

Free Trade Debate: Giving Credit Where It Is Due

by Lorna Salzman (November 2016)



In 1999 a variety of environmental and workers' organizations and unions gathered in Seattle for a week to confront a meeting of the World Trade Organization and resist its globalization and free trade policies. These doubters were dismissed as uninformed radicals who were resisting its claims about the benefits of global economic trends and, according to some pundits, were actually putting jobs and the welfare of American workers at risk. One of the most prominent pundits was Paul Krugman, a Nobel Prize winner and regular Op-ed writer for the *New York Times*. One of those he went after, in addition to the globalization doubters, was William Greider, author and columnist for *The Nation*.

Greider, in the April 1, 2013 issue of *The Nation*, reflected on Krugman's harsh, repeated attacks in *Slate*, the *Washington Post*, and Krugman's book, *The Accidental Theorist*, on Greider's book, *One World, Ready or Not: The Manic Logic of Global Capitalism*, calling it a "thoroughly silly book." Today Krugman has

capitulated to his “silly” critics in the face of incontrovertible proof that their criticism was valid and that his projections of the benefits of “free trade” had not materialized.

But there is an equally important piece of this history that has become apparent only because of the 2016 presidential campaign. Against all odds as well as a complacent economic community and a generally disinterested media, the issue of free trade has risen from obscurity to the surface of the public debate. Focused on the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and not least a president obsessed with pushing the TPP onto American workers, it is not unimaginable that the election could be won or lost over this single issue.

How and why this came to be needs to be understood: it happened because of Ralph Nader’s Public Citizen organization and its indefatigable director Lori Wallach, with valuable assists from the International Forum on Globalization (IFG), which has sponsored about five teach-ins across the country on this topic in the past decade. One could frivolously dismiss them as typical Washington policy wonks remote from the real world. But the organizing strategy of the Seattle protest and presentation were brilliant, convening environmentalists from small and large groups across the country and union workers, a partnership named “Turtles and Teamsters.” It was unprecedented, of course, but eventually the tumult and the issue died down....or so it seemed.

Actually the opposite happened. One of the most important economic schemes, designed by bureaucrats, economists, financiers and politicians, was revealed as a conspiracy to put the actions of giant corporations out of reach of the citizenry and democratic decision-making, much like the recent European resistance personified by the Brexit debate over the unaccountable control of the unelected EU Commission and the growing European opposition to the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, a sister to the TPP. The whole WTO arrangement was exposed as one designed by and for the corporations, intended to be put in a niche that was beyond democratic control. A detailed analysis of the implications of free trade is in “[Politics as if Evolution Mattered](#),” which addresses the intersection of evolution with socio-political policy.

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