


Resistance is Possible

by Joyce A. Green

L'auteure analyse la dynamique de globalisation en examinant comment les divers palliers du gouvernement canadien arrivent

"The globalization of the world's so-called market economies is a root cause of the increasing feminization of poverty everywhere. This violates human rights, the integrity of our ecosystems and poses serious threats to our health."



à un consensus politique, se penchant plus précisément sur le cas de Ralph Klein en Alberta.

The Non-Governmental Organizations' Beijing Declaration warns that

The globalization of the world's so-called "market economies" is a root cause of the increasing feminization of poverty everywhere. This violates human rights and dignity, the integrity of our ecosystems and the environment, and poses serious threats to our health. The global economy, governed by international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization and transnational corporations, impose Structural Adjustment Programs on countries in the South and economic restructuring on countries in the North in the name of fiscal health. The result is increasing poverty, debt, and unemployment. The resulting reductions in social programs and services in the areas of health, education, and housing harm the very people they purport to assist. The media, controlled by transnational corporations, acts as an instrument of social control, denying women's right to free communication.

Is this relevant to Canadian women? Let's look at the evidence. In Canada, in February 1996 the Toronto Stock Exchange broke 5,000 for the first time, and set its tenth record level in less than a year. Then in April it beat its February high. In the last quarter of 1995, the Big Five Banks posted their highest profits ever, over \$5 billion, while cutting 2,800 jobs. World-class corporations, household names to all of you, are making record profits ... and cutting jobs. In 1995, General Motors made \$1.4 billion, and cut 2,500 jobs. Bell Canada cut 3,200 jobs. Inco cut 2,000 jobs; its labour and environmental practices have

been questionable; its CEO got an honorary doctorate and it's just bought most of Voisey's Bay, the largest nickel deposit in the world, situated squarely on unceded Aboriginal lands in Labrador. The Alberta government raked in an unearned windfall in petrodollar royalties, much of which is extracted from unceded Lubicon Cree lands; sold off the profitable and unionized liquor stores, privatized whole chunks of government, slashed millions from welfare, education, and health and thousands of tax-paying jobs from the public sector. The Harris government in Ontario is using the same strategy. The Chretien government has eliminated the federal Canada Assistance Plan (CAP) (federal-provincial partnership) funding for post-secondary education, social programs, and such, which further erodes the financial base of the programs that define us as a nation and provide the basics for citizens.

What's happening here? We are experiencing life at the nexus of economic, social, and political forces in the phenomenon known as globalization, and interpreted through the dominant economic ideology known as neoliberalism.


Here I want to offer you some definitions. "Neoliberalism" is an ideology that advocates an economic arena free of government regulation or restriction, including labour and environmental legislation, and certainly, free of government action via public ownership. It advocates a retreat from the welfare state's publicly funded commitments to equality and social justice. It views citizenship as consumption and economic production. This, not coincidentally, is compatible with, and advances in tandem with "neoconservatism," an ideology advancing a more hierarchical, patriarchal, authoritarian, and inequitable society. "Civil society" is comprised of citizens located in communities, associations, and movements, in relation and subject to state and economic structures and relations of dominance, but with the capacity to name them, agree to them, or resist them up to and including revolution. Finally, "globalization" refers to the emerging world economic order, characterized by multilateral "free trade" blocs designed for capital mobility; globalization of world capital markets; financial deregulation; disaggregated production; and instantaneous communications (Grinspun and Kreklewich; Gill; Teeple). The trade blocs essentially erode political sovereignty while creating zones of market sovereignty, which has the effect of constraining state domestic policy.

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism come together to form a powerful alliance that detrimentally affects women in the paid workforce, in the family, and in society, through the under-valuation or nonvaluation of our work and the appropriation of our labour in the family and

through "volunteerism" (see Dacks, Green and Trimble).

The profitability of neoliberalism rests in large measure on the foundation of women's un- and underpaid labour; on the commodification of the land and of society; and on the state's retreat from regulatory policy, and

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yes, from spending, that supports the family, the community, and women as women in a gendered and discriminatory world.

The consequence is the erosion of the foundation of relationship: the priority of family, of community, is lost to the priority of individual responsiveness to the imperatives of the labour market. These imperatives are phrased as the need for a "re-educated" workforce, or for a "more flexible" workforce, or for sequential career changes as a norm, or for reduced expectations on the part of citizens ... and always, for the least possible government intervention in the market, except to discipline society and ensure profitability. This means the preference for no or little regulation of labour standards, environmental consequences, and so on. It also means limitations on dissent, for the success of neoliberalism depends on citizens buying the Big Lie that there is no alternative.

I want to sketch the connections between economic globalization, governments' political responses to that phenomenon, and erosion of both political democracy and civil society. But I do not mean to argue that there is no alternative. Rather, I argue that the Klein and the Harris and the Chretien governments have rolled over on us, have sold us out, have defined themselves as the tools for the interests of transnational capital rather than the instruments for democracy. When I am done I hope you will be convinced of two things: first, this agenda is only logical within its internally consistent universe of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. It is not the only possible response to the challenges of contemporary global capitalism. Second, citizens must act to reclaim and redefine the political and economic agenda, in order to save democracy and civil society.

