The streets of Seattle, Washington, filled with billowing clouds of tear gas and pepper spray during the first week in December, 1999, as squadrons of police in full riot gear skirmished with surging masses of protestors in the most confrontational political demonstrations in the United States since the end of the Vietnam War. What was all this sound and fury about? The angry crowds were there to confront delegates from 135 member nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) who were meeting to hammer out an agenda for the next round of negotiations to regulate international trade.

More than 50,000 people had come to Seattle from all over the world for this historic event. French farmers, Zapatista rebels from Mexico, Tibetan refugees, German anarchists, First Nations people from Canada, labor unionists, environmentalists, animal rights activists, and organic farmers were among those who filled the streets. They held teach-ins, workshops, and peaceful marches with thousands of participants, but what got headline coverage was civil disobedience including blocking streets, unfurling banners from giant construction cranes, and, for a few of the most radical anarchists, breaking windows, setting fires in dumpsters, and looting stores. These destructive acts were condemned by mainstream groups but got most of the press attention anyway.

The police, unprepared for such a massive protest movement, reacted erratically. Ordered to avoid confrontation on the first day of the protests, the police stood by while a small contingent of black-hooded anarchists smashed windows and vandalized property. The next day, stung by criticism of being too soft, the police used excessive force to clear the streets, firing rubber bullets and tear gas indiscriminately, spraying innocent bystanders with pepper spray, and clubbing nonviolent groups engaged in passive sit-ins. The mayor declared a civil emergency and a 24-hour curfew in the area around the Civic Center. The national guard was called in to assist the thousands of city police.

Few people in America had ever heard of the WTO before the historic protest in Seattle, and yet, this exclusive body has power that affects us all. Created in 1995 by an international treaty, the WTO is the successor to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), established at the end of the Second World War to eliminate tariffs and trade barriers. But where GATT was limited to considering economic issues, the scope of the WTO has been expanded to “noneconomic trade barriers” such as food safety laws, quality standards, product labeling, workers rights, and environmental protection standards. With legal standing equivalent to the United Nations, the WTO operates largely in secret. When considering trade disputes, it meets at undisclosed times and places, making decisions behind closed doors based on confidential evidence.

WTO judges are trade bureaucrats, usually corporate lawyers with ties to the industries being regulated. There are no rules against conflicts of interest, nor are there requirements that judges know anything about the culture or circumstances of the countries they judge. No appeal of WTO rulings is allowed. A country that loses a trade dispute has three options: (1) amend laws to comply with WTO rules, (2) pay annual compensation—often millions of dollars—to the complainants, or (3) face nonnegotiable trade sanctions. Critics claim that the WTO always serves the interest of transnational corporations and the world’s richest countries.

Most of the people protesting in Seattle agreed that the current WTO represents a threat to democracy, quality of life, environmental health, environmental justice, labor rights, and national sovereignty. Underneath these complaints is a broader unease about trends towards globalization and the power of transnational corporations. Although the diverse band of protestors shared many concerns, many disagreed about the best solutions to these problems and how to achieve them. While many claimed they wanted to shut down the WTO, others actually want a stronger trade organization that can enforce rules to protect workers, environmental quality, and endangered species.
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Among the most controversial issues brought up in this round of WTO negotiations are agricultural subsidies, child labor laws, occupational health and safety standards, protection of intellectual property, and environmental standards. Environmentalists, for example, were outraged by a 1998 WTO ruling that U.S. laws prohibiting the import of shrimp caught in nets that can entrap sea turtles are a barrier to trade. The United States must either accept shrimp regardless of how they are caught, or face large fines. Some other WTO rulings that overturn environmental or consumer safety laws require Europeans to allow importation of U.S. hormone-treated beef, Americans must accept tuna from Mexico that endangers dolphins, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cannot bar import of low-quality gasoline that causes excessive air pollution. In some pending cases, Denmark wants to ban 200 lead compounds in consumer products; France wants to prohibit asbestos; and several countries want to eliminate electronic devices containing lead, mercury, and cadmium. Under current WTO rules, all of these cases probably will be ruled illegal.

In the end, the delegates adjourned without agreement on an agenda for the "Millennium Round" of the WTO. Developing countries, such as Malaysia, Brazil, Egypt, and India, refused to allow labor conditions into the debate. Major agricultural exporters, such as the United States, Canada, Brazil, and Australia, continued to demand an end to agricultural subsidies and protective policies. Japan and the European Union, on the other hand, maintain that they have a right to preserve small, family farms, rural lifestyles, and traditional methods of food production against foreign competition. Developing countries insist that protection of their environment and wildlife is no one’s business but their own.

Following the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999, activists have demonstrated against the effects of globalization at a number of world governance meetings. The most violent of these occurred in July 2001, when 100,000 protestors converged on a meeting of the Group of Eight Industrialized Nations in Genoa, Italy. As was the case in Seattle, the vast majority of the demonstrators were peaceful and non-violent, but a small group of radicals attacked police and vandalized property. The police responded with what many observers considered excessive force, killing one man and injuring hundreds of others. Outrage at police behavior spread across Europe as live television broadcasts showed unprovoked attacks on peaceful marchers and innocent bystanders. Leaders of other European nations criticized the Italian Government for letting the situation get out of hand.

In the aftermath of Genoa, both protestors and government officials began to re-examine their strategies for future meetings. Leaders of many community groups questioned whether they should take part in mass demonstrations, both because of the personal danger and the negative image resulting from association with marauding anarchists. They began to reflect on other ways to carry out their goals while avoiding the violence that marred previous demonstrations. Government officials, for their part, announced that future meetings would be held in remote, inaccessible locations that limit public participation. The 2001 meeting of the WTO, for example, was held in Qatar, an authoritarian country that strictly forbids any form of public demonstration. Those who weren’t official delegates to the meeting weren’t even allowed into the country, perpetuating the image of the WTO as a secretive and high-handed organization. Similarly, the 2002 meeting of the G8 nations will be held in Kananaskis, an isolated resort in the Canadian Rockies that is very difficult for protestors to reach. Many activists complain that this prevents law-abiding citizens from exercising their right to free speech.

These protests connect many of the topics in this book, and introduce a number of issues we will consider in this final chapter. They show how economics and social concerns together with seemingly obscure and remote groups such as the WTO can have important environmental consequences. They also raise questions about the best ways to bring about social change. Are direct action and civil disobedience appropriate and effective, or should we focus on teach-ins and peaceful marches? Are
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confrontations useful, or is it better to try to work within the generally accepted social paradigms and established institutions?