

Progressive Mobilization in Europe*

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Meetings of global leaders – such as recently occurred in the G20 meeting at Hamburg – increasingly have a ring of farce about them. The inability to come to agreement on pretty much anything of significance is leavened only by sideshows and media obsession with which global leader met with whom for how long, who sat in for which President at the “high table”, and similar trivia. Meanwhile, there is abject failure on the part of these leaders to recognize the pressing need for urgent and coordinated global action to solve so many current problems, ranging from the terrible state of the world economy to wars and conflicts, as well as the instabilities and inequalities created not just by the forces of globalization fostered by these same governments, but their own direct actions.

But such meetings sometimes have at least one positive outcome: they become the occasion for public mobilization and calls for action around the issues that really matter for most people, and thereby help in spreading ideas for a more positive policy agenda. In Hamburg, the second largest city in Germany with a long history of left groups and progressive movements, this was very much in evidence. For several days before the G20 Summit as well as during the official Summit, there were alternative gatherings, processions and protests that were dominantly peaceful and also thoughtful, imaginative and ultimately quite inspiring.

The mainstream media have portrayed what happened in Hamburg in early July in a very different light, focusing almost exclusively on violent protests. It is interesting that violence had been predicted by the authorities well before any actually occurred, and so there was a massive police presence that effectively created a lock down of the central part of the city. To any visitor to the city, the huge show of force well before any untoward incident was startling to say the least: massive deployment of fully armed riot police in black gear and helmets on the streets; barricades put up all over with no apparent reason, even in quite peaceful neighbourhoods; convoys of police cars sweeping through roads with sirens blaring when there was no apparent reason for it; helicopters constantly swirling overhead in somewhat menacing fashion for several days and nights.

The few stray incidents of violence, when they did occur, were mostly about problems at barricades and preventing what started out as peaceful marches because some of the marchers were masked. There was some violent activity by a few dozen members of the Black Block movement, a group of hard left anarchists that came to prominence in the 1980s during anti-nuclear and anti-eviction movements in the city. Others could even have been the work of agents provocateurs, as some participants in the demonstrations pointed out that the authorities needed something to justify their massive and very expensive security operations.

But these were in fact very much the tinier parts of what became quite a moving demonstration of people’s concerns. Discussions, protests and demonstrations were variously thoughtful, creative, humorous – and even the most massive marches were peaceful. A two-day Global Solidarity Summit of activists, people’s movements and civil society held just before the G20 Summit was an impressive gathering put

together by more than 75 different organisations, which in itself was no mean feat. The energy and enthusiasm at that alternative summit were palpable, with so many people attending that the huge hall that can seat nearly 900 people could not accommodate everyone who wanted to come to the opening plenary session, and others had to listen outside. Even by the end of that summit, at the closing session that went on until 10 pm on the evening of the second day, the hall was still full for the closing plenary, as if two long and full days of intense, packed discussions around alternative strategies had only whetted people's appetite for more.

Outside there were other, livelier events. At the Fish Market, young people gathered to listen to other speakers and to musicians and others who came and performed. At another place, a "performance art" demonstration by a thousand artists took the novel form of a "zombie march", in which the apparently semi-dead people with grey clothes and faces and arms painted grey walked very slowly, sombrely and heavily through the streets, implying that this phase of capitalism is making us all into zombies. At the culmination, they tore off their grey clothing to reveal bright colours below, and danced to celebrate their liberation from zombie hood – and to point to better possibilities ahead.

Then there were five separate but simultaneous "rave demos" across the city in which trucks blaring music preceded hordes of young people dancing along on the streets, for hours. Over the next day, the streets were still full of the confetti and glitter they left behind, sending a cheerful and even joyous message that could make you smile, despite all the ominous police cars with their sirens and lines of armed policemen and helicopters flying overhead. There were large rallies and gatherings at different places, including the University.

The municipality had refused permission for protestors to camp at the usual designated ground, so the people, especially young, who had flocked to Hamburg could not be put up by the organisers of the various events. True to a city with its progressive credentials, the churches and theatres opened up their doors to house them, while some young people simply shacked down by the harbour and on any grassy bits they could find.

The climax of all these events was an enormous – and peaceful – march of around 100,000 people through some of the main streets. This contained all sorts of people from various walks of life: mostly young, but also some old grizzled lefties (whose views are suddenly finding renewed resonance and traction among the young across Europe), trade unionists and other groups representing different interests as well as young parents pushing prams, migrants and so on. The mood was serious but also lively, with lots of positive energy, as the very size of the gathering and its variety allowed participants to draw strength from it.

In her memoirs, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir had written about how solitude is a form of death, while participating in and identifying with something greater than ourselves gives us life as well as a reason for that life. So these collective occasions are important not only because of the wider message they send out of greater hope and the public mobilisation that they might result in. They also provide sustenance to the people who participate, who realise they are not alone and that together they can be a potent force for change.

If something as indicative of the sorry state of the world as such a G20 meeting can inadvertently result in such public affirmations of the continued power of progressive ideas, clearly all is not lost even in Europe.

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