

Re-presented Notes on Summits & Counter Summits

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There it was then. After almost two years of planning and a suggested figure of £200,000 spent by the 'anti-authoritarian' movement, the appeals to and protests against the Gleneagles G8 summit came and went in the space of a week.

200,000 people walked a caged route around Edinburgh at the Make Poverty History march, replete with Ukrainian-democracy style branding; 5,000 that managed to get there, despite illegal efforts against them, took part in marches on Gleneagles; and hundreds took part in blockades. Was it all worth it?

Crowds and Power

Those caught up in the spectacular disinfotainment of Make Poverty History, having appealed to the G8, should be feeling suitably duped. Lambasting Bob Geldof for his subsequent silence and overall betrayal of the poor, George Monbiot writes:

'Immediately after the summit, as the world's attention shifted to the London bombs, Germany and Italy announced that they might not be able to meet the commitments they had just made, due to "budgetary constraints". A week later, on July 15, the World Development Movement obtained leaked documents showing that four of the IMF's European directors were trying to overturn the G8's debt deal. Four days after that, Gordon Brown dropped a bombshell. He admitted that the aid package the G8 leaders had promised "includes the numbers for debt relief". The extra money they had promised for aid and the extra money they had promised for debt relief were in fact one and the same.

Nine days after that, on July 28, the United States, which had appeared to give some ground at Gleneagles, announced a pact with Australia, China and India to undermine the Kyoto protocol on climate change. On August 2, leaked documents from the World Bank showed that the G8 had not in fact granted 100% debt relief to 18 countries, but had promised enough money only to write off their repayments for the next three years. On August 3, the United Nations revealed that only one-third of the money needed for famine relief in Niger and 14% of the money needed by Mali had been pledged by the rich nations. Some 5 million people in the western Sahel remained at risk of starvation.

Two weeks ago, we discovered that John Bolton, the new US ambassador to the United Nations, had proposed 750 amendments to the agreement that is meant to be concluded at next week's UN summit. He was, in effect, striking out the millennium development goals on health, education and poverty relief, which the UN set in 2000.'

The Guardian, 6/9/05

www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1563338,00.html#article_continue

The Make Poverty History march may have indicated that a significant number of people oppose the corporate globalisation policies of the G8, but equally such an appeal was easily manipulated to reflect support for the overall concept of the G8 and the dominating power it represents. What's more, the calls for reformation of the G8 were little more than a very expensive human petition — and petitions aren't the instruments of social change we'd like to believe they are. A large enough petition may have some domestic influence, but only as tangible proof of a subset of public opinion, one that doesn't readily break down into any significant voter influence — as was seen from the huge anti-war

demonstrations. A problem which, in turn, has created a debate about the achievements of the anti-war movement.

Along with the Poverty Industry, Brown and Blair's gross illusion was to promote that from a feeling of a sense of powerlessness these ventures can be transformed into cogent, participatory agents for social change. They gave it the appeal and certainty that real change can be brought about by petitioning 'decision makers' through media spectacle — centralising their own self-importance and that of celebrities who promise access to them — irrespective of international realpolitik.

When they were up, they were up...

A large opposition realises that merely marching in supplication is not going to influence the G8. Far from there being any realistic means of achieving positive change through the G8, it is presented as responsible for and indicative of the problems. Their protest was intended to reframe the G8 as criminal, and also draw media and thereby public attention to the ecological, anti-capitalist, anti-terror, anti-globalisation and other issues they hoped to elevate — but to what end?

The paradox for the broad range of participating social movements is that people are called into the streets in the name of another possible world, but with the intention that... absolutely nothing happens. Every time that a more or less oceanic crowd moves peacefully, visibly supervised, it is proclaimed to be a great victory for The Movement.

The crux then may reside in media representation — media visibility, articulation and control over the issues and the ensuing spectacle of protest. There is an argument that such protests need to reach 'critical mass' to be deemed 'newsworthy', so that through mass media channels they may inform and influence wider public opinion. Yet to appeal for representation through the very corporatist structures they're protesting appears schizophrenic — there being little point protesting in this way if the architecture to transmit and engage those voices with a wider public either isn't there or is simply able to render the protest meaningless, when it's allowed to register at all.

