

In "No Logo" by Naomi Klein

CONCLUSION

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## **CONSUMERISM VERSUS CITIZENSHIP**

### The Fight for the Global Commons

The beers at my hotel bar in Rosario were blissfully cold, and the gang from the Workers' Assistance Center were all getting a little drunk. We were arguing, once again, about whether codes of conduct have any merit whatsoever. Zernan Toledo (who personally favors armed revolution – it's just a question of when) pounded the table. "These documents are written by the transnational corporations, so they will only serve the transnational corporations – haven't you read Marx?"

"It's different now," I countered. "With globalization, there need to be some common standards – and the governments certainly aren't setting them."

"Globalization is nothing new. We have always had globalization," said Arnel Salvador, another of the WAC organizers. His eyes were fixed not on me, but on something across the bar. Since the hotel where I stayed is the only one near the Cavite Export Processing Zone, it was, as usual, packed with visiting factory owners, contractors and buyers who were here to stay up all night singing karaoke and cutting deals for cheap clothes and electronics. I followed Arnel's eyes to a young man slouched in his chair, his feet up on the table across from him, his knees splayed apart as if he owned the world. Trendy and modern, he looked like a character from one of the many cell-phone commercials on Asian TV. "You can always tell the foreigners," Arnel said slowly, his usually warm voice icy. "No Filipino would sit like that."

The foreign investors who sing karaoke at the Mountain and Sea Hotel in Rosario are part of a long and bitter history of colonialists in the Philippines: first the Spaniards came and conquered, then the Americans arrived, setting up army bases and turning teenage prostitution into one of the country's largest industries. Now colonialism is dead, the U.S. military has receded and

the new imperialists are the Taiwanese and Korean contractors in the export processing zones, sexually harassing the eighteen-year-old Filipinas on the assembly lines. Several of the free-trade zones in the Philippines (though not Cavite) are actually built on land that only a few years back housed U.S. military bases, and all over the country workers are shuttled to and from the zones in U.S. army jeeps converted into mini-buses. To Arnel Salvador and Zernan Toledo, the much-vaunted joys of economic globalization amount to pretty much more of the same: the boss has just traded in his military uniform for an Italian suit and an Ericsson cell phone.

The day after our night of drinking, I sat with Nida Barcenas in the backyard of the Workers' Assistance Center and asked her what motivates her, night after night, to trudge out to the dorms at 11 p.m. to meet with garment workers when they finally get off work. My question took Nida by surprise. "Because I want to help the workers. I really want to help them," she said. Then the tough composure that helps her stand up to zone bosses and petty local bureaucrats disappeared and fat tears rolled down her smooth cheeks. All she managed to say was "It's like Arnel said — it's just been so long." What has been so long is not the fight for rights for her fellow factory workers, although she means that as well. What has been so long is the fight against feudal landlords, against military dictators and now against foreign factory owners. I turned the tape recorder off and we sat in silence until her colleague, Cecille Tuico, quietly brought us mugs of syrupy-sweet vanilla ice cream that turned to soup in the hot sun.

Because the Workers' Assistance Center's chief mission is to empower workers to stand up for their rights, WAC organizers don't much like the idea of Westerners swooping into the zone brandishing codes of conduct, with teams of well-meaning monitors trailing behind. "The more significant way to resolve those problems," says Nida Barcenas, "lies with the workers themselves, inside the factory." And codes of conduct, she says, have little hope of helping because the workers have no hand in drafting them. As for third-party independent monitoring, Zernan Toledo believes that no matter who performs it, it's just that: third party. All it will do is reinforce the idea that somebody else is looking after the workers' destiny, not the workers themselves. To some this flat-out rejection sounds stubborn and ungrateful, an

unfair dismissal of all the well-meaning work being conducted in board-rooms in Washington, London and Toronto. But the right to sit down and bargain – even when you don't get the perfect deal – is the fundamental right for which the international trade union movement has struggled from its inception; it has always been about self-determination. Zernan Toledo invokes an old and familiar aphorism to explain the distinction: "If you give a man a fish, he will eat for one day. But if you teach him how to fish he will eat forever." And so, every evening at the Workers' Assistance Center, Zernan, Arnel, Cecille and Nida give the workers their fishing lessons. A little black-board stands in the backyard with the chickens, and the organizers take turns leading seminars. Sometimes fifty workers show up, other times just one. Though this route will no doubt take longer than the ready-made codes and monitoring, the WAC organizers say they are willing to wait. As Nida says, it has already "been so long," they may as well get it right.

