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Looking Backward, 2002–1969
Campus Activism in the Era of Globalization

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My allusion to Edward Bellamy’s book *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* may appear at worst merely confusing. After all, Bellamy was forecasting that, in the year 2000, the horrors of the capitalism of 1887 would be such a dim memory that it would take a time-traveler from that dreary past to remind the happy citizens of the millennium of all the freedom from pain they had come to take for granted. Clearly, the world of 2002 that I share with you, dear reader, hardly fits this bill. Indeed, for many people on the planet—the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, much of Latin America, and the former USSR, as well as those laboring in near-slave conditions in the prisons and workfare programs of the United States—the realities of capitalism are far harsher than they were three decades earlier: the millennium has brought little promise of a brave new world. But, in *Looking Backward*, Bellamy also posited—as did Jack London, far more dialectically and powerfully, in *The Iron Heel*—that the golden age of the future would emerge from the toil and moil of the present, or, as Marx was fond of putting it in his various birthing metaphors, from the womb of the old. That the year 2002 may be merely a way station on the winding road to a “better world”—or, to continue Marx’s metaphor, a moment in gestation when only quantitative, and no qualitative, changes are in the immediate prospect—does not mean that, dialectically understood, it cannot afford a glimpse of where we may be going.

But if historical necessity and literary allusion dictate the millennium as my approximate end point, why choose 1969 for my starting point? In part, this option is conditioned by my own life cycle. I entered left-wing campus politics in that year, my...
last as an undergraduate, and have remained a leftist and an activist ever since—"an unconstructed '60s radical," as I sometimes bill myself. But I was fortunate in the year of my coming-of-age, for 1969 was the year when, in the United States at least, the politics of worker–student alliance enjoyed their exciting—if, alas, too brief—flourish. Spurred by the events of May 1968 in France, as well as by the example of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (a movement that, however flawed, was then and is now far too readily dismissed as the reign of repression and chaos), significant numbers of students in this country—largely under the aegis of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society)—took a definitive turn toward a class-based revolutionary politics.

Although the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was united, passionately, in its opposition to the Vietnam War and its support for black liberation struggles, its participants also disagreed—equally passionately—about the politics of partisanship. Should the U.S. student left support the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism without reservation, even though its ties with the USSR—which many of us viewed as social imperialist—were entailing the abandonment of people's war? Were struggles for African-American (then called Afro-American) studies programs—which we who were white supported and, when we were bold enough, joined—by their very nature antiracist, or would these programs, once instituted, become part of the ideological window dressing of the capitalist (and therefore necessarily racist) university? Marxism was very much in the air: the immediate demands of the movement were continually—I should say, relentlessly—viewed in the context of their effectiveness in preparing the way for revolutionary change. As long as the Vietnam War continued along its bloody course halfway around the globe, anti-imperialism was central to the theater of the war at home. During those heady days, we demonstrated against campus counterinsurgency institutes, CIA and Dow Chemical recruiters, and ROTC, declaring that it was not a perversion but a fulfillment of the capitalist university's political mission that it housed such sites and hosted such activities on behalf of the ruling class.

But, being Marxists, we student radicals also wanted the student movement to involve itself more closely with the U.S. working class. Not yet privy to the post-Marxist wisdom of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, we held that workers were, by virtue of their exploited position in the social relations of production of capitalism, objectively in need of the abolition of classes, and objectively situated to lead in that process. Moreover, we thought that African-American workers in particular, by virtue of their often superexploited and superoppressed situation, would give vital leadership to the movement that would emancipate the majority from the rule of the elite. Thus, when SDS initiated a campaign called the Campus Worker–Student Alliance (CWSA) in 1969—a campaign that brought radical students who were ordinarily white into solidarity with campus workers who were ordinarily African-American or Latino/a—it did so largely from within a paradigm that viewed racism as central to capitalist exploitation and political hegemony. Indeed, one picked up an expanded lexicon: the term racis—which I had hitherto used only to refer to bigoted ideas and attitudes—
was used to designate phenomena of both base and superstructure, economics and ideology.

