

1

ON THE ROAD

The Free Association

We all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, move. And we moved!

Jack Kerouac, On the Road

It's 3am. We're midge-bitten and piss-wet through, hiding out in some woods two miles above the A9 in Scotland. We've spent the last few hours like extras from the *Great Escape*, stumbling through the countryside, dodging police cars and helicopters with searchlights. Now we're trying to get a couple of hours kip in the open air, worrying about how we're going to manage that last yomp to the road and how we're going to block it when we get there. In the back of our minds is that conversation we had discussing the possibility that the police will send dogs into the woods to flush us out. We're tired, hungry, and nervous. One of us starts to giggle. It's infectious. Before long we're all shaking hysterically, cracking up at the sheer insanity of the situation. 'What the fuck are we doing? How did we get here? This is madness!'

It's what alcoholics call 'a moment of clarity'. After being caught up in the logic of the situation you get a flash of objectivity and a sense of its ridiculousness. Hang on a minute, perhaps we ought to reverse that. Capitalism is organised in an entirely rational way. The only irrational thing about it is the whole thing: capital itself, which exists only to increase its own value. The bottom line

for the whole system is the expansion of zeros on an accounting sheet. From that point of madness a delirium sweeps through the whole of society making our lives seem out of control. Just as a sailor who returns from months at sea can feel dry land swaying, it's capital's delirium that you perceive in a moment of clarity. It's not us that's insane. In fact we, our movement, are the realists. Of all the organisations, groups and actors circulating around the G8 summit, we were the only honest ones. We were the only ones not offering 'pie in the sky' solutions it's obvious wouldn't be tried and wouldn't work anyway. The only ones not asking our 'leaders' to do things we know they can't and won't. Anything we want to happen we do ourselves, here and now. You end up in some mad situations when you try and act sane in an insane world but it's a different kind of delirium we're after.

+ + +

It's the intensity of it that makes you feel so alive. In the Hori-Zone, in the couple of days running up to the blockades, everywhere you looked there were groups of people gathered in intense and passionate discussion. Talking, thinking, planning, arguing, agreeing, cooperating. Intense communication permeated the whole camp like an electric charge. It comes from that realisation that no one's in charge, that there's no secret committee with a secret plan who are going to come and save us. If this summit is going to be blockaded it's down to us, collectively. We were all moving so fast. One evening we emerged from one meeting at 11.30 and realised we needed to rush to grab something to eat as we had to be at another in half an hour. Who on earth arranges meetings at midnight? We had to, time was tight. It all made perfect sense. Meetings are normally painful exercises in frustration, but here it was different. There was such an intense concentration of effort, such focus, that creativity, wit, imagination, flexibility and good sense seemed to come naturally. You could stagger out of a meeting drunk on the sense of connection with the other people. Vibrating with it. It was that visceral. Then, on the Wednesday of the blockades, in the fields next to the road that intensity was ten-fold. Decisions were made so quickly you barely had time to think. Look! that lot in the next field are trying to get on the road, the police are going to block them. Let's charge down here and draw the police off. Great idea, I'll join in. Next time, hey, the police aren't falling for it. They don't believe our fake charges any more. That means we're unopposed. Here we go. Over the fence. On the road. Block the traffic. Yeh, this is actually working. We're running rings around them. We're too smart for them. We're thinking too fast.

+ + +

Of course it wasn't all like that. There are different speeds to decision-making and for a long time the Dissent! network moved slowly. There are times when we need to pick things apart, think critically about the aims of what we're doing. Prise out the underlying assumptions of the way we see things. This tortoise work is what makes it possible for us to go light-speed when we need to. Similarly it's impor-

