



# **DON'T TRY TO BREAK US— WE'LL EXPLODE**

*The 2017 G20 and the Battle of Hamburg: A Full Account and Analysis*



*The 2017 G20 summit provoked the most intense clashes in Germany yet this century. We were there providing continuous coverage; in the month since, we've synthesized the reports from Hamburg to produce a complete chronology and analysis. This is an epic story of state violence and popular resistance on a scale rarely witnessed in the US and northern Europe.*

*Cover photographs: Demonstrators on the roof of Rote Flora / the high point of the action on Friday night, at the edge of the no-police zone.*

You can find this text online at <http://cwc.im/HamburgG20> complete with extensive video footage, citations, hyperlinks, further reading, and additional maps and photographs.

**Executive summary:** The police attempted to use brute force to isolate and terrorize all who came to demonstrate against the G20, but in the process, they turned a large part of the population against them and the city spiraled out of control. This reminds us that the most important events take place on the margins of any given conflict—the spread of rebellion is more significant than the actions of avowed radicals. The police strategy underscores how central old-fashioned coercive violence is to the power of the G20 leaders; yet once again, we saw that a determined populace can outmaneuver even the best-trained and best-equipped police. If 20,000 fully militarized officers using everything short of lethal force can't maintain order at the most important security event of the year in Europe's richest nation, perhaps it is possible to imagine revolution on the horizon after all.

So we must begin by honoring the courage of those who stood up to the G20, whether by organizing demonstrations, housing visitors after the police raided the camp, marching in the black bloc, offering medical care to victims of police aggression, or interrupting the sanctimonious narrative of "Tidy Up Hamburg" afterwards.

Yet every victory brings new challenges. While no one expected Hamburg to succeed in standing up to the police and creating a temporary autonomous zone in the midst of what was essentially a military occupation, this achievement gives right-wing authoritarians and their fearful liberal accomplices an excuse to push for even greater state control. As a consequence, some people—especially those who were not in Hamburg—formed a conspiracy theory that the authorities intentionally permitted the police to lose control of Hamburg. This old allegation resurfaces every time people get the best of the police; it is an automatic reflex for those so accustomed to state control that they attribute all events to the will of a monolithic, omnipotent authority. In this chronology of the G20 protests, we'll put the facts at your disposal, and you can decide for yourself what happened.



*Standing up to the G20 in Hamburg.*



*The rebellious streets of Hamburg.*

## What Was at Stake

The 2017 G20 summit was the first global meeting of the Trump era, bringing together authoritarians like Putin and Erdogan with old-fashioned neoliberals like German chancellor Angela Merkel and the French President, Macron. In this context, protests were bound to happen. But would protesters legitimize the neoliberals in the course of opposing the nationalists? Would they meekly submit petitions—or oppose the entire structure of global governance? And would Germany permit the protests to occur, or try to suppress them?

While southern and eastern Europe continue to suffer economic crises and even France has been subjected to austerity measures, Germany remains one of the last outposts of 20th-century social democracy and distribution of wealth. In contrast to the volatile social movements prevalent elsewhere, German radical politics is still based in a counterculture descended from the 20th-century autonomist scene. Although there is a tradition of ritualized street confrontations, German police are perhaps the most experienced and effective in all of Europe when it comes to quashing unrest. If any European nation could maintain order during the G20, it should be Germany.

In an act of colossal hubris, the German authorities treated the G20 as an opportunity to see how much they could impose on one of Germany's most rebellious cities. Neither they nor the ones who mobilized against them foresaw how this would turn out.

## Location, Location, Location

Germans were flabbergasted that Angela Merkel chose to host the G20 summit in Hamburg, a historically left city with a vibrant radical scene. And not just anywhere in Hamburg, but right in the center of the St. Pauli district, full of anarchist and autonomous projects, houses, social centers, graffiti, and famously radical football Ultras.

Following the 2001 G8 summit, in which demonstrators inflicted significant damage on Genoa and riot police murdered Carlo Giuliani and seriously injured hundreds more, the next global summits were held in much more remote locations. In 2002, Canada located the meeting two hundred miles north of Idaho—in Kananaskis, population 221. The next year's G8 was situated in the French village of Évian-les-Bains, population 8822. In 2004, George W. Bush put the meeting on Sea Island, Georgia, population 298. Tony Blair chose the Scottish highlands of Gleneagles for the 2005 G8—and even there, faced considerable resistance.

World leaders have been less cautious in picking locations for the G20 summits, however. The 2009 G20 summit in Pittsburgh saw significant confrontations; so did the 2010 G20 summit year in Toronto, Canada, at which demonstrators wrecked an entire business district.

When it comes to meetings in Germany, Hamburg was by far the riskiest choice in decades. The 1999 G7 was held in Cologne, a couple months before the infamous WTO summit in Seattle. In 2007, the G8 occurred in Heiligendamm, a remote seaside resort—and people rioted in Hamburg all the same. In 2015, the G7 closed themselves up in the Bavarian castle Schloss Elmau.

No matter how remote the locations or how high the walls of the palaces, people climbed the mountains and walked through the fields to protest and blockade the meetings.

One thing was certain: whether it took place in the heart of St. Pauli or in the wastes of Antarctica, the summit would not pass unopposed. So why Hamburg? Why ask for trouble?

Bewilderment about the choice of the location created a tense atmosphere in the weeks before the G20, as stories spread about leftist radicals coming to burn down the city. One out of every twelve police officers in all Germany was to be deployed to Hamburg.



*Burning barricades around Schanze on Friday night, July 7.*

Some suspected that the authorities wanted to set the stage for massive riots that could be used to reinvent an “internal enemy” in the image of the leftist radical. This would enable the government to pass stricter laws against “extremism” and mount additional attacks on autonomous political projects. Indeed, Germany enacted a law against encrypted mobile communication just days before the summit began. According to this theory, if the riots didn’t happen by themselves, agents provocateurs would ensure them.

Another theory suggested that Hamburg was intended as a training ground. For years now, German police tactics have been exported to southern battlefields like Greece; Germany has also created environments in which to prepare for urban military conflicts. Some imagined that the German authorities had chosen Hamburg to test urban warfare strategies. This would explain why police were invited from other nations around the EU.

Finally, many were convinced that the authorities picked Hamburg in hopes of finishing off what had once been an uncontrollable district. Over the preceding years, Hamburg had been targeted to host three different mega-events, including the 23rd Ministerial of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the 2024 Olympics. As we documented in our coverage of Brazilian social movements, mega-events offer the state an opportunity to militarize the police, steamroll unruly neighborhoods, and expand the infrastructure of repression. Hosting the G20 summit in Hamburg could only be understood as a deliberate attempt to foment conflict and hasten gentrification.

All three of these narratives circulated in mainstream and social media. Regardless of why Hamburg was chosen, the authorities did their best to spread the idea that the city would be so militarized that protest would be impossible. As Merkel took over the presidency of the G20 in September 2016, the location of Hamburg was set—and forces of all kinds began to mobilize.

## **The Invasion: Hordes from the South**

*“The first cops are already out,” my friend informed me a week before the G20. “It’s all over the news. The country is outraged by their behavior.” I was anxious to check on my comrades in Hamburg, thinking the police must have used excessive force on locals.*



*A small portion of the crowd at the Welcome to Hell demonstration.*

*The news told a different story: “About 220 officers from Berlin were released from duty by the Hamburg authorities after they threw a wild party that involved public sex, brawling, urinating in a group, and a bathrobe-clad officer strip-dancing with her service weapon.”*

*“So this is what outrages the good citizens? When the cops beat us, everyone will thank them for a job well done.”*

Hamburg was set to be one of the biggest police operations in recent German history. Local police were joined by the Federal Police, the Federal Criminal Police Office, and the police authorities of other federal states. By the end of the summit, more than 20,000 police officers were in the city.

*“How people are injured will depend on which cops they run into,” a local explained as we walked through St. Pauli. Days before the summit, police were everywhere, driving through the city in long caravans of riot vans and buses. Looking at their license plates, I reviewed my German geography.*

*“These are special forces from Bavaria,” my friend explained, gesturing at a group of cops. “Especially brutal, and they hate leftists. Watch out for the cops in black helmets who have different colored dots on their uniforms. Those are snatch squads.”*

*Usually, such police stay in the back, appearing only when conflicts become intense. In Hamburg, they were walking the streets with masks on and helmets ready days before the summit began, projecting an image of force. From the moment I arrived in the city, it felt like an occupied zone.*

In the buildup to the G20, the police were never clear about how many officers they were bringing in. But they went into detail describing the militant radicals who were allegedly heading to Hamburg, spinning a story about extremist hordes invading the North from the South.

