

19

GLENEAGLES, ACTIVISM AND ORDINARY REBELLIOUSNESS

Ben Trott

We are quite ordinary women and men, children and old people, that is, rebellious, non-conformist, uncomfortable, dreamers.

Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos¹

We would live according to the ideas of others; we would live an imaginary life, and to this end we cultivate appearances. Yet in striving to beautify and preserve this imaginary being we neglect everything authentic.

Pascal²

On June 18 1999 ('J18'), over 10,000 people took to the streets in the City of London, storming the London International Financial Futures Exchange (Liffe). This 'Carnival Against Capital' was just one of many international actions held in the world's financial centres, timed to coincide with the opening day of that year's G8 summit in Cologne, Germany. Shortly after the day of action, an excellent article entitled 'Give up Activism' appeared in *Reflections on J18*, a collection of texts which attempted to assess the current strengths and weaknesses of the movement in the light of the events which had just unfolded, and to suggest ways in which it could move forward.³ 'Give up Activism' was well received: it was widely discussed within the movement in the UK, reprinted in several other publications and has been translated into at least four other languages.⁴ But despite this favourable reception, the article's impact, in terms of its stated intent – to provoke

amongst activists a critical reflection on their mode of behaviour – has been negligible. To a great extent, the Dissent! mobilisation to Gleneagles was a case in point of this.

To briefly summarise, 'Give up Activism' argued, six years ago, that despite all good intentions, those who identify themselves as political activists frequently adopt a mentality which hinders the kind of radical social change of which we so often talk. Specifically, in the absence of an overt, generalised struggle, the activist identifies herself as a specialist in social change.

To think of yourself as being an activist means to think of yourself as being somehow privileged or more advanced than others in your appreciation of the need for social change, in the knowledge of how to achieve it and as leading or being in the forefront of practical struggle to achieve this change.⁵

As with all expert roles, activism has its basis in the division of labour, the fundamental basis of class society. So just as the division of labour ensures that medicine and education becomes the sole domain of 'specialists' (doctors and teachers, for example) who jealously guard and mystify the skills they have, rather than common knowledge and tools possessed by us all, the activist becomes the 'expert' in bringing about social change.

A division of labour implies that one person takes on a role on behalf of many others who relinquish this responsibility... The activist, being an expert in social change, assumes that other people aren't doing anything to change their lives and so feels a duty or a responsibility to do it on their behalf. Activists think they are compensating for the lack of activity by others. Defining ourselves as activists means defining our actions as the ones which will bring about social change, thus disregarding the activity of thousands upon thousands of other non-activists. Activism is based on this misconception that it is only activists who do social change – whereas of course class struggle is happening all the time.⁶

That struggle is taking place all around us continues to this day to be largely overlooked by many of those who identify themselves as political activists. More often than not, struggle is understood as 'activism' and activism alone.

Whilst the Zapatistas have been an enormous inspiration to many activists in the UK and elsewhere (the influence of their rhetoric, for example, is clearly identifiable in much of the propaganda produced in the run-up to the Gleneagles summit), their argument that they are ordinary *exactly because they are rebels* has been almost entirely ignored. Class struggle is not some kind of specialist activity performed by 'revolutionaries' alone, it is an antagonistic relation, in which all of us involved in the act of producing (whether we are waged labourers or not) resist capital's efforts to enclose an ever increasing proportion of social life. We do not only struggle in those moments during which we behave like activists – blockading the road to a summit or pulling up genetically modified crops, for example – but whenever we attempt to resist capital's effort to appropriate more and more of our daily activity. We struggle whenever we phone in sick; when-



ever we resist pressure to work harder, faster and longer; whenever we surf the internet instead of inputting data. And when we bunk the train or steal stationery from work or paint graffiti or tags on walls, again we are refusing capital's logic and its rule. This too is struggle. It is only when we begin to conceive of struggle in this broader sense that we can begin to make connections between our own resistance (as 'activists' or otherwise) with that of others.

'Give up Activism' made a similar argument. It explained that the day of action on June 18, which brought together environmentalists, peace campaigners, people who had been involved in the anarchist movement in the 1980s, animal rights activists and so on, made much of the importance of 'making connections'. The problem was, however, that these connections were almost entirely connections between 'activists'. The same, it must be said, was the case with the Glen-eagles mobilisation. Again, important links were certainly made throughout the mobilisation and many 'activist' groups and individuals throughout the UK and beyond are now far more interconnected than they were two years ago. That such connections have been achieved was no small feat and should not be dismissed. As 'Give up Activism' argued, this sort of link-making is 'an essential prerequisite for further action.' It must, however, be recognised for the extremely limited form of making links that it is.

It is not enough to merely seek to link together all the activists in the world, neither is it enough to seek to transform more people into activists. Contrary to what some

people think, we will not be any closer to revolution if lots and lots of people become activists... To work to escalate the struggle it will be necessary to break with the role of activists to whatever extent it is possible.⁷

The author of 'Give up Activism' concluded by remarking that he had no clearer insight than anyone else into the means by which a way of operating, adequate to putting our radical ideas into action, could be achieved. Neither, of course, does the author of this article. There are no hard and fast answers to the problems with which we are confronted today.

