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Effective Politics or Feeling Effective

ByChris Carlsson

The anti-G8 summit demonstrations in Rostock this June had something of the atmosphere of a music festival and a detention camp — and not all the constituents of the decentralised protests were happy campers. Chris Carlsson reports back

We fought the police with words, dances, clown-armies, yoga, laughs, music... they tried to stop us with gas, batons, water cannons, bulldozers, helicopters, stop and search actions, blockades, riot gear and intimidation... We are happy. Any action is better than none. We're having fun.

— From Germany and Portugal and the rest of the world, Voluntari@s IMC-PT,

June 8, 2007, Rostock, Germany

Despite all the dozens of beautifully designed posters all around Germany calling people to come and blockade the G8 meeting and ‘smash capitalism’, capitalism is not smashed. But the week-long protests still feel like a success to most of the participants, as the quote above indicates. Thousands of people converged in Rostock to partake in marches, discussions, meetings, and symposia, and some 6,000-10,000 marched to the security fence (erected by the German State at great expense) to ‘blockade’ the G8 summit. Real courage and creativity buoyed the blockaders and kept the security forces in an exhausting round-the-clock state of alert, while the politicians wined and dined in monarchical splendor behind the formidable barriers. Their vapid pronouncements were dutifully reported by the world’s media, but always a few paragraphs down, the presence of thousands of blockading protesters had to be mentioned too. Little coverage was offered of the multiple critical views and myriad of alternatives presented to ‘business-as-usual’ by the assembled protesters, but the ‘global war’ hysteria whipped up in the past few years has clearly failed to silence the growing global chorus of people who insist ‘another world is possible.’

Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

The anti-G8 protests have to be seen against the background of a steadily increasing delegitimisation of representative democracy. Politics has become an empty ritual in most western democracies. Moreover, political formations based on class and community have also dissipated in the past two generations to the point that most formal politics is more a habit than a living, breathing engagement.

This demise of formal politics coincides with increased polarisation of wealth both inside nations and between nations. Leaders of the wealthiest countries that meet in the G8 summit every year are managers of an ever more brutal world system that keeps billions living in catastrophic, intolerable misery, and many millions more just a step or two away from immiseration themselves. Political systems drained of meaningful choices, combined with a fragmented and largely numb polity have pushed those seeking change to develop new forms of doing politics. Crucial to these forms is a need to *feel effective* in ways that regular politics have prevented.

Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

JUNE CAMPING IN GERMANY

At the beginning of June, 2007, anti-G8 summit protesters from around the world descended on northern Germany, united in their determination to ‘shut down’ the summit through direct action. Prior to the 1-8 June gathering in the former East German countryside, an Asian-European Market summit in Hamburg on 28 May was confronted by protesters, led by several thousand black bloc anarchists and squatters joined by hundreds of other protesters. This was the warm-up for the coming days of protest and for those inclined towards brawling with police it was a tantalising taste of what was to come — or so they hoped — because they certainly ‘got their riot on’ in Hamburg that day, as the streets filled with tear gas, high-powered water cannon, burning cars and smashed windows.

As it turned out, the only time the anti-G8 protests resembled that day in Hamburg was at the end of the first day’s legal march, on Saturday 2 June, when black bloc marchers attacked the police and a riot erupted, injuring 250 protesters and 250 police, some seriously. A sea of words has already splashed across the internet and the world’s newspapers, a remarkably large proportion of them dedicated to reporting on and talking about the infamous black bloc. Though the first few days of June focused on the question of anarchist violence (both in the press and among the protesters themselves), by the end of the week, the anti-G8 protest in Germany had gone well beyond that narrow framework.

Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

There were a range of preferences regarding tactics among demonstrators coming to shut down the G8, as there have been since the WTO protests in Seattle eight years ago. German organisers accommodated this difference of tactics by setting up three different camps to house protesters during the G8. Closest to the ‘red zone’ was Camp Reidelich, where anarchists and ‘hard core’ protesters concentrated. Furthest away, but closest to the largest nearby city was Camp Rostock (named after the city) on the northern outskirts of the urban area, and among its 5,000 plus inhabitants were many of the more organised NGO groups and political parties, as well as a large number of independent demonstrators. The last, Camp Wichmannstorff, was far away to the northeast, more than an hour from the other camps, and was supposed to be home to experienced anti-nuclear blockaders, but never had nearly the attendance or camps Rostock or Reidelich.