The press reporting of the G8 protests was appropriately atrocious, full of impending apocalyptic catastrophe — even supposedly sympathetic articles were then run featuring archive or framed 'riot' photos and salacious headlines. For the most it was neo-corporate propaganda and state agitation posed as reporting — for months prior, there had been a relentless ramping up of public anxiety around dangerous 'European' anarchists flooding Scotland. But in yet another dreamlike 'Intelligence failure' it didn't happen; yet the public was successfully terrorised.

The form, focus and dynamic of the media is more-and-more as the 'legitimising arm of corporate public relations', and so clearly requires a change in tactics from the protest movements that approach it — if indeed this was their express intention.

The protest movements don't have anywhere near the resources of mainstream media, but there must be something better than a steady supply of photocopy litter — Indymedia as perhaps a more decentralised while collaborative communication structure is a progressive start,

along with community radio projects. But on the whole it hasn't happened, with little independent attempt to genuinely inform a broader public.

The Illusion of Centres and Contested Terrains

In the course of these summits presentations of 'promises' of decisions that are made elsewhere are merely formalised and drip-fed to the camped-out media — only to be rolled-back and rewritten *post coitus*. The summits themselves are symbolic — pomp and ceremony where the world leaders profess their elite worthiness, which includes allowing a section of legitimised Carnavalesque 'petition'. All the while any other critical, unstaged dissent is forcefully suppressed as an exemplar of the generic threat of 'terror', one that extends and makes routine the wider suppression of even such basic freedoms.

This dichotomy — between the 'good' protesters (who wore white) and 'bad' protesters (who wore black) — reached pantomime proportions in the media coverage around Gleneagles (a set-up, complete with Chinook air show) and 'the Princes Street riots' (in effect, an upset with local retaliation). It's a duality that is mirrored in the ideological analysis of the poor, who are internally and externally designated to be deserving or undeserving, the one to be romanticised and patronised, the other to be vilified and beaten — 'saved' or shot in New Orleans.

For this reason, no matter how well they go, the protests are always symbolic for one simple reason: even if you did manage to shut down the meetings, the decisions get made anyway — if they weren't already being made elsewhere. So all the rhetoric of activists calling to "Shut Down the G8!" is, to put it bluntly, absolute nonsense; naïve at best, at worst dishonest. Add to this the number of well-intentioned activists who have been arrested (354 at Gleneagles) and those who'll get sent down, all for a symbolic protest — Dungavel Detention and Removal Centre was actually emptied.

And yet these *social pacifiers* know quite well that their capacity to pose as negotiators with the institutions doesn't particularly depend upon the number of people that they lead into the streets (millions of demonstrators opposed to the latest military aggression against Iraq have not greatly worried the governments involved in the war). In fact, if summits and counter-summits are so frequently talked about it is only because in Seattle first and later on other occasions, something happened: thousands actively confronted the damaging structures of capital and state. Without this subversive threat the institutions of domination would have nothing to do with the various representatives.

The Movement's spokespeople must then distinguish themselves from the bad ones, the extremists, the violent ones (i.e., those who practice direct action) and give political visibility to the others. On the one hand, the slogans of the social forums end up being perfectly suitable for the enlightened bourgeoisie: taxation of finance capital, democratic and transparent regulation over global trade, more state and less market, critical consumption, ethical banks, pacifism, etc. On the other hand, what they sell with their 'democratic mobilisations' is a valuable commodity: the illusion of doing something against the injustices of the world. In this sense,

counter-summits are a juicy internal spectacle. The *bad* few repressed and the *good* ones heard in their just demands: end of story?

Power knows that it isn't so simple. The disgustingly realistic proposals of the domesticated opposition have nothing to say to the millions of poor people parked in the reservations of the market paradise and repressed by the state.

The counter summits got little to no coverage this time. The celebs, apart from Bianca Jagger on this occasion, didn't have anything to do with them.

It relates to the way that people like Bono and friends work against politics and ultimately against democracy — they are engaged in a fantasy of power. They are not interested in 'joining in', they instead want to create novel political conditions. This is a fantasy which is fed from those higher up in the system, in politics and in the international financial institutions. After all, there is value in supporting the delusion of progressive gains happening without struggle.

