

After Genoa: Why We Need to Stay in the Streets

By Starhawk

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Since Genoa, there has been lots of healthy debate about where the movement needs to go. The large scale protests are becoming more dangerous and difficult. The summits are moving to inaccessible locations. The IMF and the World Bank and the G8 and the WTO continue to do their business. Are we being effective enough to justify the risks we're taking? Should we be focusing more on local work, building our day-to-day networking and organizing? I was in Genoa. Because of what I experienced there, including the moments of real terror and horror, I am more convinced than ever that we need to stay in the streets. We need to continue mounting large actions, contesting summits, working on the global scale.

Our large scale actions have been extraordinarily effective. I've heard despairing counsels that the protests have not affected the debates in the G8 or the WTO or the IM/World Bank. In fact they have, they have significantly changed the agendas and the propaganda issuing forth. In any case, the actual policies of these institutions will be the last thing to change. But for most of us on the streets, changing the debate within these institutions is not our purpose. Our purpose is to undercut their legitimacy, to point a spotlight at their programs and policies, and to raise the social costs of their existence until they become insupportable. Contesting the summits has delegitimized these institutions in a way no local organizing possibly can. The big summit meetings are elaborate rituals, ostentatious shows of power that reinforce the entitlement and authority of the bodies they represent. When those bodies are forced to meet behind walls, to fight a pitched battle over every conference, to retreat to isolated locations, the ritual is interrupted and their legitimacy is undercut. The agreements that were being negotiated in secret are brought out into the spotlight of public scrutiny. The lie that globalization means democracy is exposed; and the mask of benevolence is ripped off.

Local organizing simply can't do this as effectively as the big demonstrations. Local organizing is vital, and there are other things it does do: outreach, education, movement building, the creation of viable alternatives, the amelioration of some of the immediate effects of global policy. We can't and won't abandon the local, and in fact never have: many of us work on both scales. No one can go to every summit: we all need to

root ourselves in work in our own communities. But many of us have come to the larger, global actions because we understand that the trade agreements and institutions we contest are designed to undo all of our local work and override the decisions and aspirations of local communities.

We can make it a conscious goal of every large scale action to strengthen local networks and support local organizing. Aside from Washington DC, Brussels, or Geneva, which have no choice, no city is ever going to host one of these international meetings twice. Even now, we hear rumors that Washington is considering relocating or limiting the upcoming IMF/World Bank meeting. But if we find ways to organize mass actions that leave resources and functioning coalitions behind, then each grand action can strengthen and support the local work that continues on a daily basis.

Summits won't remain the nice, juicy, targets that they are for long. Over the last two years, we've reaped an agenda of meetings that were set and contracted for before Seattle. Now that they are locating the meetings in ever more obscure and isolated venues, we need a strategy that can allow us to continue building momentum.

As an example, some of us have been talking about linked, large-scale regional actions targeting stock exchanges and financial institutions when the WTO meets in Qatar in November. The message we'll be sending is: "If you move the summits beyond our reach, and continue the policies of power consolidation and wealth concentration, then social unrest will spread beyond these specific institutions to challenge the whole structure of global corporate capitalism itself." Marches, teach-ins, countersummits, programs of positive alternatives alone can't pose this level of threat to the power structure, but combined with direct action on the scale we've now reached, they can.

Of course, the more successful we are, the meaner they get. But when they use force against us, we still win, even though the victory comes at a high cost. Systems of power maintain themselves through our fear of the force they can command, but force is costly. They cannot sustain themselves if they have to actually use force in order to accomplish every normal function.

Genoa was a victory won at a terrible price. I hope never to undergo another night like I spent when they raided the IMC and the Diaz school, knowing that atrocities were being done just across the way and not being able to stop them. I ache and grieve and rage over the price. I would do almost anything to assure that no one, especially no young person, ever suffers such brutality again. Almost anything. Anything except backing away from

the struggle. Because that level of violence and brutality is being enacted, daily, all over the world. It's the shooting of four students in New Guinea, the closing of a school in Senegal, the work quota in a maquiladora on the Mexican border, the clearcutting of a forest in Oregon, the price of privatized water in Cochabamba. It's the violence being perpetrated on the bodies of youth, especially youth of color, in prisons all over the United States, and the brutality and murder going on in Colombia, Palestine, Venezuela... And it's the utter disregard for the integrity of the ecosystems that sustain us all.

I don't see the choice as being between the danger of a large action and safety. I no longer see any place of safety. Or rather, I see that in the long run our safest course is to act strongly now. The choice is about when and how we contest the powers that are attempting to close all political space for true dissent.

Genoa made clear that they will fight ruthlessly to defend the consolidation of their power, but we still have a broad space in which to organize and mount large actions. We need to defend that space by using it, filling and broadening it. Either we continue to fight them together now when we can mount large-scale, effective actions, or we fight them later in small, isolated groups, or alone when they break down the doors of our homes in the middle of the night. Either we wage this struggle when there are still living forests, running rivers, and resilience left in the life support systems of the planet, or we fight when the damage is even deeper and the hope of healing slim. We have many choices about how to wage the struggle. We can be more strategic, more creative, more skillful in what we do. We can learn to better prepare people for what they might face, and to better support people afterwards. We have deep questions to consider about violence and nonviolence, about our tactics and our long range vision, which I hope to address in a later posting.

But those choices remain only so long as we keep open the space in which to make them. We need to grow, not shrink. We need to explore and claim new political territory. We need the actions of this autumn to be bigger, wilder, more creatively outrageous and inspiring than ever, from the IMF/World Bank actions in Washington DC at the end of September to the many local and regional actions in November when the WTO meets in Qatar. We need to stay in the streets.

-- *Starhawk*

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