There were, however, a number of opportunities which presented themselves, both in the run-up to and during the G8 summit, which we, as a movement, could have made far more of than we did. First and foremost, we squandered many an opportunity to present a radical, anti-capitalist critique of the summit which could have made the mobilisation relevant to the lives of those with the greatest possibility of getting involved – the inhabitants of the region around Gleneagles specifically, and the population of the UK more generally. Dissent!'s propaganda and the image it projected through engagements with the mainstream media – not to mention the majority of the actions it carried out – failed to 'make the links' between the G8 and the way in which we experience our lives on a daily basis here in the UK.⁸ Whilst we often made reference to the means by which the neoliberal policies imposed by the G8 on 'developing' economies have had devastating social and ecological consequences, little or no reference was made by Dissent! to the impact which twenty-odd years of neoliberal reform has had in the UK domestically, or throughout 'developed' countries more generally. I'm not implying for a moment that the expression of international solidarity, or a commitment to defending the Earth's ecosystems, should not remain key focuses for our movement. However, there are very real limits to the potential of any movement which does not organise, to a large extent, around the immediate needs and desires of those directly involved within it.

This is not to suggest, as has so often been argued following events such as the G8 summit, that we need to turn away from 'mass' mobilisations and towards localised struggles, organising in our workplaces and neighbourhoods. Of course, organising on a local level – around issues which can appear mundane in the face of spectacular, international mobilisations – has always been worthwhile. In this sense, discussions of the importance of 'local' relative to 'global' issues, events and struggles have always been premised upon a false dichotomy. As most of us who have experienced them are well aware, 'moments of excess', in which inspiring, mass, collective moments of rebellion (the 1990 poll tax riots, the events of Seattle in 1999 and so on) appear to open up spaces in which anything – briefly – appears possible, provide us with a glimpse of another possible world: a world in which we begin to relate to one another, and indeed to ourselves, in a very different way.⁹ Such events often provide us with the energy and the conviction to continue struggling on a more day-to-day basis with a renewed sense of possibility.

In other words, the challenge with which we are presented is not one of deciding between the local or the global, but of developing a way in which we can organise around those issues relevant to our own lives, and the lives of those around us, whilst *at the same time* constructing global structures into which a multitude of singular struggles can be woven into one which never loses its multiplicity.

GLOCALISE RESISTANCE¹⁰

As I have already explained, throughout the Dissent! mobilisation, much was made of the ills of the neoliberal agenda being pursued by the G8. Nobody involved with Dissent! was under any illusion that the policies being forwarded by the Blair/Brown camp at Gleneagles (with the tacit support of Geldof and co.) were anything other than a cynical attempt to impose upon so-called 'developing' economies, under the guise of poverty alleviation, the very same policies against which the 'anti-capitalist' and 'global justice' movements had brought tens of thousands onto the streets of Seattle, Prague and Genoa.¹¹ What Dissent!, along with much of the rest of the movement in the UK, not to mention the other mobilisations against the G8, failed to do, however, was to 'render political' (i.e. to problematise, call into question, or suggest an alternative to) the means by which we experience work and life under neoliberalism here in the UK.

The period which immediately preceded the formation of the Group of Seven (G7) in 1976 was characterised by a deep economic crisis and a generalised upsurge in struggle. It was a period in which, to cite but a few examples, united action had been taken by students and workers in Paris in May 1968; the Italian 'Hot Autumn' of 1969 had overflowed into the decade-long movement known as *autonomia*; uprisings had erupted in a number of US cities such as Newark, Detroit and Los Angeles; and resistance to US military intervention in Vietnam had grown alongside a whole number of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements worldwide. In Britain, industrial action had brought about the collapse of two governments, and seen the 'three-day week' and the 'winter of discontent', eventually creating a fiscal crisis forcing the government to go cap-in-hand to the IMF. The G7 (which later, as we know, became the G8), was to play a key role in the period of intense political and economic restructuring which followed.

This process of restructuring involved a number of significant transformations within both the mode of production and of political and economic regulation. These developments were to have serious implications in terms of: (i) the recomposition of the working class which they brought about; (ii) the means by which they transformed working practices (and, in fact, the nature of social life itself); and (iii) the possibilities which existed for working class (self-)organisation and anti-capitalist practice. The shift has generally been described as one from 'Fordism' to 'post-Fordism'.

The so-called 'Fordist' era is generally understood as referring to the period



of capitalist development, spanning from the 1930s to the 1970s, in which workers tended to be organised within large industrial processes, producing standardised commodities for mass markets. The name derives from Henry Ford (of Ford Motors), one of the principal proponents of this form of social organisation. Within the Fordist era, jobs were reasonably secure and wage levels relatively high – the idea was that workers should also provide the market for the commodities that they produced.

Fordism is associated with the ‘Taylorist’ organisation of workers within the productive process, which generally involved workers being required to perform repetitive, monotonous tasks. It was based on the notion that the deskilling of workers would not only lead to an increase in productivity (the more frequently one is required to repeat a simple task, the quicker one is able to do it, or so the theory went) but that it would also remove from workers the bargaining power which had assured their collective power in previous eras (strike action, or the threat thereof, is far more effective when carried out by workers who can not be easily replaced).

However, the bringing together of large numbers of workers within one plant or factory, upon which Fordist production processes tended to be premised, provided favourable conditions in which workers were able to organise amongst themselves, either within trade unions or autonomously. Communication amongst workers, many of whom spent upwards of eight hours a day, five days

a week, standing next to each other on an assembly line, was relatively easy, and the common condition within which workers found themselves was far more obvious than it is today. A widespread refusal of work (expressed in terms of strike action, absenteeism, sabotage and so on) became common to an extent which was unimaginable in previous eras in which skilled 'professional workers' were able, to a far greater degree, to take pride in the work that they performed.¹² By the mid- to late-1970s, Fordism/Taylorism had reached its limits. Capital needed a new strategy.