Relations among the various tendencies remained largely cordial. The exception to this was the French NGO, ATTAC, who after the 2 June riot in Rostock publicly denounced the black bloc. This was at odds with German NGOs organised under the umbrella ‘Block G8’ who saw themselves as occupying the ground between the more cautious ATTAC on one side and the more provocative black bloc anarchists at the other extreme. Another nonprofit NGO, La Via Campesina, present in previous summits, once again brought their message on behalf of the Global South’s millions of impoverished peasants and farmers. When they were hectored to denounce the black block violence during a press conference, they firmly refused the framing of the discussion. Similarly, a spokesperson for the German Block G8 umbrella, Christophe Kleine, also turned the tables on the press, urging the discussion to focus on the structural and day-to-day violence imposed on most of the world by the policies of G8 countries. In this way, a solidarity was maintained that avoided splitting the movement over tactical disagreements, much as the press and police sought to expand that division. Instead, a mutual respect and acceptance was based on the shared knowledge that everyone there needed everyone else for the concept to be effective. Riots alone would not achieve political results, just as political demonstrating without any militance is easily absorbed and trivialised.

Beyond the attempt to blockade the meetings in Bad Heilingendamm, there were also four separate legal marches in the city of Rostock on different related themes from 1-4 June as well as an alternative summit, nightly music concerts, and an unknown number of decentralised actions around the vicinity.

Thousands of protesters set up tents in camps and held meetings, ate meals together, staged concerts, showed films, and carried on debates and discussions in many languages. Remarkable global villages took root in the German countryside, but these were no ordinary villages. The anti-G8 gathering sprawled over three camps and two convergence centers, two Indymedia centers. At the level of infrastructure it was impressive. Big expensive tents, 200 portable toilets, daily food provision for thousands, communications facilities, even a tent dedicated to recharging mobile phones, and another with ten open access internet computers.

Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

As with the summit battles of past years in Seattle, Washington, Genoa, Quebec, Gleneagles, etc., protesters are inventing a new culture in the camps, workshops, and protest marches, or at least many are trying to. In Camp Rostock where I stayed from Friday night through Monday night, the whole camp was jumping nearly 24 hours a day. Impromptu stages featured hiphoppers, beatboxers, speeches, bands, DJs, and movies while bars in many group camps poured an endless sea of beer. Camp Rostock became quite Burning Man-ish — wall-to-wall tents made it quite cozy, even too cozy! A hundred porta-potties dot the perimeter, a big communal kitchen, meeting tents, ‘streets’ (mud paths) called Durruti Blvd., via Guiliani, rue de Arundhati Roy, Kurt Eisner Platz, Rosa Luxembourg Allee, Leiselotte Meyer Weg. We had speed tweakers next to us the first night but they thankfully slept through the next day and night. On Sunday night there was an absolute roar surrounding us until at least 3 in the morning. The nearest stage had beatbox and rap performances in German, English, French, Spanish, terrible quality speakers make it pretty loud and bad from our distance.

2 June, Anti-G8 Protests, Rostock

Amidst all this noisy cultural invention, I had a strange thought about the camp experience — one dark view would see it as practice for involuntary life in camps in the future ... with much fewer resources and pleasures one would assume, but who knows? This might be as much an experiment for the state as for the ‘multitude’. It was a remarkable experience of Political Camp, a dash of boy scouts and an ample splash of Burning Man — unlike BM though, everyone here is intentionally political. I saw a lot of affinity groups meeting, characteristically the meetings are in the open and undoubtedly self-consciously transparent. I overheard a Greek group, a Spanish one, a Francophone African group (Senegalese and Malian I believe), but mostly German, French, a few Danish, a smattering of Russians and Poles, a few US folk, the few Latin Americans and Asians present were probably already living in Germany.

PROTESTING SUCCESS

The structure of the week of protests is complex, with hundreds of affinity groups intersecting with a large number of NGOs and somewhat fewer political parties. Issues that usually get balkanised and kept apart are continually put together in summits like this; one of the better aspects of the whole thing. So after the big opening anti-G8 demo, again using the slogan ‘Another World is Possible,’ the second day had a big demo against GMO agriculture and in support of food sovereignty and local farmers under the slogan ‘Resistance is Fruitful’. It was a spirited march of several thousand, very well decorated and quite mellow in terms of police response, as they only put some dozens of ‘anti-konflikt team’ cops in windbreakers around the march.

anti-G8 Rostock

The June 4 demo was called 'The Right to Movement' and the police turned it into an exercise in patience and attrition. The route was to be the same as the Agriculture march the day before and at the gathering point there were a lot more of us, several thousand. Before too long hundreds of heavily armored riot police had spread out in the forests, surrounding us completely. As soon as the march started it stopped. From the sound truck came the news that the police had detected 500 protesters who had infiltrated the march and evaded their control, and who they were sure were going to be violent. After an hour and a half of negotiations, the march organisers and police agreed that we could proceed only if no one wore a mask, no one wore a hoody and sunglasses, or any kind of face-obscuring clothing. It's officially illegal to hide your face in Germany during demonstrations, though that had been flaunted by 2000 black bloc'ers on Saturday.

