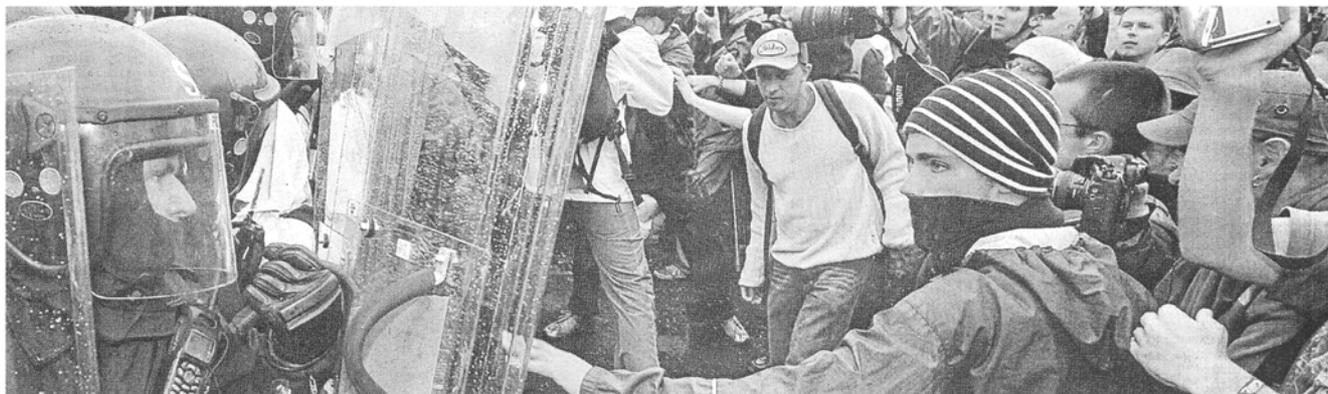


Intake: Inside and outside the G8 protests



Editors' introduction

The prospect of the G8 summit taking place in Gleneagles, Scotland, in July 2005 promised perhaps the excitement of Genoa, Seattle and the other anti-capitalist mobilizations of recent years, on UK soil. But the movement seemed to lose momentum after the last Iraq war, and some of us wondered whether the protests would resemble more the last few Mayday demonstrations – with protesters held for hours in a police cordon designed to bore people into submission – rather than the exhilaration and energy of the 1999 Carnival against Capital. Moreover, most of the predicted crowds were mostly expected to gather around the call by Bob Geldof to protest peacefully to ‘send a message’ to the politicians, rather than attempt to close down the Summit. Many of us therefore stayed away, and then heard about the protests afterwards only through the newspaper coverage of apparently ritualized confrontations between ‘anarchists’ and police. However, many of our friends who went along came back feeling inspired by what happened. One of them has written an account which raises some issues of interest to us and which may be of interest to our readership. We have therefore reproduced his account below without commenting on the extent to which we agree or disagree with all the details of his claims.

Shortly after Bob Geldof called for a million people to converge in Edinburgh for the opening day of the G8 summit, Midge Ure, the co-organizer of Live 8, was asked if he was worried about the events being hijacked by anarchists. His response was that Live 8 was, in fact, hijacking the anarchists' event.¹

This is a personal account of the protests against the Gleneagles G8 Summit. It is limited, being based on my experience as someone involved mainly with the Dissent! mobilisation, the rural Stirling camp and the blockades of the Summit on the 6th.

Introduction

The demonstrations against the G8 Summit in Scotland in July 2005 had two distinct aspects, which one you saw depending largely on whether or not you were involved in the protests and actions around the Summit.

On the one hand, most of those that were involved seemed to come back inspired by what they had experienced,

firstly in mobilising for the Summit and then in Scotland. Many felt that the Summit protests had been a great success.

On the other hand, for most of the rest of the population, the majority of what they saw of the Summit protests was Bob Geldof, Live 8 and lots of people (including the Prime Minister!) wearing white wristbands. This represents a massive hijacking of an anti-summit mobilisation to turn it into effectively a pro-government rally.

These two aspects of the Summit protests seem a little contradictory and yet to properly assess what happened in Scotland we need to take both into account. The two opposing appearances of the Summit mobilisations really didn't connect with each other. Those involved in the actions and demonstrations got on and did their thing and paid little attention to the spectacle all around them. Those on the outside saw little else.