The tendency away from Fordist/Taylorist production processes and towards 'post-Fordist' (smaller scale, more decentralised, networked and flexible) forms of production which followed had a dual purpose. It allowed for capital to respond far more readily to fluctuations in demand and the changing market conditions, whilst simultaneously removing, or at least reducing, the need for large numbers of workers to be gathered in one place, and hence decreasing their ability to share grievances, develop a sense of collective identity and, ultimately, organise themselves into a force able to act in their own class interest.

It was during the time that this shift was taking place that a neoliberal politics began to emerge within a number of dominant economies, most notably the US and UK. The welfare state began to come under attack, legislative restrictions began to be placed upon the power of trade unions (in the UK, for example, so-called 'secondary picketing' became illegal), and state-run industries were privatised. It was only after Britain and the US had gone some way along this process of restructuring that the Washington Consensus,¹³ of which Reagan and Thatcher were the principal proponents, began to usher in a period of more global restructuring.

The result of all this has been a radical transformation, over the past twenty years or so, of the way in which we work here in the UK.¹⁴ This has largely corresponded, albeit to varying degrees, to similar developments in most other European countries, as well as North America. Across the board, jobs have tended to become increasingly *mobile* (we now move between jobs far more quickly than in the past), *flexible* (the work that we do requires us to perform a much wider range of tasks than in the Fordist era), and *precarious* (jobs are becoming increasingly 'casualised' with employment contracts becoming rare and stable, long-term employment increasingly uncommon). Furthermore, as capital increasingly attempts to capture the 'general intellect' (the combined intellectual and creative capacities) of society, the distinction between work and life itself is becoming blurred.

By this I mean that, today, every aspect of social life is tending to be rendered directly productive of capital. To cite but one example of this, in her book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein describes the 'cool hunters' commissioned by big name brands (Levi's, Absolut Vodka, Reebok and so on) to search out pockets of cutting-edge lifestyle and street trends which are then captured, transformed into marketable

commodities and sold back to the youth cultures from which they were first appropriated.¹⁵ The end effect of capital's effort towards capturing ever more of our daily activity – both within and beyond the realm of waged labour – has been the opening up of the whole of society as a potential site of struggle.

The mobilisation against the G8 summit, however, failed to draw attention, in any meaningful way, to the consequences of this neoliberal restructuring of the domestic political economies of most (if not all) of the G8 member states over the past few decades. Likewise, there was a similar failure to highlight existing resistance to the increasingly common (insecure/precarious) condition in which we find ourselves today, or to begin developing and experimenting with new collective forms of struggle adequate to our current post-Fordist reality.

To make the same argument another way, the neoliberal policies against which millions have revolted in the subordinated regions of the globe, mirror policies developed, and still being developed, here in the UK and other 'advanced capitalist' economies.¹⁶ But the current global 'movement of movements', particularly in the UK and particularly in terms of the autonomous area of the movement to which Dissent! belongs, has largely failed to recognise and draw attention to the common basis of our mutual struggles. As such, the potential so often discussed as the global movement of today began to emerge – of creating a global network of resistance in which the various nodes developed and articulated forms of resistance relevant to the way in which they experienced their own lives under capitalism – is beginning to fade away. Counter-summits, in the dominant areas of the globe, are increasingly tending towards becoming a movement which understands itself as acting (primarily) on behalf of, or at least in solidarity with, an oppressed 'other'. Amongst other things, this has been a process in which the activist identity, mentality and mode of operation problematised at the beginning of this article has gradually been reinforced.

PREGUNTANDO CAMINAMOS – WALKING, WE ASK QUESTIONS

The purpose of this article, of course, is not simply to criticise the mobilisation against this year's G8 summit, within which the author of this article was himself involved, but to contribute to a discussion about the potential future(s) of the movement(s) on the basis of a critical reflection on our immediate past. If we accept that political 'activists' are not the only ones who resist the rule of capital and who seek to restore a sense of dignity to their own existence and that of others; and if we accept that the mobilisation against this year's G8 summit largely failed to connect the global 'movement against neoliberalism' to 'ordinary' people's daily lives, then what does this mean in practical terms? What is to be done?

The answer, of course, is that we do not exactly know. All that is certain is uncertainty. Moving forward, in other words, will require a process of experimentation. The phrase *preguntando caminamos* (walking, we ask questions) has

been used by the Zapatistas to describe a new way of thinking about revolution. Whereas traditionally, Marxist-Leninists (and indeed, some anarchists) have presented a preconceived idea of revolution (normally, in the case of the Marxist-Leninists, defined in terms of the seizure of state power) as an *answer*, the Zapatistas have argued that revolution, in fact, should rather be understood as a *question* – one which can only be worked out collectively, through a process of struggle. In this sense, then, we need to look at the past and present action of ourselves, of those around us, and of those much further afield. We need to examine and study the current conditions in which we find ourselves today, and the tendencies and trends which hint towards the way in which things seem to be developing. And on the basis of this, we need to start working out, through constant, open and ongoing dialogue, a way of resisting which is adequate to today's reality. A mode of resistance which enables us to break down, rather than reinforce, the distinction between 'activist' and 'non-activist' so entrenched in both our own self-image and the way in which we are perceived by others.

One of the places from which we could, perhaps, attempt to draw inspiration is Italy and the attempt which has been made, over the last four years or so, to develop in the notion of the 'precariat' a social base for the movement of Seattle and Genoa.

ITALIAN LESSONS

In July 2001 over 300,000 people took to the streets of Genoa as the G8 met within a fortified and militarised 'red zone'. The demonstrators (both 'militant' and otherwise) were attacked with the utmost brutality by the full force of the Italian state (with the tacit support of the world leaders gathered in the Conference Centre). Hundreds were injured, dozens were tortured in police custody and one protester was shot dead. Genoa signalled a turning point in the Italian movement.