It's a message that applies not just in Cavite, but to all those concerned about corporate abuses around the world. When we start looking to corporations to draft our collective labor and human rights codes for us, we have already lost the most basic principle of citizenship: that people should govern themselves. As we have seen, Nike, Shell, Wal-Mart, Microsoft and McDonald's have become metaphors for a global economic system gone awry, largely because, unlike the back-door wheeling and dealing at NAFTA, GATT, APEC, WTO, MAI, the EU, the IMF, the G-8 and the OECD, the methods and objectives of these companies are plain to see: workers and foreign observers alike understand very well what they are up to. They have become the planet's best and biggest popular education tools, providing some much-needed clarity inside the global market's maze of acronyms and centralized, secretive dealings.

By attempting to enclose our shared culture in sanitized and controlled brand cocoons, these corporations have themselves created the surge of opposition described in this book. By thirstily absorbing social critiques and political movements as sources of brand "meaning," they have radicalized that opposition still further. By abandoning their traditional role as direct, secure employers to pursue their branding dreams, they have lost the loyalty that once protected them from citizen rage. And by pounding the

message of self-sufficiency into a generation of workers, they have inadvertently empowered their critics to express that rage without fear.

But the fact that the brands have led us into this maze does not mean we should look to them to lead us out. Nike and Shell are shiny new doorways opening onto the much more complicated and less glamorous world of international law. And though it won't be easy and it won't come quickly, we will find our way out as citizens, on our own. We may feel a little like Theseus, clutching his thread as he entered the Minotaur's labyrinth, but nothing else will do. Political solutions — accountable to people and enforceable by their elected representatives — deserve another shot before we throw in the towel and settle for corporate codes, independent monitors and the privatization of our collective rights as citizens.

It is a daunting task but it does have an upside. The claustrophobic sense of despair that has so often accompanied the colonization of public space and the loss of secure work begins to lift when one starts to think about the possibilities for a truly globally minded society, one that would include not just economics and capital, but global citizens, global rights and global responsibilities as well. It has taken many of us a while to find our footing in this new international arena, but thanks in large part to the crash course provided by the brands, we are closer than ever before.

The first step has been an astonishingly successful network of popular-education projects. In 1995, the International Forum on Globalization held its first Global Teach-In in New York, which brought together leading scientists, activists and researchers to examine the impacts of a single, unfettered world market on democracy, human rights, labor and the natural environment. There were seminars on NAFTA, APEC, the IMF, the World Bank, Structural Adjustment of the North and every other global body or trade agreement you never understood but were afraid to ask. The New York Conference attracted several hundred people, but at the second conference in Berkeley, California, two thousand people showed up (with zero pre-publicity and no media coverage — just some posters and E-mail lists). A conference a few months later in Toronto attracted even more people and there have been similar gatherings on university campuses around the world.

And world leaders can't have lunch together these days without somebody

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organizing a counter-summit – gatherings that bring together everyone from sweatshop workers trying to unionize the zones to teachers fighting the corporate takeover of education. At these events – in Geneva, Cologne and Birmingham – alternative models of globalization spill onto the streets during the day, and the Reclaim the Streets parties go on all night.

It is sometimes difficult to tell whether these trends are the start of something genuinely new or the last gasps of something very old. Are they, as the engineering professor and peace activist Ursula Franklin asked me, simply “wind blocks,” creating temporary shelter from the corporate storm, or are they the foundation stones of some as yet unimagined, free-standing edifice? When I started this book, I honestly didn’t know whether I was covering marginal atomized scenes of resistance or the birth of a potentially broad-based movement. But as time went on, what I clearly saw was a movement forming before my eyes.

Three years ago, when I attended the Berkeley teach-in on globalization, I was frustrated that the speakers were all over fifty and that the links with the college-age culture jammers and anticorporate campaigners had yet to be made. A year later, these generations of activists and theorists were already enmeshed on several fronts, lending urgency and depth of analysis to each other’s actions. During this same time, campaigns focusing on a single corporation in a single place – Shell in Nigeria, say, or Nike in Indonesia – had also found each other and were starting a process of intellectual cross-pollination, often at the click of a hotlink, thanks to the Net.

This emerging movement even has a major victory under its belt: getting the Multilateral Agreement on Investment taken off the agenda of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in April 1998. As the *Financial Times* noted with some bewilderment at the time, “The opponents’ decisive weapon is the Internet. Operating from around the world via web sites, they have condemned the proposed agreement as a secret conspiracy to ensure global domination by multinational companies, and mobilized an international movement of grassroots resistance.” The article went on to quote a World Trade Organization official who said, “The NGOs have tasted blood. They’ll be back for more.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed they will.