The mobilisation against the G8 Summit was an *activist* mobilisation and did not really manage to reach beyond this. The impression you have of the Summit protests probably depends on whether or not you were ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ – whether or not you were involved, or to what extent you identify as an activist.

However, we can take a critical position outside of both of these aspects, which allows us to see how both realities of

¹ ‘The First Embedded Protest’, Kay Summer and Adam Jones, Guardian, June 18th, 2005.

the protests are related. But, first we have to look at both sides of the protests to see what is true in each side of the story.

From the inside

People who were up in Scotland and who came back quite inspired by the G8 protests mostly seem to have been impressed on a practical level. The whole process of organising the mobilisation around the country brought a lot of people together. Often creating links and connections on a local level that hadn't existed before.

Many people said they had been inspired by the general level of self-organisation, especially in the rural campsite in Stirling: that thousands of people got together without hierarchy and organised themselves; that everyone pulled together to make it happen in such a short time, under such pressure. People felt empowered by the sense of feeling our own collective strength, making links and building a community.

Secondly, people seemed to be impressed with the actions. They bettered many people's expectations in that they happened at all and the police didn't totally stop them. Roads were blocked, the opening day of the Summit was disrupted, delegates were delayed and the fences surrounding the conference centre were partially torn down as people invaded the grounds of Gleneagles.

However, there were definite limitations to the actions that took place. Looking at the Dissent! programme of actions in advance, it looked like a week of actions. However in the actual event, the blockade day overshadowed everything else. None of the other actions – such as the blockade of Faslane naval base and the 'Carnival of full enjoyment' - got anything like the numbers present on the day of blockades, and many of the other actions didn't seem organised enough. This wasn't so much of problem with the blockades day as it was collaboratively organised by everyone, but with the other actions, where this was not the case, then the lack of organisation began to show more. Also, we didn't manage to sustain the pressure we created on the blockades day and so in the end the G8 protests did become about one day. Which despite some people saying that this was exactly what they didn't want to happen, was in a way perhaps an inevitable tendency.

Even the success of that one day was a bit of a surprise and it's unsure how much of that was really due to us – perhaps it was due more to the cops not really being as organised as we thought they were.

The numbers involved in actually trying to shut down or disrupt the Summit were also quite limited. Obviously, compared to the normal run of British activist politics, it was a very big event, but compared to the numbers of people that went on the Make Poverty History demonstration, it was very small numbers. The blockades could clearly have been much more effective with greater numbers of people.

However impressive the 'eco-village' camp at Stirling was in some respects, it also reflected this. It was inspiring and good for us, but didn't really connect with anyone else – its awful location (not the first choice of the organisers, it should be pointed out) certainly didn't help with this. Stuck just past an industrial estate, down a dead-end road on the outskirts of Stirling, it was not going to attract a lot of interest from those passing by.

Perhaps a lot of people got involved locally around the country and the self-organisation of the whole mobilisation may have been impressive – but both of these things were still limited to activists and attempts to reach outside of that and to link the G8 protests to the wider concerns of people in the country mostly didn't get very far. So despite significant efforts from some of those involved in organising the mobilisation, the actions against the Summit remained inside the activist ghetto.

Also, the actions against the G8 stuck pretty closely to the traditional summit-demonstration formula. Despite some effort being put into trying to think about this beforehand, we failed to come up with anything really radical and innovative. The Gleneagles protests stayed within the rather ritualised form that these summit demonstrations have taken on.

Within the activist world, the protests can be counted a success. And this is not an illusion – within those terms they were to an extent successful. But this disregards the whole other aspect of the Summit demonstrations, which changes our assessment of the protests. The overall political impact of the Summit demonstrations has to be assessed to include both aspects. And in these terms, the mobilisation seems like less of a success due to the extent of the hijacking of the mobilisation by Live 8 and the government. So, having seen how things looked from the 'inside', we need to understand how the outward appearance of the summit protests came to be.

From the outside

Since the WTO protests of 1999, there have been concerted attempts to bring some selected NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) into the summit meetings of the international elite in an attempt to break the alliance of NGOs and more radical activists which brought gridlock to the streets of Seattle. However, the Gleneagles G8 Summit was perhaps unique in the degree of convergence between the government hosting the Summit and setting the agenda and the NGOs supposedly lobbying or protesting against the Summit.

