

We Give A Shit

An Analysis of the Pittsburgh G20

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Intro: So It Begins

The primary critique of the summit-hopping era, (one that applies to me as well) is that we never expanded outside of the activist context, never moved beyond complaining loudly around summits, never moved from complaint to active engagement. But there was something in the summit era that did hold promise; in the concentration of numbers in space there was always this possibility of breaking out of the confinement of the downtown area, the confinement of the frontal conflict between police and anarchists, the confinement of pre-planned confrontation, and the limitations of the dates of the summit itself. There was this sense that activism could be transcended, that conflict could be amplified on the streets with the speed and magnitude, that conflict could multiply territorially and break the logistical capacity of the police to contain it. This is what many of us saw, if only briefly, during the Pittsburgh G20, the finale of the summit era, and it was this that both generated the current tactical impasse that we find ourselves in and that points to the way out. The multiplication of the terrains of conflict during the first day of action creates a problem; it became clear that this form of action was insufficient to break the forms of containment that typify the summit demonstration (even if we raised the stakes dramatically). This left many of us feeling as if the terrain of conflict in our own spaces, in our own towns, began to be everything, and that seems to have left us at a loss. But it was specifically this collapse of the attempts to contain the Pittsburgh demonstrations into the traditional forms that typified the summit demonstrations that points to a way out of a dead-end strategy based in complaint and activist tourism. To understand why this was the case we must do more than just look at the context of the actions, the recent tactical shifts that had occurred between 2007 and that point, or even the actions themselves. As with all actions we have to keep in mind that these occurred in a time and in a space, and it is those, combined with the actions taken within those dynamics, that shaped the trajectory of conflict during those two days in September 2009.

To get a handle on what happened there we have to begin with the political and historical terrain. The city of Pittsburgh, however, has a long history of struggle. It was the Pittsburgh Congress of 1883 that is widely credited with being a beginning of an organized anarchist movement in America. This was the site of the Homestead strike in 1892, a huge steel strike that involved shoot-outs between strikers and Pinkerton guards and was the place where Alexander Berkman attempted to assassinate Henry Clay Frick, who now has a park named after him. This is one of those events that is now immortalized on plaques in warehouse districts and “historic areas.” Pittsburgh is also where the United Steelworkers began (and are still based), the AFL (American Federation of Labor), the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations), and was also the site of their merger agreement.

This history of struggle has shaped the dynamics of the city and its structure of enforcement. Beginning during the Homestead strike, when the Pittsburgh police refused to break the strike, the bosses called in Pinkerton guards and deputized them, beginning a practice in the Rustbelt of deputization to deal with social ruptures, something that has become a day-to-day part of life there. Homestead was also the motivation for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to create the Pennsylvania State Police, a large element of the enforcement structure during the G-20.

Like all cities in the Rustbelt, Pittsburgh is a city that has been completely fucked over by capitalist globalization. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of neoliberalism, privatization, and globalization, production of steel—the basis of the city’s economy—began to shift overseas. Today, despite being the home of the United Steel Worker’s union and commonly referred to as

“Steel City,” Pittsburgh is left with no functioning steel mills, aside from some part-time, scrap-melting mills. Massive unemployment and political marginalization was coupled with the market abandonment of these areas, leaving many with no hope in the ability of the market to provide for their daily needs. In the recent past Pittsburgh has seen a rising anarchist scene, with a series of long-running and well-known direct action groups and campaigns occurring through the late 1990s and into the 2000s, specifically the anti-war and counter-recruitment campaigns between 2002 and 2008. These often had actions turn into confrontations with the police.

Obama claimed to have chosen Pittsburgh due to its recent economic “revival” through something called the Pittsburgh Model. This model of development is based on using tax breaks and the restructuring and colonization of poor neighborhoods to provide “favorable market conditions,” (cheap or free land, cheap or free buildings, the lack of unions, tax breaks, etc.) to attract investment. In Pittsburgh this has primarily concentrated around “green building”, military engineering research, the biomedical field, and the building of large universities, as well as the demolition of a poor neighborhood to build a baseball stadium on the north side of the city. Development is also a major force in gentrifying parts of the city, particularly Oakland (the university district), parts of Garfield, and East Liberty, among others. This has created a situation in which a few research and university jobs are created while the majority of the city is left working low wage and/or temporary jobs. In contrast, 40 years ago this population had access to high paying union jobs in the steel mills. The city looks like it is reviving on the physical level, but under the facade the Rustbelt reality is the rising of the poverty rate and the shrinking of the population (by almost half since 1950).

