

The Battle in Seattle; 10 years after WTO; Interview with Jeffrey St. Clair and Alexander Cockburn

By [Mike Whitney](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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Mike Whitney—November marks the 10th anniversary of the WTO demonstrations in Seattle. Can you explain why you went even though you knew you might be harassed, gassed, beaten or arrested?

Jeffrey St. Clair—I had no intention of being harassed, gassed, beaten, shot at or arrested. This was Seattle after all. The police don't act that way in the Emerald City. I didn't particularly want to go, but Cockburn couldn't be budged from Petrolia. The Turtles and Teamsters theme turned me off. Many of the groups behind the "official" protest had prostrated themselves at the feet of the Clinton Administration for seven years as they hacked away at the foundations of the environmental, labor and human rights policies that had been in place since the Great Society without so much as a whimper of protest. It had all the hallmarks of another Potemkin protest by the politically neutered progressive bloc. But there were rumblings from the underground that a more impolite demonstration might erupt on the streets. I wanted to show up just in case. Besides, there was an exhibition of paintings by my favorite American artist Morris Graves showing in town. In the end, Graves had to wait.

MW—What groups participated in the demonstrations and was there a common-thread that tied them together?

Jeffrey St. Clair—The French philosopher Michel Foucault quipped, "It's resistance that unites us." So it was in Seattle. If there was a common thread that united Earth Firsters, anarchists, Longshoremans and even wheat farmers from the Great Plains it was resistance against the machinery of government, from the WTO to the Clinton administration to the Seattle Police Department. In the end, this strange melange included even the people of Seattle as they were indiscriminately brutalized by their own cops. The street protests were organized (if you can call it organized) by the Direct Action Network and the Ruckus Society, along with some independent operators such as the Black Bloc. But the over-reaction of the Seattle cops did more to swell the size and intensity of the protests than any of those groups. It was a unique convergence of forces and circumstances that created a one-of-a-kind spectacle that even the Situationists might have enjoyed.

MW—Most people have only heard the media's version of the events (along with the endless footage of the attack on the Starbucks store) Can you explain what the media "got wrong" in their coverage?

Jeffrey St. Clair— You can't expect the corporate media to critique global capitalism, can you? In the end, I didn't think the media coverage of the Seattle demonstrations was that terrible.

Of course, the media made no attempt to understand what was driving the protests, but that would have required them to get out on the streets and interview people as concussion grenades were exploding overhead—not something the business press, assembled for the WTO, was comfortable doing. The media certainly globalized the protests and made those street battles an inspiration to activists around the world. I don't mind seeing those images of Starbucks and Niketown getting whacked. In the end, I think the media, particularly the Seattle media, turned against the cops—at least what I was able to watch in my cramped motel room at the King's Inn. Give the Black Bloc their due. By smashing a few windows in advance of the WTO, they largely preempted any coverage of the phony labor/green parade and rally and got the cameras out on the streets where they belonged.

MW—"5 Days that Shook the World", the book that you co-authored with Alexander Cockburn and photographer Allan Sekula, is a classic of radical journalism. But I'm afraid it hasn't gotten the attention it deserves. Apart from the riveting storyline and the high-octane prose, there's quite a bit of information here that would interest antiwar protesters and civil libertarians. It looks like many of the repressive measures that people associate with the Bush era, actually had took root during the Clinton administration; extralegal surveillance, preemptive arrest, and the rise of paramilitary-type law enforcement. What did Seattle teach you about repression in America?

Jeffrey St. Clair—The WTO protests exposed what many of us had been writing about for years: the militarization of policing in America. The images of cops dressed in black stormtrooper gear, firing concussion grenades, plastic bullets and tear gas at protesters, business people and shoppers on the streets of America's most self-consciously progressive (and white) city revealed how thoroughly infected the nation's police forces had become with these brutal tactics and anti-constitutional measures. Of course, none of this would have come as a surprise to the residents of South Central Los Angeles, where these tactics had been a daily fact of life since at least the tenure of Darryl Gates in the 1980s. But now the traumas of black America had shown up on the streets of one of America's whitest cities. The Clinton administration had proved with lethal force it was more than willing to trample basic constitutional guarantees at Waco in the horrific and totally unjustified raid on the Branch Davidians, where more than 100 people were burned to death. Of course, at the time few progressives sympathized with Koresh and his followers and many of them defended the actions of the FBI and ATF, even after watching those women and kids go up in flames. It's also worth noting that the Waco raid saw the Clinton administration trample the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibited domestic operations by the US military.

It's now been proved that the Delta Force had a hand in the Waco catastrophe. Again liberals were mute on this constitutional incursion by Clinton. Then after the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Clinton pushed congress to pass the Counterterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, which was a precursor of the Patriot Act. This law widely expanding policing powers, set up the noxious Joint Terrorism Task Forces, where the FBI set up shop with local cops, and became to criminalize various kinds of dissent and protest . Seattle revealed the maturation of these tactics to middle-class and liberal America.