While some parts of the movement in Italy have retained a commitment to mass street mobilisations against the symbols of international power, an interesting process of experimentation with both a new political orientation and new organisational forms has been underway. In essence, this has been a process of attempting to identify (and, in part, thereby develop) the emerging subject of the neoliberal era. In other words, an effort has been made to explore the ways in which exploitation takes place within the 'post-Fordist', 'post-industrial', informational economy of today, and to develop forms of struggle adequate to this changing social reality.

Even in the years before Genoa, the term 'precariousness' (or, 'precarity') was used as a way of describing the generalised condition in which European workers were increasingly finding themselves. Precarity refers to the precarious (insecure, casualised, 'teetering on the edge'...) existence of an increasing number of workers involved in crucial reproductive and distributive services; in the media, knowledge and culture industries; and increasingly, throughout advanced

capitalist economies in general.¹⁷ Whilst capitalism, even in the heyday of Fordism, has always relied on precarious and insecure forms of labour – seasonal workers, ‘hobos’ migrating from job to job and city to city, apprentices and part-time workers – they are today an increasingly central feature of neoliberal accumulation. In most advanced capitalist countries, a substantial proportion of the workforce are now employed in part-time or temporary jobs (29.7% in the UK; 27.1% in Italy; 35.5% in Japan; 16.8% in the US; 46.1% in the Netherlands; 30.3% in Germany; 29.2% in France; 25.9% in Denmark). In other words, the condition of precarity is one in which a huge number of us exist today: Italy alone has 7 million ‘flex-workers’, plus an estimated 3 million paid ‘under-the-counter.’¹⁸ Amongst these millions are the vast majority of movement activists in the UK and elsewhere. Organising around the issue of precarity in Italy has allowed those involved in social movements to both render political the conditions of their own existence, and to begin making connections with the millions of others who experience a similar reality in their own daily lives.

Of course, there are a number of real and important differences between the UK and Italy (and, to a lesser extent, France and Spain where the notion of ‘precariousness’ has also been taken up by social movements). First of all, Italy, France and Spain have far stronger syndicalist traditions and strikes – even general strikes – remain reasonably commonplace, at least in comparison to the UK. Secondly, in many ways, the struggles which have emerged in these countries have, at least in part, been in response to a recent change in working conditions (and the conditions of life more generally). These conditions are, largely, the product of neoliberal policies developed in the US and the UK several decades ago and imported far more recently into the Mediterranean countries. That those of us living and working in the UK have become far more used to a precarious existence – juggling jobs, working flexible hours, finding only temporary work – presents a number of very real challenges to those wanting to organise around the notion of precariousness here in the UK. Nevertheless, the ingenuity of the recent struggles in Italy and elsewhere, and their apparent resonance with other issues, suggests that there is still much which could be learned from those already active around the issue.

MAYDAY, MAYDAY!

The largest, and perhaps best known, events organised by those involved in the movement of the precariat in Italy have been the May Day parades in Milan, the first of which took place in 2001. Here, 5,000 part-timers, freelancers, and others took part in a celebratory (but angry) expression of dissent which is said to have provided ‘a horizontal method of cross-networking the Genoa movement with the radical sections of [trade] unionism – thereby enabling an alliance between two generations of conflict.’¹⁹ By 2003, the event had grown to incorporate 50,000 people, and the following year a simultaneous event took place in Barcelona.



During this first so-called EuroMayDay event, 2–3,000 people joined a flying picket, succeeding in shutting down every major chainstore and retail outlet in central Milan, freeing up workers to take part in the parade or otherwise enjoy the day. The organisational process brought together people from collectives across Italy and Spain and included striking Parisian McDonalds workers who had occupied the franchise in which they worked, and the *Intermittents*, a group of stagehands, part-time actors and cultural workers from Paris who had been involved in blockading the Cannes Film Festival the previous year to draw attention to their precarious existence.²⁰

In 2005, following a series of discussions at Beyond ESF, one of the autonomous spaces which were organised to coincide with the 2004 European Social Forum in London, events were held in around twenty European cities, including London.²¹ In Milan, the parade grew in size once more with forty carnival floats and 150,000 people taking part.

Efforts to organise around the issue of precarity have not, however, been limited to the May Day parades and the subsequent EuroMayDay events. A huge number of actions, events and ‘happenings’ have been organised throughout Italy (and, gradually, further afield) with the aim of politicising the precarious existence of life in the age of high neoliberalism.

One such event was a ‘proletarian shopping’ trip to a supermarket in Rome. During a huge demonstration for a guaranteed income on November 6 2004,

around 700 people entered a supermarket owned by Berlusconi to carry out an act of 'autoreduction' (an Italian term to describe imposing a discount from below!), chanting 'Everything costs too much!' Hundreds of people filled shopping trolleys and demanded a 70% discount. Before negotiations could be concluded, however, most of those inside the shop simply left – 'ordinary' shoppers, as well as 'activists' – taking what they needed/wanted with them.²²

The Milanese group, Chainworkers, have been involved with the 'movement of the precariat' since its inception in the late-1990s. On their website they explain, 'Many in the ChainCreW have this strange profile of having a recent union past and a present working in Milano's media industry. Living in a country where commercial TV brought a dumb tycoon to power, we well understand the persuasive power of pop culture and advertising lexicon. Our intent is clearly to advertise a new brand of labor activism and revolt, i.e. subvertise, by using language and graphix geared to people who have no prior political experience other than the wear and toil of their bodies and minds in the giant outlets.'²³

