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ANTI-G8 RESISTANCE AND THE STATE OF EXCEPTION

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Protesters recovering from the week of demonstrations, marches and blockades surrounding the Gleneagles summit will have come home to a wide spectrum of reactions to what they had been doing and what they thought they had achieved. This was a question too easily monopolised by cynicism and overshadowed in the haste to ‘interpret’ the latest wave of terrorist attacks. In considering a response, however, it should at least be acknowledged that what protesters *did* over the space of a week was all the more remarkable for their adaptation to, and resilience against, conditions that resembled the tactics of a police state. Everywhere ‘unauthorised’ protesters congregated, travelled, and demonstrated, they met with permanent surveillance, stopping and searching, numerous arrests, and Section 60 detainment by riot police. In a particularly symbolic instance, the eco-village in Stirling, containing up to four thousand people, was put under temporary siege by riot police following a day of coordinated disruption of the routes transporting delegates to Gleneagles and at the perimeter fence itself.

The pattern of such tactics cannot have truly surprised anyone who has been protesting in the UK during the past five years. Section 60 of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act – the right to stop and search in anticipation of violence, ordered for up to 24 hours – has been used extensively to pen in protesters for several hours at a time, such as the ‘exclusion zone’ imposed on parts of central London on May Day 2000. The Terrorism Act 2000 also came into effect

for the first time in Scotland for the G8 summit, allowing police to detain protesters for up to a week without charge. The July 4 Carnival for Full Enjoyment in Edinburgh also witnessed the use of automatic street barricades that fold out to create temporary cages to confine protests at a moment's notice. The policing of public demonstration, it seems, simply extends a much wider and culturally established notion of public space as the controlled environment, able to respond instantly to the threat of disorder. The police cordon has become a necessary piece of town planning itself, the barrier that aims to protect 'the public' from unauthorised political expression. And whilst the cordons and arrests in Scotland provoked outrage and panic, there was, on the other hand, a feeling that *we have seen this before*. The routine ascription of 'Designated Protest Zones' is now assimilated within the logic of pre-emptive strike, since the *threat* alone of protest outside the space designated to it has become, in the eyes of the state, intolerable.

POLITICS OF THE CAMP

The development of this style of public containment bears important consequences for the future of public protest in general, no matter how confrontational social movements intend to be. It therefore merits a closer look at its underlying logic. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben provides some insight with his use of the concept of the 'state of exception' intrinsic to the European model of sovereignty.¹ Historically, a sovereign's mandated role is to be able to suspend the rights and guarantees of its citizens in the greater interest of security, and of law itself. The strong arm of liberal state sovereignty as much as dictatorship, therefore, must live in this contradiction of both being the law and suspending the law, in order to monopolise violence. The right of exception is '...the point of indistinction between violence and the law, the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence.'² Today, in the context of the increasing erosion of civil liberties under the rubric of the 'war on terror', it is becoming clear that such an exercise of extrajudicial authority has become *unexceptional*. We witness its most visible expressions in the creation of a new breed of Camp X-Rays, detention centres, *zones d'attentes*, exclusion zones, non-places for a new generation of terror suspects, asylum seekers and others suspended from the protection of the law. The camp, writes Agamben, is 'the space that opens up when the state of exception becomes the rule...the structure in which the state of exception is permanently realised.'³ Whilst it began its constitutive definition with the concentration camps linked to colonial struggles 100 years ago (the term 'concentration camp' refers to those set up by the English to contain the Boers at the beginning of the twentieth century),⁴ it is still materialised whenever people are reduced to 'bare life', stripped of any rights or values, 'a space in which power confronts nothing other than pure biological life without any mediation.'⁵

Such a condition is not far from the status given those terror 'suspects' caught within the military logic of a 'total war' or a 'state of emergency.' Without



wanting to confuse the experience of Camp X-Ray prisoners with that of protesters' treatment by the police, we should suspect that the same blurring of distinctions between criminal and suspect, terrorist and potential terrorist, is creeping into the domain of public protest. The presence of the camp in the midst of 'democratic' societies is only one, albeit powerfully symbolic, tool to remind citizens that we are all caught up in a state of war. As a consequence, the use of 'special powers' by police such as the 2000 Terrorism Act is becoming the increasingly 'normal' experience of public order situations, those, for instance, as far removed from terrorist threat as street carnivals. As Magnus Hörnqvist has written recently, both the macro level tactics of the war on terror and the micro level introduction of public order tactics have eroded the distinction between criminality and the creation of a 'perception of insecurity', leading to the ability for *norms of behaviour* – including the right to protest peacefully – to engender violent repression. This shift from the language of *law* and *rights* to that of *security* and *protection* – exacerbated by a climate of intense paranoia surrounding the language of 'terror' and 'anarchy' – is also the new paradigm in which political protest must function.⁶ Politics, it seems, must be removed from the public eye for its own protection, and so walls must be erected. And if the public wishes to *be* politics, to represent an alternative democracy opposed to that of the G8, for instance (as opposed to being 'history'...protesters were never advised to Make Poverty Political) then they need to be protected from themselves.



