer’s predictions of about ten thousand protesters were a little overstated.” Like a good storyteller, Aronowitz’ recollections have a double meaning. The anxiety he confesses to be feeling appears to be as much about labor's recent struggles as it is about the demo at hand.

From here Aronowitz offers a brief history labor’s relationship to the rise of capitalist globalization. Aronowitz’s review of the Cold War compromise between capital and labor at the core of American welfare state is effective and concise. By the time Welfare Reform ran its course in 1996, the underpinnings of this safety net had been all but dismantled. What follows is the awe and possibility as Aronowitz watches a radical opposition emerge from these losses. Unlike labor’s fruitless struggles against NAFTA in 1993, by 1999 labor re emerged to put together a series of victories, including Longshoremen shutting ports across the Western seaboard in solidarity with the WTO protests. And a generation took a second look at labor.

Within this context, Aronowitz’ enthusiasm is undeniable. “It’s happening again,” Aronowitz recalls a colleague from the anti-war days observing with excited approval. They were witnesses to a movement led by leaders under 30 who’d organized a coalition willing to name what it was up against: “capitalism.” This generational and strategic turn is at the heart of the essays. “Each year millions of rural people leave their ancestral homes for the megalopolis, thousands of indigenous people have cultures shattered by the missionaries and multinationals, their temporal sensibilities replaced by clock time and their myriad aesthetics pasteurized Spielberg and Disney,” Yuen explains, detailing a corporate globalization’s homogenizing steamroller over distinct public spaces. Within the rhetorical shift from challenging a “system” to challenging “corporate globalization” a vast new discourse emerges. The essays recounting the birth of the global justice movement – from

Chiapas to Seattle – over the last decade, offer the underpinnings of a vast expansion of a global public sphere. In so doing, they narrate the a new movement’s capacity to re-ignite the presumption of a truly global political project. While events in Seattle, Prague and Davos made headlines, countless micro mobilizations in between the formation of ACT UP in 1987 and the present made the idea of solidarity and resistance a daily part of a new generation of activists. This is not to say there are not vastly different views over strategy or approach to protest. Tensions between struggles against capitalism with a capital "C" and the necessity to make advances within a system recognized as inherently flawed can be witnessed throughout the collection. These complexities are embodied within the work's amazing dispatches. While some of the essays are better than others, the great essays – by L.A. Kauffman, Rachel Neumann, Barbara Epstein and the Surrealist Movement in America – far outweigh any of the problems.

If there is a gap within the essays, it’s this: There is no discussion of AIDS or queer activism in general, or more specifically, that practical activist project understood as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, which not only played an essential role in revitalizing the use of civil disobedience in the late 1980’s and ten years later challenging the WTO and the system of global patents impeding “pills into bodies” of people across the globe. Sentiment against racism, sexism, and homophobia, such as in the volume’s introduction, becomes just more reified rhetoric if its underlying sentiment is neglected.

While the editors pay homage to a new activism of “praxis,” the essays sometimes neglect to the practical tasks involved. The difficult challenge for many involved in the global justice movement is reconciling a struggle against unbridled capitalism and a practical need for immediate limited reforms necessary to make the rules of global capital more humanitarian. While countless other groups were in the streets during the next round of WTO meetings in Qatar in 2001, non-governmental organizations, including Doctors Without Borders and the Healthgap Coalition followed up on Seattle by sending members to these meetings. There they fought for and won concessions allowing countries to manufacture generic AIDS drugs at cost without reprisal.

Rather than emphasize or at least acknowledge this sort of practical, disciplined—and necessary task focused research and work, the volume reveals an opposition to the work of non-governmental organization – regardless of what role they are playing. The sentiment is certainly understandable. One of the volume's most complex essays, James Davis' “This Is What Bureaucracy Looks Like: NGO's and Anti-Capitalism” specifically responds to the moment in Seattle when professional reformers in NGO's directly assisted the police in blocking anarchists from breaking windows. In the next global justice protests against the IMF/ World Bank in Washington (2000) organized labor leaders actually called for labor not to participate in the day’s blockade while organized labor failed to play much of a role in the global justice protests after this. Both organized labor and a number of NGO's, including Global Exchange and Public Citizen, benefited from the momentum created by Seattle. Yet, anarchists did much of the heavy lifting, creating changes and breakthroughs seldom witnessed during the previous years of domestic battles over trade. Within this context, Davis suggests that celebrities, such as Bono or more "respectable" NGO's such as Medicines Sans Frontiers achieve very little by