On June 18, 1999, these virtual connections were made real when a coalition of groups including Reclaim the Streets and People's Global Action held the second Global Street Party, this time to coincide with the G-8 meeting in Cologne, Germany. The event, billed as a "global carnival against capital," took aim squarely at corporate power. All around the world, parties and protests were held in financial districts, outside stock exchanges, superstores, banks and multinational headquarters. With simultaneous action in seventy different cities, the day was the coming-out party for this new global political player: it displayed all of the movement's promise and creativity – and showed more forcefully than ever before just how much anticorporate rage is brewing.

Though they were organized locally, a common theme ran through all the events. In Bangladesh, women garment workers held a protest against sweatshop conditions; in San Francisco, they protested those same conditions outside Gap stores. In Montevideo, Uruguay, activists turned the main square of the city's financial district into a "fair trade" show, with exhibits on every corporate abuse from child labor to the arms trade; in Madrid, the entrance to the stock exchange was blocked. And in Cologne, site of the G-8 summit, European activists held a counter-summit and demanded debt forgiveness for Third World countries. The event was joined by five hundred Indian farmers who were traveling across Western Europe in an "intercontinental caravan." Along the way, they stopped off at the corporate headquarters of agribusinesses such as Cargill and Monsanto whose seed patents and genetic engineering of crops have burdened many Indian farmers with massive debts.

On the same day that the Indian farmers were peacefully protesting in Cologne, London's financial district turned into a war zone – the city hasn't seen anything like it since the 1990 poll-tax riots. The 10,000-strong gathering started as a classic RTS surreal political party. The streets were cleared by a Critical Mass bike ride and were flooded by activists dressed in second-hand suits with slogans painted on the backs. They danced in the doorsteps of office towers, formed a human chain around the Treasury and held peaceful sit-ins at several banks. The bankers and investment brokers, meanwhile, came to work disguised in casual sports clothes, having been advised by police to "blend in" with the activists so as not to catch a flying pie. But as

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the day wore on, the crowd splintered into smaller groups and became gradually more violent. One group stormed the Futures Exchange, breaking all the glass in the lobby, disrupting automated stock trading and forcing an evacuation of the building. In other parts of London, a McDonald's outlet, a bank and a Mercedes Benz dealership were trashed, a protestor was run over by a police van and several police were injured. There was also mob violence in Eugene, Oregon: windows were broken at banks and fast-food restaurants, cars were stormed, protestors attacked cops with rocks and cops attacked protestors with pepper spray. In both cities, the political messages about widening economic disparities and the brutalities of free-market globalization were drowned out by the sound of shattering glass.

In Geneva, the message was clear as day: rather than throwing rocks through windows, activists arrived with sponges, soap and squeegees to wash the façades of the big downtown banks. The organizers explained to the press that they only wanted to help these fine institutions clean up the stains left behind by crippling Third World debt and Nazi gold. In Port Harcourt, Nigeria, the mood at the "Carnival of the Oppressed" was militant but celebratory. A crowd of 10,000 welcomed Ken Saro-Wiwa's brother back to his homeland after years in exile. After listening to a speech by Owens Wiwa, the crowd proceeded to the gates of the city's Shell Oil headquarters and blocked entry for several hours. The next stop was a street named after the late Nigerian dictator, General Sani Abacha, where members of the crowd lowered the street sign and temporarily renamed the road after one of the men whose lives he stole: Ken Saro-Wiwa. According to the organizers, "There was dancing and singing in the streets, bringing Port Harcourt, Nigeria's petroleum capital, to a standstill."

And all of this happened on a single day.

When this resistance began taking shape in the mid-nineties, it seemed to be a collection of protectionists getting together out of necessity to fight everything and anything global. But as connections have formed across national lines, a different agenda has taken hold, one that embraces globalization but seeks to wrest it from the grasp of the multinationals. Ethical shareholders, culture jammers, street reclaimers, McUnion organizers, human-rights hacktivists, school-logo fighters and Internet corporate watchdogs are

at the early stages of demanding a citizen-centered alternative to the international rule of the brands. That demand, still sometimes in some areas of the world whispered for fear of a jinx, is to build a resistance — both high-tech and grassroots, both focused and fragmented — that is as global, and as capable of coordinated action, as the multinational corporations it seeks to subvert.

