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AFTER GLENEAGLES: WHERE NEXT?

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As with any major event for which activists have been planning, deliberating and organising for many months, the 'after' of Gleneagles has been difficult for many to come to terms with. The meeting of the G8 gave focus to activist efforts after the London European Social Forum, serving as limit horizon against which to measure the degree to which the 'alter-globalist-movement' (AGM) could match or even – hope upon hope – exceed the protests elsewhere. The protests duly came and went. Global big-wigs were momentarily reminded of the existence of the 'little people' whilst the 'big people', the Geldofs and Bonos, had their day in the media sun. There was a flurry of interest, and then nothing. The media gaze moves on to some other pressing issue: Hurricane Katrina, Islamist 'fanaticism', the Ashes, Sven-Goran's preposterous team tactics.

It would no doubt be easy for DIY and non-affiliated activists to be depressed about the G8 protests and what they herald as far as the state of UK activism is concerned, particularly as gauged on the basis of media coverage. So many hopes and expectations are built up in preparing for major summit protests that the realisation that the world remains almost exactly the same once the protests have finished can be difficult to bear – it *should* be difficult to bear given the effort that goes into them. Not much of any tangible note was achieved – so it seems. It would be entirely reasonable to slump into gloom and to wonder whether all the effort was really worth it. It is evidently time (once again) to confront the big questions.

What was Gleneagles for? What is radical disaffiliated activism for? Where are we going after Gleneagles?

On these occasions a healthy dose of context is usually needed. I want to use this space to try to put Gleneagles in a larger perspective so as to provoke some reflection on the larger aims and causes of which the protests are, arguably, a part.

Firstly, if we measured the success or failure of summit protests by their ability to influence directly or even indirectly what is going on inside, then we need to disabuse ourselves of the notion quickly if we are to avoid slumping individually and collectively into depression. Summits are not crucial to the business of global elites. They could quite easily do without them, and do so through the use of video-conferencing and alternative forms of interaction. Most of the business at such summits is already decided at mini-summits of flunkies and functionaries, in the ongoing and permanent negotiations of inter-governmental and supra-national bodies, sometimes meeting in session, but largely in the constant bureaucratic business of paper-swapping, diplomacy, business meetings and so forth. Summits are set-piece shows where what has already largely been decided is signed off by leaders who are themselves mere representatives of much larger and complex aggregate interests. Protests don't influence summits, and summits rarely influence global elites.

On the other hand, the idea that summits do matter in some tangible, measurable fashion is perhaps the key fallacy of 'summitism' (the view that summits are major occasions for elite deliberation and governance and hence that shutting down summits represents a substantive and meaningful blow to global elites). One of the more glaring examples of 'summitism' was the TV drama, scripted by Richard Curtis, *The Girl in the Café* shown on BBC just before the launch of the G8. It painted the participants of such summits as real-live decision-makers with the fate of the world almost literally in their hands. Watching the drama unfold we have the impression that an impassioned plea or a voice of reason in this world of madness could make a difference. We should know otherwise. Not only are decisions arrived at well in advance of the summit. They are arrived at less by the interplay of distinct moral or ethical positions, than by a rather cruder combination of perceived national interest, elite perceptions of necessity and the fear of the backlash unleashed by global forces beyond the reach of the participants (transnational corporations, global media barons such as Murdoch, party donors and so on).

This is not to say that decisions are wholly immune to ethical and moral considerations. Clearly the 'climate of opinion' is an important, if not determining, influence on the business of summits. Can we suppose that Blair and Brown would be quite so excited about the fate of the 'developing' world in general and Africa in particular were it not for the fact that ordinary men and women, opinion-formers, newspaper columnists and such like had been hammering away at the topic for some time?



Politicians are pragmatic individuals. They like to address issues that matter to constituents. This is particularly the case if it comes at zero or near-zero cost to themselves. (Banning fox hunting is the now classic example of a zero-cost measure that mattered to large swathes of the electorate but about which politicians were famously indifferent.) Politicians don't like to be thought of as immoral or unethical, even if they recognise in Machiavellian fashion that necessity is at the heart of the political. They would prefer to be doing things that are 'right and good'. They become uncomfortable if what they are doing is seen as 'wrong and bad'. But this alone will not stop them doing wrong and bad things, as the example of Britain's support for the US invasion of Iraq makes clear. However, continuing to act in ways that are widely perceived to be wrong and bad will lose politicians elections.

