

Pittsburgh G20 Protests - Firsthand Account

Contributed by David Rovics
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Editor's note: David Rovics is a dedicated activist-musician whom I know. In his column below there are a couple of statements that some might argue are exaggerated generalizations about U.S. society. But if his entire account is read, it's clear why he would make his devastating yet inspiring statements. Additional deep analyses by others follow (links).
JL

The Police Are Rioting: Reflections on Pittsburgh

There is a popular assumption asserted ad nauseam by our leaders in government, by our school text books and by our "mainstream" media that although many other countries don't have freedom of speech and freedom of assembly -- such as Iran or China -- we do, and it's what makes us so great. Anybody who has spent much time trying to exercise their First Amendment rights in the U.S. now or at any other time since 1776 knows first-hand that the First Amendment looks good on paper but has little to do with reality.

Dissent has never really been tolerated in the USA. As we've seen in recent election cycles even just voting for a Democratic presidential candidate and having your vote count can be quite a challenge -- as anyone who has not had their head in sand knows, Bush lost both elections and yet kept his office fraudulently twice. But for those who want to exercise their rights beyond the government-approved methods -- that is, their right to vote for one of two parties, their right to bribe politicians ("lobby") if they have enough money, or their right to write a letter to the editor in the local Murdoch-owned rag, if it hasn't closed shop yet -- the situation is far worse.

Let's go back in history for a minute. After the victory of the colonies over Britain in the Revolutionary War, the much-heralded US Constitution included no rights for citizens other than the rights of the landed gentry to run the show. This changed as a direct result of a years-long rebellion of the citizens of western Massachusetts that came to be known as Shays' Rebellion [organized groups of farmers marched as squads and companies upon the hated debtors' courts and force them to postpone their business. - ed.]. Shays' Rebellion scared the pants off the powers-that-be and they did what the powers-that-be do and have always done all over the world -- passed some reforms in order to avert a situation where the rich would lose more than just western Massachusetts. They passed the Bill of Rights.

Fast forward more than a century. Ostensibly this great democracy had had the Bill of Rights enshrined in law for quite a long time now. Yet in 1914 a supporter of labor unionism could not make a soapbox speech on a sidewalk in this country without being beaten and arrested by police for the crime of disturbing the peace, blocking the sidewalk or whatever other nonsense the cops made up at the time.

If you read the mainstream media of the day you would be likely to imagine that these labor agitators trying to give speeches on the sidewalks of Seattle or Los Angeles were madmen bent on the destruction of civilization. Yet it is as a direct result of these brave fighters that we have things like Social Security, a minimum wage, workplace safety laws, and other reforms that led, at least until the "Reagan Revolution," to this country having a thriving middle class (the lofty term we use when we're referring to working class people who can afford to go to college and buy a house).

Reforms are won due to these struggles -- proof over and over that democracy is, more than anything, in the streets. Yet the fundamental aspect of these social movements that have shaped our society -- these social movements that have at least sometimes and to some degree ultimately been praised by the ruling clique and their institutions, such as the Civil Rights movement -- freedom of speech and assembly, remain a criminal offense.

Fast forward another century to Pittsburgh, 2009. For those who may have thought that the criminalization of dissent was to be a hallmark of the Bush years, think again. Dissent was a criminal offense before Bush, and it quite evidently still is today.

I was born in 1967, so I can't comment first-hand on things that happened far from the suburbs where I grew up as a kid, but I can tell you unequivocally from direct experience that I have witnessed police riots before, during, and since the Bush years. Most recently, last Friday in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. (To read about previous police riots I have witnessed go to songwritersnotebook.blogspot.com.)

In a nutshell, here's how it went down. I drove to Pittsburgh from a gig in Allentown the night before, all the while listening to BBC, NPR, CNN, etc. on my satellite radio. Naturally, the coming G20 talks in Pittsburgh were in the news. The most powerful people in the world, the leaders of the world's richest nations, were meeting in Pittsburgh to decide the fate of the planet, to decide how to deal with the economic crisis, the climate crisis, and other crises caused by industrial capitalism gone mad, crises which affect each and every one of us intimately, crises about which many of us naturally want to do something -- crises about which we would at least like to voice our concerns.