MW—The book takes a few jabs at liberals (like Medea Benjamin) and Big Labor who didn't really lift a finger to disrupt the WTO meetings. How do explain the willingness of liberals and labor to roll over and let the corporations decide how they think the world should be divided up? Do you think the Iraq war protests would have been more successful had they

used the tactics of WTO demonstrators rather than ambling sheeplike through city-centers waving signs and mooning for the cameras?

Jeffrey St. Clair—It's no surprise that the big environmental groups and big labor didn't try to disrupt the WTO meetings or even come to the aid of the street protesters as they were being brutalized by the cops. All they really wanted was a seat at the negotiating table, even if they knew they were going to get creamed in the negotiations. These groups barely stood up to Reagan and Bush I. They were silly putty in Clinton's hands, willing to swallow, and at times, even defend every betrayal, from NAFTA and the destruction of welfare to logging in ancient forests. Medea Benjamin is a different story. She wanted to claim ownership of street protests but didn't want to be tarred by elements that made her funders and friends in the media uncomfortable. Her defense of Niketown was outrageous, but entirely predictable. Witness her recent statements urging a limited, modified pull-out from Afghanistan. She thrives on media stunts and in order to continue to be a quotable source (even by Bill O.) she needs to distance herself from the more radical elements, in this case, a few black kids helping themselves to some overpriced, sweatshop produced Nike footwear liberated by the Black Bloc. It was a pathetic performance.

I don't think the Seattle experience can or will be repeated. You can only take the ruling class off guard once every few decades. The greatest protest against the Iraq war was done by a single person: Cindy Sheehan and her lonely vigil outside Crawford, Texas. The failure was in the anti-war movement's inability to capitalize on Cindy's courageous stand. This illustrates—along with the failure to run the Bush crowd out of town after Katrina—of the deep institutional impotence of the American left, a paralysis that has become even more pronounced in the age of Obama.

MW—"Jeffrey St. Clair's Seattle Diary" (chapter 2) is just a great read. Can you explain the mood of the crowd and the fear you must have felt when the helicopters were buzzing overhead and the small army of truncheon-wielding robocops were clearing the streets and dragging hundreds of protesters off to jail?

Jeffrey St. Clair—I wasn't frightened. It was an altogether exhilarating experience. But then again I didn't get hit in the head with a plastic bullet or locked up in a stifling bus for 20 hours. A little tear gas now and then is good for the soul.

MW- Here's the final entry to your "Seattle Diary":

"I walked out on the street one last time. The acrid stench of CN gas still soured the morning air. As I turned to get into my car for the drive back to Portland, a black teenager grabbed my arm. "Hey, man, does this WTO deal come to town every year?" I knew how the kid felt. Along with the poison, the flash bombs and rubber bullets, there was an optimism, energy and camaraderie that I hadn't felt in a long time." What was achieved in Seattle that week in 1999?

Jeffrey St. Clair—It was an inspirational week. Seattle proved that after swallowing seven years of crap from a Democratic regime it was possible for some progressives to awaken from their hibernation and express in a direct and confrontational way their anger with their political masters. It showed that resistance is not only possible, but that it can also be fun. The movement is in repose once again. But, who knows, it make reawaken any time in the next seven years....

Notes on WTO demonstrations by Alexander Cockburn:

“As we wrote at the time, You can take state power by surprise over twenty or thirty years, and state power spends the next two or three decades making sure it won’t happen again. See May/June ’68 in Paris. The next big anti-WTO rally after Seattle was in Washington DC and as JoAnn Wypijewski reported for CounterPunch after that rally, the Maryland / DC cops had orders to shoot to kill if necessary. You can chart the fanatic vigilance of the state by the near impossibility of demonstrating within eyeshot of Bush or Cheney. There were several instances of people in wheel chairs and a sign, awaiting the Royal Progress of W or C, being hauled off to distant wire pens, there to exercise their First Amendment rights. Jeffrey and I were at the Democratic convention in Los Angeles in the summer of 2000 and the armed police presence was beyond belief, with squads of motor bike cops regularly roaring along the sidewalks. It took the arrival of a black president in the White House to persuade the police that it was okay to have a man with a revolver strapped to his leg to demonstrate at an Obama town hall meeting with a sign quoting Jefferson on the need to water the tree of liberty with the blood of tyrants.

Of course one’s tendency is to think that a hugely exciting event like the Seattle Days is the beginning of something — but alas, Seattle was more epilogue than overture. The organized left fell apart in the Clinton years and hasn’t effectively reconstituted itself since. In fact in the US the left as an energetic intellectual and political force is nearly dead, engorged by the Democratic Party. Of course there are those who fight on - like us here at CounterPunch, and the fact that we have a large and loyal audience across the world for our stuff encourages us to believe there’s life in the Old Mole still.”

“5 Days that Shook the World”, co-authored by Jeffrey St. Clair, Alexander Cockburn and Allan Sekula, Verso Publishing, London

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