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sent: Friday, October 05, 2001 12:20 PM
subject: Activism After September 11

Dear Friends,

This essay was published today in The Nation. It's an attempt to discuss what the atrocities of September 11 might mean to those of us who are publicly critical of corporate power and the current global economic model. There are no easy answers to this question so the essay is more of a meditation on symbolism and tone than a political roadmap.

Take care,

Naomi

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Signs of the Times

by Naomi Klein

As shocking as this must be to New Yorkers, in Toronto, the city where I live, lampposts and mailboxes are plastered with posters advertising a plan by antipoverty activists to "shut down" the business district on October 16. Some of the posters (those put up before September 11) even have a picture of skyscrapers outlined in red--the perimeters of the designated direct-action zone. Many have argued that O16 should be canceled, as other protests and demonstrations have been, in deference to the mood of mourning--and out of fear of stepped-up police violence.

But the shutdown is going ahead. In the end, the events of September 11 don't change the fact that the nights are getting colder and the recession is looming. They don't change the fact that in a city that used to be described as "safe" and, well, "maybe a little boring," many will die on the streets this winter, as they did last winter, and the one before that, unless more beds are found immediately.

And yet there is no disputing that the event, its militant tone and its choice of target will provoke terrible memories and associations. Many political campaigns face a similar, and sudden, shift. Post-September 11, tactics that rely on attacking--even peacefully--powerful symbols of capitalism find themselves in an utterly transformed semiotic landscape. After all, the attacks were acts of very real and horrifying terror, but they were also acts of symbolic warfare, and instantly understood as such. As Tom Brokaw and so many others put it, the towers were not just any buildings, they were "symbols of American capitalism."

As someone whose life is thoroughly entwined with what some people call "the antiglobalization movement," others call "anticapitalism" (and I tend to just sloppily call "the movement"), I find it difficult to avoid discussions about symbolism these days. About all the anticorporate signs and signifiers--the culture-jammed logos, the guerrilla-warfare stylings, the choices of brand name and political targets--that make up the movement's dominant metaphors.

Many political opponents of anticorporate activism are using the symbolism of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks to argue that young activists, playing at guerrilla war, have now been caught out by a real war. The obituaries are already

appearing in newspapers around the world: "Anti-Globalization Is So Yesterday," reads a typical headline. It is, according to the Boston Globe, "in tatters." Is it true? Our activism has been declared dead before. Indeed, it is declared dead with ritualistic regularity before and after every mass demonstration: our strategies apparently discredited, our coalitions divided, our arguments misguided. And yet those demonstrations have kept growing larger, from 50,000 in Seattle to 300,000, by some estimates, in Genoa.

At the same time, it would be foolish to pretend that nothing has changed since September 11. This struck me recently, looking at a slide show I had been pulling together before the attacks. It is about how anticorporate imagery is increasingly being absorbed by corporate marketing. One slide shows a group of activists spray-painting the window of a Gap outlet during the anti-WTO protests in Seattle. The next shows The Gap's recent window displays featuring its own prefab graffiti--words like "Independence" sprayed in black. And the next is a frame from Sony PlayStation's "State of Emergency" game featuring cool-haired anarchists throwing rocks at evil riot cops protecting the fictitious American Trade Organization. When I first looked at these images beside each other, I was amazed by the speed of corporate co-optation. Now all I can see is how these snapshots from the corporate versus anticorporate image wars have been instantly overshadowed, blown away by September 11 like so many toy cars and action figures on a disaster movie set.

Despite the altered landscape--or because of it--it bears remembering why this movement chose to wage symbolic struggles in the first place. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty's decision to "shut down" the business district came from a set of very specific and still relevant circumstances. Like so many others trying to get issues of economic inequality on the political agenda, the people the group represents felt that they had been discarded, left outside the paradigm, disappeared and reconstituted as a panhandling or squeegee problem requiring tough new legislation. They realized that what they had to confront was just not a local political enemy or even a particular trade law but an economic system--the broken promise of deregulated, trickle-down capitalism. Thus the modern activist challenge: How do you organize against an ideology so vast, it has no edges; so everywhere, it seems nowhere? Where is the site of resistance for those with no workplaces to shut down, whose communities are constantly being uprooted? What do we hold on to when so much that is powerful is virtual--currency trades, stock prices, intellectual property and arcane trade agreements?