Pittsburgh has begun to undergo a series of profound changes, with the abandonment of large parts of the city used as an excuse to restructure its entire fabric. In the attempt to draw outside investment the city government has almost bankrupted itself pouring money into neighborhood redevelopment projects, based on so-called green condo developments, medical research facilities, university expansion, and massive expansion of the policing and surveillance apparatuses, framed in a context of community policing, also known as counter-insurgency. This has caused the fragmentation of many neighborhoods, massive population displacement, and the bulldozing of the city’s history in favor of housing for yuppies. It is this environment which has generated a profound sense of tension on the streets of certain areas of the city, and it is this environment that played a large role in shaping the preparation and trajectory of conflict during the summit itself.

Police Preparations and General Operating Procedures

Analyzing the tactics of police in Pittsburgh is difficult for a series of reasons. Firstly, there were so many actions going on in so many different places that the very possibility of being able to look at their tactics as a single strategic body is impossible. Secondly, many people have reported long gaps between police sightings, periods of time with little to no police coverage of their movements. This attests to our ability to challenge their control of the streets and create zones where police had little to no physical control, but also makes analysis difficult. However, from the Twitter feeds, from news reports, and from personal experience we can begin to cobble together some understanding of their thinking during the actions.

There are a few things to keep in mind here. Cops need to build cohesive forces, to be able to generalize their needs for a certain situation, and to build force to define a situation. This takes both time and control, the time to build a cohesive force and the ability to use that force to operate within a terrain, to contain actions with their planned strategy. If the situation cannot be made to conform, then their force ceases to be relevant and they have to improvise, or move to a posture of response. This is what it means for the police to enforce definition. The state sets the limits of allowable action and the police must develop a way of enforcing those limits in a situation that is always changing, even though their force is not. Their preparation time was limited in the case of the G20, since they had only four months (as opposed to the two years it took to prepare a comparable police force for the RNC). In contrast, we can quickly do outreach, plan in out affinity groups, and link up with other affinity groups, all in non-linear structures that can adapt to changing circumstances. More time to prepare can be a good thing, but it is not as important for us. We do not need to create and enforce definitions, we are able to be mobile.

Maybe to compensate for their lack of time to prepare, maybe as an intentional tactic, the cops early on defined their approach to this series of actions. Firstly they engaged in raids meant to accomplish the two goals of disrupting organizing and intimidation. In other words, they were meant to build the feeling that the cops were everywhere. They kept catching the Seeds of Peace bus, as well as other cars, on the street instead of at static spaces, trying to create the impression that they could find us whenever they wanted to. They coupled this with very public announcements whenever they seized equipment. This approach backfired however, and led not just to lawsuits but also to embarrassment. (Having very publically announced finding PVC pipe they claimed was for “sleeping dragons,” they discovered later that the pipes were being stored by a company for product testing.) This constant presense also heightened the eerie feeling within the city of the coming police state, to the dismay of many residents. This can partially explain the intense public support that many reported while marching through the streets. These disruptions, like the tactics used on Thursday afternoon, were as much based on intimidating anarchists and the general populace as they were on materially disrupting organizing work.

This psychlogical tactic was increased by their tactic of posturing, especially through the media. In past mobilizations the press work by the cops beforehand was aimed at the general populace and meant to generate fear of anarchists coming to burn the city to the ground, and so on. The G20 pre-action press preparation was different; it was aimed at us. There were the obligatory warnings from the mayor against the people coming to “cause destruction,” but on top of that there was endless coverage of the police build-up, tours of the security perimeter, tours of their command center (something even the press was confused about), as well as constant police harassment before the actions. But without being able to carry out any raids of material importance, this all came across as psturing and nothing more. They were forced to backpedal from a lot of these statements in the days before the action as lawsuits and complains started coming in from various groups, and business owners started boarding up stores. The police were trying to strike a balance between inflating fears of anarchist horde to justify the massive police buildup, and reassuring business owners that they were safe to remain open. They failed. Ordinary Pittsburgh residents were angry at the government for turning their city into a police state, leading many of them to side with the protesters, and most downtown businesses shut down for the duration of the G20.

The press coverage was combined with the use of weapons of intimidation and staged force during the actual actions. They had announced beforehand that they “would not be the spark.” It

became obvious that they were anticipating the possibility of disruption and that they assumed it would happen downtown, or at least on the way to downtown. Twin Cities Indymedia, as well as a lot of people traveling to Arsenal Park on Thursday, reported seeing large columns of police behind the initial skirmish line at 34th and Liberty, between the residential parts of the East End of Pittsburgh and Downtown in an area known as the Strip District. These police were there in case the initial lines broke down. They used weapons that couldn't be carefully or accurately targeted, so they could not pick and choose targets until they began to bring out bean-bag rounds and rubber bullets on Thursday afternoon. The indiscriminate weapons were used to keep people away from areas. But dispersing a crowd into smaller groups makes the situation harder to define, so this tactic of dispersal combined with the air of total presence, was supposed to make us want to disperse ourselves. In other words, like all the pre-action preparation, these weapons are meant to have a psychological effect; they are used to demoralize crowds, to take the fight out of us by making us feel that resistance is futile. But these weapons backfired. Because a lot of people have seen them before, the weapons didn't have the intimidating effect the police planned on. Even the helicopters and gas (which became constants at a certain point) did little to deter people who have been in situations like this, and at this point that is a lot of us. When gassed we noticed a lot of people calmly putting on goggles and helping others to do the same, then calmly and quickly moving into more open space. Police also relied heavily on the LRAD, which had such minimal effect that it became a joke on the Daily Show, not to mention in our internal circles. (Note: many of us have switched our ringtone to the sound of the LRAD.) Police approaches generally are based in staging force, using increasing physical force instead of psychological as the situation escapes their control, and this is what they ended up doing. They brought out armored personnel carriers on Thursday, but didn't really use them except to block roads, and changed to indiscriminate use of force on Friday night.