Let me make five main points to you.

1. We are in the era of a global phenomenon, the globalization of markets and of the conditions for profit-

ability of an elite composed of certain transnational corporations and agents for investment capital. This capital moves around the world with the flick of a computer key, occasionally destabilizing national currencies in its wake, as, for example, in the 1994 Mexican currency crisis. Global capitalism is the contemporary expression of the evolution of capitalism, and is part of the historical strand that arguably emerged in the fifteenth century as part of the age of imperialism. The meaning which we attach to its practice, to its consequences, depends on our moral, theological, and ideological stances, but there is no doubt about the reality or the dynamics of its existence.

2. The interests of transnational capital are served by policy decisions at the state level, and it is in the ability of transnational capital and its smaller state-based counterparts to assist or disrupt national economies (through "capital ebb and flow") that this elite finds its power over state governments.

3. Domestic economies and the global economy, then, are being reconfigured by governments to conform to the interests of transnational capital, the former through neoliberalism and the latter through multinational not-so-free trading blocs. This means that where interests collide, governments work to meet the criteria of capital—profitability—not that of society, which is well-being.

4. There is a congruence between many of the interests of transnational capital, and domestic corporate elites. These domestic elites are influential; their approval of policy and politics is desired by governments, who anticipate it in policy matters. For example, the Business Council on National Issues and others funded advertising in support of the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement (CUFTA) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In Alberta, many corporate players eagerly anticipate passage of so-called "right to work" legislation, which amounts to legislated union-busting. Consider the implications, also, that the day of Paul Martin's 1995 budget, the *Edmonton Journal* budget story was on one side of the front page; the other side read "Wall Street Pleased."

5. The consequences of all this include the dominance of monetarist policy, the ascendance of neoliberalism, and consolidation of hemispheric and multinational trading blocks, which have the effect of entrenching global economic inequities. At the same time, national sovereignty and constitutional rights and responsibilities are subordinated to undemocratic and unaccountable international trade panels and corporate boardrooms.

The weight of popular support behind the government policies of cuts to social programs, and public sector restructuring through privatization and wage and benefit

rollbacks, demonstrates the power of populism, and of the effective use of language and images, primarily through the media. Resistance seems futile. The government and its corporate cheerleaders have expertly used language and culture to convince the public that (1) there is no option to the neoliberal, neoconservative agenda; (2) to focus public pain and anger on vulnerable targets in civil society, rather than on governments; and (3) to provide the illusion of democratic consultation for its policies while it selectively marginalizes opposition to these, and co-opts "opinion leaders." Even the most marginal dissent is suppressed, while the majority of citizens accept what government and opinion leaders serve up as analysis: the mantra of debt and deficit elimination through the imperative of public sector cuts and privatization.

We must see populism for what it is—often reactive, often un- or mis-informed, and always majoritarian. This means that common prejudices, tested by political polling or by mail-in questionnaires on public expenditure,¹ can substitute for political responsibility and accountability. The informed citizen, like the accountable government, takes this responsibility seriously. This means getting and weighing information and engaging in political debate and considering all interests, not just having an opinion.

Politics as debate about the nature and purpose of government is silenced. This constraint on debate and opposition undermines citizenship. Consider the disciplinary impulse behind the rhetoric of "special interest groups"; that is, those who dissent from the government/business agenda. Those who support this agenda are called "all Albertans," "ordinary folks," and "families."

The government invokes the deficit as the reason why society must drink from the cup of debt reduction and government restructuring. But we are told there is a bright side: we are restructuring to become competitive in a global economy.

The legitimacy of this global economy, or our role in it, remains unexamined while society is restructured to make incorporation in it inevitable. This has significant negative implications for our social and political agenda. In the words of the late, great political economist Ralph Miliband, "Democracy has no access to corporate boardrooms" (Miliband). Nor, we might add, does it have access to multi-lateral trade negotiation and arbitration panels.

Both citizenship potential and constitutionalism are eroded, as the legal and permanent effects of regional bloc trading agreements such as NAFTA and CUFTA effectively circumscribe the policy options available to government, while removing decision-making power about a host of matters from public accountability and parliamentary review and vesting it in multinational review bodies.

Multinational trade agreements function to coerce governments to privatize and deregulate even central strands of the social safety net. Economist Marjorie Cohen warned:

while the United States may not directly say "change your tax system, your health care system, your unem-

ployment insurance system, and your regional development schemes," these programs may be forced to change if Canada is to continue to trade with the United States. The pressure to conform will be indirect ... through the mechanism of American trade remedy legislation. (Cohen)

NAFTA's "trade barriers" are Canada's domestic policy options, potentially illegal if challenged under NAFTA. Now, the decision of Alberta, for example, to privatize all or a portion of health care, may well result in a permanent change: under the conditions of the NAFTA we may not be able to reverse this or similar decisions without "compensating" our trading partners for our internal policy choices.