But the key problem is that labour movements have failed to come to 'broadside' terms with globalization. And counter summits, protests, media interventions, and so forth are not confronting that failure, either in horizontal or vertical modes.

(For an understanding of the recent conflicts roughly between the "horizontal" and "vertical" social movements, especially stemming from the experiences of London European Social Forum organising process, see: www.openspaceforum.net/twiki/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=29&PHPSESSID=6969dd80d4cd273902091fafa412eaae)

Protest for Protest's Sake?

Capitalism is a social relationship and not a citadel for the powerful. Starting from this banality one can begin to confront the question of summits and counter-summits. Capitalism is not simply about powerful men sitting round tables running the world. Capitalism is not something we can gather together from all corners of the globe to protest against. Capitalism is a social relationship played out in our daily lives and that is where it must be prosecuted.

Representing capitalist and state domination as a kind of general headquarters (for the G8, the WTO, etc.) is useful to those who would like to oppose that managing centre with another centre: the political structures of the so-called 'Movement', or better, their spokespeople. In short, it is useful to those who propose merely a change in management personnel. Besides being reformist in essence and purpose, this logic becomes collaborationist and authoritarian in method, as it leads to a centralisation of the opposition movements. This is where the concern of these leftist adversaries — so anxious to make themselves heard by the Masters of the World, investing money and political hype on the summits — comes from.

But this certainly does not disturb the various representatives of the social forums and counter summits — after all, their opposition is also completely formal, consisting mainly of paid seminars (or, for the more lively, in some opportune combative performance with the police or bemusing 'street theatre') in which it is shown that neoliberalism is wrong and humanity is right. But likewise, it is not just a question of how 'radical' one is in the streets — anyone can be and was arrested or detained: illegally, arbitrarily and violently to the extreme.

An Aside: Parlour Games

Scotland's overlooked First Minister, Jack McConnell, shambled along as a minor bystander to events, packing off the Scottish Parliament into summer recess with meagre promises on the right to protest at Gleneagles, unwilling or impotent to commit any further — all the while, knowingly, these rights were being struck off as G8 Alternatives' months worth of talks with the authorities to seek permission for a march and assembly near Gleneagles spiralled into decline, to the point of protests-about-the-right-to-protest successfully displacing what little critical media there was on the G8 with Parliamentary squabble.

A troop of Scottish Socialist Party MSPs stood up in the Scottish Parliament and refused to leave the chamber in silent protest at the failure of the Parliament to act in the defence of the right to protest in any concrete terms — encased as they were in their own concrete and steel barricade. To do so would have exposed its true obsequious relationship to Westminster — maybe that was their point, if so it was missed.

But nor should the SSP be in any way surprised at the reaction: an obliging media tantrum, as if someone had been caught pimping in the Queen's bed chamber, succeeded to deflect attention away from the Scottish Parliament's self-censorship and symbolic limit. Unanimously, all other MSPs voted to sanction and bar the SSP MSPs for one month without pay, affecting their aides and contributions to Party funds, making worse their financial 'crisis' — in this circus daring to seek Parliament act beyond its symbolic ritual and speak out of turn is paradoxically treated as bringing it into disrepute. With this outcome, such stunts have been ridiculed as naïve or as 'gesture politics' by some celeb supporters. Given the media's monologue opposition to the SSP, such stunts (think Mark Steele without the humour or content) have become the required cliched incident for media exposure, inevitably attracting a standard and cliched response — no doubt Geldof and cronies would call it 'consciousness raising'.

The Body Politic

Accepting that the protests themselves were symbolic, we come to the arguments in favour of summit protests: namely, that many have gotten involved in politics after participating in or being exposed to past summit protests, and that some of those who participate for the first time in these protests will eventually develop a more coherent, class-based analysis. But does this justify almost two years of organising meetings and the £200,000 spent? How do summit protests contribute to increasing the sense of solidarity, strength and confidence within working class communities? The simple answer is they don't. Their effect is at best insignificant and at worst damaging, as it associates radical class politics with protests taking place outside daily class struggles, reinforcing the ever-growing walls of the activist ghetto. (There are numerous valuable critiques of *life-style activism* and *activism tourism* — those camped out in Craigmillar quickly moved on, proving it is not enough simply to momentarily claim solidarity; likewise, the Glasgow Southside urban garden, it quickly deteriorated.) Simply because some got involved through that kind of protest, doesn't mean that other people necessarily should, if we can develop more effective political alternatives on our doorsteps. Instead of trying to get people involved in solid class politics by first sucking them in through dead-end, life-style activism, we should try and create and encourage better entry points.