Germany invoked a special exception to the Schengen rules that permits a country within the Schengen system to reestablish controls to deal with security threats. The strongest new controls were set up on the borders with Denmark and Belgium. They already had border controls in place to the south following the “migrant crisis” of 2015-2016. Subcultural and racist profiling was already taking place at gunpoint on the border between Austria and Germany.

Next, the police presented a detailed media report on how they planned to treat prisoners, even taking journalists into the cells for a photo shoot. They



*Police getting on well with the locals in Hamburg.*

*The Invasion: Hordes from the South*

had built an impromptu prison to hold up to 400 arrestees, complete with interrogation cells and temporary courtrooms. Germany spent almost a million dollars building these facilities, hiring 130 judges to be available day and night from the end of June until the end of the summit.

A few days before the G20 meeting, the police released a melodramatic video about “homemade weapons” they had supposedly seized, warning that “we can assume this is only a small fraction of what is still hidden in cellars and garages around Hamburg.” They were building the narrative that clashes were inevitable, as “movements have been observed by the autonomous scene in the direction of Hamburg,” and framing themselves as the victims. They alleged that “8000 radicals” from France, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, and Greece were planning violent demonstrations.

Here we see the orientalist construction of the Other, a nocturnal creature from the South that grabs hidden weapons from Hamburg’s garages as it advances to burn and conquer the German city. We heard the same narrative from the Italian government after the clashes in Genoa in 2001. The Italian minister for internal affairs claimed that the clashes during the G8 were planned and organized in Slovenia at a “left-terrorist” No Border camp a week before the summit. The images of the hordes were the same—except that 15 years ago, they came from the East and North.

The discourse before the G20 summit in Hamburg was so familiar that it felt as if the police were getting ahead of the story, hastening to justify any deaths or serious injuries that might occur. Because this image clashed with the everyday experience many Hamburg residents have with radical social spaces, bakeries, bookstores, and communal gardens, the authorities situated the enemy in foreign lands.

*All around Hamburg, for several days before the summit, long lines of police vehicles could be seen driving back and forth across the city, creating an atmosphere of totalitarian control. “Look,” I said, pointing to the ambulance at the end of the line of vans, “Social democracy!”*

*My German friend looked back at me uncomprehendingly.*

*“In the US, there would be no ambulance,” I explained.*



*Police in front of Rote Flora ahead of the G20.*

## Overture to Rage

This is not the first time Hamburg made a name for itself as a hotbed of resistance. Hafenstrasse, where the Welcome to Hell demonstration was to march, has been a stronghold of the autonomous movement since the 1980s. Several houses on the street were squatted in 1981 and the squatting movement defended them fiercely over the following decade. The struggle reached its peak in 1987, when people maintained barricades for eight days to block a threatened eviction. May Day has also been an important day in Hamburg. Riots erupted on May Day in 2008 when anti-fascists sought to prevent Neo-Nazis from marching through the city.

The social center Rote Flora has been a flagship of the autonomous movement since it was squatted in 1989. In December 2013, when the government threatened to evict and demolish it, Rote Flora became a symbol of resistance to gentrification. This culminated in the December 21 riots, when more than 7000 people clashed with police in solidarity with Rote Flora and Lampedusa, a political group of migrants in Hamburg. A month later, the city announced a change of plans for Rote Flora. Both Rote Flora and Lampedusa remain to this day.

*I first got a sticker about the G20 protests in autumn 2016. That was fifteen years after the infamous G8 in Genoa. It was almost five years after the great uprisings in Europe and the Middle East and all the localized struggles that*

came out of them, including the migrant solidarity struggles in Europe. Those experiences gave us models for resistance that made the summit protests seem old-fashioned. Yet somehow, it felt important to be in Hamburg.

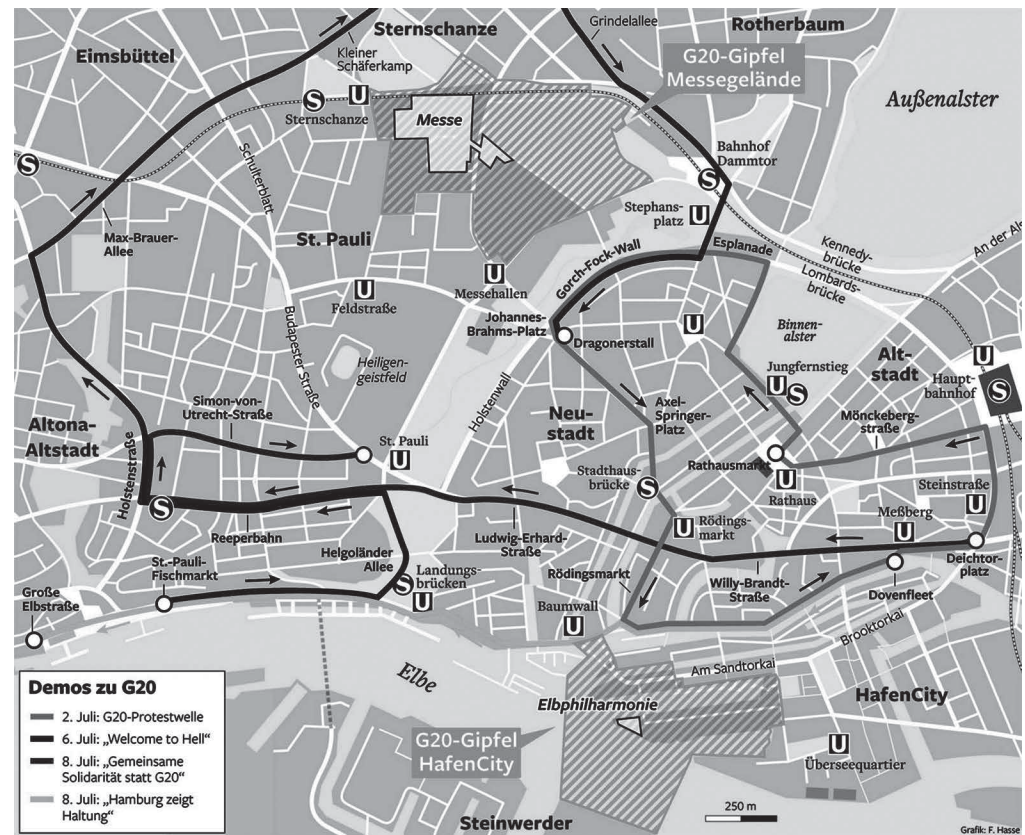
Struggles against gentrification have been intensifying in Hamburg and Berlin for years. In 2008, so many luxury cars were burnt in the famously left-wing Kreuzberg neighborhood of Berlin that a local police spokesperson said people simply shouldn't be parking their cars there. In 2016, this sport reached its peak with more than 200 cars burnt in six months, and no one arrested for it. In February, after a series of automobile arsons, an unknown collective declared that every police raid on squats or political projects would be answered with 1 million euros worth of damage. That summer, Berlin saw the successful defense of its legendary squat Rigaerstrasse 94, with massive clashes that some media described as the most violent in five years.

Frankfurt had also been a focal point of massive protests against international financial policies and meetings. In 2015, the city was shaken by riots protesting the opening of the new headquarters of the European central bank. A massive international mobilization coalesced around this symbol of the austerity measures Germany has imposed on its southern European neighbors, especially Greece. This was one of the first demonstrations in years at which people managed to outmaneuver the classic German policing tactics and gain control of the streets.

At the same time, anarchists and other participants in autonomous and anti-fascist movements have been busy fighting the rising tide of the far right. Since 2015, Neo-Nazis have focused on burning down refugee homes. As movements like Pegida have gained strength alongside political parties like Alternative for Germany, street clashes with these groups have intensified.

Immediately before the G20 summit, Berlin police brutally evicted Friedel 54, one of the last occupied social centers in the Neukölln neighborhood, injuring many people and arresting several. It's easy to interpret the violence of this raid as a provocation from Berlin police, many of whom had just been sent back from Hamburg on account of bad behavior.