Most people from the outside saw only an extravaganza of backslapping between Blair, Brown, Bono, Geldof and various other music megastars. This was the other side to the Summit protests – the sudden last minute media onslaught of the Live 8 bandwagon, totally swamping all else.

The protests against the G8 Summit were in truth hijacked twice over, first by Bob Geldof and Live 8, and then, riding on the back of that, by the government.

The Make Poverty History coalition (which was responsible for the mainstream demonstrations in Scotland) is the successor to the Jubilee 2000 campaign and has essentially the same goals – increased aid to the 'Third World', debt relief and 'trade justice'. Blair and Brown have both spoken in favour of some of these goals in the past. So their support now is not totally unexpected.²

² For example, from February 2002: "British Prime Minister Tony Blair has... called for a major public campaign on the issue of tackling [Africa's] poverty... he said he wanted a campaign similar to the Jubilee 2000 one on world debt relief." See: news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/1812382.stm.

But the unexpected wild card in the protests against the 2005 G8 was Live 8 – the huge global rock concert event organised by Bob Geldof which reached quite nauseating depths in its sucking up to the Blair government. Live 8 was considerably less radical than even the most right-wing of the NGOs who at least were asking for something more than they were being offered. Live 8 dropped even any veneer of ‘protest’ and became explicitly pro-government – Richard Curtis, one of the main organisers, even said that the point of all the rock concerts was to support Blair inside the G8; to lend weight to him against the other G8 leaders.

The convergence between the government hosting the G8 Summit and the mainstream organisations lobbying the Summit, presided over by the media and proclaimed a done deal, was something that demanded a response from radicals.

In order to take a stance against this government stitch-up, radicals needed to be able to articulate why it was happening and what it meant. If the G8 Summit deal were to be seen as some unexpected act of benevolence on the part of the G8 leaders this would undercut a radical critique of the G8. It was necessary for radicals to explain what really lay behind the rhetoric and to explain why Blair and Brown particularly were pushing this agenda.

Why, after many years of accumulating debts for some of the world’s poorest countries and the governments of the richest seemingly oblivious to calls for debt relief, suddenly now was everything different? It would seem that multilateral institutions and Western governments profited from the debt, so why were they now willing to consider writing it off? And what differentiated those still planning to disrupt the Summit from the more mainstream organisations which were seemingly having their demands granted?

Here are some brief suggestions on what may be behind some of these moves towards debt relief and why this might particularly suit British national interests:

a) Debt relief will lift this burden off the economies of these ‘developing’ nations so that they can be properly integrated into the global market. The role that much of the ‘Third World’ has taken in the global economy to date has been as locations for resource extraction, but in order for the global economy to continue to expand, this is not enough. The economic growth of the ‘developing world’ is necessary for the continuing growth of the global economy. Third World debt has perhaps outlived its usefulness for global capital. It has been useful in providing a lever with which to force recalcitrant governments into line with the current global neo-liberal plan, but this has had the side effect that these countries were permanently trapped in debt-related financial crisis, making them little use apart from for resource extraction. Also much the same ‘levering’ role can now be played by the conditions attached to the debt relief as was played by the conditions attached to the loans in the first place.

Britain particularly is pushing this agenda as due to the importance of finance capital in the British economy (financial and business services as a whole account for over 70% of GDP³) Britain tends to take on the role of representing finance capital and capital-in-general on a global level.

As Gordon Brown told a Chatham House audience: “for the world economy to prosper and for the companies operating in it to have markets that expand, developing country growth is a necessity”. Without this, rich countries were “unlikely to maintain the growth rates we have enjoyed over the past 20 years”. He talked of: “bringing the millions who live in these countries into the modern productive economy.”⁴

b) There is no particular disadvantage for Britain in promoting or allowing the ‘development’ of some of the world’s poorer countries because the UK is one of the world’s most ‘advanced’ capitalist countries, in the respect that it is de-industrialised and de-agriculturalised to a greater extent than perhaps any other of the world’s leading countries. If these countries do ‘develop’, then the sectors of the economy that they are ‘developing’ are unlikely to present any competition to the mainsprings of the British economy.

c) Further to this, there is an actual advantage for Britain in that it has much of the finance capital and the corporations that are going to be going in and doing the ‘developing’. Britain has nothing much that ‘developing’ countries could possibly compete with but stands to economically benefit through the companies that will be doing the investing and consulting and running the privatisation programmes etc required by the conditions attached to the debt relief.

