



Reflections on the G8 Protests: An Interview with General Unrest of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA)

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From July 6th to 8th 2005 the G8 (group of eight nations) met at Gleneagles, Scotland. The G8 – consisting of the U.S., Canada, Japan, Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Russia – holds annual summits where top government officials discuss issues of macroeconomic management (i.e. running the neoliberal global economy), international trade, terrorism, energy, arms control, etc. With the emergence of the global justice (anti-capitalist) movement, such summits have been accompanied by protests – both at the places where the G8 meet, and elsewhere across the globe. These protests provide a critique of neoliberal capitalism, debate alternatives to it, and challenge the “business-as-usual” performance of such summits by attempting to disrupt their operation.

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The following is the text of an interview that I conducted with General Unrest, a member of the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (CIRCA) – one of the groups involved in the protests against the G8 in Gleneagles, Scotland. The issues raised here – concerning the politics of affinity and affect, the performativity and strategy of direct action, and the critique of militarism – are of clear relevance to a critical geography interested in how challenges to neoliberalism and the war on terror are articulated. I met General Unrest in a tea-shop in Glasgow's West End, overlooking the Kelvin river. I began by asking the General to explain what the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army was.

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General Unrest: There are many people who ask us what the Rebel Clown Army is. Let me begin by quoting at length from the CIRCA website (www.clownarmy.org):

We are clandestine because we refuse the spectacle of celebrity, and without real names, faces or noses, we show that our words, dreams, and desires are more important than our biographies. We are insurgent because we have risen up from nowhere and are everywhere, and because an insurrection of the imagination is irresistible. We are rebels because we love life and happiness more than 'revolution,' and because while no revolution is ever complete, rebellions continue forever. We are clowns because inside everyone is a lawless clown trying to escape, and because nothing undermines authority like holding it up to ridicule. We are an army because we live on a planet in permanent war – a war of money against life, of profit against dignity, of progress against the future. We are an army because a war that gorges itself on death and blood and shits money and toxins, deserves an obscene body of deviant soldiers. We are circa because we are approximate and ambivalent, neither here nor there, but in the most powerful of all places, the place in-between order and chaos.

CIRCA is not an excuse to dress as clowns and bring colour and laughter to protests. We are developing a form of political activism that brings together the practices of clowning and non-violent direct action. We aim to develop a methodology that transforms and sustains the inner emotional life of the activists as well as being an effective technique for taking direct action. CIRCA sees both the soul and the street as sites of struggle, realising that a destructive tendency within many activist movements is forgetting the inner work of personal transformation and healing. Moreover, innovative forms of creative street action are crucial for building and inspiring movements. CIRCA's combatants don't pretend to be clowns – they

are clowns. CIRCA aims to make clowning dangerous again, to bring it back to the street, reclaim its disobedience and give it back the social function it once had: its ability to disrupt, critique and heal – adding disorder to the world in order to expose its lies and speak the truth. The clown soldiers that make up CIRCA embody life's contradictions, they are both fearsome and innocent, wise and stupid, entertainers and dissenters, healers and laughing stocks, scapegoats and subversives. The use of carnival as a form of joyful resistance has become a key tactic of the global anticapitalist movement, with "Carnivals against Capitalism" taking place across the world. Clowning, like carnival suspends and mocks everyday law and order.

PR: How did CIRCA come into being?

GU: CIRCA's dark origins lie in some activists' inspiration and preparation for the European Social Forum that was held in London in 2004. However, we live in viral times. In the months prior to the G8 protests, the idea of CIRCA spread meme-like, via a series of clown workshops, organised by the Laboratory of the Insurrectionary Imagination, that were held in various British cities – London, Bristol, Sheffield, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Glasgow amongst others. The call of the clown also spread to parts of Europe and the U.S. In early July (2005), as people from around the world gathered in Edinburgh for a week of actions around the G8 meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, so the clowns converged. On July 2nd, the day of the Make Poverty History march, I remember the glorious sight of 150 rebel clowns, spread out across the street, sandwiched between the car park and the Student union building of Edinburgh University, preparing for their first collective meeting to decide what our actions would be for the day.

PR: How did you make decisions about what to do during the protests?

GU: One of the principal mechanisms for such decision-making and for actions are affinity groups. Usually numbering between 3–15 people, affinity groups consist of a group of people who share common ground (friends, lovers, shared beliefs and dreams, etc), and who can provide supportive, sympathetic spaces for its members to articulate, listen to one another, share concerns, emotions, fears, etc. In affinity groups people provide support and solidarity for one another. Small enough to enact a consensus form of decision-making, these groups are non-hierarchical and participatory, embodying flexible, fluid modes of action. Affinity groups will frequently join together with other affinity groups for political actions, but retain their own separate integrity, and course of action, within the context of broader struggles. The common values, and beliefs shared by these groups constitute a "structure of feeling" resting upon collective experiences and interpretations. These

affinity groups form the bases of many nonviolent political actions. They represent interfaces that do more than talk to, with, and at each other. Their *raison d'etre* is to pass into action. They are enacted as collectivities, co-operative rather than competitive, but also celebrate and encourage the various contributions of individuals.