To move back to the point, summit protests are not merely symbolic but also substantive forms of protest – but the 'substance' here is what is contested. Stopping summits, making them expensive to police and putting elites in discomfort, has never and will never have direct impact either on the ability of elites to agree measures or on the decisions themselves. Even the Seattle protests, which at one level are still the most successful of the large-scale protests of recent years, had an only marginal impact on the proceedings of the WTO. Business that would otherwise have been attended to at the Seattle meeting was picked up and dealt with electronically and at subsequent mini-meetings and summits.

The notion that global elites are anything more than momentarily inconvenienced by summit protests is one that has to be dispensed with – and quickly. This is not the same as saying that summit protests are unimportant and that the energies that go into protests against them are wasted. Far from it. Protests are absolutely crucial, but for reasons that one rarely hears articulated, not least by activists themselves, perhaps because many are inclined (still) to think that summits are literally or figuratively centres of power and influence. They are not, and activist actions will not make a difference at this level at all. How then can summit protests make a difference? How more generally can DIY and disaffiliated activism come to matter – as it does?

A number of points come to mind here:

Summit protests help disaffiliated activists to connect and act together. Summits get activists to focus on something that requires collective mobilisation. They get activists to talk amongst themselves. People who might be busy with other projects will drop those things to join with others, thereby enlarging the scope for cooperation. People meet, they discuss, they interact, they plan actions, they work together. They might not have met if it were not for the fact that a big summit was coming to town. Without summits DIY activism is more difficult to coordinate. Coordination against something concrete like a summit is more immediately practical and focused than coordination against ‘neoliberal governance’ or ‘global poverty’. Whilst these larger campaigns are absolutely crucial, they are ongoing, continual aspects of the present and the future of the present. A summit is an event which draws activists together, making the otherwise disaffiliated conjoined to something larger than themselves and to their particular causes and concerns.

Summits are one of the key moments when what is otherwise disaggregated crystallises. It is the moment when what otherwise appears to be multiple, heterogeneous, fuzzy becomes singular, distinct, unified. Summit protests are moments when the ‘multitude’ – Hardt and Negri’s otherwise preposterously metaphysical notion – gains a measure of validity. The idea of a movement moves from the virtual to the actual; from conjecture to reality.

Summits produce a kind of agent – the ‘alter-globalisation movement of movements’. There are not that many moments when the movement is made present to itself (social forums are another, certain festivals and carnivals have been in the past). Such moments are therefore important reminders that the movement can become an agent, can matter, can act, can coalesce. Summits are moments when what is otherwise molecular becomes molar – and in turn when the molar, the sense of the movement is affirmed as molecular – as composed of a multitude of different groups, causes, activisms, passions.

Summit protests can radicalise participants. Such protests already involve many who are radical, who oppose the system and everything that it represents. Many who attend protests are not very radical, but they often become so in the course of the protest. This is so for a variety of reasons.

The first of these is that protests can radicalise individuals who might otherwise be unreceptive to engaging with the nature of global rule, poverty and powerlessness. People are exposed to new ideas, new analyses, connections are made, examples multiplied, oppressions exposed. Protests are moments when the sheer scale of the misery inflicted on the world is the stuff of discussion and interrogation. To attend a major protest is to encounter that which for many is hidden, outside of normal experience, only momentarily glimpsed.

Protesters become a kind of proxy for those who cannot be there, cannot be heard. Of course this produces its own danger; one that is all too well known in the history of radical movements. This is thinking that at one level one can represent these multiple oppressions, can somehow embody them. It is to imagine that one transcends the contingent and bounded existence of who we are, to embrace the multiple oppressions of others. One cannot escape who and what we are, thus involvement evokes a responsibility as well as mode of participation. We can and should listen and learn from others.

We should not presume to know, but rather, should use protests as a means of finding out more. But protests provoke a 'becoming radical' in ways that cannot be imitated elsewhere – and certainly not in the confines of a student bedroom or stripped pine suburbia. Protests are a kind of active learning, a pedagogical moment, for those who might otherwise be locked into the media blackout against reality.