tant not to elevate openness into some abstract principle. Openness on its own is not an answer. At Gleneagles, we were alive to all possibilities, but only as long as they were aimed at shutting down the summit. In fact, there had been a debate about whether we should even go to Scotland at all: if capitalism is global and ongoing, shouldn't we just attack it everywhere and every day? Wouldn't decentralised actions all over the UK avoid the concentrations of police? These critiques miss the point that capitalist summits such as Gleneagles (or Seattle or Genoa or Evian) can also be moments of concentration for us, where we can feel our collective strength and achieve together things that we can't achieve apart. Once we had decided to go to Scotland and disrupt the summit we were able to be more open about how people did that. It's similar to how open source software licences allow others to remix and build upon your work, as long as they license their new creations under the same terms: on the road blockades people could come and be as 'militant' or as 'fluffy' as they liked, as long as they didn't restrict the ability of others to do the same. With that focus, we had a commonality that allowed diversity. It was a moment of productive stratification, of closing down some possibilities in order to open up others.

After that virtually every other organisational move helped to keep options open. Everything we organised in advance was about creating the preconditions of spontaneity. We organised the infrastructure to allow people to be in the right areas with the space and time to organise themselves to do what they wanted. At the Hori-Zone, in meeting after meeting we made decisions to defer final decisions, or rather, we made decisions that maximised our degrees of freedom. Our bottom line seemed to be: how do we keep things open? It would have been easy to go for a single set-piece battle in an attempt to shut down the summit. But that would have flattened all of our compositional efforts (creating and maintaining multiple convergence spaces, each containing a whole range of subjectivities) into one spectacular moment of opposition. Instead, we planned multiple blockades and actions wherever and however we wanted to. At a site-wide meeting on the Monday evening, we decided to focus on the blockade of the A9, rather than the M9 – blockading the A9 simply provided more options for individual groups to maintain their autonomy and express their imagination and creativity.¹ And once we'd decided on the A9, some people floated the idea of crashing a car on this road as way of initiating a blockade; but in the end that too was rejected because it would have re-introduced hierarchical coordination and a single location, moving us back from a multi-pointed attack into something more traditional and easy to control. Instead the decision was a repeat of ones we'd made in the run-up to the summit: get ourselves, our bodies, in the right general area, at the same time with useful tools and a shared affect, a group feeling of collective purpose. With those preconditions met we all had to trust that a spontaneously generated collective intelligence would ignite as groups formed, split up and re-formed in a rolling blockade that was impossible to control. When there's

SHUT THEM DOWN!

no conspiracy, no back-room leaders pulling our strings or marking up maps, it's up to all of us to join the dots. When this happens successfully there is immense creativity with the emergence of new and unexpected properties and capacities.

+ + +

This isn't a new non-linear Leninism; we're not in control. Even when all the right preconditions are in place there's no guarantee that things will gel and cohere. And even if they do there's no guarantee that what emerges will work. In fact our movement only works by fucking up, by our learning from our mistakes and daring to try new things. If we look at the movement in the UK over the past decade, there's been a pragmatic strain running through it and setting the pace. Deeply intelligent, but not hung up on ideology and led off down the many dead ends that can bring. We can chart this movement by observing it breaking the surface of visibility from one event to the next, constantly searching to move on by solving the problems thrown up by the last one. Each event opening up its own problematic. One of the issues being worked through over the last ten years or more is how can we give up activism? Or rather, how can we give up the transcendent role of the activist? How can we act without being controlling and prescriptive? When Reclaim the Streets (RTS) emerged after the anti-Criminal Justice Bill protests it was an audacious switch from opposition to composition. Instead of simply protesting against cars and capital, we recomposed reality, creating car-free common space in the here and now. We started with the question of what we're *for*, rather than what we're *against*. But RTS actions always walked a fine line between the open and the secret: street parties need a clandestine layer of organisation to ensure that the crowds, sound systems and blockading equipment arrived at the right place at the same time. One of the problems with this was that people could just passively receive these events and the experience of collective intelligence could be hard to ignite. The J18 Carnival Against Capital can be seen, among other things, as an attempt to solve this problem. The May Day Guerrilla Gardening was another attempt to solve it by making passive reception less likely, but the preconditions for spontaneous action weren't there. You need time and space to self-organise and this is the real value of convergence centres – the Hori-Zone in Stirling, the VAAAG at the Evian G8 counter-summit, the 'no borders' camps.

