

GLOBALISATION FROM BELOW

THE GENUA-PROTESTS AGAINST THE G-8

AN EYE WITNESS REPORT

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'Genua Liberates'. The slogan was chanted by hundreds of people who almost in trance danced at the beat of drums and of beerbarrels, celebrating the success of the anti-G-8 protests in the camp erected by the organizers near the sea, along Genua's coast. But the same slogan *'Genua Liberates'* that very same night of Saturday July 21st also resounded some one and a half kilometer away, in a street where Italy's riot police force, the *carabinieri*, staged *razzias* on buildings where protestors were staying overnight. Unable to stop the raids, spectators shouting loudly nevertheless tried to impress upon the *carabinieri* that the protestors, and not the forces of state, were gaining a victory. The Italian port city of Genua from Friday July the 20th through Sunday July the 22nd hosted a conference of the G-8, the exclusive club of the richest countries on earth. Although at some moments in course of the program of actions staged in the city for three days, it appeared as if the mass protests had been *criminalised* with success, in the end the G-8 was discredited, and the Italian Home

Minister bearing responsibility for the police's heavy repression has now been on the defensive for days.

The Genua protests were a true outpouring of human solidarity. On the first day, that preceding the start of the G-8, some 50 thousand people participated in a march in support of all of Italy's and Europe's various migrant communities, demanding 'open borders' for those wishing to migrate. While there were small contingents of Bangladeshis and Indians from Rome as well as other non-whites among the marchers, the overwhelming majority of the participants were white people, disgusted with the tendency of rightwing politicians to exploit popular sentiments against foreign residents. On the third protest day, July 21st, there was another huge and equally colourful march, with participants numbering well over 200 thousand. This time, the protestors' common target was the ongoing process of globalisation, the construction of one integrated world market at the expense of the world's poor. The composition of the march was strikingly varied, with large local chapters of Italy's Communist Party for Reconstruction (*Refondazione*) walking in unison with contingents representing the Greens, Italian pacifists, the international Coalition for Debt Relief, Kurdish nationalist, etc. Images of Che Guevara were visible all along.

Whereas young and old protestors had clearly gathered from all over the world to partake in the days of global resistance against the G-8, currents together representing the range of Italy's contemporary social movements formed the backbone of the protests. A body entitled the *Genua Social Forum* (GSF), enjoying the confidence of most currents, had been constituted long ago. The GSF facilitated the peaceful demonstrations. It, for instance, formed surveillance groups to guard against possible disruptions during the anti-globalisation march. But the *Genua Social Forum* equally championed the day of civil disobedience, July the 20th, when Blocks of protestors throughout the centre of Genua besieged the zone in which the G-8 Conference was being held. It amongst others had arranged a large convergence centre along the sea, where direct resisters could sleep under the open sky, could enjoy food in large tents, and could listen to evening performances of music bands. The GSF played a *decisive* role in countering the indiscriminate violence unleashed by Italy's riot police (see below).

These, then, were perhaps the very brightest days for humankind in the new millennium so far. Imagine Genua's scene on July the 20th: wave upon wave of processions, proceeding from different points in town, encircling the shielded zone in which the G-8 had convened, and demanding that Bush, Berlusconi, Chirac and others suspend their 'empty talks'! Not even when the World Trade Organisation, the WTO, was besieged in Seattle, in November of 1999, had the number of determined global resisters been so large. Yet it was the riot-police, the *carabinieri*, which took centre stage on this day of direct action. In the afternoon, news broke that a young protestor had been mowed down by police-bullets and had died. The policeman had drawn his pistol, when the protestor, Carlo Giuliani, had hurled a canister (fire-extinguisher) at the van behind which the policeman hid (*La Stampa*, July 21). The member of the *carabinieri* reportedly had continued firing, even while the boy lied flat on the ground. Soon, G-8 leaders were pressed by journalists to explain their attitude towards this display of excessive police violence. According to GSF-sources, it was the first time in over twenty years that an Italian protestor was killed by the police.

Peak in Global Resistance

In order to understand the situation as it evolved on Genua's day of direct action, a few words need to be stated about the positioning of the *carabinieri* on that day. Heavily

armed riot policemen, of course, were stationed near each of the entrance points to the so-called *red zone*, i.e. that part of the port and the city where all public transport stood suspended and where access for outsiders was strictly limited. The presence of the *carabinieri*, specifically mobilised and brought to Genua for the occasion of the G-8, however, was in no way limited to the *red zone* alone. In a wide parameter around this zone, at diverse points throughout the hilly city, police vans, armoured cars and groups of *carabinieri* ready to launch combat, could be spotted. For the masses of direct resisters it was thus very difficult to assess from what direction the danger of a *carabinieri* attack would ultimately come. At some crossroads, protestors saw themselves faced with riot police forces from *three* sides simultaneously.

