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INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE G8 PROTESTS¹

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The demonstrations against the G8 summit in Scotland in July 2005 had two distinct aspects. Which one you saw depended largely on whether or not you were involved in the protests and actions around the summit. On the one hand, most of those that were involved seemed to have been inspired by what they had experienced, firstly in mobilising for the summit and then during the actual protests. Many felt that the summit protests had been a great success. On the other hand, for most of the rest of the population, the summit protests meant Bob Geldof, Live8 and lots of people (including the Prime Minister!) wearing white wristbands. This represents a massive hijacking of an anti-summit mobilisation to turn it into an effectively pro-government rally.

These two aspects of the summit protests seem a little contradictory, and yet, to properly assess what happened, we need to take both into account. The two opposing appearances of the mobilisations really didn't connect with each other. Those involved in the actions and demonstrations got on and did their thing and paid little attention to the spectacle all around them. Those on the outside saw little else. The mobilisation against the G8 summit was an *activist* mobilisation and did not really manage to reach beyond this. The impression you have of the summit protests thus probably depends on whether or not you were 'inside' or 'outside' – whether or not you were involved and to what extent you identify as an 'activist'. However, we can attempt to take a critical position apart from both

of these aspects, which allows us to see how both realities of the protests are related.²

FROM THE INSIDE

People who were involved with the protests against the G8, who generally came away feeling quite inspired, seem mostly to have been impressed on a practical level. The whole process of organising the mobilisation brought a lot of people together, often creating links and connections on a local level that hadn't existed before. Many were struck by the general level of self-organisation, especially in the rural campsite in Stirling: that thousands of people got together without hierarchy and organised themselves, that everyone pulled together to make it happen in such a short time, under such pressure. People felt empowered by the sense of feeling our own collective strength, making links and building a community. Moreover, the actions themselves bettered many people's expectations in that they happened at all and the police didn't totally stop them. Roads were blocked, the opening day of the summit was disrupted, delegates were delayed and the fences surrounding the conference centre were partially torn down as people invaded the 'red zone' surrounding the Gleneagles Hotel.

However, there were definite limitations to what took place. Dissent!'s programme of events appeared to promise a week-long series of actions. However, in reality, Wednesday's blockades day overshadowed everything else, with far greater numbers and a higher level of organisation. This day was collaboratively organised by its participants, but this was not the case with many of the other events and, with these, a distinct lack of organisation began to show through. Moreover, despite our success on Wednesday, we failed to maintain this pressure and, in the end, the G8 protests became about just one day. This was exactly what some people had tried to avoid, but perhaps reflects an inevitable tendency. The numbers involved in actually trying to shut down or disrupt the summit were also quite limited. In the normal run of British activist politics, it was a very big event – but compared to the numbers who participated in Make Poverty History's demonstration-cum-G8 welcome, it was numerically weak. The blockades could clearly have been much more effective with greater numbers of people. And however impressive the eco-village at Stirling was in many respects, it also reflected this. It was inspiring and good for 'us', but didn't really connect with anyone else – its awful location (not the first choice of the organisers, it should be pointed out) certainly didn't help. Stuck just past an industrial estate, down a dead-end road on the outskirts of Stirling, it was not going to attract a lot of interest from those passing by.

Despite a large number people getting involved locally around the UK and the impressive degree of self-organisation of the whole mobilisation, this involvement largely remained inside the activist ghetto and attempts to reach outside of that and to link the protests to the wider concerns of people in the country

mostly didn't get very far. For their part, the actions against the G8 stuck pretty closely to the traditional summit-demonstration formula. Despite energy, particularly by some of the mobilisation's organisers, being put into trying to think about this beforehand, we failed to come up with anything really radical and innovative.

Thus, within the activist world, the protests can be counted a real (although limited) success. However, this perspective disregards the whole other aspect of the summit demonstrations: the view from the outside. From this perspective, the mobilisation appeared less successful due to the extent of the hijacking by Make Poverty History, Live8 and the government. So, to assess their overall political impact we need to understand how the summit protests' outward appearance came to be.