And thus, when I was suspended from graduate school at the University of Chicago in the fall semester of 1969 for my participation in a demonstration that shut down the campus cafeteria in support of various campus worker contract demands, I was operating out of an understanding that students like myself should ally with campus workers because we needed to build a movement in which we shared a common interest. Racism served not just to superexploit workers of color but to disunite and demoralize the entire working class—in which, unless we were headed into the ranks of the rulers, we too figured as members. We were all about totality, linking the wretched conditions facing African-American and Latino/a campus workers with the war in Vietnam, which was, we insisted—in contradistinction to the liberals, who dubbed the war a “tragic mistake”—being waged to secure cheap labor and valuable resources for U.S. imperialism and keep its Soviet competitors at bay. We were building a mass movement against racism and imperialist war that would open up the way for revolution; anticapitalism was the bottom line to our theory and shaped all of our practice.

My recounting of these words and actions, while inevitably putting us in a bit of an echo chamber, is not entirely an exercise in nostalgia. Perhaps, dear reader, you are discerning the method in my madness, the figure in my carpet, in juxtaposing 2002 with 1969. For the remarkable revival of campus activism in the two preceding academic years (2001–1999) indeed suggests certain parallels with the concerns that preoccupied my own salad days. Tens of thousands of students participated in the massive demonstrations against the WTO and the IMF/World Bank in Seattle and Washington, D.C. In the week in early May 2000 during which I first drafted this essay, there were administration building takeovers at Ohio State and Harvard around demands for improved wages and working conditions for campus workers; Liza Featherstone, in the then-current Nation (May 15, 2000), announced the end to the era of a campus activism based on identity politics and heralded one based upon “anticorporatism.” Since that time, the student movement against “global” capitalism has increasingly noted the depredations of capital within U.S. borders and organized against the connections between the campuses and the superexploitation going on in U.S. sweatshops and, especially, prisons.

There is no doubt that the past decade—beginning with the strikes of clerical workers and then of teaching assistants at Yale in the early 1990s—witnessed a dramatically increased awareness of the varied labor processes that go into the production of learning on U.S. campuses. The outright abuse of adjuncts and lecturers paid far less than subsistence wages—and usually given no benefits—to teach at times more than half the courses offered on a given campus; the hypocrisy of designating as “apprentices” the many teaching assistants who devise syllabi, meet with students, and grade countless papers without the expectation, let alone the assurance, that this labor will lead to anything resembling secure or rewarding employment; the undermining of
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the living standards of tenured faculty by the presence of this academic proletariat
and by distance learning, as well as the direct attacks on tenure itself such as have oc-
curred at Bennington College; the use of outsourced prison and sweatshop labor to pro-
duce the clothing, furniture, and computers sold or utilized on campuses; the poverty-
level wages paid to the millions of cafeteria, secretarial, and janitorial workers who
make it possible for higher education to occur at all; these and other previously invisi-
ble features of what can be broadly be termed “academic labor” have become the focus
of much debate and activity, from the Delegate Assembly of the Modern Language
Association (MLA) to the occupied premises of many an administration building.

There have been, moreover, significant victories in attempts to unionize graduate
students and adjuncts and to win higher wages for both pink- and blue-collar campus
employees. And not a few campus administrations have agreed to abide by labor regu-
lations governing the production of textiles used in clothing and other objects bearing
college logos. The role of sympathetic students has been important—and in some cases
central—to winning these demands. The widespread recognition that global move-
ments of capital have something to do with the sweatshop conditions under which
such items are produced, moreover, has given these activities an internationalist and
antiracist character. A new student movement, at least potentially class-conscious,
would appear to be in the making. It is thus possible to drag out and dust off that
time-honored term “campus struggle” with the confidence that it has a present-day
relevance for significant numbers of students already in motion.

In looking backward from 2002 to 1969, then, am I celebrating the victory, how-
ever delayed, of the CWSA—and perhaps, in the process, vindicating the commit-
ments of my own departed youth? Or am I still insisting on some ironic divide be-
tween the two moments in time? It is tempting to make a dialectical move here and
assert that I am doing both: the reborn campus interest in the economics of the
human condition is surely engendered by the very historical forces that have produced
the millennial misery endured by so many. But the history of politics in the past cen-
tury should remind us that dialectics can be invoked to mystify as well as to clarify;
moreover, it is easy to enlist dialectics in the service of wish fulfillment, such that all
acts of negation are seen as shaped by some grand, and ultimately progressive, design,
when in fact what we may be witnessing is a negativity that is negative in the more
common usage of the word. Although there is much cause for optimism in the energy
and commitment of the emerging campus movements opposed to what is broadly
called “exploitation,” there is also cause for skepticism and critique.