The state has also unwittingly accelerated this drive towards more and more horizontal forms of organising. It has acted as a hostile evolutionary environment forcing immanence – a horizontality and openness – on the movement. Communication is a good example: after the EU summit in Gothenburg in June 2001, eight people were found guilty of 'coordinating and inciting riots', and sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment, for running an info-line during the protests (they'd collected information from scouts and scanners and then used it to tell activists where they were most needed). Faced with this sort of extreme repression, there are two options. The first is to organise even more secretly,



making sure, for example, that the info-line's location is known to only a handful of people and utilising a range of technologies to keep transmissions hidden. The problem with this approach is that ultimately we can never beat the state at its own game: we will always be militarily defeated. The alternative strategy is to remove any remaining layers of direction and control, and effectively create a peer-to-peer network. When we rang the info-line this year, we were told 'There have been reports that...' or 'The BBC is saying that...' The info-lines were a sounding board, bouncing facts and figures back to people in the field. Information was shared, but no one was told what to do or where to go: a critical difference. During the morning of the blockades they were a means of maintaining the collective affect when many people were physically split up and wanted reassurance that they weren't the only people about to rush onto the road.

This horizontal approach allowed diversity, flexibility and mobility to feed off each other, and this intoxicating mix was fundamental to our success. On the opening day of the summit people switched seamlessly from one tactic to another without slowing down. As we made our first foray onto the A9 a few of us immediately started assembling the makings of a barricade – a few rocks and a large plastic wheelie bin. But, outnumbered by rapidly approaching cops... *switch!*... sit down on the road and all link arms. Our action immediately becomes 'Peaceful protest! Peaceful protest!' For years, the state and media have attempted to label us as 'good' protesters or 'bad'. 'Peaceful' or 'violent'. 'Legal' or 'illegal'. Dissent! or Make

Poverty History. And we've often been complicit in this process of definition. While constituted parties, organisations and their spokespeople have denounced 'violent protesters' and 'trouble-makers', militants have just as frequently revelled in their distance from more constitutional forms of protest. And the police have always used the good cop/bad cop routine as a further way to divide and confuse us. This time around, however, it was us who shifted the roles, both individually and collectively: masked-up militant; pink and fluffy fairy; obliging bystander; outraged citizen. Most of the time the police simply didn't know whether they were going to be hit with a stick or a barrage of legal jargon (or even a dollop of baby sick!); whether we'd be surly or happy to share a smile and a joke; whether we'd ask friendly questions regarding their own accommodation or mock them with kisses and feather dusters... Quite simply, for long periods we wrong-footed the state with our versatility. The advantage we have is that we're quicker to respond, more flexible and far more dynamic than they can ever be. Faced with an obstacle, we can re-route, while they have to refer to their officer in charge. Another moment sticks in our memory: two people blocking the A9 dual carriageway simply by holding up a wagon alongside a van; trapped at the back, with no room to squeeze past, the police could only rev their own minibus in frustration.

This diversity of approaches and tactics, far from making us feel weak or divided, only seemed to strengthen the incredible feeling of connection. When we heard about the successful blockade of the M9, we felt as if we had been there too (even though we were 20 miles away on the A9). When we heard that the Glen-eagles fence had been breached, we felt it was us who'd torn it down. Those people who had chosen to be medics or to stay in the convergence centres and cook reported the same feelings of connection, of having done it all. Everyone felt a part of everything. Again this was one of the crucial roles of the Stirling rural convergence. There are times and places when we need to ground ourselves, to take stock, re-focus and re-connect. The Hori-Zone wasn't just a low-impact self-sufficient eco-friendly experiment. Like social centres across the world, whether permanent or temporary, it offered a base camp, a safe space to retreat to.² Without that common place, it would be impossible for different velocities, different movements to compose together. It allowed a space for people to go off in different directions (sometimes literally!) or come in from different places, all moving at different but consistent speeds.