FROM THE OUTSIDE

Since the WTO protests of 1999, there have been concerted attempts to bring some selected NGOs into the summit meetings of the international elite in an attempt to break the alliance of NGOs, trade unionists and more radical activists which brought gridlock to the streets of Seattle. However, the Gleneagles G8 summit was perhaps unique in the degree of convergence between the host government and the NGOs supposedly protesting against the summit or, at least, lobbying it. Most people from the outside saw only an extravaganza of backslapping between Blair, Brown, Bono, Geldof and various other film and music megastars. This was the other side to the summit protests, with the sudden last minute media onslaught of the Live8 bandwagon totally swamping everything else.

The Make Poverty History coalition, which organised the G8 'welcome walk' in Edinburgh, is the successor to the Jubilee 2000 campaign and has essentially the same goals – increased aid to the 'Third World', debt relief and 'trade justice'. Blair and Brown have both spoken in favour of some of these goals in the past. So their support now is not totally unexpected.³ But the wild card in the protests against the 2005 G8 was Live8 – the huge global rock concert event organised by Bob Geldof, which reached quite nauseating depths in its sucking up to the Blair government. Live8 was considerably less radical than even the most right-wing of the NGOs, who at least were asking for something more than they were being offered. Live8 dropped any veneer of 'protest' and became explicitly pro-government – Richard Curtis, one of the main organisers, even said that the point of all the concerts was to support Blair and lend weight to him against the other G8 leaders.

The convergence between the government hosting the G8 summit and the NGOs lobbying it, presided over by the media and proclaimed a done deal, was something that demanded a response from radicals. If the G8 summit deal were to be seen as some unexpected act of benevolence on the part of the G8 leaders, this would undercut any more fundamental critique of the G8. It was thus neces-

sary for radicals to explain what really lay behind the rhetoric and to explain why Blair and Brown particularly were pushing this agenda.

Why, after many years of accumulating debts for some of the world's poorest countries and the governments of the richest seemingly oblivious to calls for debt relief, was everything suddenly now different? It would seem that multilateral institutions and Western governments profited from the debt. So why were they now willing to consider writing it off?

THE LOGIC OF DEBT RELIEF

There are material reasons behind the British government's championing of debt relief. The writing-off of portions of the debt accumulated by some of the world's poorest countries is in underlying British interests. 'Third World' debt has been useful in providing a lever with which to force recalcitrant governments into line with the current global neo-liberal plan, but this has had the side effect that these countries have been permanently trapped in debt-related financial crises, which have tended to rule them out as potential sites of capital accumulation. Debt relief will lift an economic burden from these 'developing' nations so that they can be properly integrated into the global market. Also, much the same 'levering' role can now be played by the conditions attached to the debt relief as was played by the conditions attached to the loans in the first place.

Britain particularly is pushing this agenda as, due to the importance of finance capital in the British economy (financial and business services as a whole account for over 70% of GDP),⁴ Britain tends to take on the role of representing finance capital and capital-in-general on a global level. As British Chancellor Gordon Brown told a Chatham House audience, 'For the world economy to prosper and for the companies operating in it to have markets that expand, developing country growth is a necessity.' Without this, rich countries were 'unlikely to maintain the growth rates we have enjoyed over the past 20 years.' Brown talked further of 'bringing the millions who live in these countries into the modern productive economy.'⁵

There is no particular disadvantage for Britain in promoting or allowing the 'development' of some of the world's poorer countries because the UK is one of the world's most 'advanced' capitalist countries. It is de-industrialised and de-agriculturalised to a greater extent than perhaps any other country. If formerly indebted countries do 'develop', then the sectors of the economy that they are 'developing' are unlikely to present any competition to the mainsprings of the British economy. Further to this, there is an actual advantage for Britain in that it has much of the finance capital and the corporations that are going to be doing the 'developing'. Britain stands to economically benefit through the companies that will be doing the investing and consulting and running the privatisation programmes, etc. required by the conditions attached to the debt relief.

What people saw of the G8 summit from the outside was a carefully



managed spectacle, at its worst simply fulfilling the role of a giant PR campaign to polish Blair's tarnished image after the Iraq war. It was a cynical exercise in using the language of the 'global justice movement' to sell the British government's global agenda of privatisation and 'free' trade – an extension of neo-imperialism by another name. Many people involved in the more radical end of the summit mobilisations realised this, but despite some valiant attempts, we were unable to do enough to make a clearly visible stand against it.