By contrast with the worker–student alliance campus movement of the late 1960s and
early 1970s, which sought to link students with workers as anticapitalist subjects of
history, the current “economic” activism would seem—at least at present—to proceed
within the limits of; and seldom to call into question, the wage system itself. The de-
mand for a “living wage” for all workers—which guides not just current pro-campus
worker activism but a whole slew of contemporary “economic justice” campaigns—is
premised on the legitimacy of the exchange of wages for labor power. What is at issue is simply that certain groups of workers are not getting a "fair" wage. Moreover, the term exploitation has routinely come to mean what Marxists mean by superexploitation—namely, the production of profit under especially degraded conditions and at especially low wages. The premise is that if workers are paid "well," they are no longer "exploited"—a proposition that, even as it renders workers visible as subjects, renders invisible the expropriation of surplus value, which is what makes them workers in the first place.

I am not scoffing at the fact that most workers—certainly most campus workers—need more money to put more and better food on the table; under capitalism, money is the name of the game. Nor am I saying that all the students involved in campaigns for "economic justice" are hopelessly blindfolded by capitalist obfuscation. But economics is in fact far too mild a term to describe the new wave of "living wage" campaigns, many of which—while subjectively embraced by their participants for all sorts of praiseworthy reasons—nonetheless take as the limit of what is not just possible but desirable the acceptance of the labor contract. (The IWW, we should recall, would never sign a contract with any employer, because it never wanted to validate the exchange of wages for labor power, an exchange that it viewed as inherently unequal and coercive.) To declare that one "wants "justice for janitors" implies that there can be justice for janitors. Furthermore, it means that one accepts the order of a social system that forces some people to be janitors while allowing others to engage mind and body in less arduous and more fulfilling work—and then legitimizes the existence of this system by declaring that such a division of labor simply reflects meritocratic reality. Absent an analytic framework that defines class as a social relation of production, the new "economic" activism does not, pace the Nation, transcend the limitations of identity politics. Indeed, class becomes simply one more identity, and "classism" (a terrible term!) becomes the counterpart of sexism, racism, homophobia, ageism, and the other identity-based categories of oppression that form the pluralistic purview of a dispersed and coalitional—and, to the bourgeoisie, unthreatening—political praxis.

Moreover, the campaigns for better wages and working conditions for campus workers, as well as related "no sweat" and antiprison labor initiatives, often run the risk of paternalism that is, of necessity, a racist paternalism. The problem is not simply that designating a "living wage" to be, say, thirteen dollars an hour (as the students at Harvard are currently doing) entails the judgment that, for certain people, that is, janitors, this is in fact "enough" to live on—even though such a wage clearly provides, especially for a family, only the most minimal subsistence, and the great majority of Harvard students themselves would hardly consider this kind of money the kind of "living wage" that they themselves would be willing to accept upon entry into the job market. That Matt Damon and Ben Affleck of Good Will Hunting fame have graced the Harvard movement with their "townie" authenticity has hardly altered the class character or political thrust of the campaign.

