

# Get thee to Copenhagen! (Because there's no redemption in a monastery)

Friday 4 December 2009, by [BULLARD Nicola](#) (Date first published: 30 November 2009).

It is so interesting to look back at the issue of *Focus on Trade* that we published just after the collapse of the WTO talks in Seattle in early December 1999. (In case you are interested, it's number 42.) In the lead article by Walden Bello, what is striking is not the triumphant heralding of the arrival of the anti-globalisation movement, but a rather tame recounting of the collapse of the talks over issues of transparency, attempts to introduce environment and labour standards, and a disgruntled African delegation. Of course, the big outside demonstrations are mentioned, as is the march of 1,000 to the county gaol to demand the release of the more than 400 arrested activists. But in the recounting, there is no hint of the folklore — indeed the myth — that has now become the “Battle of Seattle”.

I wasn't there, so I don't know the facts from the fiction. But I do know that the WTO has never recovered and probably never will. Once we got a hint of the essential vulnerability of the organisation, and the amazing potential of well thought through “inside/outside” strategies, there was no looking back.

The Cancun and Hong Kong WTO ministerials have their own mythology. The tragic protest-suicide of Lee Hyung-kae and the heroic campesinas in their gorgeous bright shawls at the fallen fence — choosing to go no further having proved that it was possible to enter the fortress. In Hong Kong, the image is of Korean farmers silently paying homage to the Earth as they ceremoniously walked ten steps and bowed, for miles, or jumped off boats in the cold waters of Hong Kong Harbour, swimming towards the convention centre where the trade ministers were meeting. I wasn't in Hong Kong or Cancun either, but these moments are part of my story. As are Prague, Genoa and Quito, where I experienced the heady combination of tear gas and black bloc, which, one has to admit, creates a certain adrenalin rush. Genoa, most of all, left its mark: we went through fire together that Friday and came out glorious. The extraordinary solidarity as we marched together that bright Saturday, refusing to bow to the violence of the police and paying respect to Carlo Giuliani. This is what I remember.

Re-reading stories written from that time gives me goose-bumps: there is something moving about what everyone tried to do, against the odds and with humour and creativity and conviction. We experimented with new ways of doing politics, we built grand projects like the World Social Forum, and we did have an impact, in large and small ways. On the last day of the Hong Kong ministerial a “thank-you letter to our international friends” was distributed by a “group of Hong Kong people”. They said

*“Thank you for your patience in explaining to us and our media the devastating effects of the WTO, although your voices have been distorted and submerged in the local media; Thank you for showing us, through the uniform footsteps the significance of solidarity; only through people's mutual solidarity, mutual support and long term struggle, can democracy be attained.”*

Is it really only ten years since Seattle? So much has happened and so much has changed (myself included). For sure, we were not able to “seize the historical moment” of the 2008 financial crisis to bring capitalism to its knees, nor did we stop the war in Iraq. But we are constructing a (non-

sectarian) global movement with certain shared values and goals, bringing together South and North, with new ways of working together that go beyond a single demonstration or campaign. Now we are preparing for December's climate summit in Copenhagen and I can feel - everywhere — the same energy and enthusiasm that we poured into derailing the WTO and building the World Social Forum. The burgeoning climate justice movement is something real, and its provenance is in Seattle and Porto Alegre.

That's why reading Franco "Bifo" Berardi is such a downer. Just when there is so much work to be done, he tells us to go to the monastery. He sounds like a survivalist rather than a life-affirming liberationist when he writes:

*"We have to create a safe haven for the small minority of the world population that wants to save the heritage of humanist civilisation and the potentialities of the General Intellect, that are in serious danger of unredeemable militarisation."* [1]

What exactly does Bifo want to save? And who is this elite that is so worthy of salvation? The people living with AIDS who campaigned to get rid of patents? The landless women of Brazil who, in the early hours of the morning, macheted hectares of plantation Eucalyptus? The indigenous peoples of Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador who have lost hundreds of their brothers and sisters defending blood, land and water? Or maybe just the ones who voted for Evo Morales? The shack-dwellers of Durban fighting eviction and toxic pollution? The abandoned people of New Orleans? The "desocupados" of Argentina? The villagers of Thailand creating new exchange systems to guard against financial mayhem? Or maybe the climate campers who shut down Kingsnorth?

The other challenge that Bifo puts before us - to redefine "the very idea of well being, of wealth and of happiness" — is narrowly Euro-centric, and rather sad. In other parts of the world, perhaps far away from where Bifo lives, families, communities, men and women, are daily living their version of happiness and well-being, against the odds, and in the face of militarism, capitalism, patriarchy and racism.

Rather than searching for meaning in a monastery or preparing to write (yet another) Western narration on history, Comrade Bifo should get down and get dirty. Join us in Copenhagen. It may not be Seattle, but at least it will take you out of your gloomy introspection.

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## **P.S.**

\* From FOCUS ON TRADE , Number 147, 30 November 2009.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] OCUS ON TRADE , Number 147, 30 November 2009 :

<http://focusweb.org/focus-on-trade-number-147-november-2009-2.html?Itemid=1#franco>