

Globalizing Liberation

Luis Hernández Navarro

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Seattle, Bangkok, Davos, Washington, D.C.: The list of protests against globalization as a project of the major transnational companies and the multilateral institutions that do their bidding continues to grow. The same can be said of the resistance to the neoliberal policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank on Third World countries: the Zapatista uprising, the student protests at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and the movements against privatization in Mexico, Uruguay, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Cochabamba in Bolivia, and Porto Seguro in Brazil. Each new protest contributes to the construction of a global network of solidarity and resistance that transcends ideologies.

Independently of the national differences among these struggles, the similarities—beyond their shared rejection of neoliberalism and the Bretton Woods institutions—are surprising. They are mobilizations from below, distant from the traditional political classes and often unrelated to political parties. They lack recognizable leaderships, they are organized by like-minded groups that coordinate their activities and the key roles are played by new social actors, though "old" actors like trade unions have participated in some of them. They are opposed to exclusion and marginalization. They demand a general broadening of citizenship. They have made the demand for the respect of human rights—including, in particular, economic, social and cultural rights—and for a new ethics central to their discourse, while they engage in nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience.

These struggles represent a new cycle of worldwide protest whose call to action is the rejection of the model of globalization that attempts to make free-market ideology the defining element of all social relations. They are not acts of resistance based on protectionism or nationalism; though both attitudes are present in the mobilizations, they do not define them. Nor are they a modern revival of the struggles for national liberation or the counterculture movements of the 1960s, though there are elements of each in these new struggles.

What all these uprisings have in common is that those who have been "globalized" in the North and in the South are participating in them, be they environmentalists or workers, students or indigenous, landless peasants or family farmers. They are demanding a redimensioning of public space against the growing privatization of social life and of life itself, as expressed in the chants of the protesters in Washington: "Whose streets? Our streets!" They reject a process of globalization that negatively affects the well-being of millions of people, and that is being directed by multilateral institutions that are fundamentally antidemocratic in their operations, that are not accountable to anyone, and that favor the interests of a few transnational corporations.

The radicalism and expansion of the protests are manifestations of the extreme situations in global society, not the isolated causes of fanatical minorities. Frustration grows and expands even within the nation most favored by globalization. An opinion poll carried out on March 28 by the University of Maryland found that the vast majority of U.S. citizens favor global economic integration, but they also want protection for the environment, for workers and for the poor. A Business Week/Harris Poll carried out on April 12 found that only 10% of Americans favor free trade, while 51% favor fair trade and 37% consider themselves protectionists. In an extensive report, Le Monde affirms that Seattle and Washington are just the tip of the iceberg of a growing, worldwide opposition to corporate-directed globalization.

When in January 1994 the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) took up arms to oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement with Canada and the United States, many said that this uprising was a nostalgic cry against modernity. When, years later, they organized international encounters for humanity and against neoliberalism, it was said that they were trying to win international solidarity for their cause by linking up with marginal political groups. Six years later, it is evident that the Zapatista uprising was not a return to the past, but an anticipation of the future. Many of the actors who organized the most recent cycle of protests have noted that they were inspired by the Mexican rebels and have established solidarity networks with them.

The globalization of liberation is in an ascendant cycle. The time for change has arrived.

ABOUT

THE

AUTHOR

Luis Hernández Navarro is an editor and columnist at the Mexico City daily, La Jornada. His most recent article for NACLA Report, "The UNAM Stalemate: Mexico's Student Strike," appeared in the January/February 2000 issue. This article first appeared in La Jornada on April 25, 2000.

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