What follows from this "living wage" paradigm is that the reason why primarily white and (usually) economically better-off students should engage in campaigns on behalf of their black and brown classmates is simply that, in the absence of fundamental economic transformation, any "living wage" is better than none. But if we are going to be serious about the goals of the slogan "Justice for Janitors," the slogan should serve as a challenge to the very notion of the "living wage" as a more civilized version of the "sweat shop."
behalo of largely minority campus workers is not that the students and the workers actually have a common interest in ending capitalism, as we in the CWSA used to say, but that the students wish to do the moral thing. There is, of course, almost by definition, nothing wrong with wanting to do the moral thing. But local acts of morality, such as occur when primarily white (and sometimes middle-class) students fight for justice for black or Latino/a (and always working-class) janitors, are only fully "moral" if they are part of a larger moral commitment to doing away with the system that generates racism, exploitation, and alienation—for all but the elite few—in the first place. Otherwise, much of the students' activity will inevitably framed within the highly problematic doctrine of "white skin privilege," which can produce little more than a politics of guilt—capable of inspiring even heroic acts under some circumstances, to be sure, but hardly the basis for a political commitment lasting over the long haul. It is, in fact, an incorrect theory, and therefore bound to produce a flawed practice; for the notion of "white skin privilege" (which, I find to my dismay, enjoys to this day widespread currency among not just liberals but most self-proclaimed leftists) teaches that the differential treatment that capitalism accords most whites vis-à-vis most people of color constitutes an objective benefit or privilege, what W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently—but, I think, erroneously—called the "psychological wages of whiteness." (The logic of this argument is that anyone living in a part of the world not at the absolute bottom of the imperialist hierarchy enjoys "privilege" vis-à-vis those who are lower still. Does a Latina textile worker living in Los Angeles, earning seven dollars an hour and able to buy for ten dollars a pair of (on sale) sandals that are made in El Salvador, actually benefit from this state of affairs?) Even though the history of U.S. racism clearly reveals its deleterious effects on all segments of the workforce, as well as the extreme lengths to which the rulers have been willing to go in order to cement division, there proves to have been remarkable staying power to the notion that having the knife of exploitation stuck three inches into one's (white) back rather than six inches into another's (black/brown/yellow/red) back constitutes a positive advantage to the recipient of the lesser wound. In the absence of a class analysis of racism as structurally and ideologically embedded in capitalist social relations, however, campus campaigns that call for "economic justice" for workers of color cannot provide other than missionary grounds for the involvement of substantial numbers of students.

I offer the charge of racist paternalism here with some hesitation and humility, for I cannot in all honesty claim that when I—the white daughter of a professor and a high-school teacher—helped in 1969 to shut down the campus cafeteria in support of African-American cafeteria workers, I was entirely free of a politics of guilt. I was new to the movement, and my understandings and feelings were tangled indeed. But I was at least beginning to be guided by a totalizing Marxist politics that posited that my unity with blue-collar workers—most of them African Americans—was more than coalitional, and that in aligning myself with them I was also fighting against my own entrapment within an alienating and exploitative system. That I have spent the last three decades attempting to be a Marxist in both theory and practice—in campaigns
ranging from antiapartheid activism to welfare-rights protests to Radical Caucus activity within the Modern Language Association—is in no small part attributable to the paradigms that shaped my consciousness as a student “back in the day” (as my daughter now puts it). My commitment to fighting racism and sexism is inseparable from my commitment to hastening the demise of capitalism. I fully recognize that I was—and am—neither more virtuous nor more sophisticated than the students from backgrounds comparable to mine who came to campus activism in the year 2001; I was—and am—just luckier in my choice of a historical moment in which to come to maturity.

Accompanying the missionary aura surrounding some of the recent campus activism has been a profoundly mistaken view of institutions of higher education. The indignation that fuels current “campus struggles” around economic issues is a good thing, but it routinely spills over into the proposition that the main thing that is wrong with these institutions is that they are callous employers. This hard-heartedness is often attributed to the increased direct domination of institutions of higher education by privately owned businesses, which, it is charged, produce a “corporate” model for employer–employee relations, as well as a “consumer” model for teacher–student relations. There is, of course, an element of truth to this characterization. But, even with the current trend toward privatization and corporatization, which allows some colleges and universities to turn a profit in a few of their capital-intensive branches, sites of higher education do not exist primarily for the purpose of extracting surplus value from their employees or saving money on wages and salaries so as to spend it on less human—and humane—priorities; for campuses are, as they have always been, principally ideology factories, whose raison d’être is the reproduction of existing structures of capitalist inequality. As a number of commentators on higher education have shown, different types of campuses have historically performed different functions. Junior and community colleges supply workers with a narrow skill range for dead-end, low-wage employment. The less prestigious four-year colleges and state universities supply mid-level managers, technicians, and teachers. The fancy four-year colleges and elite universities, private and public, have supplied the moneymaking managers, the highly trained specialists, and the professional ideologues. In times of war and social crisis, institutions of higher education exhibit their class nature fairly openly, bringing in the police to protect CIA and Dow Chemical recruiters. But at all times their principal function is to serve the capitalist system by developing ever-new means to generate profit and rationalize inequality. That colleges and universities also treat those who work for them with abuse and condescension is consistent with, but incidental to, their primary—one might say, “higher”—social purpose.

