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THE 'BRAT BLOC' AND THE MAKING OF ANOTHER DIMENSION

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I

Another dimension! The process of social constitution of a different reality can only be the creation, the production, of another dimension of living, of another mode of doing and relating, valuing and judging. Children are often said to be living in another dimension. In our experience as parents of a 20 month old child, one of the many things that has struck us is Leonardo's praxis of time. He seems to be living in 'phase time' all the time, his attention being enthusiastically taken by new objects which he points at, by new directions to walk the street's walk. This of course means that we must continuously invent new ways to keep him happy while we take him on our daily trivial pursuits rooted in linear time (going to the shops, washing dishes, etc.) and circular time (the alternating of the rhythms of daily life, going to bed, eating and so on). Phase time is the time of emergence of new dimensions and is as much a part of life as linear and circular time. When we scale up this little domestic vignette to the problems of the making of a new world, what becomes clear is that none of these dimensions of time is specifically the time of revolution, the time of new modes of social co-production. Revolution is a mode of their articulation, a re-articulation of phase, linear and circular time.

II

During the anti-G8 actions in Gleneagles, the Stirling camp was a temporary

autonomous zone in which these three dimensions of time were re-articulated. The participants were the actors of this re-articulation, and participants were also parents and their children.

As parents, the decision to go to the anti-G8 demonstration and, especially, to stay at the eco-village surrounded by police and by media hungry for pictures of 'violence', was not easy to make. We have both been involved in demonstrations and actions before, although we've luckily escaped, so far, the worst of police brutality as at Genoa in 2001. Other comrades were not so fortunate. We both had stories to tell. But for the first time in our lives we were confronted with the non-theoretical problematic of 'safety' concerning those little creatures who live in phase time all the time, and for whom every experience is formative, every event potentially traumatic or enriching. This is, of course, a risk that many children, their parents, friends and relatives around the world face on a daily basis – the brutality and stupidity unleashed against the needs and desires of a social body that does not regard global markets, financial discipline and 'competitiveness' as gods. We heard one journalist asking a mother whether she was behaving irresponsibly by taking her child to the demonstration. What a photo opportunity that could be – a young mother with two children splashed on the front page of a tabloid next to a picture of a cop beating a black-clad activist in a balaclava. We could imagine the headline – 'Shame!' – and the argument – 'Doesn't she know that being anti-G8 means trouble?' Apart from the fact that the journalist did not understand the function of the G8 and the irresponsible effect it has on the lives of millions of children around the world (you know – snap your fingers, a child has just died of preventable disease, snap your fingers again... and so on), from our perspective as parents with children the Stirling camp offered two other responses to that question. First, it was a place of peace. Second, it was a place from which to launch a peaceful war.

That it was a place of peace was obvious to us as soon as we arrived late in the afternoon. We had spent the previous two nights at the 'prison camp' in Edinburgh, a large green area next to the Jack Kane community centre which was surrounded for the occasion by a two metre high fence. All the way along the perimeter, security guards specially contracted in from Wales were monitoring us 24 hours a day. They must have been briefed to behave very politely towards the colourful activists, thus giving the camp a surreal atmosphere – the vibes of what emerges out of social engineering attempts. By contrast, in Stirling we were in a fully autonomous zone, with the corresponding chaotic order, making it a genuine laboratory of social and relational experimentation. We parked our small van next to a large sandpit and put out our awning so that 'Uncle Olivier' who was travelling with us could stretch out his long legs and sleep.

The sandpit was a bonus. Leonardo began to run up and down, interacting with other children, picking up our neighbour's things and having fun. One of the things that parents gain in getting involved in these events is that the



communal dimension here is not a fantasy or an ideology: it affects the body. You tend to relax your control over the child, giving it up, since you know that around you other eyes and other ears are ready to knit the dangers implicit in phase time with the 'responsibility' of linear time, and act if necessary. It is as if as individuals you amplify your powers and diminish your worries by simple virtue of being closer to others, others who are there not simply as bodies having things to do and directions to follow (as when you are close to others in a Tube carriage), but others with whom you are also together in circular time, the time of norms creation. The eco-village, in other words, was a relational field not only at the 'structural level' (organised into neighbourhoods within which to take decisions and coordinate work ranging from garbage collection to direct actions) but also in terms of a widespread communicational tension, a widespread easiness in talking and relating that overcame fixed images we have of 'the other'. Just a few minutes after we arrived, for example, two young people approached the sandpit and started to throw long darts to see how far they could get. They were the spitting image of what you see on the front page of the *Sun* or *News of the World*, hoods up over their heads and a swaggering walk that says 'don't mess with me'. Massimo carefully grabbed Leonardo's hand, since they were throwing stuff in our direction. They noticed Leonardo, and politely asked whether it was OK to carry on or whether they should perhaps throw in the other direction. A middle-aged intellectual meets the image of a council estate 'yob' (as portrayed by the *Sun* and the

Prime Minister's office) and the funny thing is that they can communicate: they share a common discourse, the safety of children!

III

In mainstream financial and economic disciplines, 'risk assessment' is something that entrepreneurs and business people do all the time. When they talk about 'risk', they generally talk about the probability of losing assets or money, following an investment decision by an individual agent. In our case, 'risk assessment' was not something we could do before taking the decision to join the camp and the actions. Because once you are part of an autonomous zone, together with others you contribute to creating a context in which that risk is not only evaluated from a multiplicity of perspectives and needs, but also constructed. You become an actor together with others with whom you socially constitute 'risk'.