Notably absent from the news coverage is anything about the lawsuits that the ACLU had to file in order to force the local authorities to allow any demonstrations or marches to happen at all. Permits applied for months ago by state senators, peace groups, women's groups and others were only granted in the past couple weeks. Many other permits were never granted. It doesn't say anything about applying for a permit in the First Amendment, and in many other more democratic countries than ours no permit is required for citizens to assemble. In many European countries where I have spent a lot of time, if citizens choose to have an assembly in the streets the role of the police is to escort the march in order to divert traffic and keep things safe, and no permit is required. But not in the US -- not in Philadelphia or Los Angeles in 2000, not in Miami in 2003, not in Denver or St. Paul in 2008 and not in Pittsburgh last week.

While various progressive organizations were trying hard to work with the intransigent authorities, other groups took the sensible (but -- in the US -- dangerous) position that this is supposed to be a democracy and we should not need to apply for a permit so that the authorities could tell us where and when we could and could not protest.

The first non-permitted march that I heard about was Thursday afternoon. I should mention that I heard about it, but only with a certain amount of difficulty, because I and many other people I talked to in Pittsburgh were having strange problems with our cell phones, problems which started in whatever states we came from and continued in Pittsburgh right up until yesterday. People I talked to -- friends and fellow engaged members of society such as Cindy Sheehan, Joshua White, Sarah Wellington and others -- reported the same phenomena. Every time one of us would receive a call we couldn't hear the callers, though we could hear our own voices echoing back to us. When we'd call back it usually would work then. Coincidence? Sure, maybe.

Reports I heard over the phone on Thursday from people I talked to were in between bouts of catching breath and running from the police. Reports on the local media (the only "mainstream" media doing any serious coverage of the protests, as usual, mainly because they were intimately connected to the traffic reports) said the police were "restrained" (what else are they supposed to be?) until the march reached a certain point, at which time it was declared to be an unlawful assembly and the crowd was "dispersed." How? There was no mention.

Usually -- and outrageously enough -- whether in North America, Europe or other places I've been, if there's a meeting of the global elite happening you are not allowed in unless you're part of the gang or you're a lobbyist or a (officially sanctioned) journalist. Usually a perimeter is formed by the police, Secret Service, FBI, and whichever other "intelligence"

agencies are there, that you can't cross. This was also the case in Pittsburgh, but like Miami in 2003, St. Paul in 2008, and other occasions in recent years, the authorities were not just being "on the defensive" and maintaining a perimeter around the meetings. They were on the offensive.

If this happened in Iran or China it would be called martial law -- but here in America we never have martial law, apparently, even when the military and the police are jointly patrolling the streets with armored vehicles and weapons of all descriptions and attacking people for the crime of being on the streets. Any gathering other than the permitted march (which was a great, festive march involving many thousands of participants from all walks of life, albeit with a ridiculously large, armored and menacing police "escort") was declared an unlawful assembly and then attacked. I saw it myself on Thursday night and then again, much worse, on Friday night.

And what kind of unlawful assembly are we talking about? Hundreds of students and other folks, a few of whom may have broken a window or two at some point during the evening in the course of being pursued by violence-prone riot police, who were ultimately gathering on the grass on the campus of the university in the Oakland district of Pittsburgh. They had no weapons, they were unarmed, mostly youth, mostly college students from various parts of the country, along with perhaps an equal group of local college students, most of whom were just curious and didn't even have anything to do with the protests -- many of whom in fact were just wondering what there is to protest about! They soon found out one thing to protest about -- police brutality and active suppression of our Constitutional rights.

I have no doubt that the Pittsburgh police (and cops present from, of all places, Miami as well as other cities) will in the end have radicalized many local students who had previously been apolitical, and for this I applaud them.

