

Reflections Upon the Events Surrounding the Alternative G20 Summit

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This short article is about the events surrounding the Alternative G20 Summit¹; particularly those of 1 April 2009. This was labelled ‘financial fool’s day’ by those supporting the Alternative G20 Summit. A play on words, it was designed to highlight the foolishness of the neo-liberal financial system which has dominated us for nearly thirty years now.

Let’s start with two days prior to the Alt G20. On 30 March 2009, the University of East London (UEL) management board announced that they were closing the entire campus for the days of 1 and 2 April 2009 citing security considerations and the fear of direct action being launched from the university to the nearby Excel Centre, where the official G20 took place on 2 April (a task that would be near impossible without navigating the Thames with the help of some diving equipment, the Docklands Light Railway or a river boat).

¹ AltG20 - www.altg20.org.uk

So, at 4pm on 1 April, as I enter the UEL Docklands Campus it's not immediately clear that there is very much you could call 'alternative' happening at all. Every building is locked, and no staff or students are in sight. The Alt G20 seems to have been reduced to about forty people lying on the grass in the sun looking out onto the Thames. Someone tries to sell me a Socialist Workers Party newspaper – no thanks. Apparently some of the advertised speakers are on their way, but no-one's too sure when they're going to arrive. A few more people trundle in, there are probably about eighty or so now, and suddenly, in all his glory dressed up as Dracula is UEL Professor Chris Knight, recently suspended by his employers for his comments regarding violence and bankers on Radio 4.

Cheers go up; maybe there are 100 of us now. We all follow Chris/Dracula to the doors of one of the university buildings. Someone pushes against the door and sets off an alarm. Everyone looks a bit non-plussed; someone has an idea of smoking a cigarette in the nearby dorms to set off the fire alarms and get security down to open the buildings. Nothing happens though. At six o'clock there was supposed to be a press conference in one of the university buildings, but six o'clock comes and goes with us sitting out on the grass again. Tony Benn arrives – 'Three cheers for Tony Benn' someone next to me shouts ... some people cheer. I'm feeling a little bit disillusioned.

But let me back up again. A few hours earlier and I'm watching the rolling BBC coverage of the protests in the City of London. BBC correspondent Ben Brown is on the 'front line' of the protest outside the Bank of England. As police lines in riot gear move towards the crowd, Brown reports that the police are now moving into the crowd – refraining from using their batons though. Or are they? As the words leave Brown's mouth, behind him riot police are smashing their way through the crowds, batons and all. This, Brown tells us, is what the police were hoping to avoid all along. Why then, I think, don't they just stay where they are? Why move into the crowd? If they want to avoid smashing people with batons, why start? The newsfeed segues back into the BBC studio, where the presenter introduces a piece on the main summit by saying, 'Right, now to the politics...' It seems to me however that there's quite a bit of politics being played out on the streets of the City.

Later, after I return from the AltG20, it becomes apparent that the police were doing a lot of this throughout the day, 'Kettling' protesters and passersby alike for several hours (Kettling is the method used by the police of blocking all entry and exit points so that everyone in the protest zone has to stay where they are – at the time of writing this it is still not clear whether the death of a passerby resulted from police violence in one of these Kettled zones). It begins to look as if the violent actions of the few who broke the windows of the Royal Bank of Scotland

branch on Threadneedle Street have given the police carte blanche to move through and break up the non-violent protest groups at will.

The Climate Camp, set up outside the European Climate Exchange and which all reports suggests was entirely peaceful, is violently broken up by more baton-wielding police in riot gear. Stories emerge of ‘consensus meetings’ being held within the camp as the police bear down on it, to decide on what the nature of the camp’s response should be. The outcome of these meetings is shown on YouTube video clips, where protesters, hands in the air to denote their non-violence, greet the police batons with chants of ‘This is not a Riot!’². In a separate incident, protesters conducting a peaceful sit-down protest are rushed at by riot police – one girl reported to have been carried away unconscious. As these images and stories emerge (not all them it should be said at this point verified) I am once again left feeling a little bit disillusioned.

Does any of this tell us about the state of radical politics in the UK today? Yes and no. The AltG20 would have undoubtedly been more potent had there been a building to house it in. With one megaphone, and the planes from City Airport flying past every few minutes, the AltG20 descended into something reminiscent of 1950’s soapbox political demonstrations (and not just because of Tony Benn) –

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t244-zEENSs>

mostly white, mostly male speakers regaled the small crowd about the end of laissez-faire capitalism, yet there was no opportunity for any kind of constructive debate about what we might do in this critical conjuncture, or how we might shape what would come next. This wasn't really the fault of the organisers – we'd been Kettled, just like those in the City – despite being out in the open air, our space for debate had been closed down. We had nowhere to go. The reduction of the event to the SWP paper-seller holding a megaphone for a succession of repetitive speakers meant the event was a spectacle, not a deliberative construction of an alternative future.

Out on the streets, in the City, a different kind of radical politics was closed down. It would be easy to dismiss what happened there as a few thousand 'anarchists' having a fight with the police (as many media outlets have unsurprisingly characterized it as being). But in truth the content of the protests becomes slightly secondary when we consider the implications of what happened for radical politics today. It became increasingly apparent that the police were more concerned with the protection of bricks, mortar and finance than they were about people. Looking back at the history of protest this is no great surprise, but as we continue to travel through and make this historical moment in the present, are spaces for radical politics going to be closed down by an ever more fearful State?

If even our universities are refusing to provide the oxygen for our debates and ideas, then where and how can alternatives be constructed?

I don't pretend to have the answers to these questions. I do believe though that there is a kinetic energy that is coursing through university campuses right now, not necessarily visible in the spectacles organised by the old-guard revolutionary parties, but rather through the small collective actions taken by younger generations of students, taking seriously the idea of thinking globally and acting locally.

This can sound like a trite statement, and in the past it has often been that way, but even in the midst of the disappointing AltG20 there was evidence of current students taking this statement to think through our responsibilities to 'the global' seriously, our responsibilities which begin in our local universities, towns and cities. So whether it is the occupation of classrooms at UEL to pressure the university authorities to offer scholarships to students from Gaza (the reporting of which was one high point of the Alt G20), or activities I am involved in with fellow students on my own campus at the Open University to try and force the university to divest their resources and reputation from a military training institute which will include in-takes from private and mercenary military

companies³. I believe there is something radically interconnected about all of these local struggles which whilst local, are only local because of the global realities the situations they are fighting against or for produce, and so aren't bound by their particular circumstances.

So, what did the AltG20 and the 1 April protests tell us about the nature of radical politics today? In some respects, it showed a movement squeezed and out of ideas. In other respects though it showed us what the challenges are for a contemporary radical politics, and for that, we might just look back on 1 April as a day when it was very clearly revealed to us what is at stake during these potentially momentous times of change and why it's so important to engage now. What 1 April showed was that it's not just the bodies of a few thousand protesters on the line, but the freedom of all of us to think and enact alternatives – the importance of radical alternatives have rarely been so needed, nor have they had the opportunities to be so effective.

³<http://www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/AboutDefence/WhatWeDo/TrainingandExercises/DTR>



Photo 1: Chris Knight-as-Dracula addresses the Alt-G20
(photo taken by Clive Gabay).



Photo 2: Tony Benn strikes revolutionary-era megaphone pose
(photo taken by Clive Gabay).



Photo 3: The Alt G20 en masse (photo taken by Clive Gabay).

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