Those of us who teach in higher education must do all that we can to support our students as they call upon administrators to cease and desist treating their employees like dirt. At the 1999 MLA Convention, the Radical Caucus secured the passage through the Delegate Assembly, and subsequent mail-ballot ratification by the associa-
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tion's membership, of a resolution supporting student "no-sweat" and antiprison labor campaigns; this initiative should be used boldly and creatively on our local campuses. At the 2000 convention, the Radical Caucus and the Graduate Student Caucus got passed through the Delegate Assembly a series of measures that, if fully implemented, will put the MLA firmly behind unionization efforts of teaching staff at all levels. But we need to be aware that the current "anticorporate" campus activism—important as it is to efforts to raise the abysmal living standards of many campus employees, academic and nonacademic—routinely skirts any systematic analysis of higher education. Indeed, what is more frequently proposed is that, in mistreating and grotesquely underpaying their employees, "corporatized" colleges and universities betray their true mission, which is to impart critical thinking and provide the social mobility necessary to a functioning democracy. (That the notion of social mobility for the few implies the prior necessity of class stratification for the many is one of the great unspoken, so firm is the hold of meritocratic ideology on the millenial imagination.) Although it does not entirely lack a referent, the term corporatization carries the unfortunate (and wholly erroneous) implication that there once existed a golden age before institutions of higher education served the interests of capital—and, moreover, that colleges and universities could free themselves from serving those interests in the future. The term serves to delimit and formalize the antagonist, precluding class analysis and suggesting that if only some class-descending "we" could get away from a profit-driven model for running a college or university, everything would be peaches and cream. Although pro-worker student protesters no doubt test the patience of their deans and provosts, to a remarkable extent, college and university administrators are, at least for now, expressing sympathy with—even admiration for—the goals of the demonstrators. When the provost at Rutgers–Newark (where I teach) was confronted in April 2002 by angry students and janitors protesting the maintenance workers’ low wages ($7.30 an hour) and lack of benefits, he sheepishly replied—even as he rejected their pleas—that they were doing "the ethical thing."

Even when university administrations agree only to abide by the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), a supposedly industry-monitored group, and are met with loud demands that they follow the more stringent guidelines called for by the more independent Fair Labor Association (FLA), they evince little fundamental hostility or embarrassment. Small wonder: for while they are being criticized in their status as the holders of tight purse strings, these deans and provosts are not being held up as class enemies, presiding over institutions dedicated to the preservation of social inequality. Indeed, by expressing their approval of the moral stance taken by the student protesters, these administrators can prove their identification with the imagined community that is "the university."

Again, my contrasting experience with the CWSA, back in 1969, may be instructive. When I and ten other members of SDS were charged with "disrupting the normal operations of the university"—for which we all ended up being suspended for two quarters—we turned our collective disciplinary hearing into an occasion for
launching countercharges about what those “normal operations” actually were. We featured first the university’s racist superexploitation of its blue-collar workers, this being the immediate issue at hand. But we took the opportunity to put the university on trial—for taking funds from the Shah of Iran to build a Center for Middle Eastern Studies, sure to be a bastion of CIA-sanctioned reaction; for using its Center for Industrial Relations to buy off or otherwise neutralize militant unionists during the concurrent strike wave; and for conducting, through its Adlai Stevenson Institute, counter-insurgency campaigns against the masses rising up angry, from Ethiopia to Chicago’s South Side. (In those pre-theory—and certainly pre-Marxist theory—days, I was unable to make any connection between the English department’s neo-Aristotelian formalism and the ideological imperatives of the capitalist class. That wisdom would only come later.)

