



Contextualising Genoa: Protest, Violence and Democracy

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abstract

This note emerged from comments made in the ephemera discussion group, following the events at the G8 summit in Genoa, in July 2001. The first thing which struck me about the reporting of the protests was the extent to which the peaceful protests of the vast majority were almost completely ignored (in the UK). Instead, the media attention was almost exclusively focused on the minute number of protesters committing violence. Secondly, I felt that to a significant extent, subsequent discussions on the events in Genoa were too accepting of the establishment/orthodox rhetoric. Therefore, the twin objectives of the paper are to give some sort of voice to some of the (300,000¹) peaceful protesters, and secondly, I want to, very briefly, challenge the language of the mainstream rhetoric, to show the tensions and limitations within it. The peaceful protesters are given a voice through using direct quotations from a selection of those who protested in Genoa. These quotations are taken from a range of sources. This is more of a random, rather than a representative sample, with a focus on protesters from the UK.² This is thus a (somewhat limited) attempt to, “articulate the experiences of people who, historically speaking, would otherwise remain inarticulate” (Coleman, 1986: 31).

Contextualising Genoa

The events in Genoa represented the latest high water mark in the growth of the anticapitalist movement. Since the most public emergence of this movement, in Seattle, Washington in November 1999 it has grown phenomenally. This growth has been such that the movement has mushroomed in less than two calendar years into what George Monbiot suggests, “in numerical terms, is the biggest protest movement in the history of the world” (2001b). Thus Genoa, rather than being an isolated incident, represents only

1 This figure refers to the main demonstration which took place on Saturday 21 July. The figure of 300,00 was published in Corriella dela Sera, and has been widely used.

2 Constraints of time and space meant that it was not possible to gain a more extensive, or representative data sample.

the latest point in a trajectory of protest which started in Seattle, but which has also produced events in Nice, Prague, Melbourne, Quebec and Gothenburg.

These events, like Seattle, were timed quite deliberately to coincide with, and confront the agenda of specific intergovernmental conferences which were felt to be helping push forward the globalization of a neo-liberal economic agenda, which the protesters are fundamentally opposed to. The main actors felt to be the strongest advocates of this economic perspective are the governments of the largest industrial economies, transnational organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, as well as the planet's largest multinational corporations. The intergovernmental conferences at which the protests have been staged represent one of the main forums in which these diverse actors publicly meet and decide on important policy issues. The protests in Genoa were timed to oppose a meeting of the G8, an organization which represents the governments of eight of the largest industrial economies (Japan, South Korea, France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, the USA and Canada) and which has played a key role in the globalization of neo-liberalism.

In general, the protests have been concerned to challenge the globalization of a neo-liberal, monetarist economic philosophy. The strength of the protests against this doctrine are related to what its critics in the anticapitalist movements see as the extreme negativity of its effects. These include: increasing inequality, rather than reducing it (both between rich and poor within countries and between the most and least industrially advanced nations); the deregulation of social policies which negatively effect the pay, conditions and security of workers (leading to sweatshop labour in the less industrialized world, and insecure, poorly paid jobs for the workers of the most industrialized economies); which allows the private sector to control activities which have historically been purely under the control of governments (such as healthcare, education); and which have disastrous environmental consequences.

The diversity of the issues against which the protesters are fighting is an indication of the heterogeneity of the anticapitalist movement, which is constituted by a loose coalition of environmentalists, socialists, anarchists, and debt campaigners. This diversity is captured by the following range of quotes from some of the peaceful protesters who went to Genoa, describing why they went:

We went to Genoa because we are against privatization and the domination of multinational corporations over everyday life...we are also worried about the destruction of the environment. (Richard Moth & Nicola Doherty³, *Socialist Worker*, 4th August: 7)

I went to protest about GATS⁴, which was on the agenda at Genoa. It's about the privatization of everything. (Dave, student [Sheffield] – personal dialogue)

3 Richard and Nicola were two of the British protesters who were in the school beside the Indymedia centre which was raided by Italian police following the protests, and were among the approximately 90 people who were systematically, and brutally beaten by the police (see later).