Police officials responsible for the protection of the G-8, on the other hand, knew they would have to count with a very wide range of protestors, most of whom were committed to non-violence. There were the befamed *Tutti Bianchi*, well-trained and disciplined Italian anarchists with protective gear determined to break through the police lines by the sheer force of their numbers. Another major contingent, the *Lilliput Block*, consisted mainly of principled pacifists and environmentalists, who simply sat down on the road whenever the situation turned tense. Further, industrial workers formed too distinct *Blocks*. One was composed of port workers and other local labourers participating in a city-wide strike. The procession of the COBAS, Italy's coalition of militant unions, had been given permission to gather separately, at the square *Paulo di Novi*, not very far from the main entrance towards the venue of the G-8. On the morning of the 20th, COBAS' workers were not amused, when they found big steel containers had been moved onto the square in the preceding night. The march planned by COBAS was obstructed from the very start.

I myself had decided to accompany the *Pink-Silver Block*, along with Spanish and Swiss internationalist friends. This procession was a rather amorphous lot, yet its participants shared one key denominator: since all members of the *Pink-Silver Block* were unarmed and none carried protective equipments, the Block would seek to avoid any head-on clash with the riot police. People of the *Pink-Silver Block* gathered in the morning at the convergence field along the sea, and initially, when heading Northwards in the direction of the danger zone, were in a very festive mood. Many had dressed up in *carnavalesk* style. There were female dancers dressed in pink and black, inspiring a whole battalion of press photographers, there was a music band which set the rhythm of the march, and many protestors had pink roses tuck behind their ears. The spirit of the *Pink-Silver Bloc* was well reflected in the leaflet distributed in the morning to recruit additional participants. It called upon people to '*Dance Down the G-8*'!

Yet the mood of festivity in the *Block* was not to last for very long. Soon after the procession had passed the many thousands-strong contingent of the Italian pacifists and environmentalists, we were led near a huge iron fence which evidently was one of the border points of the prohibited red zone. *Carabinieri* were posted behind the fence, as well as on the opposite side, behind the small square located in front of the same fence. For a while, one or two brave *Pink-Silver* marchers endeavored to climb the iron fence and tear it open from the top. The *carabinieri* at first reacted by pouring water lavishly from water cannons onto the crowd. When this tactic failed in its mission of discouragement, patience with the riot police quickly ran out. However the attack that ensued was not staged by the *carabinieri* posted behind the iron fence, but instead by the *carabinieri* posted behind the marchers facing the fence, on the other side of the square. We got a full taste of teargas, which forced us – i.e. all *Pink-Silver* marchers and the press people accompanying them - to hurriedly retreat from this border point.

Indiscriminate Police Violence

My first encounter with indiscriminate police-violence occurred shortly after the *Rose-Silver Block* attempted to proceed beyond Piazza Manin, a square located near the North-Eastern tip of the prohibited red zone. From here, demonstrators were suddenly driven back by the *carabinieri*, who apparently were busy chasing a small group of opponents dressed in black, but who turned upon non-violent participants of the *Rose-Silver Block* desparately attempting to escape from the fighting via one of the smaller by-lanes. These activists indicated quite clearly to the *carabinieri* that they were in no mood to resist. Imitating the pacifists, they sat down with raised hands. Still, the *carabinieri* fell on them with a vengeance, to say the very least. The policemen mercilessly beat up the whole group with their batons, making sure two of them, bleeding heavily, had to be taken to hospital. Anybody trying to intervene with appeals for sanity was either ignored or given a trashing. A Dutch cameraman accompanying me, who tried to film what was happening, was rudely beaten in his face and his expensive camera was smashed.

This surely could still have been an isolated incident where *carabinieri* acting on their own behalf took the chance to knock down unarmed civilians. I therefore decided to attend the Press Conference which the Genua Social Forum convened next day noon, to explain its version of the July 20 events. Here, a long list of witnesses appeared to explain to the international pressmen and –women gathered, that the *carabinieri* all through the day had used indiscriminate violence to counter the day of direct action. A witness representing a 15 thousand-strong contingent of the Italian movement for civil disobedience, for instance, reported that the *carabinieri* had beaten up non-violent protestors in streets from where it was impossible to escape, and this at widely different spots in the city. The contingent itself was assaulted with teargas and with stones. And when it tried to stage a retreat in the late afternoon, it was once again attacked from behind by a *carabinieri*-force.

