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Chapter XIV

Globalization, Citizenship and New Information Technologies: From the MAI to Seattle

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines how information technologies have been used by non-governmental organizations to contest economic globalization. The chapter uses as case studies the failed attempt to negotiate the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (1995-1998) and the failed effort to launch a new round of trade negotiations at the World Trade Organization ministerial meetings in Seattle 1999. We do not take the simplistic view that non-governmental organizations were solely responsible for defeating the MAI, or stopping further trade negotiations, but rather use these cases to examine how Internet technology contributed to the capacity of groups to communicate, to quickly mobilize and widely disseminate critical information, outside the control of national elites.

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INTRODUCTION

For more than 300 years, politics has been a state-centered activity revolving around the institutions of states and relations between states. Since the 18th century, who we are as citizens was defined, and given meaning by, states. Culturally, beginning with the French Revolution, people identified themselves as citizens of particular nation-states. Moreover, the territory of states not only provided the public space in which politics occurred but also the primary space for economic activity, as markets tended to be located within and regulated by states. In sum, there was a considerable overlap of economic, political, and cultural space (Shields & Evans, 1998).

Today, political, economic, and cultural spaces are said to be becoming increasingly separated. Economic activity is becoming globalized, while politics is still defined by the shrinking confines of the nation-state. The cultural question of “who am I?” is being separated from its association with civic nationalism and being reattached to homogeneous ethnic communities (Shields & Evans, 1998). The driving force behind these changes is, observers claim, globalization. Globalization is commonly defined in economic terms as an increasingly integrated system of global production involving a transnational division of labor organized within a single linked group of corporations. As part of this process, capital, unlike labor, moves fairly freely, facilitated by rapidly changing technology. Increasingly open national economies, as a result, have become integrated into, and dependent upon, networks of international exchange.

As states open to the global economy, they expose themselves to a loss of political and economic authority. Indeed, much of the recent popular discussion of globalization has centered on the extent to which it has constrained states, undermined sovereignty, and created an international system where global capital dictates state policies (Greider, 1995). Susan Strange (1996), for example, contended that:

Where states were once the masters of markets, now it is the markets which, on many crucial issues, are the masters over the governments of states. And the declining authority of states is reflected in a growing diffusion of authority to other institutions and associations, and to local and regional bodies, and in a growing asymmetry between the larger states with structural power and weaker ones without. (p. 4)

As the state retreats and becomes less relevant, the implications for the politics of the state are profound. According to Brodie (1997), “the ascendancy of the market over the state and *inside* the state...atrophies the public, closes political spaces, and further marginalizes the already marginalized” (p. 7). The atrophy of the public and the problematizing of the state, territory, and sovereignty have, in turn, profound implications for citizenship. Lipschutz (1998, p. 3), for example, argued that there is a crisis of citizenship that arises, in turn, from a crisis of the nation-state, itself in trouble largely as a consequence of globalization.

Globalization thus poses serious questions to the futures of the state and the citizens. If there are no sovereign people, can there be a state? How can citizenship have any relevance in a world in which national borders are becoming porous and even disappearing? This is, no doubt, a pessimistic interpretation of the impact of globalization on the state, politics, and citizenship. In our opinion, it is too pessimistic. We argue that globalization is contestable and that as capitalism globalizes, so do its opponents.

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