Germany appeared to be the last outpost of social peace in Europe, but it was boiling beneath the surface before the G20.



A map of downtown Hamburg including the neighborhoods of St. Pauli, Altona, and Sternschanze (aka Schanze), the Fischmarkt, the Reeperbahn, and the Messe (where the summit took place), and showing the planned routes of the Welcome to Hell march of July 6 and the grand march of Saturday, July 8.

## Sunday, July 2: NGO Legalism and the Raid on the Park

From the beginning, the authorities made it clear that they intended to crush any form of dissent that didn't fit the format of legalistic acquiescence represented by the NGOs that scheduled their demonstration a week in advance to ensure that they couldn't exert any leverage on the G20 leaders.

While that demonstration was taking place, the police were blocking access to Entenwerder Park, where the anti-capitalist camp was to be established. After a lengthy court battle in which the authorities did everything they could to prohibit the camp, the highest court in Germany had ruled that the organizers had the right to establish a camp there. Despite this, in flagrant violation of the ruling, the police blockaded the camp for several hours.

*Sunday, July 2: NGO Legalism and the Raid on the Park*

At the end of the afternoon, they finally permitted people to enter the park, while surrounding the site with hundreds upon hundreds of riot police in full body armor. They waited until nightfall so that filming would be more difficult, then marched into the camp, beating and pepper-spraying people at random and seizing tents.

The raid on Entenwerder Park revealed the naïveté of NGO legalism. The authorities were not invested in adhering to the decisions of the courts; the police had become de facto the highest law in Germany. The liberal organizers were the only ones who still took the law seriously, and they were only permitted to engage in their demonstration because it was utterly ineffectual.

*The police raid on Entenwerder Park and the unprovoked attack on the Welcome to Hell demonstration four days later fit seamlessly together: they are two examples of a single strategy. It was not about what happened in the foreground but the effects. The point was to discourage people from participating in the protests against the G20 summit. The attacks clearly had nothing to do with the behavior of the demonstrators; in retrospect, they appear choreographed. They attacked the camps in order to convey the impression that there were no safe places in Hamburg for out-of-town demonstrators to go.*



*Anti-tent raid on Tuesday, July 4.*

## Tuesday, July 4

As Hamburg has gentrified, one of the familiar features of the urban landscape is “cornern,” people hanging out eating and drinking in the street. Local organizers sought to weaponize this activity, calling for an evening of “hard cornern” three days before the summit. Bands played at the park Grüner Jäger at the edge of the Schanze neighborhood; thousands of people thronged the streets around them. This antagonized the police, who had sworn to keep downtown Hamburg empty during the summit. Already, in a small way, they seemed to be losing control.

Meanwhile, as organizers had given up on camping in Entenwerder Park, demonstrators arriving from all around Europe began setting up camps throughout the city. One of these was established behind the church of Johanneskirche at Sternbrücke. Activists also raised banners inviting people to occupy Schauspielhaus theater. People also attempted to set up camp at Gählerspark, in the middle of St. Pauli.

Shortly before 9 pm, while lawyers were still struggling to establish legal status for the camps, police began gathering around Gählerspark. They demanded that the tents be taken down, gave two warnings, then stormed the park in full riot gear, stomping on the tents and seizing twelve of them. People stood up to the police, who responded with pepper spray and batons. Finally, amid chanting and cheering, the police retreated, showing the first signs of unease before a crowd that was getting angrier by the minute.

*We heard about the eviction of Gählerspark and headed in that direction. People were “cornering” on every intersection. “Maybe we will gentrify the G20 out of Hamburg,” laughed a comrade, gesturing at the crowds re-branding an activity otherwise associated with tourism and gentrification.*

*As we approached the park, we saw a quick movement of people to our right and ran towards them. We joined a loose crowd flowing from one street to another, chanting. As we advanced, more and more people joined in, while the police raced around in water cannons and vans trying to block us in. “This is typical for Hamburg,” a comrade explained. “The cops are nervous around here, because people have targeted the police stations in this neighborhood before.”*



A spontaneous demonstration leaving Gählerspark broke into smaller groups; the police deployed water cannons to disperse them. Around 10 pm, clashes on Sternbrücke resulted in several arrests and injuries. A couple minutes later, 50 people were kettled at Susannestrasse in the Sternschanze district, while sit-down blockades occurred not far away on Stressemanstrasse.

That night, police arrested two French demonstrators for spray-painting an anti-G20 slogan on the wall of a restaurant in Schädlerstrasse. The police later admitted that both of them needed medical attention after the arrest.

*I'm walking towards Pferdemarkt. It's a wide avenue with a big crossing in the middle of St. Pauli. On one side there is a long, high wall; on the other, rows of houses punctuated by smaller streets and bars. As I approach the avenue, I see police donning their helmets and starting to form lines behind water cannons on one side of the street; they are blocking the other side in the distance.*

*A friend and I sneak onto the avenue at the last moment before the police close the adjacent street. We jump over the small wall and start moving with the crowd that is being pushed away from Grüner Jäger, the park where a concert had been taking place. There is some resistance, but most people scatter upon the initial police charge. Police hit an older man here, girl on a bike there.*

*Small wonder Pferdemarkt became a flashpoint of resistance throughout the weekend.*

At 10:30 pm, a large mobilization of police began clearing Pferdemarkt. First, they applied the water cannon, as thick lines of police slowly pushed back the crowd. Then, as fireworks burst in the sky, creating a surreal background and temporarily chasing away the police helicopter, they became more and more aggressive, pushing and hitting people and dousing them with pepper spray.

A few people in masks shouted "All Hamburg hates the police." But most people were simply partygoers who found themselves targeted for no reason, including those attacked in Arrivati park. By midnight, the police had cleared most of the improvised blockades around the city.

*I take a break from running. Looking for safety, I pass a dozen people sitting on the sidewalk, grilling vegetables and drinking beer. A sign hangs in the window: NO G20. They welcome me and offer food and water. As we're talking, one of*

*them gets up and stands in the street blocking traffic for couple of minutes. Most of them are not activists but artists, students, bohemians. One takes me up to his flat, where his partner and a little child welcome me.*

*That night, I had the same experience in several flats. Many residents of Hamburg felt that the state was occupying their town like a foreign military; they struggled to put their children to sleep with helicopters roaring overhead and police sirens in the streets below. Many had put red dots by their names on the intercoms by the front doors of their buildings to denote that their homes were safe spaces for everyone opposing the G20.*

*I had expected the rage of activists. But I found the really angry people on the sidewalk, grilling.*

*We ended up in front of a Greek restaurant in the Schanze neighborhood. The family that owns it is sympathetic to the demonstrations; the father is a communist, the son an anarchist. Demonstrators helped them move their tables inside as riot police begin to carry out charges down the street. This is typical for Hamburg: larger conflicts often spill over to this intersection, and the police always position a squad here.*



Signs like this hung all around St. Pauli ahead of the G20.



*The mobile dance party on Wednesday, July 5*

*At the time, the police seemed unbeatable, though the locals were making an honorable effort to put up a fight. Little did we know that just three days later, we would watch a joyous Critical Mass of bicyclists pass through this intersection while barricades burned at all the access points to the neighborhood and Schanze was a police-free liberated zone.*

## **Wednesday, July 5**

Activists from outside of Hamburg had a rough night, as the police continued to harass people wherever they were sleeping. During the night, riot police tried to evict the occupied Schauspielhaus Theater, where many had found refuge. The director of the theater refused to cooperate with the police; they eventually had to leave the premises and around 100 people slept there. “We did not want to send anyone back to the streets after what happened,” the theater staff told the press.

The Schauspielhaus is an official state theater that has nothing to do with radical activity of any kind. This was another sign that the police were turning the inhabitants of Hamburg against them. Over the following days, several

other institutions joined the effort. For example, the football club St. Pauli offered its stadium to house 200 people on July 6. They also hosted an alternative media center, a public kitchen, an information point, and a football tournament and concert intended to offer a safe space for protesters while the police were trying to clear the streets.

Outside of Hamburg, people took advantage of the fact that so many police had been repositioned to the northern port. In the small town of Wuppertal, activists succeeded in physically blocking the deportation of 38 refugees. As they overheard on the police radio, all Wuppertal’s riot cops were in Hamburg.