seeking a compromise with capital. “NGO’s, however well intentioned many may be, are not a substitute for real social and political movements,” Davis contends. He takes Ralph Nader to task for suggesting, “Public interest groups are like crusades... you can't have work rules, or 9 to 5.” The point is essential. You can't fight for global justice with workers denied health care coverage or basic “work rules.” Process counts. How a social movements and social movement organizations actually go about achieving goals counts. Davis is right to suggest the hierarchical, even sectarian, nature of many organizations is worth interrogating, whether they are NGOs, non-profits, or social movement based organizations. And most certainly new approaches and thinking are necessary for social movement organizations to remain connected to the needs of communities as opposed to merely looking “respectable.” Yet, in the meantime, both organizations and grass roots groups are both necessary to handle both the short and long goals of movements. Its difficult to deny that movements need people in the streets and at the negotiating table. Respecting this imperative is part of the “diversity of tactics” which gives the Global Justice Movement its thriving energy. Yet instead of acknowledging that different groups play different roles, Davis offers a dismissal: “NGOs are to imperialism what artist bohemians are to urban gentrification.”

In these quiet days before the revolution, people get a little hungry. People need food and shelter and medicine. And few still forward the argument that people must suffer before they revolt. Many would argue the opposite. In the meantime, many low-income people depend on NGOs and non-profit organizations to provide vital services, including clean needles, dental dams, stem kits, housing, food and healthcare. To deny these needs is to speak from the vantage point of privilege or ignorance. While there are countless problems with non-profit-organizations which provide services or unions which protect workers, there are very little in viable alternatives provided herein. Until a system shifting seismic political shift occurs, peaceful incremental change is a viable option for translating movement goals into organizations and programs aiding the material realities of people’s lives. Victories such as Seattle set the stage for these forms of social change.

The attack on NGO’s speaks to a difficulty encountered within *The Battle of Seattle*. With so many essays about one great week, albeit a great one, one gets the feeling that the authors are hanging on for dear life. Saul Alinski once said that wins are necessary to keep movements vital. By making Seattle the standard against which everything else is measured, another unmatchable monolith – another Woodstock emerges as a commodity to fetishize instead of build upon. Since the book was released, Eddie Yuen has argued that local community organizing, not the Seattle-like protest which can only happen with an element of surprise long gone, is the most effective way to respond to the 9/11 backlash. Translating the goals of the global justice movement into such local struggles thus becomes a central challenge for those involved in the movement. Given the current context, it may be easier to look backward to glorious victories than forward to a future which risks compromise, economic decisions within a scarcity of resources, or the slow road into political oblivion. After observing the Democratic National Convention in LA (2000) just miles from the very South Central LA streets which sparked the LA Riots of 1992, Juan Gonzales suggests: “The movement... must expand to America’s heartland, or it will

slowly wither and die. Expansion requires more time spent in local hometowns, educating and winning over those who now might disagree with its aims... It means, above all, firmly grasping that the road to fundamental change in American society lies not simply in disrupting our downtowns, but in awakening, organizing, and providing some vision of a better world to our South Centurals.” A number of other writers suggest the movement needs to diversify and deal with the question of race.

It’s an essential point that countless writers emphasize in the conditional tense – “must,” “should,” etc. The protests against the prison industrial complex during the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia offered just such a possibility. Yet, since then the movement appears to have turned its back on continuing campaigns, such as New York’s Drop the Rock (efeller Drug Laws).

The feeling emerges that the movement has an aversion to the slow work on building local alliances or dealing with policy decisions. Yet, there is a simpler road. The model of local activists joining local struggles for racial justice, community labor alliances, queer public space groups, and campaigns organized by people of color offers a more useful model than bemoaning why activists of color from Harlem and the Bronx are not joining pre-action meetings of middle class while Lower East Side. There is something to be said for white activists asking how they can help out instead of asking others to join campaigns they lead, which presents an effective alternative. Within the context of a permanent war economy in which drug users and activists are equated with terrorists, global justice activists assisting struggles against an escalating War on Drugs in local communities offers a useful way out of the dead end. An aversion to anything that smacks of incrementalism only gets in the way. Unfortunately, the movement’s often oppositional nature, reflected within the unfortunate use of the expression “antiglobalization” instead of “global justice” throughout the volume’s introduction, presents just such an impediment.