Seen in this light, the whole process was a great example of collective intelligence. No single person or group had total knowledge. Instead there were countless overlapping zones of skills, experience and information, and the only entity which had the bigger picture was the living, breathing movement itself. Of course, it's a hard thing to deal with. Some people never quite cottoned on to the No Plan idea and kept on waiting for it to be 'revealed'. As late as Wednesday lunchtime, when we were still playing cat and mouse with the police on the A9, we were asked

by some other protesters: 'What d'you want us to do?' All we could reply was 'Do what you want!' But the day before, on Tuesday morning, even we were starting to have doubts about the approach. We couldn't see how we could manage to get thousands of people out of the camp and into the hills. But we were asking the wrong question: as individuals, the task seemed daunting because it was hard to see the collective intelligence at work. But in a mass meeting of 300-plus, the strategy made sense because we could feel our collective power: across the site, people were already self-organising, starting to make their own plans. One of us spent several hours on Tuesday afternoon and early evening driving a minibus. No Plan. Groups simply consulted a map and worked out their own plan: 'There's 11 of us. We're planning to walk somewhere up in the hills. Can you drop us off here?' 'We're going to camp at this spot. We want you to drive us there. Can you do it?' Drivers are important, of course, but they're frequently seen as having a certain authority too. Not this time and it was fantastic.

+ + +

As we've already said, flexibility and a collective being don't arrive by magic. It's a question of creating the right conditions and the right space in which they can emerge. And once established, they have to be guarded and defended. There's always a temptation to revert to old, more established ways of being and doing. On the Wednesday morning we were part of a meeting on a hillside in the rain at 5.30am. As well as being nervous and wet, we were all more than a little confused. It was hard to see any collectivity emerging, even though there were at least 100 of us. A few scouts reported back and told us that a 20 minute walk would take us down to the closest section of the A9... and into the arms of the waiting police. Isolated from other groups, and not really knowing what was going on, the mood of the meeting drifted quickly towards this option. Luckily, a few people refused to accept this, and argued we should stick to the original idea, to hit the A9 at multiple points north east of the Greenloaning junction, even though it meant a much longer hike into uncertain territory. The meeting swung back again and we became a collective body, focusing instead on the practical: which road to take, how to meet up with other groups, etc. In situations like this, it takes more than confidence or bravado to make that leap of faith; we need to feel that connection with others. Solidarity. The scenario was re-played as we reached the road for the first time: faced with police screaming orders, there was a moment's hesitation before, as one body, we vaulted the barbed wire.

This connects to another point. We don't just need the space and the conditions, we need the tools. This might be something as simple as a physical infrastructure: marquees, kitchens and common meeting spaces were central to the working of the barrios in the Hori-Zone, even more so than at Evian. But we can widen the idea of tools to include the whole notion of consensus decision-making and spokes-councils. They seem to have taken root quickly but, to us at least, are still relatively new. Without them, we would have been lost. Consensus allows



us to create collective bodies and establish collective intelligence. It might seem insane now, but in the space of six frantic hours on Wednesday morning we took part in at least three spokes-councils in the hills and fields around the A9, each involving more than 100 people. And each time we managed to arrive at brave and imaginative decisions. It was a way of slowing things down to reassess. Of course all constituted forms can become empty and institutionalised. What they rest on are affects held in common, the right collective feeling – which allows us to cohere, allowing the range of velocities consistent with each other to be widened.³