Similar accounts of police injustices were presented by the heads of the GSF's medical and legal teams, and by representatives of other groups of protestors. Dr. Cordano, for instance, of the First Aid Team, said that many of those who had ended up being treated in hospitals, in fact belonged to the contingent of the Italian pacifists. Again, the spokesperson who presented the experience of the Italian Farmers for Another Agriculture described how his contingent was driven back by teargassing policemen, and the spokesperson for the international campaign against financial speculation, *Attac*, decried the *carabinieri* for having arrested people holding balloons, and for having treacherously attacked his contingent when it had almost returned to the GSF's convergence-and-camping ground. The GSF's spokesperson, Agnoletto, leading the Press Conference, demanded the resignation of Italy's Home Minister, and of those police-officials responsible for the indiscriminate violence used by the *carabinieri* on the previous day.

If doubts could still have persisted as to the accuracy of the reports presented at noon of July the 21st, these were completely dispelled by the experience which I gained after returning from a dance party at the end of the day. Towards midnight, members of the *carabinieri* staged *razzias*, - both on the building that functioned as the independent media centre and as operational base of the GSF, and on a school located opposite this building. Whereas the raid upon the first building, where I was housed, resulted mainly in intimidation of whoever was present, the *razzia* on the school had the aura of a full criminal assault. Hundreds of *carabinieri* armed with shields and batons stood guard outside, preventing access to the building for lawyers and for a Member of the Italian Parliament who had rushed to the

spot. Meanwhile, the policemen who entered the school left behind a trail of destruction. A reported 63 persons were injured, many of them so badly that they had to be carried off to hospital, and there were many arrests. This event became a 'boomerang' for Berlusconi, who the next day, Sunday, was besieged by angry Italian pressmen, but could not explain who had given the orders for the raids. On Tuesday July the 24th, at least *a hundred sixty thousand* people demonstrated in cities throughout Italy against the repressive methods used to suppress the anti-G-8 protests (*La Stampa*, July 25, 2001)!

The Behaviour of the 'Blacks'

In shrill contrast with the above narration, the world's media primarily put the spotlights on the violent activities of a section of the Genua-protesters identified as the '*Black Block*'. This press attention for the '*Blacks*' no doubt was *disproportionate*, if account be taken of the numerical size of the group identified as such. For the number of protesters considering themselves '*blacks*' probably amounted to no more than some hundreds, in a total of well over fifty thousand protestors. Further, the name '*Black Block*' itself is rather deceptive, since contrary to other sections waging resistance in Genua on July the 20th, members of this '*Block*' did not try to march in unison. They apparently were not assigned any 'official' space by the coordinating body which allocated spaces to individual blocks in the various area surrounding the G-8's red zone, and groups wearing black dresses, throwing stones and breaking windows appeared unannounced at spots which had been assigned to COBAS, to the *Lilliput Block*, and to other sections participating in the mass protests.

Secondly, the '*Blacks*' which received such overwhelming press coverage often appeared to be completely oblivious of the need to protect the safety of other demonstrators. They not only used provocative tactics to defy the *carabinieri* and draw them into battle, but moreover did so freely under the cover of the mass protests, frequently putting other demonstrators unnecessarily at risk. Such happened for instance on the third day, when '*black*' participants stopped the forward movement of the main procession, to initiate a fight with the *carabinieri* posted at a distance. The same had also happened the previous day when members of the *Pink-Silver Block*, for instance, had been caught between *carabinieri* and '*blacks*' unexpectedly crossing their way. And while some would argue that the '*blacks*' active in Genua used proper methods of urban guerilla – moving waste containers onto the street as barricades to prevent the *carabinieri* from catching retreating protestors - , the indiscriminate smashing of windows of cars belonging to the public can hardly be described as a prudent 'guerilla tactic'.

The behaviour of the '*Black Block*' not surprisingly has aroused the suspicion that at least a part of the protestors populating this section were state *provocateurs*. The *Corriere della Sera*, one of Italy's main dailies, on July 23 published two photographs distributed by the Genua Social Forum. On one of the pictures, a masked protestor is standing close to, and communicating directly, with a member of the *carabinieri* wearing a helmet. On the other picture reportedly taken in front of the barracks of the *carabinieri*, a policeman with a helmet poses amidst people in civilian dress, some of the latter wearing black dresses and holding sticks. At the press conference staged by the Genua Social Forum on July the 20th, Teresa Matei, an elderly lady who had been a member of Italy's Constituent Assembly 45 years back, argued with force that the methods used by '*black*' protestors reminded her of the professional capacity to break windows historically displayed by fascist groups in Italy.