The fact is that summit protests are yet more disconnecting of politics from the lives of working-class people. They are totally symbolic and for all their radical talk don't begin to build a movement capable of challenging capitalism. Our politics are only relevant if we ground them solidly in our everyday lives and orientate ourselves to solve the problems that we and others face through collective struggle to improve daily conditions. 'Emancipation' can only be found in struggle that is informed, and grounded, by class politics. This isn't to say we should reject a global analysis in favour of some kind of 'localism'. It just means that while we have a global political analysis, we realise that the only way we can fight all the problems of capitalism is by fighting it in solidarity where it affects us. As the old cliché goes, "think globally, act locally". And we can't do this through a series of annual symbolic protests with no real substance to them. We can only do it through day-to-day meaningful action — whatever increases confidence, autonomy, initiative, participation, solidarity, equalitarian tendencies and self-activity, and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces passivity, apathy, cynicism, differentiation

through hierarchy, their alienation, reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others — even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.

If domination and dispossession are in every part of society and in daily life, action has no need for staged dates. A subversive 'federalism' of actions and groups, signifies an important rupture with the logic of those who centralise *the enemy* in order to centralise *the struggle* (and render it symbolic). Rather, being in the place where the enemy does not expect you, far from the appointments, is the best perspective. Even in their most interesting aspects, counter-summits limit this perspective. Besides, it seems chasing after such dates is becoming a redundant cliché and a devourer of energy: as soon as one counter-summit ends, centralising preparation for another begins. More and more, the dates and agendas are fixed through the mass media, to the point that if many have demonstrated (for example against the war in Iraq) almost no one has managed to express any practical solidarity with anyone, anywhere else. Often more importance is ascribed to clashes with authority that involve almost exclusively 'militants' as compared to authentic social and class opposition.

The State of Exception

We know why many go to counter-summits — wide-spread direct action and the generalised 'clash with the cops' is only possible in mass situations. Since only in greatly expanded situations can these actions be conducted. But if summits are of fragile importance, why on earth are so many in which decisions are merely being rubber-stamped given such extravagant publicity. All this seems to be a great terrain for the security forces to study and experiment with anti-riot techniques. A kind of homeopathic treatment: power is inoculated with tiny doses of the virus of subversion in order to reinforce its immune system in view of much broader social plagues. It must know how the *bad ones* move and organise themselves, and with which *good ones* it is possible to dialogue in such a way that nothing really changes.

Power is increasingly brazen. On the one hand, The Masters know that the current social conditions, increasingly marked by precariousness and dependence on commodities, can be imposed only through terror: such terror is manifested in the exterior in the form of war and in the interior in the form of fear for the future (for example, fear of remaining without work or through the repression of increasingly widespread social groups). On the other hand, decades of social pacification — in which every despicable act has occurred simply because nothing has been done to prevent the preceding ones, an incredible acceleration of degradation — have given power an arrogance without precedence.

Above all, summits constitute another form of experimentation: seeing what level of oppression the population is willing to put up with. Bringing its armoured patrol cars around every corner, the state informs its subjects that, until proven otherwise, they are criminals; that nothing is secure enough for the policing and technological apparatus; that city planning is the continuation of the social war with other weapons. More than sixty years ago, Walter Benjamin wrote in his 'Theses on the Concept of History' that "the state of exception in which we live has become the rule".

Summits are the concentrated representation of all this, the legal suspension of every right. "What's going on?" the average citizen asks, forced to take a detour in order to go shopping. "Nothing, it's just the anti-globalization people," the woman at the supermarket responds. Meanwhile, they are even privatising the drinking water, while the police are everywhere...