Whatever our errors, whatever our inflated belief in the power of words, our Marxism continually led us in the direction of totalizing analysis. It would have been unthinkable to divorce the university’s callous treatment of its cafeteria workers from its larger function in securing the hegemony of the U.S. ruling class; all of the campus’s practices were linked and manifested its class character. Although we were committed to creating a world in which skills of analysis and advanced bodies of knowledge would be made available to the masses, we were not attempting to sanitize the capitalist university, but to build a revolutionary movement that would, among other things, eventually dismantle higher education as the gatekeeping and elite-serving institution that, under capitalism, it must be.

Because I continually revert to the category of totality, some comments on “globalization,” then and now, are, finally, in order; for surely “globalization” is the relevant actually existing totality with which an epistemology purportedly based in a dialectics of totality must contend. As my use of quotation marks suggests, I consider “globalization”—like “corporatization”—to be a highly ideological term, one that masks as much as it describes. Elsewhere in this volume, people more learned and sophisticated than I about matters of economics have contributed commentaries on this very question. What I wish to stress in my critique are three points—none of them original with me, but of particular relevance to my argument.

First, it has become a commonplace among participants in campus antisweatshop and “living wage” campaigns—as well as in the discourse accompanying the anti-WTO and IMF/World Bank demonstrations in Seattle and Washington—to propose that “globalization” is at the heart of the attack on the world’s workers. In a purely descriptive sense, this statement is obviously true. But this assertion is frequently accompanied by an implied analysis of multinational capitalism as some kind of Great Blob, “flexibly” oozing wherever the highest return on investment offers itself, but no longer based in nation-states to any meaningful degree. Like Foucault’s “power,” it has no center, no home—it is always already everywhere. Indeed, it is argued, nation-states are increasingly powerless in relation to multinational corporations, which yoke together the fates of both investors and workers in networks of heretofore unimagined
interdependency. The bosses of the world, it is argued, are united as never before against the workers of the world in a transnational bloc that makes Rosa Luxemburg's "superimperialism" look timid by comparison.

There is no question that something new is taking place in capitalism as a world system. But it is at our peril that we ignore one of the defining characteristics of capitalism, one that Marx expounded upon at great length—namely, that its very existence is premised on (not just accompanied by, but premised on) both uneven development and competition. The collapse of the Soviet empire (for its domain was, for its final three or four decades, indeed, an empire) effaced the old bipolar model and initiated a new world disorder in which multiple ruling elites, old and new, have been scrambling for positions of leverage and hegemony. The late 1990s bout of "Asian flu," rather than spreading the infection to U.S. capitalism, temporarily gave Wall Street a new lease on life, as investors the world over poured their capital into what appeared the only stable place for it to inhabit.

Moreover, as economists from William Greider to Doug Henwood have continually pointed out, the global economy is not all financial smoke and mirrors: the production of things—commodities—still drives the production of credit, albeit several mediations removed. And, despite its unquestioned military dominance, the United States faces, as do its principal industrial competitors, a worldwide crisis in overproduction that is doing nothing to counter the declining rate of profit over the long term. Although most U.S. capitalists are eager to do business with China, the Pentagon is keeping a close eye on China's nuclear arsenal. Even the fact that Daimler and Chrysler have joined forces does not mean that a revived united Germany—especially as the bully dominating the rest of the European Union—might not move into open economic conflict with the United States: Daimler-Chrysler would, presumably, have to choose which parent to live with as the divorce battle begins. In the world of international finance, one month's trading partner is the next month's enemy in a trade war; and trade war always has the potential—indeed, over the long run of the crisis-prone capitalist business cycle, the likelihood—to break out into armed conflict.