Undoubtedly, it would be wrong to ascribe the appearance of self-styled, violent '*black*' protestors to the intervention of extreme rightwing forces or state intelligence services

alone. A group claiming the identity of the 'Black Block' was already present during the mass protests staged against the WTO Conference in Seattle, in 1999. Here too, 'black' protestors reportedly concentrated much on breaking glass. In an autonomous press communique they identified themselves as a new generation of 'violent anarchists' (*l'Unita*, July 22, 2001)). As successive meetings of the institutions of world capitalism have continued failing to result in substantial changes, and as the violent interventions of the 'blacks' are attracting ever more media attention, this current increasingly becomes a pole of attraction for youngsters disaffected with globalisation from above. Yet after the experiences gathered by the movement against globalisation in Gotheborg, Sweden, and in Genua, there can be little doubt that the activities of the 'Black Bloc' do play into the hands of policymakers bent upon criminalising the movement.

Results of the G-8?

Only few paragraphs are needed to highlight the paucity of the G-8 meeting's results. First, it appears that there is a large degree of agreement among the huge contingent of pressmen who attended the Genua-events, that the expensive top meeting in which over two thousand representatives participated, has thrown up very few concrete results. The one concrete outcome stated with some conviction, is the agreement reached among the G-8 leaders that a group of independent international observers should be asked to oversee the fragile truce between the Israeli state and the Palestinians staging their second *intifada*. The given suggestion on the posting of observers was one of the proposals contained in the so-called Mitchell Report, drafted to mediate the ongoing conflict. However, even though this agreement on international observers puts added pressure on the Israeli government, the latter has already reacted by posing a conditionality, i.e. that all observers should be Americans. Israel's reaction weakens the impact of even this one G-8 result.

A major proposition that has been put forward by the G-8 meeting, is the proposal that an international *task force* be formed to promote the access of Southern countries to information technology. The task force is to be composed of representatives of all the G-8 members, of an EU-representative and of representatives of Southern countries, including India and Indonesia. Its aim will be to ensure that information technology be used to relieve poverty in the South, and more particularly to enable Southern nations to construct a modern state apparatus. In the words of Berlusconi's spokesperson, Buonaiuti, '*Information technology can contribute towards the construction of a system of good governance*' (*Il Secolo XIX*, July 22, 2001). Yet in pushing the sale of info-technology, the G-8 has conveniently glossed over the fact that much of the present information technology has its origins in military research, and that the US and other G-8 powers do widely employ it for repressive purposes. How computers will be used to feed hungry mouths remained sadly unexplained.

Another G-8 initiative advertised, was the partnership offered to African countries, in the garb of the '*Genua Plan for Africa*'. To this end, a special G-8 representative group will be set up, which reportedly will work to combat Africa's pervasive problems of corruption, poverty and armed conflict (*Il Secolo XIX*, July 22, 2001). Unfortunately, very few concrete details were revealed about this '*Genua Plan for Africa*' in the various European newspapers I have glanced through. It is easy to see, though, that the G-8 is ill-equipped to address Africa's plight. After all, the internecine wars besetting Angola, the Congo, Sierra Leone and other African countries, are largely rooted in the dependence of these countries on the exports of diamonds, oil, gold and other raw materials, and continuation of the wars is premised on the exchange of these goods against arms. Since most of the corporations profiting from this

exchange are Northern-based, and since the ideology of free trade propagated by the G-8, instead of helping to counter, legitimises the given *disparate exchange* (1), the contribution of the G-8's representative group to the solution to Africa's problems is likely to be close to zero point.

Thus, the summit in the eyes of the majority of journalists who gathered to report on it, was largely a meeting of empty promises. In fact, Northern participants of the G-8 re-affirmed their commitment towards the regime of 'free trade', so passionately questioned by the anti-globalisation movement. In a summary report published in the French daily *Le Monde*, G-8 leaders are stated to have expressed they resolve to promote '*the strengthening of the World Trade Organisation*', which institution presumably is '*indispensible as the foundation of the system of multilateral trade*' (*Le Monde*, July 22-23, 2001). Clearly, the G-8 leaders are a very long way from being ready to digest the criticisms as expressed by the anti-globalisation movement from the WTO-meeting in Seattle and onwards. While the three-day mass protests have contributed much to expose and discredit the G-8-meeting, - the meeting's predominant response has been to express vague concerns about the pervasive problems of poverty and injustice. The host Berlusconi has suggested that the G-8 should be 'restructured' and 'broadened', but in Genua this entailed no more than the taking on board of the representatives of some 8 Southern states, largely as powerless observers.