The containment of dissent in this way parallels the hidden performances of global power. Forced to retreat to a remote hotel in Scotland surrounded by five miles of fencing, riot police and the army, the world's most powerful today bear witness to the new mode of sovereignty: out of sight, out of mind. Its secrecy represents the retreat of politics itself to an ivory tower removed from the public glare. What can be the remaining symbols of power and hierarchy to the growing dissatisfaction of the masses *apart* from those fences and barriers themselves, the illegality of borders and barriers? In a liberal, laissez-faire political culture in which public life is carefully kept away from political life, in which public debate and rationalisation is confined to spectatorship and media consumption, the Gleneagles protest in *all* its guises represented trespass in the eyes of neo-liberal government.

RECLAIM SPACES!

Against this backdrop of a culture of exclusion zones and sieges, the disappearance of both the dissenter and the centres of power from public interaction, what *can* be achieved, to return to the original question facing the protesters? For one, it must never be forgotten that the logic of this siege culture is already rippling through the rhetoric and practice of resistance itself, the imperative of *territory* directing its survival under repression. In the very language of 'direct action' protest, there is a popular awareness of the perpetual threat to mobility, an acceptance that today's political skirmishes are fundamentally a contestation of space. The idea that resistance has strength in numbers is well known to be relative to the ability for those numbers to scatter, to work autonomously, to resist enclosure. And in Scotland protests responded tactically simply by the fact that, spread as they were over so many actions and geographic locations, there was never one group to be contained and defeated. Blockades of various delegate routes into Gleneagles, as well as protests at the perimeter fence, were spread out around the surrounding area. Whether people chose to march, sit down, or break down physical barriers, the fundamental police tactic of containment, unsuited to the countryside, was stretched to the limit of its resources. Whatever conclusions people come to in assessing whether the protests around Gleneagles were 'successful', therefore, should at least acknowledge that a broad rejection of the principle of containment and disappearance was evident throughout. In a global order often described, in its financial and power flows, as 'deterritorialised',⁷ this battle for space is a powerfully symbolic as well as practical one. The palpable desperation of protest that wants to 'reclaim the streets' and 'reclaim the commons', is a significant reminder that even if global capitalist power has transcended geography, the popular consensus upon which it is founded still *lives* and works in those spaces. And what people are beginning to see in those spaces is an increasingly paranoid and violent erosion of the freedoms they were instituted to protect.

Global protest movements *are* waking up to the disembodied reality of

global politics, through an exploration of mobility and fluidity of bodies. And if this is true, it is surely what invites a greater dialogue between the desires of more mainstream demonstrations such as the Make Poverty History march, the left-wing coalitions like G8Alternatives, and the more confrontational attitudes of direct action groups like Dissent! For it is potentially not so much the desire to be *seen* and *heard* that constitutes the 'publicness' of public protest, but the constant promise to be present and evade disappearance, to make known its political desires wherever power meets. In this case, the desires latent to each movement might not be as alien to one another as some people assume. As Hardt and Negri put it, the 'multitude' is a source of constant antagonism to Empire precisely because of its fluidity of movement across boundaries, *and* of ideas across social identities.⁸ This idea continues to express itself in the critique of borders and fences, the containment and separation of social subjects. Organisations such as the 'no borders' campaigns against asylum deportations, international solidarity actions, or symbolic protests like the Camp X-Ray reconstruction in Hulme, Manchester, are, in their own ways, attempts to expose the encroaching borders that are placing us all under siege, 'protecting' us from the space of politics. Not only can such actions uphold the moral outrage that is appropriate to it, they also contest the containment of dissent itself. Perhaps more than any other summit protests, the experience in Scotland took the popular anti-capitalist slogan 'We Are Everywhere' to its most practical application, an attempt to defy the confinement and dehumanisation of political action.

- 1 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* trans. Daniel Heller-Rozen (California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.20. Agamben's interest in the 'state of exception' is derived principally from the German political scientist Carl Schmitt. Central to Schmitt's legal theory was the 'paradox' that the sovereign is 'at the same time outside and inside the juridical order' (*ibid.*, p.15). It therefore resembles the notion of the state of siege or of emergency powers in the French and English traditions. See also, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004) pp. 7–10.
- 2 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 38
- 3 Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino (London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) pp. 39, 40
- 4 *ibid.*, p. 38
- 5 *ibid.*, p.41
- 6 Magnus Hörnqvist, 'The birth of public order policy', *Race & Class*, 46 (2004) p. 37
- 7 See, for example, Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984).
- 8 Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*.