The creation by Chainworkers of *San Precario*, the Patron Saint of the Precariat, is an example of exactly such an attempt to use creativity, irony and subversion. *San Precario* first appeared in central Milan in February 2004 leading a mock procession and a series of surreal prayers in front of a newly opened supermarket to 'celebrate' the generalisation of Sunday work in Italy. During the EuroMayDay events in Milan, *San Precario* reappeared as an enormous statue, built and painted by Milanese theatre temps, leading the parade. Having caught the imagination of a number of people, manifestations of the Saint began to proliferate across Italy, performing miracles and holy deeds on behalf of the precariat. A 'counter-franchise', the San Precario Chain has recently been formed to provide legal information, practical advice and active solidarity to striking precari. Within a few months of the Saint's birth, the national media in Italy began referring to *San Precario* in reference to the radical unions and organised flex-workers. It had become the icon of nationwide conflict.

PRECARIETY IS IN FASHION

A further brilliant example of the media-savvy of the Italian movement is the subversion of Milan's Fashion Week in February 2005. Early on in the week, a group of anti-precariety activists succeeding in carrying out a number of successful actions, disrupting a series of events, including a Prada catwalk show, and issuing statements about the precarious conditions of many of those employed within the fashion industry. The stage had been set for a more high-profile confrontation, and the activists declared that they would disrupt the *Serpica Naro* fashion show, organised by a famous Japanese designer, due to be held at the end of the week. Milan's police duly contacted *Serpica Naro*'s press agent and warned them of the threats which had been made. The agent in turn gave a number of press interviews about the prospect of disruption.

As the *Serpica Naro* team added the final touches to the set of their fashion show, which was to be held in a large marquee in a car park in the centre of the city which could only be accessed via a single bridge, anti-precarity activists began to gather in a nearby social centre. As they slowly made their way towards the event, the police gathered on the bridge were easily able to block their route (the location having been perfectly chosen to facilitate such protection). A stand-off soon commenced, but to the bewilderment of the police the activists were laughing rather than becoming aggressive or demoralised about being prevented from reaching their target. To add to the confusion, the protesters were accompanied by the *Serpica Naro* agent and a group of models. The protesters then produced a document showing that they had, in fact, officially booked the bridge for an event.

Eventually, the truth came out. There was no famous Japanese designer called *Serpica Naro*, the name is, of course, an anagram of *San Precario*. The whole event was an elaborate hoax which had been organised by the anti-precarity campaigners who were now set to turn the tables on the media and fashion industries with their own fashion show. With egg on their face, the police withdrew and allowed the growing crowd to cross the bridge. An hour or so later, the press, who were still largely unaware of the joke, began to assemble for the show. *Serpica Naro's* press agent took the microphone and explained the situation to the gathered media. The spotlights then came on, traversed the catwalk and the show began.

Seven models took to the stage one after another in outfits designed to expose and poke fun at the issues surrounding the precarious nature of employment today. Cameras flashed and TV crews jostled for position. As the show drew to a close, the activists had succeeded once more in their attempt to step outside the confines of that which is traditionally perceived as activism (demonstrations, militant actions, blockades and so on) and to subvert an event with its roots firmly within popular culture. The following day, the media was full of reports from the action and a space had been opened up – not simply within the media itself, but throughout society more generally – in which the issue of our precarious existence within contemporary capitalism could be discussed.

FIRST TIME AS TRAGEDY, SECOND TIME AS FARCE

'Give up Activism' attempted to problematise the role of the activist within the anti-capitalist movement of today just as that movement was coming to fruition. Throughout the 1990s, numerous peace, environmental and animal rights activists had been radicalised through their experience of struggle in direct action campaigns (and in particular on anti-road and other camps); the experimentation with alternative forms of social organisation and the new sets of social relations which emerged amongst those involved; and the direct experience of repression. In addition, a concerted effort on the behalf of a number of people



involved in the movement, particularly those based around London Reclaim the Streets, succeeded in introducing a class-based anti-capitalist politics to the movement, perhaps most notably through the series of solidarity actions organised in support of the striking Liverpool dockers.²⁴ It was only really in the late-1990s that it began to make sense to talk about an anti-capitalist movement in the UK at all.

Of course, this process of radicalisation was by and large to be welcomed. But as 'Give up Activism' pointed out, the problem remained that although the *content* of activism had changed, its *form* had not. The limits of single-issue campaigning had been acknowledged: ecological destruction, for example, became recognised as a logical consequence of a capitalist society, and therefore it was capitalism – as opposed to any particular company, government or piece of legislation – which needed to be fought. But the mode of operation adopted by single-issue campaigners was carried over. Instead of going to Monsanto's headquarters to protest against genetically modified food, then, the early anti-capitalist movement found itself at the purported 'headquarters' of capitalism – the City of London.