Recuperation was more of a problem for the G8 Summit protests than repression.

What people saw from the outside was a carefully managed spectacle, at its worst simply fulfilling the role of a giant PR campaign to polish Blair’s tarnished image after the Iraq war. It was a cynical exercise in using the language of the ‘global justice movement’ to sell the British government’s global agenda of privatisation and ‘free’ trade – an extension of neo-imperialism by another name. Many people involved in the more radical end of the Summit mobilisations realised this, but despite some attempts, we were unable to do enough to make a clearly visible stand against it.

Unlike some other summit mobilisations in other places, there doesn’t seem to have been a huge wave of police repression and downturn following the Gleneagles G8 – perhaps because our actions were not so spectacular.⁵ The problem for other movements has sometimes been that when the dust has cleared and everyone has gone home, radicals have been left in a much weaker position after the summit than before, with a combination of police repression, imprisoned activists to support and a general atmosphere of clampdown and a lack of public support for radicals. To the contrary, in this situation we *seem* to have been left in a stronger position. This is hard to call of course, but local groups have formed and worked together to organise against the Summit, there are new social centres in several towns

⁴ Speech given by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, at the 'Financing Sustainable Development, Poverty Reduction and the Private Sector: Finding Common Ground on the Ground' conference, Chatham House, London, 22 January 2003.

⁵ See ‘Days of Dissent: Reflections on Summit Mobilisations’ for some examples and discussion. Available at: www.daysofdissent.org.uk.

³ Economist Country Briefing: Britain.

and cities, and on a national level, there is a new anti-capitalist national network – the Dissent! network.

However, the Live 8/government hijacking of the protests nullified some of the political impact of the various protests and demonstrations. It was always going to be difficult to make clear our perspective when faced with the massive media onslaught around Live 8 and to try and prevent ourselves being seen as merely the radical wing of the whole Live 8, debt-relief spectacle - different in militancy, but not in essentials.

As much energy needs to be put into combating recuperation as into avoiding repression. But less thought was put into this in advance by those involved in the radical end of the G8 protests. The failure to distinguish ourselves from the positions of the mainstream NGOs was compounded by the decentralised nature of the Dissent! network, in that it included people whose politics were barely distinguishable from Make Poverty History and it included enough people whose politics were unclear enough that there was always a danger of things being produced under the Dissent! banner, which read as if they had been written by Christian Aid. This said, however, there were plenty of people who realised the necessity of making our position clear and put effort into doing so, but it was always going to be a very uphill task.

However, the hijacking of the agenda by Live 8 and the Labour government did not totally negate the value of the radical end of the G8 Summit demonstrations and the mobilisation to disrupt and blockade the Summit. Particularly when the reality of the paucity of the deals done at the G8 Summit began to come out in the days following the Summit, and it was obvious that it was going to be business as usual, the actions of radicals in attempting to shut down and blockade the Summit seemed to make more sense. Even if our ideas didn't get out through the media, our actions clearly did. And our actions conveyed a fairly clear message of the rejection of the G8. A message which was retrospectively justified by the clear pointlessness of much of the mainstream mobilisation, seeking to ask the very people, institutions and nations responsible for world poverty to go against their entire past record to try and end it.

End

Taking a stance outside of both aspects of the Summit protests allows us to see how both realities of the G8 protests were related.

As they have become more established, summit demonstrations have become ritualised. They are a known quantity – people know what is supposed to happen. There is less that is unknown and unexpected in them. There is therefore a tendency for people to come and fulfil their predetermined roles, to do their thing, like they have done before.

There was a real disconnection between the activist protesters and the whole spectacle of the Make Poverty History demonstrations, Live 8 etc. Not that there should have been an active engagement with this by the radicals, but it was as if they were in different worlds. The activists just got on and did their thing, preparing the blockades etc. and Geldof et al carried on with their thing on the level of the media.

The ritualised nature of summit protests leads to a disconnection or a disregard for their overall context. Each one is seen as just another in a series, its context being provided by the other summit protests that have gone before rather than the particular political circumstances surrounding the mobilisation.

