



Information for Social Change

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The Battle in Seattle: its Significance for Education by Glenn Rikowski The Tufnell Press: London, 2001

A Review by Paul Catherall

This book was published as a response to the events surrounding the World Trade Organisation's 3rd Ministerial Conference in Seattle November 1999, when an estimated 40,000 individuals protested against the Geneva-based World Trade Organization (WTO), described in Wikipedia as follows:

...an international rules-based and member driven organization which oversees a large number of agreements defining the "rules of trade" between its member states... The WTO is the successor to the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) that was set up in 1947, and operates with the broad goal of reducing or abolishing international trade barriers.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Trade_Organisation

The opening preface of the book, 'The Morning After Prague' reflects on the continuing trend in massive popular protest at the time of the author's writing (during the demonstrations in Prague, September 2000); the author reflects on possible motivations for popular protest against the WTO, including the parody of international aid in the context of crippling debt amongst developing countries and the decline of living conditions amongst some developed countries where the capitalist agenda has transformed and degraded society.

In the main part of the book, 'The battle in Seattle: Its significance for education', Rikowski begins by considering 'the WTO's forays into education' in terms of policies and agreements established by the WTO and member states; the author also considers how education itself represents a threat to this advocate of corporate interest. The first part of the book 'The World Trade Organisation and the battle in Seattle' provides an informative overview of the WTO and related economic structures following the end of the Second World War, setting the scene for a detailed explanation of the anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements that arose in response to the phenomenon of Globalisation; this historical prelude illustrates the cultural and political background to the protests at Seattle in 1999 and provides an informative précis on the main tenets of Globalisation.

In the second section 'The Significance of Seattle', the author summarises the motivations for protest at Seattle, including the origins of the anti-Globalisation movement as an essentially anti-capitalist phenomenon. Rikowski discusses the concerns of this movement including shifting economic prosperity in developed countries and the effects of WTO trade policies (citing Gleeson and Low, 1999/2000 that 'everything must be sacrificed to the free market and the welfare of businesses'). The author considers interpretations of the Seattle protests by mainstream commentators and academics, particularly those that interpret the events as individualised protests on issues such as poverty, Third World debt or Globalisation (rather than a more fundamental protest against capitalism per se) - Rikowski contends that political awareness amongst the protestors was sufficient to indicate deeper understanding and opposition to the politics of capitalism. Issues of how to respond to Seattle and the possibilities for reform of the economic system are also discussed.

The third section of the book 'Seattle, the WTO and education' builds a case to support the direct link between the WTO agenda and education, citing a prominent corporate executive - 'Yes, globalisation is going to be over everything – education, health, communication, capital, knowledge... (Jacques Rogozinski 1999/2000). The influence of the WTO on educational policy is described as an integral part of the wider range of services targeted by the WTO. Rikowski describes how the Seattle protests disrupted agreements on the privatisation of key public services such as health and education when implementing the GATs agreement (General Agreement on Trade in Services) requiring WTO states to de-regulate public services and allow for private sector competition. Rikowski illustrates how public services have been targeted by business as a source of income following the decline of manufacturing in recent years; the ongoing process of public sector privatisation is described in terms of recent developments across Europe. A number of WTO reports are also discussed which further describe the role of education within the agenda of the CTS (Council for Trade in Services).

The last part of the book 'The significance of education for anti-capitalism' explores possibilities for the future, drawing on Marxist political and economic theory; Rikowski examines Marx's view of commodities and 'labour-power' as key components of our economic system, i.e. how economies are dependent on the capacity of individuals to perform labour in order to produce commodities. One key aspect for Rikowski is the development of skills; Rikowski describes how governments such as New Labour have developed a skills agenda (i.e. lifelong learning) to focus and accelerate the capabilities of individuals to become more efficient workers, effectively harnessing this labour-power in order to maintain and expand the economic system. Rikowski offers a critical perspective on this emerging agenda, questioning the ultimate value of the skills agenda for the state and individual. The author points out that there is no ceiling or point of satisfaction within this social model, i.e. that society is driven to increasingly higher goals and higher targets, not least in education. The role of educators and learners is considered in this context, where expectations become absurd in the light of constantly shifting performance targets.

The book concludes with considerations on the strategic importance of education in the production of labour-power and the importance of teachers in fostering an alternative approach to the current skills agenda, including the central role of critical pedagogy in challenging government advocacy.

On a personal note, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the areas of globalisation, Marxism, trends in education or the future of public services generally. This book reveals that there is an urgent need for greater awareness amongst academics, educators and the general public of the threats to public services as a consequence of the GATs and other WTO agreements. If you have heard of terms such as Globalisation or anti-Capitalism, this book explains the origins and history of the international financial mechanisms that are becoming more powerful within world politics and within the daily lives of us all.