Protests are often the first taste of what it means to be confronted by state power in its most immediately concrete, direct and unmediated form. The idea of the police or the state as being an agent of the power of the ruling class is laughable to many who have not attended a major protest. Yet the sheer intimidating power of the police is on these occasions startling, even for the most obdurate supporter of the status quo. Participants at recent pro-hunting and Countryside Alliance events have spoken about having been made to feel like an antagonist, an outsider, an enemy of law and order. And of course such protesters are treated with kid gloves compared with anti-capitalist protesters at major summits.

To be photographed, videoed, ridiculed, humiliated, herded into human pens, trampled on, barged into, charged, detained is to enter a different world. A world where the police and the state appear not as the neutral, benevolent guardian of our eternal interests, but agents of elite rule. State power is revealed for what the honest apologists of capitalist rule always asserted it should be: a harsh 'night-watchman' whose job it is to beat back the feckless, indolent mob. To activists nothing is new here. Activists know from bitter experience about the nature of state power. However to those who are just starting down the road of activism, such experiences are often revelatory moments of radicalisation. The world is turned upside down and we begin to see that the Thatcherite rhetoric of 'enemies within' is not just rhetoric: they mean it.



Summit protests are the most visible reminder of the conflict and antagonism at the heart of contemporary globalisation. It was pretty easy for Francis Fukuyama to present his claim in 1989 that we had reached ‘the end of history’, that fundamental antagonisms and arguments had disappeared from contemporary politics, that liberal-democracy (aka liberal-capitalism) had won and that we could settle down in our ‘air conditioned comfort’. There were few major protests concerning the state of the world. His claim had the veneer of empirical respectability. Of course radical activists knew this claim was nonsense and that beneath the surface of the administered world of transnational brands and corporations lay something much less edifying and much less easily controlled.

But people’s view of the world is heavily mediated by an elite-controlled media spectacle that covers events as opposed to analysing issues. Anger, disillusion and alienation are channelled into affirmative actions or at least in ways that do not disrupt the normal functioning of the machine. The media controls ‘bad news’ by focusing on human interest stories and of course on ‘events’ such as elections, accidents, disasters and the like. Summits conform to the logic of a media agenda in that they are events – time-limited with leaders, and thus photo and interview opportunities, gravitas, and the impression that something is ‘happening’. Globalisation, global poverty, exploitation, degradation of the environment do not ‘happen’ in this sense and thus can be safely ignored by most parts of the media, until and unless they intrude as events (as with Hurricane

Katrina). But summits happen and so do summit protests – they intrude in the order of things. They need to be covered and some explanation has to be given for why there are protests. Most of the time these ‘explanations’ are pithy, incomplete, wrong or misguided, and any opportunity to present protests in a negative light is usually grabbed with both hands. But protests are visible reminders that the ‘everything is right with the world’ rhetoric that marked elite discourse between 1989 and 1999 is fragile, incomplete and questionable. Summits induce some reflection, if not necessarily action on the part of many ‘ordinary’ men and women. But reflecting is a prelude to acting.

Needless to say, the mediatisation of summit protests produces its own problems and dilemmas. One of these is that some are attracted by the prospect of the ‘protest as spectacle’, ignoring the substantive political message that most activists wish to project in favour of behaviour that will fall straight into the hands of a hostile or uncomprehending media. This is the stance of what Vaneigem aptly terms the ‘active nihilist’, the individual who is attracted to the image of himself (it is usually a him) as ‘protester’, ‘militant’, ‘outsider’. One of the successes of recent summit protests in this country is the degree to which such ‘activists’ have been side-lined, leaving the media scratching around forlornly looking for the ‘action’. More generally, however, there would be even less mainstream coverage of the kinds of issues that matter to activists had it not been for the summit protests.