Capitalism, however, is of course something quite different from a company, and with quite different vulnerabilities. As 'Give up Activism' explained, activists have often been successful in terms of dissuading companies from pursuing a particular course of action (building a road, testing cosmetics on animals, investing in genetic engineering, and so on) by threatening to make the venture

unprofitable through consumer boycotts, sabotage or whatever. Other companies, such as Consort Beagles or Hillgrove Farm who were targeted by animal rights campaigners, have been shut down altogether. Capitalism, however, needs to be approached in an altogether different way. It would be utterly insufficient (and a doomed strategy) to simply attempt to extend the tactics deployed against specific companies to every business in every sector until 'capitalism' finally packed up and did something else instead. Yet, in a sense, this is what was attempted on June 18 (this was, at least, what the day of action was *perceived* by some as attempting to do), and it is on this basis that mobilisations against international summits have also often been criticised. As one critic of summit mobilisations has pointed out, capitalism does not have a general headquarters, or a centre, it is, after all, 'a social relationship and not a citadel of power.'²⁵

However, whilst it is certainly the case that elements within the counter-globalisation movement have tended to identify international summits, institutions or certain multinational corporations as the embodiment of capitalism (a position which can, should and often has been criticised) what critics have often overlooked is the extent to which counter-summits (and other 'spectacular' mobilisations) have contributed to the development of new sets of social relations and commons. In other words, if we accept that capitalism is a social relation, and one which has escaped the confines of the factory wall and permeated every aspect of society at that, there is no particular reason as to why the cities, streets and golf greens surrounding international summits should not themselves become sites of struggle. The problem, of course, is not really that mobilisations take place around international summits, but that these mobilisations become reified and fetishised as the *de facto* form of anti-capitalist resistance today.

Summit mobilisations, then, should begin to be recognised (by both their proponents and their critics) not as an attempt to strike a blow to the very heart of capitalism, but as an opportunity to catch a glimpse of, experience and help build possible future worlds. This is, of course, not to suggest that life after capitalism would necessarily involve thousands of people living in fields together, taking every decision in interminable spokescouncil meetings and eating their evening meals from 350 litre saucepans. Rather, it is the transformations which take place in the way in which we relate to ourselves and one another which allow us to see the possibilities for a life beyond capitalism: a life outside and beyond exchange relations, based on solidarity, dignity and free association.²⁶ However, to realise their true potential, summit mobilisations – in the dominant areas of the globe – need to be made far more relevant not only to the lives of those in the area surrounding the summit but, importantly, to the lives of those involved. It is in this sense that the Gleneagles mobilisation failed to learn the lessons of June 18.

There are innumerable ways in which this could have been achieved. Our propaganda could, for example, have gone in to far more detail about the extent

to which the simultaneous rebellion taking place on the streets of Bolivia was a response to the imposition of a set of policy prescriptions developed here in the UK.²⁷ A far greater effort could have been made to organise and promote events connected to EuroMayDay, which in turn could have been used as a springboard for further anti-capitalist activity around the G8. A conference, gathering or assembly could have been organised to discuss what it means to call ourselves anti-capitalists today, and what – if we reject the ideologies, structures and organisational forms of the ‘old’ left – we see as the problems, potentials and possibilities for developing a coherent anti-capitalist *strategy* today. In many ways, however, identifying the missed opportunities around the G8 is the least challenging aspect of the process of reflection through which our movement now needs to pass (which is not to say that it is not important – learning lessons for the next time around is essential). More challenging is to work out what needs to be done in the meantime.

GIVING UP ACTIVISM, WITHOUT GIVING UP

‘Give up Activism’ drew heavily on leading Situationist Raoul Vaneigem’s critique of the leftist ‘militant’ of the ‘68 era.²⁸ It argued that today’s anti-capitalist activists often fall into the same trap as the ‘militant’ of previous decades. It was this aspect of the article’s argument which was singled out for the most criticism, and the author himself admitted later that the parallel was, perhaps, an inappropriate one to draw.²⁹ Whether or not this is the case, one parallel which certainly exists is the notion that ‘consciousness’ needs to be brought to the masses: ‘If only people knew about the horrors of capitalism – about starvation and climate change – then they would join us!’ The first step towards giving up activism (whilst, of course, maintaining a commitment to radical social transformation), then, would involve a rethinking of the way in which those of us who perceive ourselves as belonging to this movement relate to those perceived as ‘outside’.

While it may well be the case that most people are largely unaware of the intricacies of the relationships between the G8, the IMF and the World Bank; or that ‘aid’ programmes have often been conditional upon the adoption of structural adjustment policies, this is perhaps not as important as some tend to think. The reason people do not get involved with social movements is not because they see nothing wrong with the world, but because they do not see much hope for changing things. Thatcher’s famous maxim, ‘There is No Alternative’, appears in many ways to be true. Of course, not on an essential level, but certainly on a practical one. Our task, then, as individuals, collectives, groups and networks committed to the notion of another possible world is to work out a way of acting which allows us to organise around our own needs and desires, to demonstrate solidarity with our friends and neighbours as well as with movements and struggles elsewhere, and in the process develop structures which allow us to amplify this resistance.



Whilst the Old Left lament (or, at times, blindly deny) the passing of the Fordist era (a time in which unions appeared to offer a means of workers organising in their own collective self-interests and where a basic standard of living could, more or less, be assured) and the death of the Soviet Union (as a demonstrable ‘alternative’ to capitalism), the rest of us need to begin developing an understanding of the *possibilities* as well as the *problems* with which the neoliberal era presents us. To be sure, the highly fragmented, insecure and precarious world of today does not immediately appear to present us with favourable conditions within which a revolutionary movement could develop. But perhaps, as well as looking to contemporary Italy (or Spain, or France, or...) for inspiration, we need to look a little further afield and a little further back in history.

Exactly 100 years ago, in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) set out to organise a transient, mobile and largely immigrant American workforce.³⁰ Their intention was to organise all workers, of all industries into One Big Union. IWW militants migrated between sites of struggle, agitating and offering political and material support to workers as and when it was needed. Through promoting direct action (including strikes, sabotage and ‘go slows’) at the point of production, they were enormously successful in winning improved living and working conditions and in fomenting both solidarity and a revolutionary spirit amongst workers.