I went to Genoa as part of a delegation of four people from my local GMB⁵ Branch. We wanted to send a message against privatization, in defence of asylum seekers, and against corporate greed. (James Woodcock, *Socialist Worker*, 4th August: 6)

I earn a living as a teacher. In the last 10 years I've seen conditions deteriorate, colleagues made redundant... then Labour wins in 1997 and does it's best to privatize everything. (Geoff, Teacher & NATFHE⁶ union representative [Manchester] – personal dialogue)

We are both students in sixth form colleges in London. We joined the protests in Genoa because we felt it was the only real way of getting our voices heard. (Ben & James, *Socialist Worker*, 4th August: 6)

I went to Genoa to participate in the mass demonstrations against the G8 and it's policies. I went because I believe in a free and equal society with people living in harmony with each other and the ecological system. (Jonathan Norman Blair [<http://www.ainfos.ca> – 01/0801])

CHALLENGING RHETORIC

The purpose of this section in the paper is to briefly attempt to challenge the assumptions of the dominant rhetoric concerning two issues: the question of violence and the question of democracy/representativeness. Too much of the debate that I was involved in on these topics pandered to the mainstream/orthodox agenda of those trying to discredit the activity and goals of the protesters. What was unexplored, in relative terms, were the tensions and contradictions in the rhetoric used to undermine the perspective of the protesters. For example, how does the violence of the protesters compare to the violence routinely used by the governments of the G8, or of the violence which could be argued to be inherent in capitalism. In examining these issues, I am attempting to both broaden and shift the focus of the debate. In shifting the debate I suggest moving from the legitimacy and actions of the protesters, to the legitimacy and actions of the agents of corporate globalization – global multinationals, neo-liberal governments, and the IMF etc. In terms of broadening the debate, the issues of violence and democracy should encompass the actions and the legitimacy of all parties, not just the protesters. This does not mean that the violence of the protesters should be ignored, but that it can be considered within a more balanced context.

The Question Of Violence

In the discussions that I have been involved in, I felt that dialogue had been too narrowly restricted to debating the violence and actions of the protesters. Thus even though the Italian police were making widespread use of tear gas, extended batons, and riot shields (not to mention live ammunition), their actions (at the time the events were

4 General Agreement on Trade in Services. This is a proposal concerned with opening up a range of public services to private management and ownership.

5 British Trade union

6 One of the largest British higher education teachers trades union.

being reported), were typically not questioned, and were not conceptualised as violence in the same way as the actions of the protesters were. In addressing the question of violence, it is useful to consider it in its widest possible context, encompassing all types of violence (emotional, psychological, physical, economic..), and all agents of violence. In the limited space I have in this article, it is not possible to fully examine the question of violence within capitalist societies. What follows is therefore a brief sketch of some pertinent points.

The alienating monotony, stress and repetitiveness of work, which is the typical experience for vast numbers of human beings can be conceived as producing significant levels of emotional and psychological violence against workers. This is to some extent a direct result of the economic logic of capitalism, where the vast majority of humans are denied the benefits of the wealth that they help produce (Harman, 2000: 26). Marx described this experience of work, and the psychological consequences of it on workers, in his early work:

‘It is true that labour produces marvels for the rich, but it produces privation for the worker. It produces beauty, but deformity for the worker...[the system] replaces labour by machines, but it casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labour, and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence, but it produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker.... [The worker] therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind....The worker only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. (Marx, 1975: 325-6)⁷

Secondly, capitalism produces what could be referred to as economic violence due to the unequal distribution of resources, and because economic resources are not distributed on the basis of human need. Thus, between 10-12 million children on this planet die from diseases that could easily have been prevented if global economic resources had been distributed more equitably (Callinicos, 2001: 396). Susan George (1990), in a *Fate Worse than Debt*, damningly illustrates how the structural adjustment programmes of the IMF imposed on vast number of African countries in the 1970s vastly exacerbated, rather than alleviated, the suffering of millions of ordinary African people.⁸

Finally, there is the issue of war, which is inextricably linked to the capitalist system, the tensions between nation states, and their competing economies. Arguably, the twentieth century represents an extreme low point in this respect as it witnessed immense levels of violence and suffering, against civilian as much as military populations, vividly articulated in Eric Hobsbawm’s history of this period, *Age of Extremes* (1994).

7 While these words were written in the mid 19th century, they can be easily applied to the sort of sweatshop workers in Central America, and Indonesia that were so vividly described by Naomi Klein (2000).

8 These programmes represented an early form of neo-liberal, free market economics.

Overall therefore, capitalism can be understood as a system which produces suffering on a vast scale for enormous numbers of people, and where this physical, emotional and psychological violence is to some extent inherent within the structure and logic of the global capitalist system (Callinicos, 2001: 396).