The model of interimperialist rivalry that Lenin held up in 1916 remains, in my view, largely applicable today. Those of us who demonstrated against the Vietnam War as an imperialist war can and should still view nation-based competition between and among capitals as the driving force in international affairs. Moreover, the struggle for control over global oil supplies—which has fueled conflicts from the war in Kosovo through the invasion of Afghanistan and the attempted coup in Venezuela in April 2002 to the impending U.S. war against Iraq—continues to remind us how necessary aircraft carriers are to the movement, or halting, of oil tankers. It is only by forgetting dialectics and mistaking appearance for essence that we can conclude that the apparently cozy relations among smiling heads of state signal an abandonment of the old rule of tooth and claw. Different forces deploy different terms to describe the current state of affairs. Peter Jennings speaks lovingly of the "international community" that presumably will come to the rescue of embattled humanity. By contrast,
demonstrators in Seattle, Washington, Quebec, and Genoa excoriate the WTO, the IMF, and the World Bank as octopuses strangling the workers of the world. Although these formulations bespeak different allegiances, they are in some ways the flip side of each other, insofar as both posit transnational capital as primarily unified, and only secondarily fissured. The real lesson of Seattle, I would suggest—and here I am backed up by no less an authority than Laura D'Andrea Tyson, Dean of the University of California at Berkeley's Haas School of Business—was that “the proponents [of globalization] were unable to reach a compromise on a negotiating agenda” (Business Week, February 7, 2000)—a fact that had very little to do with the the angry demonstrations occurring in the streets surrounding the conference hotels.

The prospect of global war—not immediate, but not so far off as we might wish to think—is, in my view, ultimately the logic of “globalization.” To avoid looking this possibility—indeed, probability—in the face is to repeat the error of Karl Kautsky and the rest of the leadership of the Second International, who failed to see the sharpening rivalries preceding the Great War—a misestimate that had tragic consequences for the millions of workers led to the slaughter by their Socialist misleaders. To deny the potentiality of major interimperialist war is also, however, to underestimate the extent to which, in such a context, capitalism emerges as the monster that it is, causing it to lose credibility in the minds of the many millions willing to tolerate its alienation and exploitation in those times of muted—or at least undirected—class warfare that go by the name of “peace.” To fail to see the fissures and fault lines that mark capitalism as a world system is at once to be in denial of the horrific prospect of global warfare among major powers and to be blind to the revolutionary potentiality that this prospect could unleash. In a paradox more apparent than real, it is the neo-Kautskyites of our day who have produced an overly totalized view of the totality that is “globalization”; to understand this complex social formation from the standpoint of Marxist dialectics is to grasp its moments of instability, even vulnerability.

Related to the fetishization of global capital as an entity above and beyond national—indeed, human—agency is (this is my second point) the widespread currency, in the anti-WTO/IMF/World Bank movement, of the notion of “fair trade.” This term emerges primarily from the discourse of organized labor, which, under the leadership of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, purports to be about the business of protecting U.S. workers from the rapacious competition with labor overseas that is “free trade.” The racist and nativist undercurrents always present in the rhetoric of protectionism came out fairly clearly in Seattle when United Steel Workers of America (USWA) President George Becker presided over the dumping of a quantity of Japanese-made steel into the bay, carrying the supremely unproletarian internationalist message that Japanese and U.S. steelworkers are mortal enemies.

However ironically directed against the no-longer-socialist-let-alone-communist Chinese government, moreover, the anticommunism both explicit and implicit in organized labor’s attacks on China’s use of prison labor also functions to bait any Reds who might surface in the U.S. labor movement. (That the United States, at close to
two million, has in absolute and relative terms a substantially larger prison population than any other country, and that these prison laborers produce everything from computers to blue jeans to aircraft parts, is, needless to say, sloughed over by these tribunes of the proletariat. Boeing, in fact, outsources to the Washington State prison system without any protest from the Boeing workers’ union. 1) The AFL-CIO’s history in breaking the back of left-led labor movements from Iran to Guatemala—which deservedly earned it the name “AFL-CIA”—is only with peril forgotten by progressives seeking an alliance with labor. Moreover, the fact that multibillionaire textual tycoon Roger Milliken supports the presumably antiglobalization organization Public Citizen and entered into a public tactical alliance with consumer advocate and 2000 Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader should do little to enhance the confidence of progressives in any of the parties involved in the much-touted coalition of anti-WTO forces.

Above all, however, the very notion of “fair trade” is, from the standpoint of a Marxist analysis of labor, spurious; for the principal commodity being “traded” in the phenomenon of “globalization” is not so much the products of the labor process as the commodity labor power itself. As Marx demonstrated in the Rosetta stone that is Capital, labor power is the hieroglyph that, once decoded, offers the key to an understanding of how capital manages to expand itself through the hiring of workers for wages. Although “fair trade” would seem to be about the regulation of the tariffs accompanying the exchange of the products generated by labor in different parts of the globe, what it is really about is establishing the rules of the game that will make it easier for capitalists from more parts of the world to buy the labor power of workers living elsewhere in the world. From the standpoint of the proletariat, there is no such thing as “fair trade”; there is only a greater or lesser degree of exploitation.