Summit protests embody the hope for something better. Related to the above, summit protests are suggestive in non-conformist, idealistic and utopian ways. They embody the impossible hope for something better. Utopianism used to be laughed at by activists of all shapes and forms, and in particular by those busily ‘building’ the po-faced Party-movement. As the Party-movement form receded into the sepia-tinted gloom, so something was needed to punctuate the present and to remind us that Tomorrow does not have to be like Today; that there are values, beliefs, ways of living, modes of thought and action that are radically at odds with ‘common sense’ and ‘received wisdom’. Summit protests involve the creation of spaces in which people can experience a different ethic or way of doing things directly – from the convergence spaces and hubs involved with the organisation of protests and action, to the conferences and workshops that accompany them, to the eco-villages, camps and settlements that spring up to sustain them. To DIY activists it is a no doubt banal point that such spaces represent something outside the commodified, routinised exterior world. Some activists might know little of this ‘exterior’, such is their facility to move between activist spaces and places without having to encounter the ever-increasingly one-dimensional world in which the ‘muggles’ live. Yet for initiates, first-timers, the curious, to interested on-lookers, neophytes, unaffiliated students, even journalists and those covering protests, such spaces are reminders that protests are not just protests – they are not just events. They are moments where such experiments in living and working

can be approached directly. This matters to those who might otherwise be put off by media reports of violent protesters, black bloc 'fanatics' and lawless activists. The ability to enter spaces, interact with activists, learn about campaigns, protests, the cause of poverty, be different, think different is key. They are little suggestive islands in a sea of 'normality', in turn part of an archipelago of hope.

My suggestion is thus that summit protests matter, but not for the reasons that many activists and commentators offer. The G8 met and it deliberated. It decided matters that had already been decided, give or take some details on aid. The existence of protests made little direct difference to the proceedings of the summit at all – nor could they have. Power does not lie in the summits themselves and summits are not arenas of contingency or unmediated choice, except in a very marginal sense. If protesters managed to close down every summit from the Gleneagles G8 meet onwards, it would make little difference to the ability of elites to impose their vision of the world on the global majority. It would inconvenience them, it would make the business of creating consensus around certain decisions perhaps more demanding to achieve, it would deny the global media the chance to look at and examine global issues against the backdrop of important people and important buildings. It would not change global politics. It would not make the lives of the poorest easier. It would not undermine global capitalism.

Where however the summit protests did make a difference and continue to make a difference, is to the much more nebulous and difficult battle for the hearts and minds of those without whom real and fundamental change to the structure of global capitalism cannot take place: ordinary men and women. Lasting change will not be effected by challenging global elites in some literal battle for the space of power. Storming Gleneagles and taking Bush and Blair hostage might have made for an entertaining Eisenstein-type distraction, but the notion that storming parliaments and disrupting global media events will deliver power to the masses is a gloriously antique notion that we can dispense with in short order. Whether one likes it or not, we are in the current conjuncture engaged in what in another part of the radical jungle is called the battle for 'hegemony' – a 'war of position' as opposed to a 'war of manoeuvre'. This is to say, we are in the midst of a struggle to transform the thoughts, ideals and beliefs of our fellow human beings so that substantive change to the structures, institutions and processes of power can be contemplated on terms that are dictated by us as opposed to global elites.

Here, however, we tread on the toes of a number of orthodoxies concerning the future of the AGM. For most radicals, the place of power is still vital to the movement and to effecting change to global politics. We need to capture power. In order to do that we need to build the Party-movement that will enable those with the needs and interests of the global majority at heart to change the global balance of power. Summit protests are on this view a decorative form of resistance, at best an occasion to summon the masses behind a ringing message of

revolt, at worst, a case of 'hysterical' or spectacular politics whose results are meagre to say the least. The 'real' business of radical activism should (of course) be building a revolutionary Party – or, even more grotesquely, taking back ownership of the Labour Party so that it can be the vehicle for a radical transformation of British society. Hence the critique – so often aired by Marxist groups, radical democrats and fashionable neo-Leninists such as Slavoj Žižek – of 'summitism', 'spontaneity', 'movementism' and other crimes besides.