RECUPERATION AND REPRESSION

Unlike some other summit mobilisations, there doesn't seem to have been a huge wave of state repression and downturn following the Gleneagles G8 – perhaps because our actions were not as spectacular as on some other occasions. The problem for other movements has sometimes been that when the dust has cleared and everyone has gone home, radicals have been left in a much weaker position than before, with a combination of police repression, imprisoned activists to support and a general atmosphere of clampdown and a lack of public support for radicals.⁶ To the contrary, in this situation we *seem* to have been left in a stronger position. This is hard to call of course, but local groups have formed and worked together to organise against the summit, there are new social centres in several towns and cities, and on a national level, there is the new anti-capitalist Dissent! network.

However, the Live8/government hijacking of the protests nullified some of the political impact of the various protests and demonstrations. It was always going to be difficult to make clear our perspective when faced with the massive media onslaught around Live8 and to try and prevent ourselves being seen as merely the radical wing of the whole Live8, debt-relief spectacle – different in militancy, but not in essentials.

As much energy needs to be put into combating recuperation⁷ as into avoiding repression. But less thought was put into this in advance by those involved in the radical end of the G8 protests. The failure to distinguish ourselves from the positions of the mainstream NGOs was compounded by the decentralised nature of the Dissent! network, in that it included people whose politics were barely distinguishable from Make Poverty History, and there was always a danger of things being produced under the Dissent! banner which read as if they had been written by Christian Aid. This said, however, there were plenty of people who realised the necessity of making our position clear and put effort into doing so, but it was always going to be a very uphill task.

Despite this, the hijacking of the agenda by Live8 and the British government did not totally negate the value of the radical end of the G8 summit demonstrations and the mobilisation to disrupt and blockade the summit. Particularly when the reality of the paucity of the deals done at the G8 summit began to come out in the days following, and it became obvious that it was going to be business as usual, the actions of radicals in attempting to shut down and blockade the summit seemed to make more sense. Even if our *ideas* didn't get out through the media, our *actions* did – and they conveyed a fairly clear message of rejection of the G8. A message which was retrospectively justified by the clear pointlessness of much of the mainstream mobilisation, seeking to ask the very people, institutions and states responsible for world poverty to go against their entire past record to try and end it.

RITUALISATION

Taking a stance apart from both aspects of the summit protests allows us to see how the two realities of the G8 protests were related. As they have become more established, summit demonstrations have become ritualised. They are a known quantity – people know what is supposed to happen. There is therefore a tendency for people to come and fulfil their predetermined roles, to do their thing, like they have done before. The ritualised nature of summit protests leads to a disconnection or a disregard for their overall context. Each one is seen as just another in a series, its context being provided by previous summit protests rather than the particular political circumstances surrounding the mobilisation.

There was a real disconnection between the activist protesters and the whole spectacle of the Make Poverty History demonstrations, Live8, etc. Not that there should have been an active engagement with this by the radicals, but it was

as if they were in different worlds. The activists just got on and did their thing, preparing the blockades etc. and Geldof *et al.* carried on with their thing on the level of the media. In some senses, summit demonstrations have become a victim of their own success. They have dogged the leaders of the world wherever they have chosen to meet, forcing them behind giant fences and into more and more remote locations. They have helped extend an opposition to neo-liberal globalisation into the countries of the global North. They have created new links and networks between radicals and given new hope to them, creating new forms of politics and putting 'anti-capitalism' into everyone's heads. But their very success has resulted in them becoming stuck in a ritualised repetition. They have seemingly reached a plateau and their early promise to push beyond this has receded. From being something open, which had the potential to go in any direction, they have settled into a way of being and taken on a form.

But how else could it have been? That is surely the point about so-called 'moments of excess':⁸ that they are points at which possibilities open and anything could happen. Yet, it is in the nature of this state that they are brief. These situations cannot last long. Sooner or later they will settle into something. And the very fact of becoming *anything* rather than being a moment of openness, a jumping off point for an unknown future, must in a way feel like a disappointment. So, unable to go further, having reduced all the possibilities open to a new phenomenon into merely one, you repeat. The process of something becoming ritualised is not unexpected. In a way it is in the nature of revolutionary politics. It is like a failed revolution.

In revolutionary politics, everything you do is an attempt to push beyond the world we live in now, to open up new cracks, new paths, to open up as much space to experiment with alternative forms of life as possible. And until we succeed, we are going to keep failing. That means there are going to be a lot of revolutionary moments and openings that have solidified into institutions or rituals: insurrections that have become organisations, uprisings that have given birth to networks, projects and infrastructure that remain when the initial cause is over.