Further, the extent to which governments will use violence to 'protect' intergovernmental meetings, and to protect property at all large-scale demonstrations requires to be acknowledged. The police behaviour in Genoa represents something of a low point in this respect, and is worth documenting. Firstly there was the killing of the Italian protester.⁹ Secondly, were the general tactics of provocation, intimidation and violence used by the Italian police to deal with peaceful protesters throughout the three days of protests. This is captured in the following quotes from some protesters:

The police were itching for a fight, and were pulling peoples teargas masks off...they fired volley after volley of tear gas at the peaceful demo by ATTAC¹⁰....the whole day was characterized by the police attacking peaceful demos...police brutality was worse than anything I've ever seen. (Dave, student [Sheffield] – personal dialogue)

The police raided the camping centres at dawn on the 20th, even before the summit began. Dawn raids by paramilitary police! (Another report on Genoa [<http://www.ainfos.ca> – 01/08/01])

Genoa was my first big demo. It was a roller coaster ride, emotionally and physically....at moments I felt so strong, because of the solidarity...I also felt extremely scared at times by the police tactics... the police were cutting and slashing with batons, there was sheer panic..those guys were so big...with their massive batons. (Sue, student [Manchester] – personal dialogue)

Arguably, most shocking of all was the level of violence used by the Italian Police on the evening of Saturday 21st July, when the demonstrations had finished. This occurred when the Italian Police raided a school building which was known to be housing protesters. Some of the detail of these events, and the scale of violence used is captured in the following quotes and picture:

What happened in the school and carried on here at Bolzanetto¹¹ was a suspension of human rights, a void of the constitution. I tried to talk to colleagues and you know what they answered: we don't have to worry because we are covered. (Italian Policeman, quoted in *La Repubblica*, 26th July 2000)¹²

...the serious beatings, and the pools of blood in the GSF building were described as the result of police brutality. The group involved were referred to as anticapitalists who organized the protest marches against the G8. ...The serious beatings and the pools of blood in the GSF building were well described. (<http://italy.indymedia.org> [published 01/08/01])

9 Carlo Giuliani was killed on Friday, 20th July. He was shot twice, and his body was then driven over by police.

10 Association for the Taxation of Financial Transaction. This is a French protest group, set up in 1998, involving a coalition of individuals, associations, trade unions and newspapers.

11 This was the detention centre where those arrested were taken following the Police attack.

12 For the original Italian of this article see: www.repubblica.it/politica/gottododici/pestaggi/pestaggi.html



(Source: <http://italy.indymedia.org>)

The police beat people one by one. They worked their way along the line. People were screaming and crying. I couldn't walk after the beating. I had to be carried out of the building. (Richard Moth, *Socialist Worker*, 4th August: 7)

They beat the people who had been sleeping, who held up their hands in a gesture of innocence and cried out "Pacifisti! Pacifisti!" They beat the men and the women. They broke bones, smashed teeth, shattered skulls. (Fascism in Genoa [<http://www.zmag.org>, 01/08/01])

If the issue of violence at Genoa is to be discussed fully then the actions of the Italian police require to be considered, as much as the violence of the protesters. In this context, the property-related violence of a handful of protesters seems somewhat less significant. Further, when the political issues raised by the protesters are taken account of, this also shines a light on the extreme violence inherent within capitalism. However, while the violence inherent in the capitalist system may make the violence of the protesters pale into insignificance, this does not mean that the violence of the protesters can be totally ignored. This is particularly the case because the question of violence is one of the issues which divides the anticapitalist movement.¹³

13 Some of the questions the anticapitalist movement faces with regard to violence include: is it ever justifiable? Can it be used in self defence? Is violence justified if it is with the objective of overthrowing a violent social system? Is violence against property different from violence against people? Is it justifiable to attack the property of multinational corporations, but not locally owned businesses?

The Question of Democracy and Representativeness

...these protestors are unelected, they represent nobody and everyone should remember that the leaders here are elected to represent their nations, unlike their protestors...(Reported comments from a security advisor to George Bush, SKY News, 19/07/01)

Who is better placed to speak on behalf of the poor: middle-class white people in the north or the elected representatives of the poor of Africa themselves? (Claire Short, UK Minister for Development, quoted by Seabrook, 2001)

The above quotes bring into question the legitimacy of the protestors' right to protest. Primarily it is suggested that because the protestors are unelected, they do not represent anyone except themselves, and that they do not speak for significant numbers of people. However, the legitimacy of the G8 leaders present in Genoa as being democratically elected, or as representing the opinions of their populations can also be questioned.¹⁴