A combination of the some 300 transnational corporations which currently dominate the global economy, together with fluid and mobile investment capital, disciplines governments to impose policy measures on their societies to enhance profitability, regardless of national populations' material well-being and political development. Corporate agents can move investment and production around the globe, in search of cheap labour, compliant governments, and maximum profits.

In response to the chaotic social conditions resulting from globalization, states have moved to monetarist policy and restrictive social policy, characterized by "deregulation, free trade, and technological change" (Lipietz) intended to maximize "competitiveness"; that is, to appeal to the robber barons of capital.

There are also domestic advocates of restructuring for globalization. Through the political and economic power of domestic corporate elites pressure is brought to bear on democratic processes of the state to adopt policy measures that further the neoliberal and neoconservative agenda; and through corporate and political influence over the media, the public is taught the wisdom of restructuring in terms which make it inevitable and desirable.

Consider the relentless torrent of *Globe and Mail* editorials and columns on this subject, together with the frequent appearance of these same writers on television and radio programs to propound the gospel of neoliberalism.

We, the people, the taxpayers, equality seekers, service users, panhandlers, voters, are asked to vest a simplistic trust in the largely unanalyzed marketplace. There is virtually no policy discussion of the economy as a tool of society. Rather, society is cast in the service of The Economy. This unquestioned economic imperative is increasingly shaping our politics, our relationships, our career prospects, our education, health care, and other policy options in fundamental ways. And, the restructuring of the state also reduces the ability of citizens to challenge or monitor government choices. Even information is commodified.

Additionally, the notion of "citizen" is reconstructed as "consumer" or "worker," rather than as the one who holds the right and obligation to engage in public discourse and

political activism. We are being commodified; our significance now lies in our utility to the economy as wage-earners, investors, and consumers but not as citizens or as human beings. Commodities have no rights and don't talk back.

Alternatives to the undisputed crises of the welfare state, such as a reduced work week and a move from a consumption-driven perpetual growth economy to a stable-state economy, are ignored, despite the existence of sound analysis and theory-building in these areas.

In the environment of globally active corporate monopolies, public policy is increasingly defined as the conditions most attractive to corporate non-citizen interests. These interests are invariably contrary to the interests of the majority of state citizens. Governments have allowed national and provincial economies to become so dependent on the presence of increasingly mobile and transnational capital(ists) that the interests of the latter have become conflated with national interests in national economic and civic decision-making.

But the logic of transnational capital, and of neoliberal state policy, and of international competitiveness as the leading indicator of success, is no logic for civil society. It coerces workers of the world to compete, to scabble after any job, regardless of conditions, of fulfillment, of social or environmental cost. It privileges consumption over social production, so that child labour in some jurisdictions and prison slavery in others makes cheap goods possible for consumers in relatively privileged states. It leads to economic "recovery" without jobs, as Canada is now experiencing. It creates a large and growing "marginal" class here and elsewhere, people who may never know full employment, stable employment, meaningful work, or work at all. And as governments comply with neoliberal dictates, eroding and eliminating the social safety net and the social component of public policy, a cruel Malthusianism² kicks in: blaming the poor and the marginal for choosing to be poor and marginal.

Human beings find greatest meaning as individuals in the context of community—in families, in communities, in society. What it means to be fully human is being eroded by the emerging economic order. Resistance is a moral imperative.

So where are our sites of resistance to this overwhelming consensus? Politics at the level of communities and within and among national and international social and political movements will foster awareness, commitment, and solidarities. In these arenas, we can create space for the practice of citizenship; create the power to rein in the state; and to capture The Economy as a tool created by and for human well-being. In partisan matters, beware neoliberal governments ... and neoliberal opposition parties.

And always, we have the touchstones of feminist experience. Sisterhood is powerful: we are called to solidarity with one another. The personal is political. The power relations that affect our lives most intimately are an expression of politics writ large, and must be named and

contested. And, none of us has made it till all of us has made it. Together, in all of our diversity, we can forge a better alternative than the neoliberal neocons suggest.

This paper was presented to the conference "Alberta Through the Eyes of Women," May 3-4, 1996; organized by the Ad-hoc Committee on Alberta-Beijing and Women's Program, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, to follow up on the impetus of Beijing. The title "Resistance is Possible" is a play on the creed of the Borg in the TV series "Star Trek." The Borg, a semi-mechanized fascist life form, went around the universe assimilating others, repeating "resistance is futile."

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¹As, for example, the Klein government recently did to ask households how it should spend the Alberta budget surplus.

²Malthusianism refers to inheritors of the views of Thomas Malthus, who argued in 1798 that society owed the poor nothing, as they were responsible for their own misfortune because of their prolific breeding and indigence or incapacity.

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