In Edinburgh, there were fifteen different clown affinity groups (called ‘gaggles’) from different places. For example, there were groups called Glasgow Kiss, the Cloon Army, Group Sex, Backward Intelligence, etc. We held clown councils, whereby we would all sit in a circle and have meetings based upon consensus decision-making (Figure 1). Each affinity group would propose a spokesperson who would sit at the front of their group and discuss matters with the other affinity group’s spokespersons. Each issue raised by the “spokes council” would be discussed by each affinity group amongst themselves and their decision communicated back to the entire council via their spokesperson. Once consensus on each issue was reached we would move on to the next issue. These councils were held every day during the protests, at first in Edinburgh, and then at the rural convergence site near Stirling. Each group also kept in contact via mobile phone.



Figure 1: Clown Council at the *Make Poverty History* demonstration, Edinburgh (Source: Indymedia.org)

PR: Did such decision-making amongst a large group present any problems?

GU: Not really, since the idea of consensus here is based upon the notion of mutual solidarity – constructing the grievances and aspirations of geographically and culturally different people as interlinked. Mutual solidarity enables connections to be drawn that extend beyond the local and particular, by recognizing and respecting differences between people while at the same time recognizing similarities (for example, in people’s aspirations). So, in the clown councils we might agree to differ, to allow each group to pursue its own set of actions during the protests. Or we might all agree on a specific strategy during one of the protests. Either way we are also open to the spontaneity of clowning and of the event, so as not to become too rigid in our action and play.

PR: Could you tell me a little about what the clowns got up to during the protests?

GU: Well, our overarching strategy was to wage a War on Error, since we believe that our laughter, our freedom, and our love of life is confronted by fundamentalists who preach the gospel of Error. The international threat of errorism takes many forms. For example, there is the economic errorism of privatization and the increasing wealth and power of Multinational Corporations; the environmental errorism of over-consumption and pollution of land, water and food resources; and the political errorism of invasion and occupation of sovereign countries to colonize their oil. From 6–8th July 2005, the most dangerous Errorists of the world’s eight richest countries (G8) were meeting in Gleneagles, Scotland, to plan further Errorism on a global scale. CIRCA was convinced that no one was safe, since no amount of money had been spent to protect us from the Errorists, and that there was a popular demand for liberation from the error of the G8’s ways. As a result we launched three major initiatives: Operation Brown Nose; Operation Mass Distraction; and Operation HA.HA.HAA (Helping Authorities House Arrest Half-witted Authoritarian Androids).

PR: What forms did these operations take?

GU: Operation Brown Nose was conducted during the Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh on July 2nd. We shared people’s realization that the only real way to end poverty, in the global South or in the suburbs of Edinburgh, was to stop the G8’s rather nasty slapstick routines – kicking the poorer nations with war, arms sales, and bullying trade policies, manipulating their markets and plundering their resources while dangling the crumbs of “debt forgiveness” in front of them. However the CIRCA Advanced Intelligence Team discovered a grave threat to the movement for global justice. It came to our attention through deft infiltration, clever clandestinity, and watching the telly that several criminal antisocial elements were trying to hijack and coopt the movement and that dangerous errorists might be

marching in the demonstration. They were Gordon Brown (Member of Parliament) the financier of the invasion of Iraq, whose £5 billion War Reserve Fund could, instead, have fully immunized every child in the developing world for two years, and Hillary Benn (Member of Parliament). Both would be wearing pretty debt relief masks over their true faces of privatisation and plunder. CIRCA was mobilized to patrol and protect the demonstration, so that these brown-nosing interlopers did not hijack the march. Operation Brown-nose involved giving hugs to the needy, playing games with all our friends, and other similarly militant activities.

Operation Mass Distraction was deployed at the blockade of the Faslane nuclear submarine base on 4th July (Figure 2), and was designed to highlight how the G8 distracted the public from the real causes of terrorism, poverty, and climate change, i.e. the G8 themselves. For example, bogus debt relief distracted us from the privatizing, free-marketing economic policies that continue to cause widespread poverty in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Scare-stories about violent anarchist demonstrators distracted us from the Iraq war (with 100,000 Iraqi dead; and a cost of £5 billion to the U.K. taxpayer, and £100 billion to the U.S. taxpayer). Fancy fossil-fuel burning helicopters flying in and out of five star luxury golf courses distracted us from the corporate/consumer causes of climate change. Unlike either the U.S. or U.K. governments, CIRCA's Advanced Intelligence Team received irrefutable information about the precise location of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Surprise, surprise, they were not in Iraq! They were in Scotland, right under our red noses! Operation Mass Distraction showed that CIRCA had learned a trick or two from the G8. CIRCA offered its inept services as fluffy Weapons of Mass Distraction. Cavorting Clowns performed dazzling deeds and side splitting stunts so as to distract any would-be weapons inspectors, foreign spy satellites, or nosey-parkers from the true location of WMD's.

Operation HA.HA.HAA was deployed to invert the logic and expectations of the July 6th demonstrations against the G8. Instead of trying to climb the fences and disrupt the meeting, we wanted to deploy rebel clowns to keep the world's most dangerous errorists under house arrest in perpetuity. Build the fences higher, and never let them out of their five star luxury prison!