Genua and the New Internationalism

Let's lastly try to put the experience of the Genua protests into a broader historical perspective. It is not very long ago that the idea of *human solidarity* was considered outdated by a major part of public opinion, for instance in the country of the Netherlands where I live. Street demonstrations were described as anachronistic, and any compassion for those victimised by the ongoing process of globalisation was looked upon as no more than an unnecessary indulgence. The Genua protests above all were an extraordinarily powerful demonstration of human solidarity. Both the huge numbers of Italians who participated, and those varied groups that joined in from the rest of Europe and from all over the world, showed a deep awareness that human solidarity continues to count, that the most effective redemy against the ever growing might of global corporations, is indeed the building of *global resistance* around conferences and meetings intended to consolidate the contemporary regime of 'free trade'.

Further, the protest days, and in particular the day of civil disobedience, July the 20th, has once again brought out that *direct resistance* indeed is an effective means to question the legitimacy of the G-8, of the WTO and of other world economic bodies. Unlike the protestors who closed down the WTO-meeting in Seattle, and unlike the activists who disrupted the annual meeting of the World Bank and the IMF in Prague in September of last year, the participants in the day of direct action in Genua did not succeed in physically interrupting the G-8's deliberations, nor did they prevent the world leaders from reaching their hotels. Still, Berlusconi and other G-8 leaders were constantly at odds to explain their response towards the protestors besieging the red zone within which the G-8 Conference was being held. And the message of direct resistance against the illegitimate G-8 was carried by literally hundreds of media-journalists to all corners of the globe.

Genua, above all, has been a new, and the *highest peak* in globalised, direct resistance so far. Direct resistance in Seattle had been very broad, with a reported seven hundred organisations and fourty thousand people joining in, but subsequent days of direct resistance against world economic bodies had been less diverse in composition, and less numerous in

terms of participants. In Prague, 12 to 15 thousand persons showed their resolve to combat the WB/IMF, - a very respectful number, but still well below the size of participation in Seattle. With protestors in Genua consisting, as said, amongst others of different sections of the Italian labour movement, of a huge block representing the country's pacifist movement, and of groups representing a variety of international campaigns, - the 20 July day of civil disobedience has worthily continued the trend set in November, 1999. Examples of mass direct action on this scale are exceedingly rare in the history of Europe and of other regions in the Northern hemisphere.

In each period of history since the Industrial Revolution, internationalism has taken a specific form. The 19th century saw the rise of cross-border workers' solidarity in Europe, with trade unions in England, for instance, organising support for striking workers based elsewhere. The First International, commonly dreaded by Europe's rulers at the time, had strenuously tried to give an organised shape to the actions of workers' solidarity. In the subsequent, 20th century, internationalism found its continuation amongst others in the role which Cuba, and especially the Argentinian revolutionary Che Guevara, played in support of the oppressed in Latin America, in Africa and beyond. The protests in the form of *globalised resistance* staged from 1999 through 2001 against conferences of world economic bodies, have not only proven that the ideal of human solidarity is alive at the dawn of the 3rd millennium. They have already proven that this is indeed the most appropriate expression of internationalism in the present period of human history (2).

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PostScript

While most foreign journalists who came to report on the Genua-events left Italy at the time of the closure of the G-8, in Italy itself the public outrage over the *carabinieri's* raids of July 21 and over indiscriminate police violence in general has now snowballed into a national controversy. First, Italy's major dailies have freely publicised the gory details of the nightly *razzia* on the school building, where the smell of blood lingered in the corridors after the *carabinieri* left (*La Stampa*, *Corriere della Sera*, July 26, 2001). The mass demonstrations held on Tuesday the 25th throughout the Italian peninsula were an impressive show of sympathy for all the victims of police violence. A reported two thousand persons, many of them in tears, attended the funeral of Carlo Guliani, the youngster killed on July the 20th. Meanwhile, Members of Parliament have introduced a motion for the resignation of the Home Minister, Scajola, who according to the police chief was kept fully informed of the *carabinieri's* tactics all through the protest days. Moreover, since there were German nationals amongst those wounded and arrested in Genua, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs has now demanded clarifications from the Italian government on the circumstances under which protestors were injured by members of the Italian riot police (*Corriere della Sera*, July 26, 2001).

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References:

(1) for an overview on the consequences of the exchange of raw materials against arms for the African continent, see Peter Custers, 'System of Disparate Exchange. African Experiences' (*Economic and Political Weekly*, May 12, 2001, p.1594);

(2) for a discussion on the emergence of new internationalism through the Seattle protests of November, 1999, see the special issue of *Monthly Review*, New York, USA, July/August, 2000, 'After Seattle: A New Internationalism?'.