+ + +

Commonality is always precarious. The success of our actions in the first few days couldn't be sustained indefinitely, and the forces that worked to our advantage for the first day of the summit turned against us when news of the July 7 London bombings filtered through. In Stirling, we experienced them as a moment of vertical power which effectively de-mobilised many of us. Earlier in the week at the site-wide meeting to discuss strategies for the opening day, there was an amazing fluidity, and a clear willingness to engage and to find common ground. But by Thursday morning many people had reverted to a default mode of either partying or party politics: there was another massive site-wide meeting, but this time it was dominated by ideology and old-style politics. We came up against a widespread feeling that we had to 'take a position', and there was an energy-

sapping effort to draft a press release. In fact, 'taking a position' was the last thing we should have done. We should have dealt with this external event in the same way a crowd of 200 of us dealt with an oncoming police car which attempted to block our path early on Wednesday morning: we literally flowed around it. 'Taking a position' means standing still and losing the initiative. It also means that it's hard to reconcile the different speeds and directions people are travelling in. After Thursday the mood, affect, feeling, buzz – call it what you like – was defensive and closed, compared to previous days: the desire had gone, and with it the energy.

Of course, it's easy to over-state the impact or significance of the bombings. They were simply the flip-side of the liberating processes we'd enjoyed over the previous days: there's always a comedown, even though this was a particularly intense and accelerated one. When we were on the move, all the affects of precarity were exhilarating and empowering. But as soon as things stopped moving, those same affects became disadvantageous – flexibility became precariousness and all those attitudes and techniques we'd developed suddenly became obstacles to liberation. On top of that, we experienced these bombings as an entirely mediated event. The TV, radio and press had a field day, sucking everything into the black hole of endless speculation. For a time we were tempted to see the bombings as proof that there are far wider forces at work, making our mobilisations at Gleneagles and elsewhere pale into insignificance. This is the deflationary effect of all mediation. But in fact the opposite is true. Our week in Gleneagles, just like all the weeks before and since, makes it even clearer that there is no 'wider' field of play, no 'real world' outside of what we do. There is one power, and it's ours.

The whole idea of the counter-summit wasn't really about protesting against the G8. For us, it wasn't even directly about abolishing global poverty. It was about life. It was about being and becoming human. It was about our desire. No matter how 'well-paid' or 'secure' our employment, as we shuffle pieces of paper, as we gaze out of the window in a meeting, as we trudge around the supermarket, we think 'there must be more to life than this...' We never felt this in Scotland, no matter how frustrated we became in one or two meetings, however pissed off we got with a few individuals or angry at the state. This was living; this was being human. This 'ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being'. Of course, it's easy to dismiss this as if it's simply about a 'feeling' or an obsession with 'process'. But doing stuff for ourselves, making decisions, running our own lives... this process of creation, invention and becoming isn't a 'feeling', it's a material reality. The new capacities we experience at these events don't just disappear. They are there to be accessed during the rest of our lives... if we can work out how to reach them again.

Fundamental change starts with small, localised, material innovations, perhaps the introduction of new tools, technologies or ways of thinking. But every now and then these incremental changes build up into an event, a moment

SHUT THEM DOWN!

of excess, where so much life is produced that it overflows existing social forms. We spend most of our political lives developing such tools but we never quite know when an event will arise or what the effect of it will be. Nevertheless, 'we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies.'⁴

- 1 *As it happens even the decision to focus on the A9 wasn't prescriptive, nobody was bound by the decision, it was simply a way of focusing energy and assessing what others were going to do. Those who didn't want to target the A9 or thought they couldn't get there simply organised a blockade of the M9 which was fantastically successful and creative. Instead of energy being split, it was amplified.*
- 2 *An affinity group can also act as a safe space. During chaotic mass actions you often act with whoever is next to you. If someone makes a suggestion and it sounds like a good idea you join together. Affinity groups are just the people you know better, in whom you have a greater level of trust and with whom you have talked a few things over. During such events you need to keep checking back with your friends and then make the big decisions together, like when to go home.*
- 3 *As we start to explore affective activism just think of all the experience and resources we have to draw on. Our movements have always included cultural activism. Punk, rave, free parties, gigs. All based on the creation of shared affect.*
- 4 *Quotations in the final two paragraphs are from Kerouac's On the Road.*