SEATTLE

"Above all, we must not be triumphalist"

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Description :

Peter Leuprecht worked for the Council of Europe from 1961 to 1997. He was its Director for Human Rights from 1980 to 1993 and was then elected Deputy Secretary General. He resigned in 1997 as a sign of protest against an enlargement of the Council of Europe which ignored its standards regarding democracy, Human Rights and the rule of law. He is now dean of the Law Faculty at McGill University, Montreal and participated in the Seattle conference as
representative of the People's Decade of Human Rights Education, an accredited NGO. In an interview given to the Letter, he reviews what happened at the Seattle conference.
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What is your assessment of the Seattle conference, both from the point of view of the outcome of the official conference and from the point of view of the mobilisation which resulted?

First of all, personally, I do not see Seattle as an isolated event, even if it was an important event. Principally, I see it rather in a wider context of struggles that led to the defeat of the MAI, the now famous Multilateral Accord of Investments. Seattle was another almost logical stage, but we must be careful not to be triumphant.

This said, what happened in Seattle was fascinating. Outside the official conference, there was a considerable mobilisation of all sorts of NGOs. One could say, from a critic's point of view, that it was a very heterogeneous alliance. For example, the United States trade unions had their own agenda and their own concerns. All the same, in the grand diversity of NGOs, there was quite a large commonality of views and analyses even though the organisations had different views beforehand and acted in an
uncoordinated manner ... ecological groups, peasant groups, Human Rights NGOs, NGOs with a social vocation, Third Worldists, etc. Under the pressure of events and under threat, these NGOs have found more of a common language and common approach. I consider this development to be very important. From the point of view of the official conference, as some said after its failure, everything has been thrown back into question - even concessions which were obtained at certain moments in the context of the WTO. So I think that it is quite difficult to foresee the future. I think that the poorest countries, the Third World countries, will have been encouraged by Seattle to adopt quite a hard line.

What place do fundamental human rights have in this common approach which appears to be emerging among the NGOs? What is very interesting is that people - and not only Human Rights NGOs - are now looking at the questions of international trade and investment precisely from the angle of fundamental rights. By the way, there were some gatherings of NGOs arranged before the conference. From this point of view, Seattle has in some way played a catalysing role.

I also think that Clinton’s speech, which, on a superficial first reading, could be perceived as an acknowledgement of certain of our concerns, must be read more carefully.

It was felt by the Third World countries to be a sort of provocation and I think that, objectively, it contributed to something that was not really expected: that is, a much more
united front than previously on the part of the poor countries. On the one hand, Clinton's speech, and on the other, the encouragement from the NGOs had a positive effect in this regard.

Can one say that the Human Rights NGOs had the opportunity at Seattle to make clear their claims on liberalisation of trade and economic globalisation? You know, at Seattle, there was a multitude of demonstrations. There were those that could be seen on television or in the streets.

However, there were also many alternative demonstrations, where different sides of the story could be heard. It was very interesting that not only NGOs aired their views, but also certain governments. It was also partly the tactic of the NGOs to influence certain governments and ministers to follow them. There were also differences in terminology, for example, the differences found in the terminology used by representatives of the UNDP...Of course, the terminology of the UNDP is different from that of the WTO and it is only at first sight, in fact, that these differences are surprising. I think it must be understood that governments are schizophrenic and do not necessarily speak in the same terms in different contexts. A particular government may say one thing to the WTO and another to the United Nations or to the Human Rights Commission, for example. And I think we could gain something positive from this schizophrenia. We can take governments at their word and remind them of what they have said in other contexts about the need to respect the rights of the person - we can urge them to take these rights into account, and perhaps especially when looking
at problems linked to
development and trade. I will not say
yet that we have won, but I think that
we can build something positive on
what happened at Seattle.

I myself learnt a lot of things at
Seattle, notably on subjects such as
intellectual property and especially
the abuse of patents, and
genetically modified organisms
(GMOs). It is important that the
Human Rights NGOs concern
themselves with these questions
which, at first sight, can seem far
from their traditional field of
concern, but which have an
everseous effect on respect for
fundamental rights, particularly in
southern countries.

And how do the NGOs perceive the
failure of the official conference at
Seattle? Does this failure
represent a success or a handicap
from the point of view of the followup
to the process?

In one respect I think that it is a
success because it is not what the
governments and the directors of
the WTO wanted. It is true that the
conference started badly and was
badly prepared; apart from the
demonstrations, the conference
started under unfavourable
auspices. However, no-one desired
its failure. The risk, perhaps, is that
in the future, because of the
mobilisation, some of the WTO and
some governments may try to return
to the practice of greater
'confidentiality' and negotiate more
in camera. In another respect, I
think that it will be more difficult for
them in the future. What certain
governments have understood, and
others must yet understand, is that
we also have our eyes on them; we
will watch what they do in the
context of the WTO. Therefore I
would be surprised if the WTO could continue as before. I also think, but this is a bit of a joke, that in future, the WTO will have difficulty finding a host country for its conference...

And what do you see as the most urgent and important from the point of view of the Human Rights NGOs, in particular for the future?

I think that it is really - and it is relatively new for Human Rights Organisations - to understand that nowadays it is essential, if one wants to defend fundamental rights, to address the problems of international trade, economics and intellectual property seriously. I also think, more strongly, that we must call into question the ideology underlying the path being followed by the WTO and liberalisation of trade.

I call this the pan-economic ideology. Among other things, a political power must be organised more and more at an international level, and even at this level, it must be a citizen power.

Also, one of the important questions in the future will be to see how the WTO links up with other organisations; I am thinking for example of the International Labour Organisation. The answer to this question is far from clear.

Comments reported by Sylvie Paquerot