In many ways, the IWW offer a model for a way in which we – as a move-

ment – could begin to organise around issues related to the conditions in which we live and work, whilst building on the experience, resources and sense of possibility that we have developed through our involvement in social movements. A French group calling themselves the Solidarity Collective (*Collectif de Solidarité*) have had real successes in terms of the contribution that they have made to struggles in and around Paris over the last few years.³¹ For example, when five McDonalds workers were sacked after being accused of stealing from the till, Collective members joined picket lines and carried out solidarity actions (such as occupying, blockading and shutting down various McDonalds outlets around the city) leading to the workers being rehired and others granted concessions. Similar successes were achieved when the Collective took part in the campaign to improve the working conditions of a group of Senegalese and Malian women working as cleaners for ACCOR, a multinational hotel chain. The group joined regular occupations of the hotel chain foyers, distributing leaflets to staff and customers letting them know about the conditions in which the striking workers were employed (most were hired on a week-to-week basis with little or no sense of job security, and many acquired work-related injuries for which they received no compensation) and calling for solidarity. Benefit concerts were arranged and material support given to the strikers who were eventually rehired, offered regular hours and paid 35% of their regular wages for the time in which they had been on strike.

The Industrial Workers of the World, as their name implies, recognised the necessity of organising on an international level. In reality, however, they never really existed, in any meaningful way, outside of North America. Today, as the circuits of production, distribution and exchange increasingly traverse the entire globe, the need to organise on a global level – for our resistance, in other words, to become as transnational as capital – is increasingly clear (and the possibility of this actually becoming the case is greater than ever before). Perhaps, then, we require something along the lines of a Post-Industrial Workers of the World in order to provide an open, horizontal structure within which a multitude of resistances can coordinate themselves; an organisational form which, as was the case with the original IWW, allows for all of those involved in acts of social production to ‘plug in’ to the network as and when they need, to draw upon resources, experience and the solidarity of others, whilst constructing basic democratic forms of organisation on both a local and a global level.

Of course, such an initiative would not necessarily involve entirely escaping the role of the activist (and thereby the limitations of that role). Neither does it appear that a complete transcendence of the role of the activist/militant has been achieved in the movements which have emerged around the notion of precariousness described above. As ‘Give up Activism’ pointed out,

Activism is a form partly forced upon us by weakness... it may not even be within our power to break out of the role... It may be that in times of a downturn in struggle, those who continue to work for social revolution become marginalised

*and come to be seen (and to see themselves) as a special separate group of people. It may be that this is only capable of being corrected by a general upsurge in struggle.*³²

Whether or not this is the case, any serious efforts towards radical and lasting change require that we attempt to push the boundaries of our current limitations and constraints. Whether or not another world is possible, then, may not be entirely down to us. In which case, our first priority should be breaking down the division between 'activist' and 'non-activist' so that we, at least, do not continue to reproduce the current one.

- 1 La Journada, August 4 1999. Translated and cited by J. Holloway in *Ordinary People, that is, Rebels* (2005), available online at: http://spip.red.m2014.net/article.php?id__article=138.
- 2 Cited in R. Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Rebel Press, 2003).
- 3 For a detailed account of the 'Carnival Against Capital', see 'J18 1999: Our Resistance is as Transnational as Capital' in *Days of Dissent* (2004) (available at www.daysofdissent.org.uk), or 'Friday June 18th 1999: Confronting Capital and Smashing the State' in *Do or Die: Voices from the Ecological Resistance*, 8 (1999) (at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no8/index.html>). Reflections on J18 is available online at http://www.infoshop.org/octo/j18_reflections.html.
- 4 'Give up Activism' was published in French in *Je sais tout* and *Echanges*, 93, Spanish in *Ekintza* Zuzena, German (available online at <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/new/givupact.htm>) and Portuguese in N. Ludd, *A Urgencia das Ruas: Reclaim the Streets!*, o Black Bloc e os Dias de Acao Global (2003), a Brazilian publication.
- 5 Anonymous, 'Give up Activism', in *Do or Die: Voices from the Ecological Resistance*, 9 (2001). Also available at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/activism.htm>
- 6 *ibid.*
- 7 *ibid.*
- 8 There were, of course, a number of attempts made by people involved with *Dissent!* to make these connections. The *Carnival for Full Enjoyment*, held in Edinburgh on Monday July 4, was exactly such an attempt. It was, however, an event to which a relatively small number of resources were devoted by *Dissent!* and with which a small number of people were involved with organising. For more on this, see L. Molyneux 'The carnival continues...' in this book (p.109–118).
- 9 The phrase 'moments of excess' was coined by Leeds May Day Group. See <http://www.nadir.org.uk/Moments%20of%20Excess.html>
- 10 The term 'glocal' has been adopted by a number of counter-globalisation groups to describe a way of organising, and of acting, which attempts to engage in local struggles whilst connecting them to regional, inter-regional, international and global processes. The important role that summit mobilisations play in facilitating international collaboration between locally-based groups and struggles has been set out by Glocal Group Hanau in *Gipfelperspektiven: Gipfelmobilisierung als ein Teil transnationaler Organisation und Kooperation* (February 2005) (at <http://libcom.org/forums/viewtopic.php?t=7031>).