As my account above indicates, summit protests and the forms of activism and engagement that underpin them should not be regarded as 'second-best'. They are not gestural, ineffective or impotent sideshows in the real battles that confront us. Summit protests are the product of a kind of activism that prefigures and embodies a wholly different kind of politics, a politics of 'everyday life', one that seeks to transform the way we envisage power and relate to it. This is a hidden, subterranean politics when compared with the muscular revolutionism of Trotsky and friends, but it is one that gives shape and substance to what can indeed seem an apparently random and sporadic set of revolts against the system. In theoretical terms it is a praxis of the kind analysed by Max Stirner, Deleuze and Guattari, Vaneigem, James Scott, Foucault, Piven and Cloward, de Certeau, Hakim Bey and most latterly John Holloway, in short by those whose vision is one informed by the necessity of real and far-reaching change in the way we think about power. What kind of politics is this?

One that challenges, undercuts and supplants the idea that the task of the politically radical is to capture power as a macro-social 'thing'. What disaffiliated activism has sought is the transformation of power, not the creation of a machine that imitates the very exclusionary dynamic of the world we are seeking to change. This involves empowering ourselves and others. It is to take power back from those who would annex it in institutions and processes that are removed from those who are subject to them. It is to generate micro-social resources – a praxis in which proposals, legislations, plans and projects are generated immanently, rather than imposed by virtue of office, hierarchical positioning, celebrity, strength, wealth or any other transcendent quality. It is to generate micro-communities, micro-spaces in which people are heard, react, learn, speak, listen, take decisions, participate and above all create power through their own interactions, solidarity and collective desire to do something, achieve something, run something.

One that seeks to resist incorporation into an ideology of liberation/emancipation/universal good. As DIY activism has long demonstrated, it is enough to have a sense of what one is against to effect a mobilisation, whether that is against human rights abuses, racism, imperialism, war or neoliberalism. 'Being against' is not weaker than 'being for', whether that 'for' is anarchism, socialism, communism or Moonism – it is the condition that allows anarchists, socialists, communists, and indeed Moonies to act together in the name of a commonly perceived injustice.

Such forms of action may be temporary, contingent, fragile, but they are also inclusive, open, and negotiable – qualities distinctly lacking in traditional ideological crusades. They also necessitate or make desirable a dialogue of a tactical kind. People need to discuss, come together, formulate plans. They have to enter into a dialogue with each other, to listen to each other as opposed to listening to the One who will tell us what to believe, what the line is, where we are expected to line up. It necessitates spaces of negotiation, learning and listening. Being against is a step towards something else: becoming radical – desiring change, desiring a reappropriation of the world for the world.

Radicalism is not necessarily an *ideological* stance of opposition. One doesn't need to have read Marx, nor Bakunin for that matter. One needs to desire change, and desire is not the preserve of the well-read, the theorist or the 'strategist'. It is the quality of those who have seen and heard enough. As Subcomandante Marcos puts it, this encompasses everyone who believes in as simple a value as human dignity. Dignity and respect for what is distinct, particular, idiosyncratic – not just the 'working class'. No analysis or special training is required. What is required is a willingness to open one's eyes to the state of the world, at the simple causes of misery and powelessness, and the desire to do something about it.

One that seeks to nurture and promote the movement through alliance, affinity and association – not Party-movement building. Protests are the most visible reminder that at the core of a disaffiliated politics is the sense of impermanency and contingency of contemporary activism. Activists come together for *this event, this moment, this summit*. This is of course a source of huge frustration for the 'vertical' wing of the AGM which argues that without the permanent and institutional crystallisation of activist demands in the Party form the movement cannot build and conquer power. Verticalists are confusing problem with cure. The problem is the lack of voice, the lack of participation and opportunities to act – the cure is not to close off these feelings of powerlessness and exclusion, but the opposite: to recognise that no amount of Party-building will substitute for forms of interaction that fully meet the need to be included, to count and be heard. What is required is rather the generalisation of inclusive forms of activism so that they are not isolated moments, as the (media) focus on summits can sometimes make them appear to be.

In the UK context, there are already many ways in which such a process of generalisation is taking place: through social centres, squatting, the creation of Indy-media, disaffiliated yet conjoined protests across a range of issues from animal rights to welfare reform and protection of immigrants and asylum seekers. A web of interactions already exists that facilitates and encourages coordinated responses to a dazzling array of matters of pressing concern. Of course the results are uneven and can seem depressingly minor when compared with actions elsewhere.