Summit demonstrations have become a victim of their own success. They have dogged the leaders of the world wherever they have chosen to meet, forcing them behind giant fences and into more and more remote locations. They have helped extend an opposition to neo-liberal globalisation into the countries of the 'West'. They have created new links and networks between radicals and given new hope to them, creating new forms of politics and putting 'anti-capitalism' into everyone's heads.

But their very successfulness has resulted in them being stuck in a ritualised repetition. They have seemingly reached a plateau and their early promise to push beyond this has receded. From being something open, which had the potential to go in any direction, they have settled into way of being and taken on a form.

But how else could it have been? That is surely the point about so-called 'moments of excess'.⁶ that they are points at which possibilities open and anything could happen. Yet, it is in the nature of this state that it is brief. This situation cannot last long. Sooner or later it will settle into something. And the very fact of becoming *anything* rather than being a moment of openness, a jumping off point for an unknown future, must in a way feel like a disappointment.

So, unable to go further, having reduced all the potentialities open to a new phenomenon into merely one, you repeat. The process of something becoming ritualised is not unexpected. In a way it is in the nature of revolutionary politics. It is like a failed revolution.

In revolutionary politics, everything you do is an attempt to push beyond the world we live in now, to open up new cracks, new paths, to open up as much space for experiment in alternative forms of life as possible. And until we succeed, we are going to keep failing. That means there are going to be a lot of revolutionary moments and openings that have solidified into institutions or rituals: insurrections that have become organisations, uprisings that have given birth to networks, projects and infrastructure that remain when the initial cause is over.

Every little opening in alienation makes us want more. Things almost inevitably disappoint because we are always greedy for more. These summit demonstrations initially excited a lot of people because they seemed to open new possibilities, make new links and connections; they seemed to show a new way of being anti-capitalist. But they obviously could not go on pushing boundaries forever. They obviously were going to settle down into something that was more or less 'ritualised'.

Given that this is the case, the point is to preserve as many of the high points of a phenomenon as possible and to keep as much flexibility and openness as possible – not to completely ossify. We need to defend the gains that we have made and to when there is a wave of a radical upsurge, to ride that wave and somehow allow it to leave us in a better

⁶ A phrase used by the Leeds Mayday Group in discussing summit mobilisations. See: www.nadir.org.uk.

position when it recedes than we were in before, ready and better prepared for the next thing.

One way of preserving the gains of a particular innovation is through 'ritualisation'. This obviously has disadvantages, which, for example, many of the critics of summit mobilisations have pointed out: things become dull and stale, the authorities know easily how to deal with them, the element of surprise and unpredictability is lost, and they have no potential to go beyond this – they only promise more repetition of the same. However, if the 'ritualisation' of struggles is to a certain extent inevitable, then maybe we also need to look at the other side of this process.

The repetition of a winning strategy, or a form of action that worked, is one way of maintaining and keeping what you have gained. It also keeps up the pressure on your opponents, lets them know that you haven't gone away.

Given the unlikelihood of some tactic like summit mobilisations being able to push the boundaries endlessly, we are left with the choice to either abandon this form of action or to keep on. Both tendencies are present within activist politics. The tendency to establish something, some form of resistance and then after it has been successful, to abandon it and move on to something new is quite strong. Something new, a new issue, a new campaign, a new tactic, because it is new and untried still feels like it has the potential to go further and break the mould.

But partly this is just a product of its newness. Rather than always chasing after new things, there might be something to be said for a certain amount of ritual.

Historically, there have been ritualised forms of rebellion – folk customs of attacking the rich and powerful at particular times or in particular ways. These things are not necessarily totally bad – just limited. What's good about such things is also what is limited in them. When forms of rebellion become ritualised it can mean they are repetitive, stale, stagnant. But also that they are ingrained, have become customary, expected – which can be a big pain for those in power, but also simultaneously limiting for radicals. Things can become entrenched – with both the positive and negative sides of that – a position that is firmly held and very difficult for the enemy to shift but also difficult to move forward from.

It is a measure of the success of these summit mobilisations that they have bred both things – both the ritualisation of protest on the part of the activists and the recuperation of protest by pop stars and the government. These two things are connected in that a successful movement is more likely to become ritualised and a successful, ritualised, fixed form of protest is easier for those forces seeking to assimilate the movement back into the mainstream to latch on to. This has in turn generated this two-sidedness to the summit mobilisations and the disconnection between their two aspects.