If there is a useful lesson in Bill Ayer’s recent memoir of his SDS and Weather Underground days it is that he wished his movement had spent more time engaging and converting its suburban parents to the cause as Ho Chi Men had asked than engaging in guerilla warfare. The same could be said of today’s struggles with Bushites between New York and California. If the global justice movement fails to engage within local political realities, as Gonzales pointed out back in 2000, it is difficult to imagine the movement enduring.

All this being said, the world is a much better place with a fabulous global justice movement of colorful actions. In the end, what unfolds in *The Battle of Seattle* is a frustrating and wonderful set of essays – frustrating because of the political and cultural forces that have slowed this movement, and exciting because of the continuing possibility of the carnival against capital which the movement has offered the world. The movements and possibilities offered while samba beats roared and propaganda flared within these movements are some of the most amazing moments I have had as an activist. Yuen et al’s collection delightfully captures this spirit, while offering the necessary questions for the movement to continue to thrive. Yuen counsels, I believe correctly, that the movement is at its best when rejecting the hair-shirt left. Perhaps my favorite essay in the volume is George Lakey’s, “Mass Action Since Seattle: Seven Ways to Make Our Protests More

Powerful.” I will include those seven ways here:

1) Create more “dilemma demonstrations” placing the powers that be in the awkward position of either allowing the demo to succeed or exposing their own moral bankruptcy by attacking a peaceful protest. The macho game of “my weapon is bigger than your weapon” confuses onlookers. Do not give cameras images of police as protectors of the peace.

2) Decide specifically which movement public you are trying to influence: whether its media coverage or for a specific policy making body. It’s not always possible to do everything.

3) Use campaigns more often, to become proactive than reactive. Lakey advises: “A good word for continuous reaction is “disempowerment.” Mohandas K. Gandhi’s first principle of strategy was to stay on the offensive. Having our action agenda dictated by where and when the power holders want to have their meetings is not staying on the offensive.”

4) Shift understanding of the role of mass media. “We free up our creative energy when we simply acknowledge that these biases exist, rather than go into righteous indignation every time we read or see a new piece that puts us in an unfavorable light.”

5) Heighten the contrast between protestors and police behavior. Lakey notes: “Our power lies in our choices. We can choose to design our confrontations using appropriate symbology so that the part of the public we most want to influence will see us as the people standing for justice.”

6) Take a powerful attitude toward the prospect of state repression. Use it rather than waiting for it to use you. Don’t let police and the powers that be introduce “the fear game” into your actions and groups. Closing a group to avoid infiltration often worse for a movement than maintaining the high ground and staying open to new people and ideas.

7) Fully and explicitly commit to strategic nonviolent action. It is useful for groups to clearly outline a position on violence, especially when working in a coalition in which arrests for some may involve a parole violation serving as a route back to jail.

In wrapping up this long review, its worth addressing the debate about violence which took place after Seattle. Simply put: there is violence and there is violence. Countless essays within *The Battle of Seattle* tackle the question of “tactical diversity,” a euphemism for respect for a diverse range of tactics – from permitted marches to old style civil disobedience to the use of property destruction. As the ACME Collective noted shortly after Seattle, there is property damage against companies, and then there is violence against human beings, and they are two very different things. It is difficult to describe property damage against a Starbucks or other company that damages the physical or mental environment as violence. Part of what brought all the attention to Seattle in 1999 was the fact that the left had deployed a righteous muscle and broken a few windows, shedding its image as a neutered political consciousness. And the media feasted. Its important to recall that Nightline planned to run a 20 minute segment on the then prophetic critique of “crony capitalism” at the heart of protests during the World Economic Forum protests in NYC in January 2002. Yet, when activists acted “responsibly” and there were no headlines about “property destruction” during the peaceful 20,000-person-strong rally, the segment was

canceled. In a PT Barnum world, sometimes a little spectacle is necessary for a political idea to garner attention. Notions of respect for a diverse range of approaches to social change make the global justice movement a pulsing force. The vast majority of the essays in *The Battle of Seattle* highlight this possibility within an effective framework for future successes. They are ideas movement activists can use to create both more successful actions and sustain joyful communities of resistance and liberation.

-Benjamin Shepard

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