Meanwhile, new camps were growing around Hamburg, most notably in Altona, a camp in Königstrasse, and Moorfleet camp. After the initial attempt to legalize one big camp, it proved easier to decentralize activities and squat or legalize several different camping locations around the city. This forced the police to evict one camp at the time, rather than descending in hundreds on a single venue.

At 12:30 pm, a chilling performance titled “1000 Figures” began in Hafencity. For two hours, over a thousand people painted in gray clay symbolizing the alienation and isolation of capitalism shambled through the streets, zombie-like. At the end of their long slog, they joyously threw off the clay, becoming colorful and vibrant in a gesture illustrating the transformations that remain possible for all people.

This was a perfect prelude to the massive street party beginning at 6 pm at Landungsbrücken. The dance demonstration created a joyful and relaxed atmosphere. Despite the clashes of the previous night, some 20,000 people gathered, dancing around 12 trucks with music for every taste. “No fear, these are our streets,” was the watchword as evening descended in Hamburg.

After hours of dancing, the police put their helmets on. Around 10:30 pm, they stopped the rave and moved in with water cannons and tactical units. Despite this, most of the demonstration managed to arrive at the designated destination, Gängeviertel, around 11 pm. Some water cannons were stopped by sit-ins around Gänsemarkt and eventually retreated. A smaller demonstration formed and unsuccessfully attempted to reach the red zone around Messe where the G20 meeting was to be held. Several arrests occurred in Jungfernstieg and Binnenalster.

This was the second night police attacked evening crowds, creating great dissatisfaction in the media (social and otherwise), putting pressure on the mayor, and creating a tense atmosphere before Thursday's much-anticipated Welcome to Hell demonstration.

## Thursday, July 6: Hell's Gates Open

Thursday was the day the G20 leaders arrived in Hamburg. That morning, Hamburg woke up to the news that 12 Porsche luxury sport cars had been burned in the Eidelstedt district, causing about \$1.3 million worth of damage.

Around 8 am, after many hours of delay, an international train that had set out from Basel, Switzerland arrived in Hamburg bearing hundreds of activists. Without offering explanations, the authorities had prevented dozens of people from embarking on the journey. Those who arrived were greeted by a line of riot cops on the platform who initially blocked them from entering the metro in the direction of the Altona camp, but eventually let them pass. The activists formed a spontaneous demonstration and marched towards the camp, chanting and waving flares, arriving in style around 10 am.

All morning, people were stopped, detained, or delayed as they arrived Hamburg. Two buses from Berlin were stopped, and the police searched everyone's bags. Two comrades from Italy were detained at the airport.

*As I walked towards the St. Pauli stadium, the city looked like it had been evacuated. The only vehicles I saw were packed with police; the only people walking around were journalists in full protective gear. The buses had stopped working, shops and banks were barricading their windows, and police were peering suspiciously at every group of six or more people.*

*"Is your Internet not working, too?" asked a journalist from the mainstream media. "It suddenly slowed down for no reason. I have tons of data!" He was worried he wouldn't be able to livestream the upcoming demonstration. Many journalists around us were facing the same problem. At that point, we had no idea how determined the police were to discourage the press from filming. Hours before anything started, tension was already thick in the air. Everyone was watching the time, waiting for 4 pm.*



Welcome to Hell posters blanketed Germany for months before the G20.

Longtime participants in the Hamburg autonomist scene had called for a massive rally at 4 pm under the title “WELCOME TO HELL,” to be followed by a march. For months, posters and stickers had blanketed Germany reading “Live Resistance—Join the Black Block.”

The organizers had proposed a lengthy march route, a miles-long loop around the perimeter of the no-protest zone. They anticipated that the authorities would force them to settle for a much shorter route in return for a permit. Yet the police authorized the entire march route without a single objection. After all their efforts to prohibit camping and forbid protesting throughout the entirety of downtown, this was ominous: it meant that they had no intention of letting the march proceed under any circumstances.

Consequently, many experienced activists chose not to participate in the march; some did not even attend the rally. The prevailing wisdom was that, with 19,000 police at their disposal, the authorities would kettle the entire demonstration. The starting point was the St. Pauli fish market along the river Elbe; with the water to the south, it seemed it would be easy for the police to block all the intersections around it and create a trap. Some imagined that they would pen in the crowd, then provoke conflicts in order to capture people with the snatch squads for which the

German police are notorious. Others feared that the authorities might try to hold the entire crowd in a kettle overnight in order to prevent them from participating in the other protests during the summit.

Nevertheless, a tremendous number of people turned out for the Welcome to Hell rally. For many, it was simply too important to miss, however badly it might go. It had been promoted for months as the chief expression of defiance against the G20 summit; if nothing happened, that itself would be a defeat. Others went simply because they couldn't resist their curiosity.

The crowd that listened to the speeches and performances in the St. Pauli fish market was unexpectedly multigenerational and diverse. They didn't look like the bloodthirsty hoodlums of the police propaganda. They looked more like local festival-goers and picnickers, grandparents and grandchildren. The undercover cops in the crowd were easily identified by their scowls. Everyone else was having a good time. The black bloc was there too—in the form of a huge black inflatable block towering over the crowd, reading “the only good block is the black block.”

Around 5 pm, while people were listening to speeches and concerts at the fish market, a spontaneous demonstration of over 500 people began marching



The standoff at the beginning of the Welcome to Hell march.

from Volkspark stadium towards the start location. About half an hour later, the notoriously violent Bavarian riot police attacked the crowd, then retreated.

At 7 pm, when the program concluded at the fish market, several sound trucks playing a variety of revolutionary music moved through the crowd to the front of the crowd, followed by one affinity group after another, participants pulling black rain jackets and gloves over their colorful summer clothing. Line after line formed: this was the Welcome to Hell black bloc.

The police allowed the march to proceed a couple hundred meters east along St. Pauli Fischmarkt, then stopped it with a solid wall of riot police, water cannons, and military vehicles south of Park Fiction. Cynically, they had let the front of the march into their trap, then blocked it in a sort of canyon where the road dips ten or more feet below the pedestrian walkway on the southern side.

The intent of the police was obvious: isolate the militant front section of the march, attack it, and shut down the demonstration completely. This was consistent with their treatment of the camp on Sunday and with their attempts to crush dissent by brute force throughout the entire week. Yet the confrontation between the police and the black bloc did not go the way anyone expected it to, for there were additional elements in play.

The black bloc was perhaps 1000 people, but the crowd that had gathered behind it numbered up to 12,000 strong. Thousands of police were massed ahead of the march and in every intersection surrounding the area; fully armored snatch squads were positioned at regular intervals throughout the crowd. Yet outside the police lines, looking on from the railings overlooking St. Pauli Fischmarkt, thousands more spectators had gathered. Many of them were involved with the media: cameramen jostling for position, bloggers struggling to see through the crowd pressed several lines thick. Others were simply curious onlookers, people from the neighborhood who had come out to see what was happening or simply to have a beer on the first really warm day of summer. Beyond the peak of the hill of Park Fiction, some locals played basketball, apparently oblivious to the massive drama unfolding below even as black-masked police snatch squads moved into position beside the court.

From the perspective of the police, all of these spectators and bystanders were a potential risk: they looked harmless, but they might be *black bloc* anarchists in disguise. The police kept positioning their snatch squads outside



*This photo shows the lines of spectators surrounding the police positions around the Welcome to Hell demonstration.*

the lines of spectators—but every time they did, more spectators gathered to watch them. The police who had hoped to surround and isolate the radicals were themselves surrounded by society at large. As of that moment, the spectators were really just that, spectators: attempts to lead chants among them fell flat. But they were watching, and the police were watching them.

The standoff went on for 45 minutes. The front lines of the black bloc held their ground, impassively holding up their banners before the forces of destruction marshaled against them. Finally, the police broke the tension. They shot a volley of tear gas canisters, then charged in from the back, breaking into the march between the bloc and the rest of the crowd. They had the black bloc surrounded from the front and the back, with walls at least ten feet high on the sides around them.

A cry went up from the railings and balconies looking over the scene: onlookers were outraged at the poor sportsmanship of the police. It was the sort of response you might hear at a football game if one player punched another to take the ball. The stench of tear gas was strong in the air. Even in the park overlooking the street from the north, it was difficult to breathe.

