



## A bequest from the barricades

David Harvie

### review of

Scholl, C. (2012), *Two sides of a barricade: (Dis)order and summit protest in Europe*, Albany: SUNY Press (PB, pp. 272+xiii, £19.97, ISBN 9781438445120)

I was gripped by this book. I enjoyed it partly because it tells my own story – and who can resist their own story? Or rather (because only I can tell my own story), it tells the author's story of a series of events and of a movement that I was part of. Namely: that wave of North American and European counter-summit protests that emerged with the mobilisation against the WTO in Seattle in November 1999 (or possibly with the 'Carnival Against Capital' in London a few months earlier), and then waxed and waned over the course of the following eight years or so.

But – my own history apart – *Two sides of a barricade* is of far wider importance, at least to anti-capitalists. It suggests: first, that this cycle of counter-summit mobilisations mattered, and second, that its trajectory – its *movement* – can teach us lessons more generally relevant to anti-capitalist movements.

Christian Scholl's analysis is powerful because it is underpinned by a number of important principles – principles all too frequently neglected by supposedly anti-systemic scholarship. By 'anti-systemic scholarship', the author means scholarship, whether academic or not, that critiques the capitalist mode of production and that, further, suggests, whether implicitly or explicitly, that this system – capitalism – should be overthrown or transcended or replaced by some other social system.

First, he reads summit protests *politically*, in the sense used by Harry Cleaver in *Reading Capital politically* (Cleaver, 2000). That is, he reads summit protests not from the perspective of ‘social stability’ or ‘law and order’ or even ‘democracy’, but from the perspective of anti-systemic movements; and his analysis is designed to inform such movements. As Scholl writes, his ‘standpoint... resists being socialized methodologically as a “social movement scholar”’ (18–19). Second, Scholl takes seriously Mario Tronti’s maxim, first formulated in ‘Lenin in England’ and developed throughout *Operai e capitale*, (Tronti, 1966) that working-class struggle drives capitalist development: that the struggle of the working class and capital develops as a spiralling ‘double helix’. Thus in the context of summit mobilisations: counter-summit protestors innovate tactically, and this forces the state to respond; the state’s response provokes, in turn, another round of anti-systemic tactical innovation. Third – and following from the second principle – Scholl understands social movements as *moving*. Fourth – and again relatedly – Scholl’s approach is anti-identitarian. Thus the categories – state, ‘social movement’ (understood as noun), protestor, etc., as well as history itself – are understood as open.

Finally, antagonism is central: politics is understood as a fundamentally antagonistic process. This antagonism at the heart of politics is alluded to in the ‘barricade’ of the book’s title. This principle is important not only for the analysis that runs throughout the book, but also for understanding why summit protests themselves are (or were) important, why they mattered. Drawing on other studies of social movements, Scholl contends that ‘the success of social protest depends not so much on organisational resources, but on its ability to disrupt established routines’ (44). Distinguishing ‘contained contention’ and ‘transgressive contention’, he argues that,

Transgressive contention is central... because, first it provides visibility and consciousness about antagonistic power relations, and, second, because it challenges and threatens the stability of existing power relations. This is not to say that no communication [of political messages] takes place, only that it starts with the production of conflict. (46)

With these principles informing his investigation, Scholl focuses on six particular counter-summit mobilisations: those against the joint IMF and World Bank meeting in Prague (in 2000), against the EU summit in Gothenburg (also in 2000), and the anti-G8 counter-summits in Genoa (in 2001), in Evian (2003), in Gleneagles (2005) and in Heiligendamm (2007). The analysis is organised around ‘four contested sites of struggles: *bodies, space, communication, and law*. We can see protest events as an interactive process of *bodies* moving through *space* and *communicating* about *legality*’ (5–6; emphasis in original).

In the chapter entitled ‘Bodies that matter’, then, Scholl explores the extraordinary variety of ways in which protestors have used their ‘disobedient bodies’ (as opposed to ‘docile’ ones) to (attempt to) ‘surprise and disrupt their opponents’ (72–73) – and the way that protestors have innovated their bodily tactics in the face of the state’s response. In particular, he focuses on four of the most prominent bodily tactics: those of the *Tute Bianche* (white overalls), the ‘Pink & Silver’, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army and black blocs. Opposed to these white, pink or black bodies are the ‘blue’ bodies of the police. He examines the various ways in which these tactics were employed in conscious attempts to subvert or escape state logics of conflict and confrontation, and instead to shift the antagonism onto an (unpredictable) terrain more favourable to the protestors and their ‘cause’.