A third and related issue has to do with the theorization of the nation-state that frequently accompanies the discourse of “globalization”—namely, the proposition that the nation-state, as a site of possible struggle, must now be defended from and by the left. Jürgen Habermas, not heard from much for a couple of decades, is being brought back into currency with his notion of the “public sphere” as a zone for contestation, where the best ideas will, presumably, win if the debate is conducted in a fair and democratic way. Those who invoke the state as the principal provider of this renewed public sphere often wish to safeguard for the working class as much as possible of the “social wage” that is paid through taxes into such needed realms of the common good as education, health care, transportation infrastructure, and a host of other requirements of “civil society.” But to dub the site of the struggle for these things the “public sphere,” and to view the government as a possible ally of the working class in the battle against predatory corporations, is to abandon Marx’s (and Lenin’s) theorization of the state—whether constituted through “democratic election” or not—as the executive committee of the capitalist class; for it is government policy that has implemented the various “free-trade” agreements that have diminished the quality of workers’ lives in most parts of the world.
Moreover, it is government policy that has relegated millions of inhabitants of the United States to the near-slave sector of the economy, wherein they can be fully competitive with the cheapest labor in the most exploited parts of the world. The politicians in our own nation-state, we must know, are responsible for creating the laws that produce the conditions that motivate Kwalu, a South-African-based manufacturer of chairs for McDonald’s, to move its capital investments from the townships of Johannesburg to Ridgeland Prison in South Carolina, where a larger return on its investment could be earned. And although the authoritarian and profoundly reactionary nature of the regime of Bush II becomes more evident every day, it is with the blessing of the Democratic president Bill Clinton, we must remember, that a hundred thousand more police were put on the streets of the nation’s cities—where, under the guise of “community policing,” they instituted a pattern of augmented repression in minority and immigrant working-class neighborhoods that deserves to be characterized as “fascist.” That this control through open police terror will be increased with the explosion for life of millions from welfare, the returned high rates of unemployment, and, above all, the implementation of the U.S.A. Patriot Act in relation to U.S. citizens as well as noncitizens is, I fear, only too predictable. In this context, the “public sphere” wherein the legitimacy of “prison reform,” “profiling,” and “workfare” has been “debated” has been very effectively controlled by the ruling class, the efforts of WBAI notwithstanding. Even when different sectors of the ruling elite quarrel among themselves about policy—as Rockefeller-dominated “old money” and California-based “new money” not infrequently do—it is the power of the state that implements their initiatives. As in the days of the Vietnam War, the only opposition that is accorded legitimation in the “public sphere” is that which colludes in obscuring the class function of the state.

I hope that I have conveyed critique rather than nostalgia, constructiveness rather than crankiness. My point has not been that it was bliss to be alive in 1969, but that there is something to be learned—above all, by the heaven-seeking young activists of today—from the lessons of that time. That capitalism—which currently kills as many of the world’s children every year as the Nazis killed of the world’s Jewish people during World War II—cannot serve the world’s producing masses is apparent to many. That it is unformable is not yet sufficiently clear to enough people—though the events of the next few years will, I suspect, augment the ranks of the doubters. But what is to be done is not so clear. Marxism remains indispensable, in my view, as not only a paradigm for critique but also a strategy for negation and supersession. To understand the whys and wherefores of the process by which “actually existing socialism” failed to progress toward egalitarian societies in the course of the last century, and to offer a strategy built on this self-criticism, remains the principal responsibility of those of us who consider ourselves Marxists. This is a task of monumental dimension and onerous responsibility. It will only be deferred and complicated, however, if
the reemerging activism on the campuses and in the streets remains confined within the ideological limits set forth in its guiding concepts—"corporatization," "globalization," "fair trade." In order for the emerging generation of activists—or their children, or their children's children—to look backward on 2002 from a future in which they will need to have patiently explained to them the horrors of our present, we must begin now to bring that brave new world into being.