As the first tear gas fell, police attacked the crowd from the back of the fish-market as well. This was never reported, because media was all concentrated at the front of the demonstration—but it is important, because it debunks false claims from the police that they were simply responding to a group of

people in masks at the front of the march. People panicked and began running; there were only two ways out, uphill on narrow stairs or down, and both felt claustrophobic. Some experienced demonstrators tried to maintain calm, but the snatch squad tactic of charging into the crowd attacking people at random succeeded in creating the conditions for a stampede.

## **The Courage of the Black Bloc**

Imagine the scene: you are in the front lines of the Welcome to Hell black bloc. You and your friends decided to be here months in advance, to ensure that the front of the bloc would be populated by reliable people. You knew from the beginning that you would be walking into a nightmare. Still, your commitment to your comrades and to the movement outweighs fear for your personal safety; you have chosen to be here, come injury or prison, out of love of humanity and desire for a better future. Unlike the police, you have no protective gear, you are not receiving a salary, and you are not following orders.

St. Pauli Fischmarkt forms a sort of canyon here, where it drops beneath the level of the other streets—but for you, facing an impenetrable wall of police, it feels more like an arena. The railings above you are packed with viewers. They throng the pedestrian walkway that passes overhead and the hill of the park to the north; they are even gathered on the rooftops of the tall apartment buildings beyond the park. Standing there below them, you can't help resenting those spectators passively watching from the safety of their terraces. Ahead, you can make out one—two—three—at least four water cannons and some armored cars behind them. You and your companions are like gladiators trembling as the gates go up and the lions come out.

Explosions are going off behind you. They punctuate a din of screaming, shouting, and the robotic voice of police announcements over the loudspeaker. From your vantage point, you can't see what is going on back there, where the police are carrying out charge after charge against the back of the bloc as demonstrators struggle to hold them off with a volley of bottles and debris. You can only smell the tear gas in the air and hear the sound of detonations and shattering glass. A canister explodes in front of you, enveloping you in smoke. When the smoke clears for a moment, you see that the ranks of the bloc behind you are thinning—fearful of being trapped and brutalized, demonstrators have formed a human pyramid to escape by climbing up the wall to the south.

At this moment, the riot police ahead of you charge, forming a wall all the way around the bloc stretching from the front to the northern side. There are perhaps fifty of you left in the front now, still holding up your banners as a fragile rampart against the full might of the state.

The water cannons zoom up, sirens blaring, and halt right in front of your line. There is a scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which the orcs fall back as the mighty Balrog steps forth to attack the protagonists. In that same manner, the lines of white-helmeted riot police inch backwards as the water cannons train their barrels directly at you. Tear gas is still filling the air. The comrades behind you have fled. Deafening pandemonium. You are surrounded on three sides now, outnumbered ten to one by storm troopers clad head to toe in full body armor.

It could hardly be more terrifying if the earth cracked open and flames leapt out of the chasm. Welcome to hell, indeed.

Incredibly, the front lines of the black bloc held their ground in these conditions for more than five straight minutes. In video footage, you can see the officers in the front hesitating to attack even as other police are charging the rear of the bloc. The determination of these fifty or so individuals is humbling; it must have given pause to even the most hardened thugs among the police. By holding their position, these comrades managed to enable the people behind them to scale the wall and escape. When they saw that they were the only ones left in the street, they calmly drew back to the wall, even as the police attacked from all sides. The ones on the outside continued holding their lines until everyone behind them had escaped.

Thousands of spectators witnessed this whole thing—the cowardice of the police and the bravery of the black bloc. Within forty-eight hours, the courage of fifty anarchists had become the courage of tens of thousands.

*At first, we had wondered why we were permitted to start walking. Later, it became obvious that the police had prepared a trap for us.*

*My group was among the first ten lines of the demonstration. With so many spectators there to watch rather than participate, we felt like zoo animals.*

*When the police charged, large fractions of the black bloc around the sound truck panicked, running and climbing the wall. For us at the front, the decision*

*to walk in a line in the black bloc entails not running away at the first confrontation—rather, to protect ourselves and each other equally in the bloc formation.*

*As the numbers behind us dwindled, some from the front rows decided to position themselves on the sides to form new lines. However, as we continued to lose numbers and the attacks became more and more brutal, we had to flee up the wall as well. It was a very strong statement that many people helped us even though doing so exposed them to water cannon attacks.*

*But that was not the end of the police aggression. Now we were trapped in another encirclement with police on both sides, only two meters higher than before. Below us, where we had come from, were the last 30 people who had decided not to run and stood blocking the police despite the violence.*

*The last possible direction was a wall behind which there was a 2.5 meter drop down to concrete. We climbed over it. We had no choice: the water cannon kept pushing us. So we jumped over the wall down to the concrete next to the river Elbe. Again, we were grateful for the people who were there to catch us, saving us from serious injury. The last ones behind us were pushed over the wall by the police.*

*But we couldn't stay there, either. The police forced us back to where we had first gathered at the beginning of the march.*

*The thing that made me most frightened was the risk that the police would kill people at that wall. While people were trying to get up the wall, the police were pepper-spraying and beating everyone in the street, including those who were already lying on the ground unconscious.*

*I couldn't see anything because of the pepper spray in my eyes. But I saw a shadow of something lying at the foot of the wall. People were stepping on it in their desperation to escape. I thought there was a person lying there, and I tried to keep people away. I remembered an accident that had happened at the love parade in Duisburg.*

*When I reached the object on the ground, I found that it was only a backpack. But I will never forget the seconds when I believed that a person had been trampled to death. Then there were people above shouting to me to get up quick. They took my arms and pulled me up that wall.*

*Afterwards, you could see shoes lying scattered on the street where the police had attacked us.*

## **The Wildfire Catches—and Spreads**

With so many people behind the place where the black bloc had been attacked still waiting to march and so many more spectators looking on, the police couldn't set up a proper kettle. While most of the black bloc had scaled the wall on the south side of the street, then fallen back to the original site of the rally as the police continued attacking on the pedestrian walkway, large numbers of demonstrators managed to get past the police positions to the north to regroup on the other side.

A few minutes later, a lively march erupted from Silbersackstrasse onto the Reeperbahn, the next major thoroughfare to the north parallel to St. Pauli Fischmarkt. The participants were not wearing masks or black clothes, but they were chanting "A! Anti! Anti-Capitalista!" Miraculously, they even had a sound system blasting electronic dance music.

The action had shifted to another set of protagonists—and the police were nowhere to be seen.

Small groups fanned out, moving quickly from one street to another. Legal observers reported that police vehicles repeatedly drove into the crowd at high speed around this time. In response, the first barricades appeared around 8 pm, consisting of material from construction sites—a sign of gentrification. The police asked for more riot cops to accompany the water cannons, as they were afraid to move through the angry crowd.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Welcome to Hell march was still blocked by riot police, multiple water cannons, and an armored military vehicle at Hafenstrasse near Landungsbrücken. The crowd was chanting "Let us pass!" Finally, the police relented and permitted the march to proceed. Around 10 pm, it reached the Reeperbahn and marched towards Nobistor, where another spontaneous demonstration was gathering.

*After the attack on the Welcome to Hell march, we found a way out of the demonstration and went to a safe room on the Hafenstrasse to treat everyone from our group who was suffering from pepper spray. We didn't want to give the*

*police the satisfaction that it only took a single orgy of violence to remove the black bloc from the street, so we went right back out.*

*We found the rest of the Welcome to Hell demonstration where we had last seen it, with cheerful music and announcements that surprised us. People were encouraged to stay positive and happy. After some tough negotiations, the police declared that the demonstration was permitted again and allowed us to move forward. Sadly, some of the participants received this news with applause, as if it's appropriate to be grateful when we receive permission to protest.*

*A black bloc with new lines formed again with impressive speed. We arrived at the Reeperbahn close to the police station, where we were stopped again. Here, the police beat their way through the demonstration to encircle the black bloc once more. When we tried to avoid being trapped, they discharged pepper spray at us beside a small fence. A punch from one policeman and a dousing of pepper spray pushed two people from our group back into the encirclement. One person caught at the fence was beaten; two more were choked with pepper spray while attempting to help a person lying on the ground between two officers.*

*Afterwards, we spent a while in a friendly nearby bar, where a doctor cared for the two people who were blind on account of the pepper spray.*

*Like the first attack, this second attack on the black bloc took place without any provocation and without any opportunity to escape. This wasn't about "dispersing an unlawful assembly" or capturing individuals who were accused of anything in particular—the encirclement was dissolved shortly afterwards, without any particular reason. The goal was to terrorize people for wearing black together, pure and simple.*

Meanwhile, a new hotspot opened up at Neuer Pferdemarkt in Arrivati park, where police cleared the avenue a few minutes after 10 pm.