While the recent second landslide election victory that New Labour received in the recent British elections (June 2001), suggests a massive popular mandate, a closer analysis brings this into question. Firstly, the turnout, at 59% was the lowest since 1918. Further, New Labour only received a total of 10.7 million votes, the lowest number of votes a winning party has EVER received in Britain (Rees, 2001). This number represents approximately only 25% of the UK electorate. New Labour can therefore hardly claim to be a representative voice of British public opinion.¹⁵ The lack of representativeness of the Blair government seems even starker, when the massive unpopularity of many of their policies is acknowledged. Thus, while opinion polls in early 2001 suggested that over 70% of the UK population were in favour of the renationalization of Britain's railways, New Labour are firmly opposed to such a policy.¹⁶ Further, while Ken Livingstone won the mayoral elections in London, on a mandate to keep London's underground system totally within the public sector, in late July the UK government won a court action against Livingstone, to force through its detested Public-Private Partnership scheme for the redevelopment of the underground.

The issue of democracy becomes even more contestable when considering the vast numbers of senior business people who have been given *unelected* positions of significant power within New Labour's previous and current governments. Some of the most prominent examples include Lord Simon (BP), Lord Sainsbury (Sainsbury), and Lord McDonald (television). Further, the full extent to which UK politics has witnessed the involvement of senior business people in a wide range of domains, is described

14 Apologies in advance for the parochiality of examples provided in this section. They are drawn primarily from the UK, and the USA. However, the similarities in the policies of the G8 governments, and links to business means that from whichever of the G8 countries you consider, you can easily swap the name of Blair or Bush, for the head of state of other countries.

15 This is even more so in the case of George W. Bush in the USA, as he received less than half the votes cast in recent U.S. elections, with a turnout of even lower than occurred in the UK elections.

16 As were the other two mainstream political parties.

vividly in George Monbiot's recent book, *The Captive State*.¹⁷ This situation is arguably, not that different within the other G8 nations. As George Monbiot illustrates:

Of the eight men meeting in Genoa this week, one seized the presidency of his country after losing the election. Another is pursuing a genocidal war in an annexed republic. A third is facing allegations of corruption. A fourth, the summit's host, has been convicted of illegal party financing, bribery and false accounting.... (2001a).

The clearest blurring/overlap between government and business is arguably in Italy, where the party of Silvio Berlusconi, the powerful TV magnate, won their recent general election (with approximately only 30% of the vote). The extent to which these neo-liberal governments directly involve business people, and represent their interests led Susan George to talk about, "the permanent government of the transnational corporations" (foreword to Bircham and Charlton, 2001). Overall, therefore, the democratic legitimacy of Blair, Bush, and other G8 governments to be representatives of the opinions of their people, rings somewhat hollow in the light of the above. Thus, it is suggested that any debate about the issues of representativeness, or democracy, can most usefully be discussed within this broad context, rather than focusing narrowly on the legitimacy of the protesters.

Conclusion: A Time For Cautious Optimism

In concluding about the significance of the events in Genoa a note of cautious optimism can be sounded with regard to the development of the anticapitalist movement. Not least because the movement has provided an important ideological and symbolic opposition to neo-liberalism, and corporate globalization. Thus for those opposed to the current economic order and the disastrous consequences it has for the vast majority of the inhabitants of this planet, there is cause for optimism that there is increasing support for an alternative, more equitable and sustainable vision of society. The extent of the violence used in Genoa (by the Police), and at the EC intergovernmental conference in Gothenburg earlier in 2001 could be interpreted as an indication of the anticapitalist movements' strength: it is perceived as such a real threat that extreme levels of violence are felt to be justified in dealing with it. Arguably, the level of violence used to 'protect' these meetings could be interpreted as sending a deliberate message to any prospective protesters: if you come to protest, be prepared to face serious injury.

However, a note of caution is also necessary. The anticapitalist movement has grown phenomenally, but it could also fragment, or decline just as quickly. While the strength of the movement is the unity of purpose that has been created from groups with extremely diverse ideological perspectives, this also represents a potential weakness. Differences of opinion over the question of violence represent one among many issues

17 Again, this situation is to some extent replicated in the USA. A significant proportion of George W. Bush's policy advisors are closely involved with the business organizations which funded Bush's election campaign.

which divide the movement. Thus, it remains an open question whether the aftermath of Genoa will witness the splintering of the anticapitalist movement, or whether it will continue to grow.

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