

Class, Race and the Battle of Seattle
An Open Letter to Michael Albert
by George Katsiaficas

Dear Michael,

I was disappointed by your Z magazine article, "On Trashing and Movement Building," because you jump on the anti-trashing bandwagon, already traveling downhill fast. I also felt you misrepresent the sixties movement.

I realize you were not in Seattle so you did not catch a whiff of the cult-like, self-righteous messianic pacifism of many people, including some members of Direct Action Network (DAN), the main organizational force of the thousands of people who shut down the WTO on the first day of action. While DAN is a multifarious organization, those members I met were highly agitated against anyone defending the attacks on corporate property—to say nothing of those who did it. Whipped up by the mass media into a frenzy, their and others' commitment to uphold the sanctity of property--no doubt a product of consumer culture and American property fetishism as much as it is inspired by Gandhi--seriously impaired the movement's ability to celebrate its victories in Seattle and to reconstitute our forces for the battles to come. Some pacifists publicly called for the police to arrest the violent anarchists, and I heard more than two reports of movement marshals or "peace police" attacking trashers.

When you maintain that "breaking windows [was] against the demonstration's norms" you cater to pacifists' "ownership" claims of the demonstration, an ownership claim that mirrors their concern with corporate ownership of storefronts. Many individuals and groups came to Seattle to demonstrate against the WTO. I interviewed over a dozen people who were present on Tuesday morning. (I did not arrive until Wednesday morning since I was in Korea.) On Sunday, DAN/Art and Revolution's street festival drew about a thousand people. Even the largest estimate of the DAN contingent (including everyone caught up in the areas focused upon by DAN) was a small fraction of the minimum estimate of demonstrators present (40,000). The nonviolent actions were intensively organized and extraordinary to be sure, but they were neither the majority of those present nor the only group to prepare elaborately for confronting the WTO. Some people prepared in advance to squat a vacant warehouse. Once they accomplished their first objective, they set up house and used the squat as a base from which to blockade the streets and attack corporate targets. You disagree with their radical tactics. In my view--and in the eyes of many others--the tactics of these "anarchists" are no less legitimate than any other group who came to protest the WTO--although that is NOT how nearly everyone on the "Left" has treated them. For you to assert that trashing had "no positive effects," that it should only occur when it will "meet widespread approval" (i.e. never or on the day of the Revolution), and that we should find "collective" agreement on tactics all denies a variety of tactics and the autonomy of minorities to act according to their own thinking and needs. Clearly you are attempting to tell others what is appropriate no matter what they believe.

Were you also opposed to the French farmer--in all the media in Seattle and previously in Paris--who drove his tractor through a McDonald's and destroyed it? Somehow that action is considered appropriate and beloved by the media and even by pacifists with whom I spoke. Was it because he used a tractor rather than rocks? Or because he is French?

Rather than focus on more significant news from Seattle, including the new types of gas used by both the police and National Guard, the multicultural alliance in the streets, and the splendid solidarity of demonstrators, your national publication arouses readers to the already inflamed and well-covered actions of property destruction. In your diatribe against trashers, you invoke your experiences in the 1960s. I remember your position well in 1969 and 1970. We belonged to the same organization at MIT (Rosa Luxemburg SDS) and at the time were quite close personally. During this heyday of what is called "the sixties," if there ever was a demonstration that called for popular radical street action, it was on April 15, 1970. Bobby Seale, Chairman of the Black Panther Party, was on trial for his life in New Haven, the FBI and police were murdering Panthers left and right, and it appeared the courts were going to join in. Some of us were asked by the Panthers to have a white riot to help save Bobby's life. For staying true to that course, the small group of us who worked for the riot were ostracized from the movement's offices and mimeo equipment, cut off from phones, contact lists and good vibes from activists who opposed our action because of its militance. You were one of those who initially were part of the action but dropped out and later ridiculed us for being so close to the Panthers. Your current position on trashing now is not much different than it was then.

Despite what you maintain, pacifists' self-righteousness is today's closest equivalent to the Weatherpeople, not the anarchist trashers--who are pussycats compared to the attacks on police by Weatherpeople. I have not heard one report of anyone throwing rocks at police or even fighting back when brutalized, nor in the two days I was present did I see anyone do so. We both remember the gut-checking and acerbic pronouncements of Weatherpeople, the continual drone about "white skin privilege" and being right all the time. DAN picks up from this same psychological source of self-aggrandizement, and they have the cultist dimension of the Weatherpeople as well.