Yet we know there is something linking the various efforts of radical activists across the 'developed' and 'developing' world – whether or not they attain head-



line-grabbing status. It is the generalisation of forms of radical inclusivity, one that moves from the site of protest to the site of economic power and communal governance. The autonomous social centres of Leeds and London are not the autonomous zones of Chiapas, and the various experiments at collective and communal economic activity scattered around the country are not the same as the large-scale reappropriations of economic power of the kind found in Latin America. Yet they manifest the same *desire*: to take control, to make power everyday, to make democracy something immediately lived and experienced as opposed to a form of 'governance' to which we are subject. It is the transformation of power as something held by distant elites, to something that is creative, immanent, subservient. It is to make power a collective-communal resource as opposed to a distant Leviathan that looms over us. Those of us who think such a characterisation of the aims and goals of the AGM is valid are not alone. Far from it. As the title of the book says, 'We are Everywhere'.

In view of the above it would be quite wrong in my opinion to regard the hegemonic battle both within the AGM and between the AGM and the wider public, as something that disaffiliated activism is struggling unsuccessfully to influence let alone win. On the contrary, as I think is evident, the last decade has seen an enormous upsurge in efforts to resist not only neoliberalism, but also those ideologies that promise to *overcome* neoliberalism and implant some monotone blueprint of human happiness on activist efforts ('the counter-empire').

This is a revolt against power as macro-social sledgehammer, as something that is captured and used for 'our' benefit, leaving us as powerless as we were before. If this is what protests are supposed to build, then we have to reject building in this arid, alienating and uninteresting way. We need instead to continue to generalise, nurture and promote forms of self-activity and self-creation.

This is not, of course, an easy task nor, in the context of advanced industrial society, is it one that is easily imagined or envisaged as creating the conditions for a reappropriation of what is rightfully ours: our own power of individual and collective invention. It is one that confirms that the widespread pessimism concerning the possibility of radical activism is misplaced. But the conditions that gave rise to the expectation of the Party-builders are exhausted. Class-consciousness, ready-made practices of collective production, clear and demarcated group identities have collapsed under pressure of individualisation, atomisation and differentiation. Of course whereas some theorists draw notoriously conservative conclusions from such developments, telling us that all we can hope for is some sort of half-baked semi-contractual welfarism, it is possible for us to construct a quite different account of the potentials contained within such otherwise bleak sounding prognoses.

Individualisation means an escape from the inherited mantle of received roles and subservient identities. Atomisation means the end of traditional and usually submissive sectionalisation of society under conditions of extreme division of labour. Differentiation means a greater desire to be heard for what one is and what one wants to become as opposed to the subject of group or class representation. Such tendencies are at the very heart of the problem which animates the AGM and yet which seems curiously ignored by those who imagine that barking out a correct analysis to the hapless masses will enable the coalescence of identity, interest and consciousness needed to create the Party. It will not, and such efforts are likely to go to waste or to become the basis for authoritarian-populism.

The point is that the AGM is itself multiplying, diversifying, fractalising and becoming *more* not less 'chaotic'. One only has to recall 2004's World Social Forum in Mumbai and the incredible diversity of aims, demands, groups, needs, interests and voices to remind us that a genuinely inclusive politics means going beyond the passive acceptance of the denumerable, the already known and established. Inclusivity means being open to the new, the unpredictable and yet-to-become. This in turn implies that the stance of the AGM should be less one of building in the name of some fixed future (communism, anarchy, 'another world' in the singular) – but a task of proliferation and multiplication of the networks, actions and resistances and experiments that are already being generated, spawned, nurtured so that other *worlds* become possible.

Summit protests are thus to be differentiated from Party-building by an acknowledgement that the time to act is not tomorrow or at some point to be

decided by the central committee. The future is already here; the future is the future of the present, the future of the myriad molecular projects, plans and experiments we see developing in force and influence across the world. Protests are part of that present, and we can use protests to remind ourselves and the rest of the AGM that we have outworn a *strategy* – whether Trotskyite or radical democratic – in favour of a *practice* of resistance in the here and now. We have moved beyond being told what to do and how to do it – whether by elites, vanguards, theorists, or ‘strategists’. There is a movement, there is a network, there are protests and many opportunities for making voices heard. We don’t need to change the tune; we need to turn up the volume.