At 10:30, the second iteration of the Welcome to Hell march was on the Reeperbahn, close to the Davidwache police station, while another demonstration made its way up the adjacent Holstenstrasse. The two merged into a huge mass that moved onto Max-Brauer-Alle shortly before 11. The demonstration now consisted of about 12,000 people, with more joining in all the time—perhaps bigger than the original Welcome to Hell demonstration. The head of the march reached Schanzenstrasse while the back was still at Sternbrücke. Riot cops blocked the way here. Several clashes erupted in response, starting around 11 pm.

At one point, the water cannons on Holstenstrasse were forced to retreat while the crowd chanted “Whose streets? Our streets!” Barricades appeared across the street; for a while, the police withdrew from the area.

Shortly before midnight, people gathered at Grüner Jäger once more, where barricades had been erected earlier. They threw bottles at the water cannons as they drove by. The same scene was playing out up and down the street for blocks.

*Long lines of police vans kept whizzing past us on the street. Every time they passed, people would pelt them with bottles. Incredibly, the vans didn't even stop. “This means they've totally lost control,” my friend from Hamburg explained. “Normally, they would never put up with that.”*

A little after midnight, the police succeeded in dispersing the main body of the demonstration, but that only spread people throughout the area, where they continued fighting in smaller groups.

At about the same time, just around the corner, special forces positioned themselves in front of Rote Flora on Schulterblatt street. Clashes soon broke out here as well, and once more, the police were repeatedly forced to retreat. People erected burning barricades to keep them at bay.

All around the city, banks, luxury shops, and cars were attacked throughout the night. This occurred as far north as Osterstrasse, where several shop windows were broken. Similar damage occurred in Altona—to Sparkasse, for example.

At about 1:30 am, water cannons and a huge number of riot cops sought to disperse the crowd that had gathered at Sternbrücke. Yet clashes continued throughout the night on the smaller streets of central St. Pauli. Supposedly, 76 cops were injured in the course of the evening, although it later turned out that police had spread flagrant lies about the number of injuries they sustained. They refused to give out the numbers of injured and arrested protesters. Rescue teams were deployed 89 times, mostly to treat head injuries, broken bones, and abrasions.

*Well after 2 am, we decide to head home. The streets are strewn with broken glass and fragmented barricades; long lines of police vans are still parked around every major intersection. The local metro stations are closed, and the buses completely irregular.*

*When we finally manage to catch a bus, it's packed. The atmosphere is cheerful: a mix of lost young protesters, seasoned demonstrators awkwardly attempting to pass as locals, bemused bona fide locals, and low-level bureaucrats in town for the summit.*

*The accent of the fellow beside us identifies him as a visitor from elsewhere in Germany. A thick wooden pole protrudes half a meter out of his backpack. When the bus driver makes an announcement, he belts out a jolly hooligan chant in response, something about broken glass and breaking up the paving stones. No one objects.*

*As we walk home afterwards, I reflect on how much stronger the resistance was than anyone expected. I assume that the next day will be more peaceful, that people must be worn out after an entire night of rioting.*

## **Friday, July 7: Battleground Hamburg**

*We woke up to the sound of sirens. From the other side of the port, thick smoke was rising from the inner city. My comrade and I exchanged glances wordlessly.*

Early in the morning, a black bloc made its way through Altona building barricades, smashing the windows of shops and banks, and burning several cars. They reached Ikea and attacked it with fire. The police were nowhere to be seen; they still had not regained control over the city since the previous night. Hamburg called for police reinforcements from elsewhere around Germany to join the 19,000 cops who were already present.

Elsewhere in Hamburg, police surrounded and trapped about a hundred people by the Rondenbarg trailer park, then charged and attacked them. Some of them tried to flee over a fence 4 meters high. Shouting “Antifa swine, this is your breakfast!” the police knocked down the fence and injured 14 people, 11 of them with broken bones and other serious injuries. Some of them were still in the hospital a week later. Police announced to the media that the group had attacked them first, but videos subsequently revealed this to be an outright lie.

A decree prohibiting protests in most of Hamburg had been in effect since 6 am. Yet soon after dawn, blockades had appeared throughout the city, especially around the port, the red zone where the summit was, and the roads that G20 delegates were using. The blockaders had gathered in the metro stations





*A blockade Friday morning.*

at Landungsbrücken, Berliner Tor, Altona, and Hammerbrook. From there, they moved through the city in different directions, carrying out a variety of decentralized actions. Some came close enough to the location of the summit to stop delegates in their vehicles.

At 8:20 am, the harbor was blockaded at Worthdamm and Veddel Dam. This lasted until 11 am. Police attacked blockades throughout the city, but people quickly set up new ones. In the city center, around 10 am, police pushed blockaders towards Mönckebergstrasse. Melania Trump was delayed inside her hotel on account of confrontations outside it, and missed her scheduled activities.

At 10:30 am, all the blockaders had reached their positions, delaying the summit, shutting down the harbor, and disrupting the infrastructure of capitalism. Around 11, a convoy of G20 delegates was stopped on Gorch-Fock-Wall due to blockades. At the same time, thousands of students were going out on strike.

*We passed one of those blockades early that afternoon—it just looked like a few hippies playing with one of the big silver inflatables while four water cannons and an armored military vehicle waited. The hippies weren't blocking the*

*street, the water cannons were. Repeatedly, a line of vans or a motorcade drove up to the intersection, found it blocked, and did a U-turn. This must have been happening all around the neighborhood.*

*When the water cannons finally began attacking the hippies with the inflatable, this only drew more spectators, some of whom also ended up in the street. We walked another block on, only to find a cordon of police blocking off the street so that no one else could get into the area. The heavy-handedness of the police was more effective at shutting down the district than any activist blockade I saw.*

Meanwhile, at a press conference at the media center at Hamburg's world-famous St. Pauli stadium, representatives of Welcome to Hell, Block G20, Solidarity without Borders, and other groups presented a unified front in condemning the previous evening's police attacks, emphasizing that it was only a matter of good fortune that the police had not killed anyone and declaring that the protesters would not be divided. When a journalist from the conservative media outlet NDR attempted to foment division by alleging that he had read criticism of the Welcome to Hell march on the Facebook page of another protest group, Right to the City, a representative of that group stood up from the audience and repudiated his insinuation, forcefully asserting their solidarity with the other groups.



*In response to creative blockading tactics, all the police could come up with was—more pepper spray.*

*Friday, July 7: Battleground Hamburg*



*A sign of the times.*

Another conservative journalist accused the panelists of “propaganda” for attempting to tell the story of how the police initiated violence the preceding night. It’s a safe bet that he never raised his hand in a police press conference to accuse the police of propaganda, despite the blatant lies that the police spread about the number of injuries suffered by officers at the G20.

*At 3 pm, we went to Millerntorplatz, the second rendezvous point for the Block G20/Color the Red Zone efforts. We were surprised to see that ATTAC, one of the most liberal and legalistic organizing groups, was gathering to participate in the blockades alongside much more radical organizations. Someone in the crowd had adjusted his ATTAC banner by drawing a circle A on it and adding a “K” so it read “ATTACK.” We approached him with curiosity.*

*“Are you part of ATTAC, or is that banner just...?”*

*“Me? Yes, I am. Um... I guess you could say I’m part of the left wing of ATTAC.”*

At 3 pm, filtering out from the barricades to the north, people began to gather at the Reeperbahn for an afternoon demonstration entitled “Color the Red Zone,” hoping to block access to the Elbphilharmonie in which the G20 lead-

ers were scheduled to hear a performance of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony. As soon as the demonstration got underway, it was a game of cat and mouse, with people running one way and then another through the park and the streets with lines of riot vans and water cannons in hot pursuit.