4 June Freedom of Movement march

The plight of immigrants in Germany and Fortress Europe in general is just as bad, or worse, than in the United States. Here in Germany an immigrant is placed in a certain district, usually rural and poor, and while they await processing it is illegal for them to leave that district. Later, if they get legal residency status, and if they are still on welfare, it is illegal for them to leave that district unless they have a job outside of it. Of course, it might be tricky to arrange a job somewhere else in a country that you are banned from visiting! The Kafka-esque nightmare of migration stands in sharp contrast to the ever-easier movement of capital, whipping to and fro in a frenzy of speculation across the planet.

4 June Anti-G8 Protests, Rostock

So we finally moved a bit, only to be stopped again after a few hundred yards. Now the police insisted on lining the route of the march with riot cops 3 deep on each side. The organisers refused to proceed under those conditions, so another hour went by as they negotiated. Finally we got to go without that level of police accompaniment, though there were thousands of riot cops all around, along with giant water cannon vehicles, and fleets of police vans that were constantly moving around Rostock. This is the backbone of the police infantry, their 21st century horses, and at times they park them three and four rows deep, crisscrossing the road to serve as barricades.

4 June March

Capitalism was never threatened directly by these protests, to no one's surprise. At this point in history, we are creating the foundations for a challenge to capitalism, rather than taking it on directly. Still, it's important to many participants to claim that the anti-G8 protests were successful on many levels. Of course, the measurement of 'success' in this kind of week-long event is a pointless exercise, akin to reducing a complex moment in social and political history to a football match with a final score and winner and loser. It's an inappropriate framework for understanding the meaning of this, and insofar as we accept it, we succumb to a logic of the Spectacle, flattening complexity into bite sized nuggets of unnourishing mystification.

The individuals who animated the camps and the marches and blockades contributed to a process of political re-invention and re-engagement. No one protesting the G8 would have been satisfied to merely write a letter to a politician or a newspaper (though some of them undoubtedly did that too), let alone accept that the proper way to respond to this self-designated global elite was to await the next election in their home country. It is precisely against the impotent rituals of modern democracy that these folks are in motion. For those 10 thousand plus who hiked miles across open fields to sit on roads and rails to blockade the summit, their direct action was a far more *potent act* than any of the activities that preceded it during the days prior, even if the politicians and supplies were flown over the blockades by helicopter.

Among the people who took time out of their normal lives to camp and march and argue and blockade, there are more differences than commonalities. But they represent a continuum of subjective choices, refusals of the limits of politics, and an embrace of ‘action,’ defined in a variety of ways. There are sharp differences on what kinds of tactics and behaviors are appropriate. For some, showing up in Rostock and walking in legal marches and attending workshops is already a break from the atomised lives most of their compatriots accept as normal. For many others, participating in a legally approved political demonstration is to affirm one’s own passivity in the face of a system that demands acquiescence. Some of them want to make music, to dance and sing together, to make wild and marvelous artistic floats and puppets with subversive messages. For them, drumming and dancing is to throw their bodies into another level of engagement, to feel their own participation in a visceral and sometimes powerful way. By introducing a Dionysian element of pleasure and even celebration, they are refusing the somber, obedient, sheep-like behavior acceptable to both the state and to leftist organisers. At its most extreme, they are creating the beginnings of a new post-capitalist culture, filling the streets with art and music in the here and now. For those who want to connect through pleasure and joy, the passivity and quietude of many demonstrators is what they’re trying to break through.