The affinity group with parents and children emerged out the need to be a united front against possible police brutality. Many of the participants (mostly women and mothers) had experiences from previous counter-summits and demonstrations which were directly aimed against economic, military and global power, and hence knew to what extent our governments use police forces to repress social movements and keep popular protest away from the 'red zones' surrounding their meetings. Since many of us have been engaged for many years in the movement, becoming a parent hasn't changed the way we regard the G8 and the institutions of global capitalism. Above all, as a parent the anger intensifies, acquires more concrete depth and mixes with a deeper sense of sorrow as you more readily empathise with the pain of the victims of structural adjustments and understand the extent to which the struggles of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world for food, water, health and education also acquires the value of preserving the bodies, spirit, dignity and future of children. No – becoming a parent does not mean becoming 'petty-bourgeois', withdrawing into the overwhelming preoccupations of 'private life' and allowing these self-appointed leaders of the world to decide who can survive and who cannot. We are on the streets with our children, to reclaim our powers, so our children are not raised in isolation or as puppets of the current machine, but grow aware of the systems that articulate our lives and develop their relational powers to build communities with others, however they want to use these powers in their lives.

Our determination to be there meant that the fear of police brutality was something that we had to confront, not escape. Many other parents shared this attitude, and so, along with our children, we put together what was initially called the 'babies bloc'. That name was then turned down because the older children could not identify with the young ones. So the 'children's bloc' was born – although we prefer to call it the 'brat bloc'.

At least fifty families were at the first meeting, called in the middle of the camp by word of mouth, and the issue of 'safety' and how to participate in the

protest and direct action activities became top priority in our agenda. The first important decision was made through easily achieved consensus. While most other affinity groups were planning to leave the camp in the middle of the night or in the early hours of the morning to avoid being surrounded by the police, we were never in any doubt: we would only leave *after* breakfast! Then there was a series of discussions, decisions, and sound no-nonsense problematisations of the issues, tasks, dangers and opportunities. When children and the problematic of reproduction are centre stage, all nonsense of political talk vaporises and decisions become immediately a matter of common sense.

One of the central questions was, of course, how to deal with police brutality in case another Genoa scenario evolved, either in the streets or if the camp was raided. In both cases we hoped the police would not touch us if we visibly stood our ground as a group. In the event of a raid on the eco-village, we would gather in an open area in the middle of the camp, making our children clearly visible to the police. Since rumours and speculations of such a raid were mounting, we made sure that both the media and the police knew that there were children in the camp, and that they knew our actions and intentions. It's funny how in these cases you rely on what is common between you and the police: they have children too, don't they? They know what it means, don't they? There are even policewomen there, aren't there? We remember having read in some tabloid that demonstrators were opportunistically using children as shields. Far from the truth. When mothers and fathers bring their children on to the streets, it is not to use them as a shield. It is to hold individual members of the police to account for their values: we are forcing them to acknowledge or reject that children's safety is a common issue between the two camps.

The following morning, we left in a convoy and drove to the motorway to support the people who were blocking the roads to Gleneagles. We left after breakfast quite excited, some of us with costumes and music. Our van was painted with a 'Make *Charity* History' sign, and some clowns from the Clown Army cheered Uncle Olivier, Uncle David and Leonardo. A few policemen attempted to prevent us from leaving the camp, but this was soon solved and we finally drove through in a festive mood.

What we hadn't foreseen, however, was that when travelling in a convoy you always have to keep an eye on the vehicle behind you and make sure you are being followed. Somehow, the convoy got a bit split up, with some cars driving too fast, and others allowing the convoy to fall apart at roundabouts. Once we passed the slip-road for the motorway where we wanted to go, something went seriously wrong because the police were blocking the entrance. Fortunately, we ended up in a traffic jam in Stirling where we were able to re-group and make our way back to where we wanted to go in the first place following side roads.

When we got closer to Gleneagles, signs of actions were in sight, especially when we saw the 'hooligan faces' of the 'black bloc' of the day (that is, the riot police)

chasing the smiley faces of the 'colourful bloc' (that is, the Rebel Clown Army). It was quite hilarious. One of the many bridges leading to Gleneagles was our demonstration point, and some people stopped there. Others, including us, drifted around the area, following 'road diversion' signs. In the end, we all ended at the demo, via different routes. From the tales we gathered back at the camp at the end of the day, some of the kids and grown-ups ended up in a tea house annexed to a church, some ended up having a picnic two metres away from the riot police, while others invaded the commons next to the red zone. Overall, it had been a fine day, and we all returned to the camp safely and ready for a good night's sleep.

IV

When our friends read this account, they said, 'Hey, that is all fine and great, but we think it maybe needs a concluding paragraph or two, in which you relate your story of the action(s) back to the question of the construction of new-world(s) and the three notions of time.' So, we sat down and thought. Should we end this with a moral of the story which, if followed in its linearity, would make the readers live happily ever after in their revolutionary certainties? Better not. Or should we make our activist readers hesitant, and remind them that the circular time of children's reproduction teaches us that 'struggle' is not only about wearing big boots and shouting big words, but is also about eating breakfast safely and resting our bodies in an environment we have helped to construct? Or perhaps we should end with an emphasis on phase time, and remind ourselves that as we entered the different time dimension in the camp, so upon our return to London, we travelled back to an old dimension of time.

But when we travelled back, the delirium hit us full blast. Indeed, what a return that was! Bombs on buses and the Tube, dead people on the streets and subways of London, scared bus drivers and commuters, trains into London stopped and roads closed... no, this was not the type of phase time we found at the eco-village. Quite the opposite. Here it is then, our friends should be happy now, the story of our actions is related to the question of the construction of a new world in a very simple way: the phase time of the Stirling camp was predicated on life exchanges, while the phase time brought by the bombs in London were part of death exchanges. It seems to us that from the perspective of children's safety they are very different, are they not?