Several blocks away, riot police, water cannons, and police horses arrived at Landungsbrücken. They charged demonstrators there, who defended themselves with bottles and chunks of concrete near the location of the previous day’s attack on the Welcome to Hell demonstration. Once again, police trapped a group of about 50 protesters on a narrow promenade by the river. Pushing from the back and front, police pursued the protesters while showering them with water cannons from the third side. On the fourth side, the river blocked their escape. People tried to find hiding places behind the little cottages beside the water as they desperately sought to escape. More and more fell behind until they were all finally kettled.

Undaunted, demonstrators erected barricades between Fischmarkt and Landungsbrücken around 5:30 pm while police looked on from a distance.

The rest of the demonstration was slowly moving towards the Elbphilharmonie, clashing continuously with police along the way. By 6:20, people were blocking the entry of the Elbphilharmonie. Around 7:30, protesters managed to block Japanese delegates close to Milerntor, but were quickly dispersed by water cannon. Elsewhere in Hamburg, a Critical Mass of hundreds of bicyclists was just getting underway.

*Trapped within police lines, we had to make our way through. My colleagues went up to the cordon and explained to one officer that we were accredited members of the press, which was sort of true. After some debate and flourishing of credentials, the officer agreed to let us through on the condition that he search our bags.*

*Searching my colleagues’ bags went fine; they had nothing to hide. When he opened up my bag, however, his eyes narrowed. “What’s this?”*

*“That? That’s a map,” my colleague explained helpfully. Indeed, it was a map— from the literature table in the Rote Flora.*

*“No, I mean—this!” He pulled out a long black scarf.*

*“It’s just a scarf,” my colleague protested. We were hot standing there in t-shirts with the July sun beating down on us.*

*“And this?” The officer pulled out a black hooded sweatshirt and held it up triumphantly. My colleagues looked at me in dismay. If the cop went any deeper, he would find a black rainjacket as well.*

*Not speaking German, I appealed to them for help. “Tell him... tell him I’ve never been to Germany before. I thought it would be colder.”*

At this point, the police had attacked the main demonstration so many times that smaller groups were scattered throughout downtown. After days of nonstop mobilization and 24 hours of open conflict, the officers were tired and angry. They had lost the ability to distinguish between militant anarchists, law-abiding activists, and ordinary bystanders. Reports kept coming in about unprovoked attacks on locals. Police attacked people in front of a restaurant; they attacked neighbors at Hein Kölich square; they threw one man from his bicycle and shoved another to the ground at Hein Kölich place. They shoved and beat whoever was around them without any justification whatsoever.

When footage appeared on twitter of riot police dragging around a person who was unconscious and badly injured, the police tweeted a response from their official account: “And what had the person done before?” If their treatment of others in the neighborhood around that time is any indication, the answer is probably “nothing whatsoever.” Even speaking on the record, the police spokespersons were not concerned with the legality of knocking people unconscious and dragging them around the streets; only with their grudge match against the general population.

Around this time, clashes erupted once more in front of the Rote Flora. In the Schanzenviertel neighborhood, when a spectator was chased off for refusing to stop taking photos, an undercover cop fired a live round in the middle of a crowded street before running into a store to hide.

The situation nearby on Pferdemarkt was spiraling out of control. The police were forced to retreat, and burning barricades appeared in their wake.

Another demonstration had originally been called for 8 pm on the Reeperbahn by an authoritarian communist group, but they had canceled it. Nevertheless,



*Schanze, police-free zone, on the horizon.*

thousands of people gathered on the Reeperbahn, where an outdoor concert was already taking place. When no demonstration immediately got underway, people began to filter north towards the chaos in the Schanze district.

*We made our way north along the same route we had taken Thursday night, from the Reeperbahn towards Schanze. Massive numbers of police were trying to block the intersections, but they were harried from all directions; we managed to make our way around them, line by line. A punk band was starting to play at Grüner Jäger Park in the middle of the chaos. At the next intersection, we witnessed a hit-and-run attack, in which dozens of demonstrators in full black bloc attire appeared from a side street to the west and pelted the police with projectiles before disappearing again. This distracted the police enough for us to make our way past them once more. One cop was covered in pink paint. He didn’t look very happy about it.*

*We’d heard that there were clashes outside Rote Flora, but we expected that they would die down by the time we arrived. Beyond the next line of police, however, we could see that something dramatic was unfolding in the distance to the north. Several water cannons seemed to be embroiled in a battle. Past them, two thick columns of smoke were ascending into the evening sky. Even at this distance, the deep bass thud of explosions made us jump.*



The burning barricades at the intersection of Neuer Pferdemarkt, Schulterblatt, and Schanzenstrasse.



Everything for everyone: demonstrators looting one of the few shops in Schanze that didn't put up a sign expressing opposition to the G20.

*There were hundreds of police charging back and forth at this intersection, but they were exhausted and stretched thin. When they switched out one squadron for another, we took advantage of the opportunity to rush across the street. Suddenly, we were on the other side of their lines, where courageous demonstrators had been keeping the water cannons at bay with a steady rain of projectiles.*

*On the other side was—freedom. The police had lost control. We walked up to the intersection where Neuer Pferdemarkt meets Schulterblatt and Schanzenstrasse. There were two massive bonfires there. The atmosphere was relaxed. People were standing together, admiring the fires, talking and eating and drinking. Outside, where the police controlled the streets, it was a hell of violence, chaos, and fear. Here, where they had lost control, we experienced the first peace we had come upon in days.*

## **The Defense of Schanze, Police-Free Zone**

By 9 pm, burning barricades surrounded the Schanze district. The police had been forced to withdraw. At 9:30, some stores were looted, including Rewe and Budni. Goods were taken from the stores and redistributed freely. Fierce clashes were taking place along Lerchenstrasse as great bonfires burned nearby. By 10:45 pm, people were affectionately describing St. Pauli as “out of control.”

*In the clashes at the edge of the liberated zone, someone was using one of those enormous umbrellas that cover outdoor tables at cafés as a shield to try to protect himself from the water cannon. The force of the blast kept pushing him back so he skidded along the asphalt. Then somebody else got another umbrella from the café and wedged it behind the first one. In that position, the water cannon couldn't move them. It was just symbolic, but somehow it felt like a moral victory.*

*Further into Schanze, at the burning barricade, people were looting an electronics store. Someone got his hands on a massive flatscreen monitor and carried it towards the fire. Everyone else was shouting for him not to do it, that it was expensive, but he joyously heaved it into the flames. Then everyone cheered, feeling somehow lighter. Destroying commodities can be a kind of therapy that relieves us of covetousness.*

*For me, these scenes exemplify the inventiveness and festive atmosphere that prevail in moments like the ones we experienced in Schanze when it was free of police.*

The critical mass that had gathered at 7 pm rode into Schanze around 11 pm, at the high point of the evening. Despite all the fearsome rhetoric portraying Schanze as a scene out of Breughel during the time the police were excluded from it, those who were there experienced an atmosphere of revelry and



*Celebrating in liberated Schanze.*



*Clashes in Schanze, Friday, July 7.*

camaraderie. Many businesses were open, packed with people buying falafel or drinks. As people lined the streets, cheering at the arrival of the bicyclists, it could have been a family-friendly festival. The vast majority of participants were not anarchists or foreigners from Southern Europe, but ordinary people from Hamburg who had turned against the police over the preceding week. Outside of Schanze, even in areas where there were no anarchists, locals pulled their own trashcans into the street, forcing the police to spread themselves ever thinner over more and more territory.

*After we watched the bicycle parade go by, we walked up the hill to the east. Here, the neighborhood seemed almost deserted; the quiet was a welcome relief. A few people were playing with a beach ball in the middle of the road; above them, the full moon sailed through the smoke of burning barricades. A surreal scene.*

Afterwards, there were some legitimate complaints from locals about “apolitical rioting,” in which young people with no particularly honorable motives threw things, broke bottles, and filmed themselves on their cell phones. It seems the solution for this is not less rioting, but more politics.

At 11:30, the first reports circulated that special forces SEK and GSG9 with real guns were gathering at the edge of the Schanze district. The first attempts the police made to clear the burning barricades and enter Schanze met with fierce and cheerful resistance. As the police finally gained ground, moving from one barricade to another, special forces set up on the rooftops,

controlling the streets from above with machine guns. This is nothing new in the US, but extremely rare in European protests.