Seen from outside the black bloc seem like a Calvinist nightmare, all color and individuality expunged from their ranks, while their hostility to the limits of legal marches or to the ‘hippy’ fun of drummers and dancers is notable. In a real way black bloc’ers are ‘throwing down’ — throwing their bodies on the gears of the machine as best they can (to echo Mario Savio’s epochal call in Berkeley’s 1964 Free Speech Movement). It’s a romantic and ultimately doomed approach — fighting military with military will fail even if the insurgents ‘win’. Though the ‘machine’ may use police as its first line of defense, the cops are replaceable parts too, and underneath the ninja turtle suits, much to the dismay of those who have demonised them in their symbolic roles, they are people who we need to join us instead of fighting us. I enjoyed a walking tour of Berlin after returning from Rostock that ended with a stirring account of the revolt that finally brought down the wall — in Leipzig in October/November 1989 hundreds and then thousands of demonstrators turned out until a crucial evening when the mobilised armed forces of the East German state were sent to crush them — but the soldiers refused to fire on the crowds. Weeks later the iron curtain was kaput! Mass demonstrations were crucial, but the subversion of the police and army was equally crucial, not their military defeat *per se*.

Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

Black bloc ‘anarchists’ got most of the press here Saturday-Tuesday at the expense of the other 75,000 protesters and their respective messages because of the riot at the end of Saturday’s big anti-G8 march. This obsessive press angle led eleven US Protesters to write an open letter in which they argued: ‘Summit after summit, we have seen the same pattern in the media. The images of black-clad protestors hurling rocks at police, the stories of senseless hooligans — those whom the government says should be punished and locked away. These stories and images of street fighting do nothing but spread fear, criminalise protests, divide social movements, and distract the public from the story of the G8 and their unaccountable polices that are spreading militarism, poverty, violence, environmental destruction and climate change.’ Only Americans can be surprised that the media does not communicate their message properly! Few have commented on the strange psy-ops perpetrated by the police as they continuously made bizarre claims about nonexistent weapons (potatoes spiked with nails?) and nonexistent combatants, filling the air with disturbingly unverifiable claims that went unchallenged by the media.

There is actually a striking parallel in the mirror-like behavior of the mainstream press and many protesters in their mutual obsession and focus on the black bloc and violence. At a breakfast table Monday morning, everyone was reading about Saturday’s demonstration. In the Indymedia Center (IMC), most of the internationals uploading pictures and stories were working on images of the riot.

My friend browsed English language Indymedia sites and there wasn't much mention of any other aspect of the protests in Rostock beyond the riot during the first few days. In this sad way, the anti-G8 protesters perfectly mirror the mainstream: if it bleeds, it leads. Conflict and violence are much easier to capture and communicate, and resonate much louder, than any of the dozens of other messages, groups, creative expressions, etc.

secret weapon, Anti-G8 protests, Rostock

There wasn't anything particularly new or different about this anti-G8 protest from the Gleneagles protest in Scotland two years ago, or the longer history of other summits (and before that, anti-nuclear and anti-military protests in the 1970s and 1980s). It might have been more effective to have the blockades at the gates of Bad Heilingendamm matched by mass strikes and urban demonstrations in Berlin and Hamburg, but the protests were not embraced by a sufficiently broad swathe of the population to bring that about.

Waiting for politicians or legal protest to bring about radical change is hopeless. But as people 'take action', curious questions emerge about how *feeling* effective is not the same as *effective politics*. Obviously the people in motion are an evolving social and political movement, and Rostock is another important chapter in that evolution. Just as obviously capitalism is not directly threatened by dancing in the streets or brawling with police, though it may someday be challenged by the culture that these activities help nurture. If anything we might note that security bureaucracies are responsive and evolving too, learning lessons and making adjustments in response to the endless creativity of its opponents. And as protests grow larger, so too do the resources dedicated to repressing them.

Is the summit-hopping culture too insular and self-referential? Is it too disconnected from the daily lives of everyday workers and citizens? Aren't protesters themselves everyday workers and citizens? Why the separation then? These are among the questions that future summit protesters will have to face in coming years.

Can the movement escape the cycle of predictability and a politics of ineffective self-gratification? Can more of the same, bigger and better, produce more subversive results? Or might there be a lesson in the disobedience of the Eastern bloc soldiers back in 1989? A new world, beyond borders and capitalism, is in formation. Will it burst forth one day, inspiring even those who are employed to suppress it to join in? Our protests and creative alternatives have to inspire even our enemies to join us. That's a big challenge, to be sure. Revolution is not something to be imposed but rather, it should be an irresistibly compelling invitation. That other world we keep claiming? It beckons some of us already, because in it we'll feel and taste and know things we've only dreamed about. Are our protests communicating that dream, those implausible hopes, those urgent necessities? Would your mother want to come along?

Chris Carlsson, <cc@chrisCarlsson.com> is a writer, publisher, editor, and community organizer. He was one of the founders, editors and frequent contributors to the ground-breaking San Francisco magazine *Processed World*, www.chrisCarlsson.com