

Chapitre14/Chapter 14

The Grenoble Colloquium : One Year Later (hors série)

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Over the last two years, the world has changed beyond recognition. The tragic events of September 11 demonstrated a dramatic clash of values and assumptions that underlie the relationships between different civilizations. The painful question "Why did they do it?" made people in the East and West, North and South look for possible explanations of the disaster that reflected a deep-seated fear of America and rejection of the attempts of American corporate giants to maximize global profits.

Of the many conferences that addressed the issue of American multinational corporations the Bilingual Colloquium "Reflections on the Social Impact of American Multinational Corporations" held at the Center for the Advanced Study of American Institutions and Social Movements of Stendhal-Grenoble III University was especially challenging and invigorating. It was symbolic that the colloquium took place only a few days after the Euro had been introduced as the official currency of the European Union. Francs like German marks or Italian liras were to sink into oblivion closing a long and thorny chapter in the history of Europe. The US dollar was brought into competition with the new currency representing the economic might of the new Europe. Did it mean that the "United States of Europe" was to compete with the world's Superpower? What is the role of multinational corporations in this transformation of the map of the world? Does this situation signify a tendency or is it a statement about the change?

These and similar questions constantly arose during the heated discussions at the colloquium, which brought together distinguished academics from various countries. The choice of speakers was excellent! Michael Parenti from Berkley, Sushil Mittal from Millikin University, Diana Johnstone from Paris, Michael Albert from "Z Magazine", Richard Du Boff from Bryn Mawr College, Bertell Ollman from New York University, Marianne Debouzy from University Paris-VIII to mention only a few. They represented different academic schools and approaches but taken together their presentations manifested the growing concern over the future of humankind, which is threatened by the aggressive manipulations on the part of multinational corporations.

The topics of the conference plenaries reflected the most important issues that show the effect of American big corporations on the strategies of the world's development. The question "Democracy in Peril?" with which the conference opened has now turned into a strong and unhappy statement. Yet unable to see into the events of February 2003, the participants of the panel managed to indicate the geopolitical agenda for the future. They pointed out that 9/11 showed the vulnerability of the U.S.A. but its consequence may be U.S. diktat on the planetary level. At a time when 2 billion people live beyond the poverty level and one person dies of hunger every four seconds big multinational corporations are involved in economic globalization, which can be regarded as a new form of totalitarianism. In spite of democratic procedures, real power belongs not to the democratically elected governments but to transnational monopolies that tend to control the media.

The issue of globalization was dealt with practically at every session. Many speakers commented on the dangers this process has for the sovereignty of national states. Under the diktat of IMF and World Bank, governments are often unable to pursue their own

economic policy. Transnational capitalism, which is replacing national capitalisms, presents a real threat to national sovereignty as it turns national states into a mechanism to pursue its own goals. World integrated economy is based on the functioning of multinational corporations, which often results in conflicts between their global interests and the interests of a particular country. One may expect that in the near future the problems connected with the question of national sovereignty will increase.

The issue of globalization was discussed from different points of view. The focus of most speakers was the critique of this phenomenon of the epoch of late capitalism. Michael Albert chose a different perspective. In his brilliant presentation at a conference plenary, he showed a positive alternative to globalization and corporate domination greatly contributing to the constructive spirit of the colloquium.

The final plenary summed up the discussions held during two days and mapped out a blueprint of strategies for change, which have become so topical today.

Among the many benefits of the colloquium was a possibility to exchange views with people of different walks of life and different views. The atmosphere was conducive to openness and sincerity. The participants understood that their voice mattered, and this feeling made the discussions so precious. The organizers did their best to make everybody feel at home. Renowned professors and students, famous politicians and ordinary people made a wonderful mix of those responsible citizens who know that they also have a say in the decision making process. What the future is going to be like depends on everyone.

Special words of thanks must go to the organizing committee and especially to Prof. Francis Feeley who was the heart and soul of the conference. He was the one to find the keynote speakers, look for funding, take care of the arrangements, provide a fantastic cultural program and make Grenoble a unforgettable place for all those who had the privilege and honor to take part in the colloquium. Prof. Feeley also managed to create a dedicated team of colleagues and students who did the translations and attended to the needs of the participants. I retain strong impressions from my encounters with academics from France, the United States, Italy, Finland and other countries.

Coming from a country, which became independent only 11 years ago and is to this day torn between the totalitarian past and an unstable present I was happy to take part in the numerous debates both in and outside the university lecture halls. The major question for my country is how to preserve sovereignty and independence at a time when multinational corporations tend to use all their power to make the world one-dimensional. Discussing the possible scenarios of the world's development the colloquium managed to give some of the answers that we in Belarus so badly need.