On Friday night I went to a free concert a local community radio station was hosting on the campus. It ended around 8 pm. Over the course of the next two hours there were more and more riot cops arriving. Why? Because they knew what I knew -- that a few hundred young folks were planning on gathering on the green at 10 pm, many of whom came by bicycle, after having engaged in a criminal, non-permitted mass bike ride around the city. Around 9:30 I had to leave to go to a different neighborhood, and I returned in my rental car around 11 pm along with Cindy, Joshua and Sarah.

If the police had made announcements for everyone to disperse (as I'm sure they had at some point) we were too late for that. What we arrived in the midst of was a police riot. We parked on the street in front of the campus and walked on the sidewalk on the campus. Within seconds we saw a young man on a bicycle, a student at that very university, being violently tackled by two riot cops, thrown down to the ground with the police on top of him. All of the police all of the time were dressed in black armor head to toe, many of them driving armored vehicles. Earlier in the evening Cindy and Joshua and I were hanging around one of the armored vehicles while Cindy harassed the cops and soldiers strutting around there, telling them her son died in Iraq because he didn't have an armored vehicle like this one. (They studiously ignored her, of course.)

The young man with the two cops on top of him and his bicycle cried for help, perhaps not realizing that there wasn't much anyone could do other than take his name, which he was too freaked out to pronounce in a way that anybody could understand. Within seconds we found ourselves running from a group of cops, along with a bunch of young folks who had their hands in the air, hoping vainly that this might deter the police from attacking them. It didn't. Off the campus, a block away, police were running in groups in different directions, penning people in, throwing them to the ground, hitting them with clubs, handcuffing them and arresting them.

The four of us (an affinity group I suppose) got separated. Sarah and I were running and were about to be boxed in by police coming in different directions. After I was myself clubbed in the back by a cop with his truncheon, we ducked into the front of the lobby of the Holiday Inn and started talking with guests, other protesters, and various students who had also gone there because they were quite naturally afraid to be on the streets. Fifty feet away in either direction the police were assaulting and arresting people, individually and in small groups, picking them off the sidewalks. Cindy and Joshua had ended up running in a different direction, through clouds of tear gas. They ducked around a corner just in time to watch dozens of young people, running away, being shot methodically with rubber-coated steel

bullets in the back. One friend of mine there from Minneapolis said he saw someone who had ten welts on his back from being shot ten times. On both Thursday and Friday nights the authorities used their fancy new LRAD weapons, a sound-based weapon that causes people to flee because it hurts their eardrums so badly. (At future demos, look out for the noise-cancelling headphones accompanying the goggles...)

At every turn you could hear the sound of shocked students who had never seen or heard about this sort of thing happening, who were struggling to come to terms with what they were experiencing. They're just attacking anybody on or near the campus, they're not differentiating between us and the protesters! Some of them seemed to think that it might be OK to club protesters as long as you don't club the students, others had concluded that attacking people for hanging out on the grass was over the top regardless. (This is not an easy thing for a sorority girl from a wealthy suburb to come to terms with, so I was duly impressed at hearing these heretofore clueless youth having such epiphanies.) What was particularly entertaining was the first-hand realization that the local students could not themselves differentiate between "their" fellow students and the other ones who had come from out of town. How could they? It is, in fact, completely impossible to tell the difference between a college student from Pittsburgh and one from Toledo, even if they do have very different politics...

Eventually, by 1 am or so, Cindy and Joshua were able to move without being fired on, and they joined Sarah and I in the comfort of the patio at the Holiday Inn. The people who worked at the Inn, at least some of them, were trying to keep protesters out. The thing was, though, that if you could afford to buy a drink you were no longer a protester, but a guest of the bar, which is what we were. A little while before Cindy and Joshua arrived a convoy of limousines and other fancy cars pulled up in front of the hotel, and then security locked the doors. You could still go in or out, though, just not without security opening the doors for you.