You can be excused for not being aware of pacifists' self-righteousness and divisiveness since you were not in Seattle. But your parroting of the mainstream media's denunciation on the destruction of corporate targets is another story. The main news from Seattle--and it is truly new and noteworthy--is the alliance in the streets of labor and environmentalists, of turtle-impersonators and truck drivers, of Teamsters and anarchist street fighters. Nowhere in your editorials is there any mention of this fabulous development. The new movement is something much of the Left has wished for since day one, yet now that it is here, you ignore it. Why?

Why are these dynamics off your radar screen? In a phrase, because of your conscious political choice to downgrade the importance of class. For years you have prided yourself on "undoing" the influence of Marxism in the US, and class politics is an essential dimension of the legacy you seek to bury. Even your analysis of Weatherman neglects this all-important aspect of who they were: the children of the rich and the super-rich--the Mellon family comes to mind as the most vivid example (as do feminists Rockefeller and Firestone, not members of Weather but nonetheless movement heavies who

have led thousands down their chosen paths of activism). This class content of movement politics has yet to be adequately addressed, even though many of today's movement publications owe their existence to inherited family trust funds rather than to popular democratic organizations to which their editors are accountable (Think for a moment of Mother Jones, product of a South African diamond fortune. In These Times is financed by the sale of inherited real estate. AK Press is a charity of AK Media we all know, whether we know it or not. And that is just the beginning of the list.)

The parallel to Weatherman's self-righteous misdirection of the movement today is not the anarchist window breakers, most of whom come from working-class and middle-class homes and do not pretend to preach to anyone, but the trust fund wielding "leaders" of the movement who pontificate to the movement about what is proper street etiquette and political direction.

I know you do not like to think in terms of class, Michael, and that the reality I raise to consciousness is not one you will allow yourself or the readers of Z even to ponder for more than a blip of time. Why then do I bother to write? Because the overriding meaning of Seattle is the new class alliance that shut down the city and the WTO. For you and others to ignore this dynamic is impossible. To simply credit DAN and the pacifists and to trash the anarchists, as you do, all the while ignoring labor participation, is simply rubbish. It is not a position that can be maintained by any thinking person. By the way, Alexander Cockburn makes a good point that on Tuesday, the labor march did not hook up with the direct-actionists. On Wednesday, however, after a waterfront rally where labor leaders intoned against going into the "no-go" zone declared by the Seattle mayor (an ex-anti-war activist), thousands of us left the rally and were soon gassed and driven off back down the hill toward the waterfront. A magical moment ensued when we were running out of space to maneuver. A breakaway labor contingent had left the rally later than we did. Complete with banners and union jackets, they arrived quite by accident at the same intersection to which we had been pushed, and the two crowds merged and together faced off with Seattle's finest and their gas, mace and clubs.

The most significant division that emerged in our ranks in Seattle's streets occurred on Tuesday in front of Niketown. A group of ghetto dwellers arrived there in the midst of the street festivities, the liberating of public space from corporate colonization--called "violence" by some--to enjoy footwear normally reserved for wealthier clientele. They were stopped and then blockaded by a determined crew of pacifists who warned them about giving the action "a bad name." Apparently that was too much for these "violent" kids, at least three of whom (according to two different versions I was told) punched the pacifists before leaving. (Didn't Fred Hampton similarly deal with the Weatherpeople?) I can't remember how many people told me that these "kids" had no clue why they were against the WTO (Pardon me)!

A final note: the whole idea of comparing everything today to the 1960s is itself extremely problematic. To paraphrase Marx, the tradition of the past hangs like a dead weight on the brains of the living. For activists today the "1960s" has been so mythologized that many people are overwhelmed by its aura. Whatever they do, they are outshone by and always compared to the sixties. Let us remember Seattle as a fresh start, as a movement of workers, students and youth, whose militance in the streets and unity forged by brutal police attacks are far more significant than any

media's attempt to divide us. Rather than burying Seattle in the categories of the past, let us appreciate its new point of departure and forge ahead with the global class struggle!

All Power to the People!

Long live the militance of the young and the young at heart!

December 11, 1999