Only when the majority of people had gone home to sleep did the police succeed in reestablishing control of the area. Exhausted and humiliated, they treated the stragglers even more brutally than before.

All this time, the police had been fighting on the terrain of media as well as on the streets. Earlier, they used their Twitter account to beg people not to support the black bloc; in the evening, they demanded that journalists stop filming their operations and retreat from the Schanze district. Some officers even forced journalists to leave at gunpoint. Obviously, they did not want media documenting their loss of control, nor their violent attempts to reestablish it.

## **Saturday, July 8: The Whole World Hates the G20**

Saturday was a victory lap for the demonstrators. Not only had they definitively showed that social peace was impossible under the governance of the G20, they had demonstrated that they could at least temporarily face down the police. Now tens of thousands came together to show unity across political and strategic lines in a lengthy march that crossed the city to a rally site beside the St. Pauli stadium.

*Walking around the rally, I was struck by all the diversity on display. In addition to the main stage, several sound trucks hosted dancing to a variety of styles of*

*Saturday, July 8: The Whole World Hates the G20*

*music, while many different food projects distributed free drinks, snacks, and lunches. The greatest number of people were simply ambling about, talking with their friends, taking in the scene. Contrasting this with the digital isolation in which so many in the US spend their lives, it occurred to me that social life is the original commons—in which we are vitalized and emboldened by each other's company, intoxicated by each other.*

Organizers put the number of participants at 76,000, while corporate media allowed that it was over 50,000. This is a very important point: although politicians and corporate media bewailed the “violence” in Hamburg (i.e., acts of self-defense against police violence), claiming it had alienated the general public, the rally was packed by any measure. In participating in Saturday's demonstration, which occurred immediately on the heels of two days' fierce rioting, tens of thousands of people were asserting that they were part of a movement that included a wide range of confrontational tactics. They were not alienated by the events of Thursday and Friday. On the contrary, many were inspired by them.

When we think of the concerned citizens who claim to represent the general public that was supposedly alienated by the resistance in Hamburg, how many people are we talking about? Sunday's Tidy up Hamburg social media stunt drew only a few hundred participants, a pitiful fraction of the massive numbers that came to protest events throughout the week. Some business owners in Schanze published a remarkably supportive statement.

Rather than imagining a faceless “general public” that disapproves of violence (except when the police enact it) and believes whatever the pundits say, let's remember that society is comprised of countless different elements, many of whom have opinions that are never repeated on television by talking heads. Most of the fearmongering about the resistance to the G20 is an intentional media campaign with classic talking points. It isn't intended to reflect reality as it is, but rather to make us fearful of each other, to make it hard to imagine that there are others who want what we want. On Saturday, looking around the crowd in downtown Hamburg, it was clear that outright resistance is already popular.

Even in this context, where they stood to gain nothing, the police couldn't help antagonizing people at the rally, randomly spraying the water cannon from the edge of the rally and sending snatch squads into the crowd to march around randomly. Eventually, demonstrators formed a perimeter around the police, sitting down in front of the water cannons to block them. This showed, once

more, that so long as there are police, we can only be as safe from them as we make each other by facing them down together.

## The Aftermath

That evening, as out-of-town demonstrators left Hamburg and exhausted organizers turned in early for the night, the police found themselves in conflict with crowds of ordinary locals. Over the preceding 48 hours, it had become common for even apolitical crowds to throw bottles at police motorcades when they passed; resistance to police occupation had become normalized. In such situations, however exhausted we are, it is especially important for experienced anarchists to make contact with rebellious elements in the rest of the population who desire to act ungovernably, but lack the know-how to do so safely.

Later, tensions rose in front of Rote Flora as special forces officers with machine guns gathered in front of it yet again. Many feared that the police would try to carry out an eviction. In the end, the police formed lines and charged the crowd, creating panic, but they didn't touch the Flora itself. Despite the backlash, despite the far right hurrying to use the debacle in Hamburg to demand more totalitarian policies, the left scene in St. Pauli survived the tempest with its infrastructure intact.

At least for now.\*

We will see what the coming years bring. Certainly there will be backlash, as the powers that be use what happened in Hamburg as an excuse to crack down. But they've been cracking down anyway, as quickly as possible. Docility won't protect us; it can't halt the escalating conflicts we are already embroiled in. We need to learn from what we were able to do in Hamburg and become better at it. In short, we have to scale up, not scale back. There is no going back to a less contentious time. History has no rewind button.

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\* On August 24, after the publication of this report, the German government carried out a series of raids in Freiburg and shut down linksunten.indymedia.org, the most widely used German-language platform for radical politics and organizing, absurdly justifying this on the grounds that the alleged administrators constitute an illegal organization for the sake of destroying the German Constitution. The gloves are coming off.



*Fearmongering after the G20.*

An upheaval like the G20 offers aspiring tyrants opportunities, but it also offers us opportunities to argue for collective self-defense and to expand the popular imagination when it comes to resistance. The legacy of the 2017 G20 will be determined now, afterwards, in what we remember from it, what we learn from it, and how we use it to spark the conversations we want to have. The first step is to support the arrested and injured and orient ourselves in the current public discourse so we can use the events of the G20 to delegitimize capitalism and the state, rather than letting them use this opportunity to demonize us.

Later, we should do more to identify the strategies and objectives that guided the authorities in Hamburg—and to refine our own strategies and objectives.

*During the G20, I learned what it means to be afraid that people I love could be killed. I had to stay home; I only could read the news. I saw the images of the protests and the massive police violence. And when I heard the news about the undercover officer who fired a “warning” shot, I finally freaked out.*

*Now all my friends have returned home and I am grateful that they only sustained a few injuries. But that is only to consider physical injuries—the hidden psychological injuries are less obvious. I notice that my friends have changed a bit. Some people have trouble sleeping; others can’t stop thinking about Hamburg. And nobody mentions the trauma they have. After G20 I found my “task.” I start to talk to the people about the stuff that happened and try to help them to get over it. Because that is the only thing we can do. We have our structure get over it while everyone in politics is talking about traumatized cops that went to Hamburg to hurt and almost kill people. But we have each other and we will get over it together. We will keep on fighting.*

### **Appendix: From May Day 1987 to Hamburg 2017**

The events of Berlin May Day in 1987 and the 2017 G20 both illustrate a police strategy reaching its limits.



*The aftermath on Friday, July 7.*

*Appendix: From May Day 1987 to Hamburg 2017*

In 1987, the German police began to shift to their current model for crowd control, in order to correct for the ways that crowds had outmaneuvered and defeated them—especially on May Day of that year. The subsequent model of German policing, in which long lines of riot police are supplemented with highly mobile snatch squads that maintain close contact with the crowd, had more or less served to control urban unrest in the country until the G20. (For a more thorough overview of the recent history of German police tactics, consult this helpful article.)

In 2017, exactly thirty years after this model originated, the crowds of Hamburg succeeded once more in outmaneuvering and defeating the police. This time, they did so by spreading the action over a vast area of the city, moving swiftly and focusing on decentralized actions. Wherever the police established a control line, people gathered on the other side of it—not only demonstrators, but also supportive spectators. Small, highly organized and mobile groups of demonstrators were able to identify exit routes and carry out swift attacks, while larger crowds stretched the police one direction, then another. The more territory the police had to control, the more they antagonized the population, and the more demonstrators they had to deal with as their lines became more and more thinly stretched. Finally, they lost control of the most unruly district and were forced to retreat entirely.

Rather than imagining that the authorities somehow staged a breakdown in their own control—attributing, as a paranoid does, all agency to an omnipotent adversary—let's study how and why their strategy collapsed. If we apply Occam's razor, eliminating conspiracy theories, we are compelled to conclude that in Hamburg, the police considered it necessary to attempt to crush all resistance by brute force, even knowing that this approach might backfire. They underestimated us, or else they couldn't come up with a better plan. This tells us something about our historical moment: even in the wealthiest nations, the tenuous peace between the constituent elements of society is becoming unsustainable. It should also serve as a warning: soon, we may be dealing with new policing strategies.

Resistance, as they say, is the motor of history.

*Until everyone joins the black bloc,*

## **CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective**

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