It is important to stress, as Scholl does, that these were *tactics*, not *identities*. So, for example, quoting from a *Tute Bianche* text: ‘The white overall is not an identity, it is a tool. One shouldn’t even say “I’m a white overall”, the correct phrase is “I wear a white overall”.’ This anti-identitarian impulse is crucial. Just as identity is essential for capital in general (‘identification is domination’, as John Holloway [2002: vii] writes at the beginning of *Change the world without taking power*), so, in particular:

Police regulation of protestors’ bodies relies very much on protocols. As do many hierarchical organisations, police try to establish standardised procedures for dealing with identifiable problems. During disruptive summit protests, it is the absence of protocols regulating the treatment of protestors’ bodies in such instances that is critical. For protocols rely on the identification of these specific uses of bodies in order to channel interaction with them into predictability. So identification emerges as a crucial part of the social and regulatory control of unpredictable bodies. (72)

Scholl interprets these attempts to identify and categorise protestors and their various behaviours using Foucault’s analysis of state processes of creation of ‘docile bodies’ and ‘normalisation’ – such ‘docile’ or ‘normalised’ bodies are easier to police and, more generally, to govern. But the refusal of identity he praises goes deeper, I think: the antagonistic class relationship at the heart of capital relies on the subordination of heterogeneous, concrete *doing* to commensurable abstract labour (the subordination of use-value to exchange-value). In other words, identity and identification – the process of identifying one activity or one human being with another – is fundamental for capital. Thus the importance of an anti-identitarian impulse to anti-capitalist politics.

Scholl’s discussion of his other three ‘contested sites’ is similarly incisive and provocative. Thus, in the chapter entitled ‘Leave them no space!’, he explores, amongst other issues, the state-protestor dynamics surrounding the ‘fence’ (or,

in police terminology, the ‘technical barrier’) and the ‘red zone’: while in one sense ‘securing’ a ‘safe space’ for the summit meeting, at the same time the fence itself created another ‘security concern’ for the police, a new terrain for protestors to exploit. Here Scholl also explores the various tactics police have used across different summits to spatially incapacitate protestors, depriving them of ‘their most powerful spatial repertoire: to move, and therefore, to be unpredictable as to where their movements can inhibit the flows necessary for a summit protest’ (128–29).

In ‘Psy(c)ops, spin doctors, and the communication of dissent’, Scholl warns that ‘one of the effects of ... (psy)cops in our minds ... is the erasure of memory [of our struggles]. ... What remains is merely a history of public disorder, but not of dissent. When nobody anymore wants to say “I have been there”, then the official account is left as the only surviving story’ (142). More generally, he examines ‘the problem of communicating dissent in liberal representative democracies’ (142).

Finally, ‘A revolt is a revolt is a revolt’ explores questions around violence, the law and the ‘state of exception’. Here Scholl points out that certain elements may seek to ‘introduce moment[s] of sovereign power into antisystemic dissent’, thus ‘transform[ing] constituent power into constituted power’ (180). He also suggests that, while state violence may be murderous (as in Genoa, with the unpunished police murder of Carlo Giuliani), ‘bringing about a state of exception shows the potential of summit protests for creating a historical rupture’ (201).

If I have a criticism of this book, it is that Scholl pays insufficient attention to the question of organisation. I would have found useful more discussion of the strengths and limitations of the organisational forms adopted by various groups. Although he notes that ‘the problem associated with decentralized structures avoiding representational forms of politics is that large meetings become rather symbolic (or affective) and practically redundant’ (151) and that in some situations ‘the commitment to transparency and horizontal decision-making contracts... the practical necessity of clandestine forms of communication for planning transgressive actions’ (152). However, I would be interested to read a more sustained discussion of these problems.

My second ‘criticism’ is in fact not a criticism at all. It concerns the lessons for current movements of the cycle of counter-summit protests analysed so well in this book. Scholl hardly mentions the anti-austerity and other struggles that have emerged in the wake of the global economic and financial crisis that erupted in 2007. How and what, in the words of Phillip Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers in *Capitalist sorcery*, do we ‘inherit from Seattle’? (Pignarre and Stengers, 2011: 3) Or, as explored by The Free Association (2011) in *Moments of excess*, if a new

‘generation’ is to generate itself – if anti-systemic movements are to *regenerate* – then which organisational forms, which tactics should we retain from earlier struggles and which should we leave behind? How to exceed the possibilities of the past? Scholl does not address these questions in this book. But why should he? These are questions for us all. Counter-summit mobilisers – part of the wider anti-globalisation ‘movement of movements’ – have bequeathed present and future anti-systemic movements an extraordinary array of tactics and ideas. What Scholl has done is provide us with an excellent tool with which to assess our inheritance.

## references

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