PR: This sounds a lot like street theatre.

GU: There was an element of that, certainly. However, CIRCA was also concerned to undermine and ridicule the intimidation and provocation of security forces at demonstrations. For example, by blowing kisses to riot cops behind their shields; or by hogging the lenses of police cameras, and following the evidence gathering teams around, mocking them and preventing them from conducting their surveillance. During the Make Poverty History march in Edinburgh, a large group

of black bloc brothers and sisters were surrounded and detained by police. CIRCA was mobilised to provide solidarity, encircling the cops who were encircling the black bloc. Our presence contributed in some small way to the police finally releasing them. Protestors at Faslane told us that we had helped diffuse tense situations at the blockaded gates. The G8 Alternatives folk – who organised the July 6th march on Gleneagles – thanked the clowns for dispelling tension at the demonstration.



Figure 2. Operation Mass Distraction at Faslane submarine base, Scotland, July 4th 2005 (Source: IndyMedia.org)

PR: So the clowns act to transform the energy of an action?

GU: Again, there was also an element of that. Clown actions contain an element of dissimulation, or the unexpected, what Sun Tzu, author of *The Art of War*, termed “being unknowable as the dark”. By this he is referring to the crucial attributes of

fluidity and adaptation – the interchange of surprise unorthodox movements and orthodox direct confrontation, mixing together into a whole. Now, fluidity and adaptation are primary characteristics of affinity groups. The personnel and workings of such groups are fluid and decentralised. There are no real leaders (although there are temporary organisers of particular actions) which both reflect the autonomist philosophy of such groups as well as posing deep problems for surveillance and control by the authorities. Adaptation means not clinging to fixed methods, but changing according to events. For example, Operation HA.HA.HAA saw many clown groups join the mass blockades along the A9 road which leads to Gleneagles on the morning of July 6th. Police repeatedly attacked people blockading the A9 road with very violent charges. Although several protestors were injured and arrested in this action, the blockade proved to be one of the most successful of the day. Throughout the morning, blockades continually sprung up all over the area. Some had been planned and prepared in advance by a wide range of affinity groups, others occurred more spontaneously by groups of people that came together whilst roaming the hills and roads in the surrounding area. As a result of the mobile road blocks, travel to the G8 meeting was disrupted. Also, the situation was so ungovernable that police initially cancelled the G8 Alternatives march from Auchterarder to Gleneagles hotel. The march organisers threatened to march anyway, and eventually the police relented, although the march was delayed from noon until 4:30, with many people being turned back.

Also, at the demonstration at Gleneagles, in addition to the polite march, there were very active forms of protest, which involved several clown groups (amongst others). Some people quickly started to try to dismantle the fence surrounding the hotel where the G8 errorists were meeting. Police reacted by changing into riot gear, and forming several lines with police on horses and on foot. This did not prevent part of the crowd from taking on the fence, and eventually partially dismantling it. Shortly after that, a group of about 700 people, including a large group of clowns, trespassed into the adjoining barley fields, and moved towards the fence that formed the perimeter of the Gleneagles hotel or “red zone” Before police could react and prevent any action, the second fence was also partially dismantled, and a watch tower attached to it also attacked. From that moment on, police activity increased substantially, and units of police on horse, police with dogs, reinforcements of riot police and even two “chinook” military helicopters bringing in more police into the grounds, started to take positions and eventually charge against the crowds. However, the crowd maintained their ground for over an hour, whilst a group of about 100 people staged a sit down protest in front of the gap caused by the earlier breach of the fence. Eventually, and after a couple of hours of protestors’ activity and police moves, a large number of riot police using baton charges and horses, moved into the crowd from the top of the hill and pushed everyone out of the field.

On July 8th, the international day of action against climate change, around 50 clowns converged on Glasgow, and while the street party was taking place on the George IV bridge over the river Clyde, clowns closed down several petrol stations in the city.

PR: Another CIRCA “operation”?

GU: In a sense it was an impromptu operation. Remember that the day of action took place the day after the terrorist bombings in London. Some of the clowns grew up in London and felt very strongly about drawing attention to the cycle of violence between the war for oil in Iraq – an illegal war of terror visited upon Iraqi civilians for a non-renewable resource – and the terror visited upon London civilians, as revenge for the terror in Iraq. Some of us wore black armbands with “London” painted in white on them. By colonising the gas stations, performing random spontaneous acts of joyful foolery, and closing them down, we wanted to make the connection between the oil economy, climate change and wars of terror.

PR: So where do the clowns go from here?

GU: We continue to train new clowns, and prepare for future actions. There is a growing network of clowns in the U.K. and abroad. Contacts are being made, face-paint hoarded, uniforms adorned in fluffy pink and neon green. We continue to train ourselves in the arts of clowning. We are everywhere, having arisen from nowhere. We refuse real names, noses, and faces. We are deviant clowns who love life and happiness. We are neither here nor there, but in the place in-between order and chaos. My advice to everyone is: run away from the circus! Join the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army.