

The Battle for the Globe's Future

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I was recently reading about the preparations for the upcoming Free Trade Area of the Americas summit planned for April 20 in Quebec City and struck by how poorly the human race is managing its transition to a truly global society.

The negotiations have mobilized the biggest security operation in Canadian history and involve 2.5 miles of reinforced chain-link fence, 5,000 police officers including five mounted riot squads and the relocation of prisoners from Quebec's prisons to make room for protesters. There will be more police officers than delegates at the summit. The entire Old Town of Quebec City will be off limits to everyone but delegates, the press and *registered* residents for the duration. People seeking to enter Canada from the US will face tight security and close scrutiny. (It seems quite ironic that a summit dedicated to the discussion of opening borders has resulted in some of the most strict border controls Canada has ever implemented.)

This military state in miniature, in liberal, peace-loving Canada of all places, should set off bells for all of us that something is horribly awry. What exactly is the problem and what can we do about? How can we reframe this clash in order to begin to work on a solution together? To answer that question I would like to suggest that the movement described in the media as "anti-globalization" or "anti-free trade" is really a pro-democracy movement against the increasing concentration of power and the resulting powerlessness in the US and abroad that more and more people feel.

The press, government officials, and the protesters themselves have been somewhat confused concerning what exactly the protestors are for or against since there is such diversity in their ranks. What do steelworkers and activists seeking to save sea turtles really have in common?

What they share is a growing awareness that the rules of the game have changed. No longer can we pretend that our governance systems are operating on the democratic principle of "one person-one vote" either within the US or internationally. Instead we have a system in which spending is considered a form of protected political speech (*Buckley v. Valeo, 1976*) which effectively means that it operates on a principle of "one dollar-one vote." In a country where the richest 1% of Americans have 38.1% of the wealth and the bottom 40% have 0.2%, this clearly influences whose interests get served. At the global level things look much worse: the three richest men have wealth that exceeds that of the 48 least developed countries.

Large corporations are one of the most prevalent and visible manifestations of the concentration of wealth and power that results from this shift. As a result of the 1886 US Supreme Court decision *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific*, corporations were

granted legal personhood, establishing that they enjoyed many of the same rights that you and I do. (Prior to this corporate charters were routinely revoked when they no longer served the public purpose.) Over time corporations have slowly concentrated power to an unprecedented degree, even on a global scale. But of course, except for a very few people (who generally run those corporations) our individual resources are grossly outmatched by the resources these corporations command. In a one dollar-one vote system, it is clear that average citizens will be the losers when there is a divergence of interests: shareholders win, stakeholders lose. In the US we understand well the dangers of concentrated governmental power, so why are we not equally wary of concentrated corporate power?

What can be done to restore the effectiveness of our democracies? The short-term answer is reducing the role that money plays in influencing decision-making processes, and reasserting our public right to revoke the charters of irresponsible corporations. The longer-term solution will require democratizing access to power throughout the globe and institutionalizing this access so that there are forums for reconciling our diverse interests more justly.

The Seattle WTO negotiations and now the FTAA summit vividly illustrate who has real power and who does not. When we understand that “anti-globalization” protesters are really “pro-democracy,” we can recognize the vicious cycle that is beginning. Efforts like those we see in Quebec City to maintain the secrecy and elite character of the summit will be viewed as further evidence of the suppression of legitimate democratic voice and only strengthen the resolve of the protesters. They will do whatever it takes to assert their right to exercise power. As more and more militant action is required to gain attention, the delegates will feel more and more threatened leading to more and more repressive police tactics. This could easily result in tremendous violence and a tragedy for everyone involved. And the next summit will be even worse.

How do we extricate ourselves from this grim dynamic? Using the language of leadership, we can see that there is tremendous adaptive work to be done. The short answer is that both sides need to care enough to engage in meaningful dialogue and demonstrate a willingness to listen, learn, and change. But this kind of dialogue is only possible when the power difference between parties is small enough to prevent one from taking unilateral action against the other. The delegates clearly have much more formal power, so any participatory process that does not equalize power will only lead to manipulation, co-option or coercion. We should also recognize that the protesters will resist sending representatives to negotiate for them on principle: pluralistic democratic access is their objective and an elite representative would directly contradict that objective. The process of engagement is likely to look more like South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation process than the current closed-door negotiations if and when they are begun.

I have only limited advice for each side, but perhaps it may be helpful. For the protesters:

1. You will need to continue to organize to develop a base of power from which to negotiate your interests. You will only be squashed, ignored or co-opted

- otherwise. Be willing to talk and listen, but retain your unity and power to demand fair consideration if it is not granted to you. Be reasonable and do not alienate sympathetic allies unnecessarily.
2. It is essential that you keep your protests non-violent and reign in your violent element. Your legitimacy and broader public support depend on it.
 3. Retain your internal diversity while simultaneously being clear with the public what it is that brings you together. Be a model of the pluralistic, democratic world for which you are advocating. Experiment organizationally with ways to devolve power and democratize your movement while simultaneously improving overall coordination, collaboration and effectiveness. Rely on teams, cooperation and peer accountability rather than authority, coercion and hierarchy.
 4. NGO's should speak with one voice in attacking the legitimacy of official country "representatives" in international negotiations. Explain how a representative system only works when representatives accurately represent the interests of their constituents and can be held accountable by them. Note that this is currently not the case.

For the delegates and those that have decision-making power:

1. Recognize that the protesters are not interested in simply hearing that you have taken their interests into account, but that instead they want ongoing democratic access to decision making. Consider the value and legitimacy of this desire.
2. I encourage you to engage in some scenario planning. What are the possible futures of this conflict? You may find that it is in your long-term interest to share your power. Learn lessons from South Africa and Guatemala.
3. Remember that people do not hate you, they hate an unjust, undemocratic system. Do not feel overly threatened by the protests. Listen, learn, and be willing to change. Don't harden yourself against them but seek to express your empathy when you feel it.

I am hopeful that we can avert needless conflict, but this will require properly understanding its true nature. We must reframe it so that the current opponents can begin to see themselves as allies in addressing their shared challenge of fashioning an effective and sustainable model of global democratic governance.