Every little opening in alienation makes us want more. Things almost inevitably disappoint because we are always greedy for more. These summit demonstrations initially excited a lot of people because they seemed to open new possibilities, make new links and connections; they seemed to show a new way of being anti-capitalist. But they obviously could not go on pushing boundaries forever. They were obviously going to settle down into something that was more or less 'ritualised'.

Given that this is the case, the point is to preserve as many of the high points of a phenomenon as possible and to keep as much flexibility and openness as possible – not to completely ossify. We need to defend the gains that we have made and, when there is a wave of a radical upsurge, ride that wave and somehow



allow it to leave us in a better position when it recedes than we were in before, ready and better prepared for the next thing. One way of preserving the gains of a particular innovation is through ‘ritualisation’. This obviously has disadvantages, which many of the critics of summit mobilisations have pointed out: things become dull and stale, the authorities know how to deal with them more easily, the element of surprise and unpredictability is lost, and they have less potential to go beyond this – they only promise more repetition of the same. However, if the ritualisation of struggles is to a certain extent inevitable, then maybe we also need to look at the other side of this process.

The repetition of a winning strategy, or a form of action that worked, is one way of maintaining and keeping what you have gained. Given the unlikelihood of some tactic like summit mobilisations being able to push the boundaries endlessly, we are left with the choice of either abandoning this form of action or keeping on. The tendency to establish something, some form of resistance and then after it has been successful, to abandon it and move on to something new is quite strong. Something new, a new issue, a new campaign, a new tactic, because it is new and untried still feels like it has the potential to go further and break the mould. But partly this is just a product of its newness. Rather than always chasing after new things, there might be something to be said for a certain amount of ritual.

Historically, there have been ritualised forms of rebellion – folk customs

of attacking the rich and powerful at particular times or in particular ways. These things are not necessarily totally bad – just limited. What’s good about such things is also what is limited in them. When forms of rebellion become ritualised it can mean they are repetitive, stale, stagnant. But also that they are ingrained, have become customary, expected – which can be a big pain for those in power, but also simultaneously limiting for radicals. Things can become entrenched – with both the positive and negative sides of that – a position that is firmly held and very difficult for the enemy to shift but also difficult to move forward from.

It is a measure of the success of these summit mobilisations that they have bred both things – both the ritualisation of protest on the part of the activists and the recuperation of protest by pop stars and the government. These two things are connected because a successful movement is more likely to become ritualised and a ritualised, fixed form of protest is easier for those forces seeking to assimilate the movement back into the mainstream to latch on to. This has in turn generated this two-sidedness to the summit mobilisations and the disconnection between their two aspects.

- 1 *An earlier version of this article appeared in Aufheben, 14. See: www.geocities.com/aufheben2*
- 2 *I was actively involved in the anti-G8 mobilisations and therefore was obviously very ‘inside’. When I talk about taking a ‘critical position’ in order to think about something, I don’t mean that you shouldn’t also be practically involved. I just mean that sometimes it is useful, for the purposes of critical reflection, to mentally step outside of your own shoes for a while. Nevertheless, it is still worth noting that this account of the protests against the Gleneagles G8 summit is limited by my experience as someone involved mainly with the Dissent! mobilisation, the rural Stirling camp and the blockades of the summit on July 6.*
- 3 *For example, in February 2002, Blair called for a major public campaign on the issue of tackling poverty in Africa, saying he wanted a campaign similar to the Jubilee 2000 one on world debt relief. See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1812382.stm*
- 4 *Economist Country Briefing: Britain. See: www.economist.com/countries/Britain*
- 5 *Speech given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, at the ‘Financing Sustainable Development, Poverty Reduction and the Private Sector: Finding Common Ground on the Ground’ conference, Chatham House, London, January 22 2003.*
- 6 *See Days of Dissent: Reflections on Summit Mobilisations for some examples and discussion. Available at www.daysofdissent.org.uk*
- 7 *In Situationist jargon, recuperation is the process whereby a radical phenomenon potentially threatening to the existing order is transformed into something harmless and integrated back into capitalist society. Capitalism assimilates our ideas and actions, dilutes the passion and anger behind them, and then repackages them as something unthreatening or even beneficial to itself.*
- 8 *A phrase used by Leeds May Day Group in discussing summit mobilisations. See www.nadir.org.uk.*