The short answer, at least before September 11, was that you grab anything you can get your hands on: the brand image of a famous multinational, a stock exchange, a meeting of world leaders, a single trade agreement or, in the case of the Toronto group, the banks and corporate headquarters that are the engines that power this agenda. Anything that, even fleetingly, makes the intangible actual, the vastness somehow human-scale. In short, you find symbols and you hope they become metaphors for change.

For instance, when the United States launched a trade war against France for daring to ban hormone-laced beef, Jose; Bove; and the French Farmers' Confederation didn't get the world's attention by screaming about import duties on Roquefort cheese. They did it by "strategically dismantling" a McDonald's. Nike, ExxonMobil, Monsanto, Shell, Chevron, Pfizer, Sodexo Marriott, Kellogg's, Starbucks, The Gap, Rio Tinto, British Petroleum, General Electric, Wal-Mart, Home Depot, Citigroup, Taco Bell--all have found their gleaming brands used to shine light on everything from bovine growth hormone in milk to human rights in the Niger Delta; from labor abuses of Mexican tomato farmworkers in Florida to war-financing of oil pipelines in Chad and Cameroon; from global warming to sweatshops.

In the weeks since September 11, we have been reminded many times that Americans aren't particularly informed about the world outside their borders. That may be true, but many activists have learned over the past decade that this blind spot for international affairs can be overcome by linking campaigns to famous brands--an effective, if often problematic, weapon against parochialism. These corporate campaigns have, in turn, opened back doors into the arcane world of international trade and finance, to the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and, for some, to a questioning of capitalism itself.

But these tactics have also proven to be an easy target in turn. After September 11, politicians and pundits around the world instantly began spinning the terrorist attacks as part of a continuum of anti-American and anticorporate violence: first the Starbucks window, then, presumably, the WTC. New Republic editor Peter Beinart seized on an obscure post to an anticorporate Internet chat room that asked if the attacks were committed by "one of us." Beinart concluded that "the anti-globalization movement...is, in part, a movement motivated by hatred of the United States"--immoral with the United States under attack.

In a sane world, rather than fueling such a backlash the terrorist attacks would raise questions about why US intelligence agencies were spending so much time spying on environmentalists and Independent Media Centers instead of on the terrorist networks plotting mass murder. Unfortunately, it seems clear that the crackdown on activism that predated September 11 will only intensify, with heightened surveillance, infiltration and police violence. It's also likely that the anonymity that has been a hallmark of anticapitalism--masks, bandannas and pseudonyms--will become more suspect in a culture searching for clandestine operatives in its midst.

But the attacks will cost us more than our civil liberties. They could well, I fear, cost us our few political victories. Funds committed to the AIDS crisis in Africa are disappearing, and commitments to expand debt cancellation will likely follow. Defending the rights of immigrants and refugees was becoming a major focus for the direct-action crowd in Australia, Europe and, slowly, the United States. This too is threatened by the rising tide of racism and xenophobia. And free trade, long facing a public relations crisis, is fast being rebranded, like shopping and baseball, as a patriotic duty. According to US Trade Representative

Robert Zoellick (who is frantically trying to get fast-track negotiating power pushed through in this moment of jingoistic groupthink), trade "promotes the values at the heart of this protracted struggle." Michael Lewis makes a similar conflation between freedom fighting and free trading when he explains, in an essay in *The New York Times Magazine*, that the traders who died were targeted as "not merely symbols but also practitioners of liberty.... They work hard, if unintentionally, to free others from constraints. This makes them, almost by default, the spiritual antithesis of the religious fundamentalist, whose business depends on a denial of personal liberty in the name of some putatively higher power."

The battle lines leading up to next month's WTO negotiations in Qatar are: Trade equals freedom, antitrade equals fascism. Never mind that Osama bin Laden is a multimillionaire with a rather impressive global export network stretching from cash-crop agriculture to oil pipelines. And never mind that this fight will take place in Qatar, that bastion of liberty, which is refusing foreign visas for demonstrators but where bin Laden practically has his own TV show on the state-subsidized network Al-Jazeera.