We continued going in and out of the bar, passing by none other than Kevin Rudd, the Prime Minister of Australia, and his entourage, who were all staying that night in the Holiday Inn (of all relatively downscale places to stay!) and watching some big Australian rugby match on TV. In our confusion at having just escaped the riot police only to find ourselves ten feet away from the Australian Prime Minister, Cindy, Joshua, Sarah and I were all at a complete loss as far as what we should say to the guy. We all talked a lot about what we could say, but by the time we were getting close to coming up with a plan he had gone to bed.

The next day, Saturday, I joined a couple dozen friends and acquaintances outside the county jail where people had spent the night, waiting to get out on bond. Most folks got out on bond, others were (and perhaps still are) being held on a higher bond, waiting for friends and relatives and comrades to come up with the money. Talking to people just out of jail I heard more horror stories. One man, Gabriel, told of being kept outside between 2 and 6 am in the rain, and then being held in a cell where he was handcuffed to a chair along with another man, not able to stand or lay down, for 13 hours.

I left Pittsburgh in the late afternoon from the jail, heading towards New England to continue this northeastern concert tour. In Connecticut this morning I got a call from Cindy Sheehan, who had just gone to the Emergency Room because she was having trouble breathing. People around her the night before had been vomiting profusely as a result of the tear gas. Having suffered injury in the past from getting gassed in Quebec City, I knew exactly why she was in the ER.

There will be lawsuits, and the lawsuits will be won. People like Cindy and Gabriel might make a bit of money from their suffering at the hands of the authorities. Not to worry, though -- the authorities have a multi-million dollar slush fund to deal with these lawsuits. They expect them, and they don't care. This is democracy in the USA. It's always been like this, under Democrats or Republicans. If you doubt me, it's quite simply because you don't know your history.

Protest, however, matters. The end of slavery, the banning of child labor, the fact that most working class people live to be past 30 these days, is all a direct result of protest – of democracy happening in the streets. Marches, strikes, rebellions, and all manner of other extra-parliamentary activities. The authorities are well aware that democracy in the streets, no matter what they say – that's why dissent is criminalized. Because as soon as we are allowed to have a taste of our own power, everything can change. It has, and it will again, but the powers-that-be will continue to do what they do best -- try hard to make sure we don't know how powerful we are. They require the consent of the governed, the consent of those students in Pittsburgh, and they have now lost it, at least for many of those who were in Oakland last Friday night. They would have lost it a lot more if they had done mass arrests or used live ammunition, which is why they didn't do that.

We don't have freedom of speech or assembly and we never have, but it is through all kinds of “unlawful assemblies,” from Shays' Rebellion to the Civil Rights movement, that change happens. So here's to the next Pittsburgh, wherever it may be. I hope to see you there, on the streets, where our fate truly lies.

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Further reading:

This Is What A Police State Looks Like
by M. Burton Brown, Pittsburgh Independent Media Center, Sept. 26, 2009

Are We Addicted to Rioting?

An analysis of militant-street protest, movement strategy, and the state of anarchism based around the G20 Pittsburgh demonstrations

by Ryan Harvey, Sept. 27th, 2009

"Today's 'Anarchism' is too disconnected from larger movements, too fragmented in its own, and too carried away with its own romanticism."

Mainstream corporate report: Cops and Anarchists Clash at G-20 by Marty Levine, Time magazine, Pittsburgh, Sept. 25, 2009

The anarchist march had started at 2:30 p.m. in a park in the working class Pittsburgh neighborhood of Lawrenceville. The sounds of chanting — "Our city, our streets"... the protest crowd... was led by a banner reading "No Hope in Capitalism." Bicycle scouts reported police locations to the marchers, who had swarmed around an unmarked police car just a few blocks after their start. Still, the first confrontation between anarchists and cops was over quickly.

Read David Rovics' previous article in Culture Change: Pivotal Moment in the Green Scare / Civilization sabotages itself (with a contribution by Dmitry Orlov).

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