- 11 *To be sure, Dissent! were far from alone in making this recognition. Many of those involved with G8Alternatives and some of the smaller NGOs involved in the Make Poverty History coalition made a similar argument, as did a number of left/liberal journalists and commentators. See, for example, G. Monbiot's 'A Truck Load of Nonsense' in The Guardian Tuesday June 14 2005 (at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,5673,1505927,00.html>). On the tensions and contradiction within Make Poverty History, see S. Hodkinson's 'Make the G8 History' published in Red Pepper (July 2005) (at www.redpepper.org.uk).*
- 12 *The term 'professional workers' has been used by a number of political theorists to describe the class of well trained workers (primarily craftsmen (they were, generally, men) and skilled machine operators) who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were able to use their privileged position to achieve a degree of autonomy and authority. It was the professional workers of this era who largely formed the vanguard of the workers councils and soviets which sprang up in Germany, Russia and elsewhere.*
- 13 *The Washington Consensus is the name given to the set of neoliberal policy prescriptions imposed, first of all, upon a number of Latin American countries via a series of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes.*
- 14 *The means by which working practices in the UK have been transformed is documented in, amongst other places, A. Gray 'Flexibilisation of Labour and the Attack on Workers' Living Standards' in Common Sense, 18 (1995) (at <http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3843/gray1.html>).*
- 15 *N. Klein, No Logo (London: Flamingo, 2000), pp.72-73.*
- 16 *G. Caffentzis and S. Federici's A Brief History of Resistance to Structural Adjustment (2001) presents a detailed account of resistance to neoliberalism in the subordinated regions of the globe. The text is available online at http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Globalization/Brief__Hx__StrucAdj__DGE.html.*
- 17 *For a good introduction to the concept of 'precarity' and the struggles which have emerged around the issue see: Greenpepper Magazine: Precarity 2004 (2004) (at www.greenpeppermagazine.org); Mute: Precarious Reader (2005) (at www.metamute.com); or the Precarity (2004) DVD-zine produced by P2P Fightsharing (more information at: <http://republicart.net/disc/precariat/dvdprecarity/>).*
- 18 *All figures cited in this section are from A. Foti 'Mayday, Mayday: Euro Flex Workers, Time to Get a Move on' in Greenpepper Magazine: Precarity 2004 (2004), p.23.*
- 19 *Foti, op. cit., p.21.*
- 20 *For more about the struggle of the Intermittents, see A. Capocci et al. (2004) 'Culture Clash: The Rise of the Flexworking Class in Europe' in Greenpepper Magazine: Precarity 2004 (2004; p.33-37).*
- 21 *For a report on the action in London, see www.precarity.info.*
- 22 *For more, see: Hydrachist, 'Disobbedienti Ciao' in Mute: Culture and Politics After the Net, Issue 29 (Winter/Spring 2005) (at www.metamute.com).*
- 23 *<http://www.chainworkers.org/dev/who>.*
- 24 *For an example of the argument made by some of those involved with London Reclaim the*

- Streets as to the relation between workers' struggles and the radical ecological movement, see 'Why Reclaim the Streets and the Liverpool Dockers?' in *Do or Die*, 6 (1997) (available online at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no6/rts.htm>). For a detailed account of the emergence and development of the anti-roads and radical ecological movement in the UK, see 'Down with the Empire! Up with the Spring!' in *Do or Die: Voices from the Ecological Resistance*, 10 (2003) (available online at <http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no10/empire.htm>) or *Aufheben*, The Politics of Anti-Roads Struggle and the Struggle of Anti-Roads Politics: The Case of the No M11 Link Road Campaign (available online at http://www.geocities.com/aufheben2/auf__mckay.html).
- 25 Some Roveretan Anarchists 'Notes on Summits & Counter-Summits' in *Where is the Festival?: Notes on Summits and Counter-Summits* (2003), p.18.
 - 26 This is not to privilege summit mobilisations per se over other forms of struggle. There have, naturally, been counter-summits where repression, a low turn out or any number of other factors have prevented any effective action being carried out. In these cases, participants have often been left to feel powerless against the enemy with which they are confronted. Likewise, numerous other phases and periods of struggle – the British miners' strike of the 1980s, the anti-poll tax movement, the anti-road camps of the 1990s – have allowed strong communities of resistance to emerge. In the current era, with a downturn in struggle, summit mobilisations, however, appear as a rare opportunity in which another way of being can – briefly – be experienced.
 - 27 In the weeks leading up to the summit, hundreds of thousands took to the streets of Bolivia, effectively shutting down La Paz, the country's capital, by blockading the only motorway leading into or out of the city. The rebellion had been sparked off by threatened privatisation of natural resources (water, gas and oil) as a result of the conditionalities attached to the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative, a 'debt relief' package designed and delivered by Gordon Brown. For more about the roots of the rebellion in Bolivia, see J. Whitney 'Bolivia's Laboratory of Dual Power' in *Left Turn Magazine*, 18 (2005) (available online at <http://leftturn.org/Articles/Viewer.aspx?id=625e-type=M>).
 - 28 Vaneigem's text to which 'Give up Activism' referred was *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, cited above.
 - 29 The critique of 'Give up Activism' referred to here is 'The Necessity and Impossibility of Anti-Activism' which was originally published in *The Bad Days Will End!*, 3 and is available online at: http://www.geocities.com/kk__abacus/ioaa/necessity.html. The 'Postscript' to 'Give up Activism' was published alongside the original article in *Do or Die: Voices from the Ecological Resistance*, 9 (2001; p.166-170) (see: http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/activism__postscript.htm).
 - 30 For an introduction to the IWW, see S. Bird et al. (eds) *Solidarity Forever: The IWW – An Oral History of the Wobblies* (Chicago: Lakeview Press, 1985).
 - 31 For a detailed account of the activities of Collectif de Solidarité see L. Goldner 'Marx and Makhno Meet McDonald's: What does 'precarious' struggle look like in practice?' in *Mute: Precarious Reader* (2005).
 - 32 Anonymous, 'Give up Activism', op cit.