Our civil liberties, our modest victories, our usual strategies--all are now in question. But this crisis also opens up new possibilities. As many have pointed out, the challenge for social justice movements is to connect economic inequality with the security concerns that now grip us all--insisting that justice and equality are the most sustainable strategies against violence and fundamentalism.

But we cannot be naïve, as if the very real and ongoing threat of more slaughtering of innocents will disappear through political reform alone. There needs to be social justice, but there also needs to be justice for the victims of these attacks and immediate, practical prevention of future ones. Terrorism is indeed an international threat, and it did not begin with the attacks in the United States. As Bush invites the world to join America's war, sidelining the United Nations and the international courts, we need to become passionate defenders of true multilateralism, rejecting once and for all the label "antiglobalization." Bush's "coalition" does not represent a genuinely global response to terrorism but the internationalization of one country's foreign policy objectives--the trademark of US international relations, from the WTO negotiating table to Kyoto: You are free to play by our rules or get shut out completely. We can make these connections not as "anti-Americans" but as true internationalists.

We can also refuse to engage in a calculus of suffering. Some on the left have implied that the outpouring of compassion and grief post-September 11 is disproportionate, even vaguely racist, compared with responses to greater atrocities. Surely the job of those who claim to abhor injustice and suffering is not to stingily parcel out compassion as if it were a finite commodity. Surely the challenge is to attempt to increase the global reserves of compassion, rather than parsimoniously police them.

Besides, is the outpouring of mutual aid and support that this tragedy has elicited so different from the humanitarian goals to which this movement aspires? The street slogans--PEOPLE BEFORE PROFIT , THE WORLD IS NOT FOR SALE--have become self-evident and viscerally felt truths for many in the wake of the attacks. There is outrage in the face of profiteering. There are questions being raised about the wisdom of leaving crucial services like airport security to private companies, about why there are bailouts for airlines but not for the workers losing their jobs. There is a groundswell of appreciation for public-sector workers of all kinds. In short, "the commons"--the public sphere, the public good, the noncorporate, what we have been defending, what is on the negotiating table in Qatar--is undergoing something of a rediscovery in the United States.

Instead of assuming that Americans can care about each other only when they are getting ready to kill a common enemy, those concerned with changing minds (and not simply winning arguments) should seize this moment to connect these humane reactions to the many other arenas in which human needs must take precedence over corporate profits, from AIDS treatment to homelessness. As Paul Loeb, author of *Soul of a Citizen*, puts it, despite the warmongering and coexisting with the xenophobia, "People seem careful, vulnerable, and extraordinarily kind to each other. These events just might be able to break us away from our gated communities of the heart."

This would require a dramatic change in activist strategy, one based much more on substance than on symbols. Then again, for more than a year, the largely symbolic activism outside summits and against individual corporations has already been challenged within movement circles. There is much that is unsatisfying about fighting a war of symbols: The glass shatters in the McDonald's window, the meetings are driven to ever more remote locations--but so what? It's still only symbols, facades, representations.

Before September 11, a new mood of impatience was already taking hold, an insistence on putting forward social and economic alternatives that address the roots of injustice as well as its symptoms, from land reform to slavery reparations. Now seems like a good time to challenge the forces of both nihilism and nostalgia within our own ranks, while making more room for the voices--coming from Chiapas, Porto Alegre, Kerala--showing that it is indeed possible to challenge imperialism while embracing plurality, progress and deep democracy. Our task, never more pressing, is to point out that there are more than two worlds available, to expose all the invisible worlds

between the economic fundamentalism of "McWorld" and the religious fundamentalism of "Jihad."

Maybe the image wars are coming to a close. A year ago, I visited the University of Oregon to do a story on antisweatshop activism at the campus that is nicknamed Nike U. There I met student activist Sarah Jacobson. Nike, she told me, was not the target of her activism, but a tool, a way to access a vast and often amorphous economic system. "It's a gateway drug," she said cheerfully.

For years, we in this movement have fed off our opponents' symbols--their brands, their office towers, their photo-opportunity summits. We have used them as rallying cries, as focal points, as popular education tools. But these symbols were never the real targets; they were the levers, the handles. They were what allowed us, as British writer Katharine Ainger recently put it, "to open a crack in history."

The symbols were only ever doorways. It's time to walk through them.

This essay was first published in The Nation.