Days Filled with Stones and Flowers

The People's Uprising March

To begin to attempt an analysis of the People's Uprising march is difficult. There was such widely dispersed action after the first half hour or so that we need to look at the dynamics of the action instead of the actions themselves. In other words, the actions built a dynamic environment, and this is what to focus on. What we know now is that outside the large police presence at Arsenal Park there was a much larger and more concentrated presence of police between the initial point of contact (34th and Liberty St) and the perimeter downtown, staggered in increased concentrations the closer we got to the David L. Lawrence Convention Center.

The initial police contingent seemed willing to give the street to the march. This is not surprising within a new, modified police tactic of containment/dispersal, or containment as dispersal, a tactic that we have encountered in Washington, DC. If the police think the march will be able to take the street, or is determined to do so, they will set up a zone of control, an area of the street that they will give to the march to avoid confrontation, while they try to contain everything outside this space. So they may give the street but surround the march on all sides, they may give a lane, etc. As this march moved out, some noticed this and redirected the march through the park to another exit point, which immediately frustrated the police attempt to contain the march.

This was evident as we were passing small contingents of riot cops, spaced out on the corners of intersections, especially when we encountered two riot cops in a car as we turned onto Liberty (i.e. we were seeing the backside of their tactic). At this point the march split, some trying to head away from the massive police contingent in downtown and go to any number of recently gentrifying commercial districts. On reaching the corner of 34th and Liberty we saw a line of riot police, an armored personnel carrier (APC) equipped with an LRAD, and a series of other vehicles. Unknown to many at this point was that this was only an initial line, there was a much higher concentration of cops further on. The cops gave a dispersal warning and then sounded the LRAD for the first time.

The march diverted down an alley next to the Church Brew Works, where the first dumpsters were came out and barricades were built. This area of Pittsburgh, in a neighborhood called Lawrenceville, is characterized by narrow winding streets, often dead ending into one another, which only requires a single dumpster to completely block. As we rounded the corner again, to get back to Butler St at 37th (and thus began to move through the Strip District towards downtown), we were met with another line. That is when the cops first used high concentrations of gas. After they failed to contain the march at the park, they switched to a blocking tactic, one that is only meant to prevent access to certain areas. They used a show of force and shifting blockades to prevent access to downtown while also trying to convince us to disperse. This is speculation, but it seems as if they made some mistakes in their projections of our actions. Firstly, they seemed to assume our goal was to head into downtown, and they allocated force to prevent that movement. This became clear as the march formed into smaller groups; those who headed away from downtown saw almost no cops for a long period of time. Secondly, police made a big deal before the actions about training to defeat lockdowns, maybe expecting a repeat of the Republican National Convention activist tactics, which centered around blockading access to certain areas of downtown. For G20, few if any groups planned on locking down, opting to remain more flexible instead of using a tactic that immobilizes at the point of deployment.

As the march "dispersed" into smaller groups, the situation became really fluid and dynamic. The constant changes in the scenario kept cops from accounting for numerous groups in the streets. We can separate these trajectories of movement into two general movements. One group engaged with the cops in their own territory by trying to head downtown. This was a rather large section of the march; they got stopped in the Strip district. It seems like many cops were diverted to stop this group. Another set of groups started to head the opposite way towards the gentrified shopping areas of the East End through Lawrenceville and Bloomfield. These groups began to notice a series of things. The most astonishing was that people from the neighborhoods, and these were largely working class neighborhoods, began to come out onto the streets to engage with the events, both in cheering anarchists on and in certain instances helping to barricade off streets. These groups set up barricades to create space. A PNC Bank got its ATMs smashed, pulling more police into simple response actions, and away from the operation of a coherent strategy.

There are two fundamental aspects to these sets of movements. Firstly, in multiplying the terrain of conflict, in the organized and intentional dispersal across space, we were able to break the zone of containment that the police attempted to set up, and to eventually break outside of their ability to contain the terrain of conflict at all. This forced police to respond to a series of points of conflict, often too slowly to actually catch anyone or to even engage, which constancy of movement stretched their capacity to maintain logistical coherence of strategic initiative. Sec-

only, the use of barricades and property destruction occurred in a way that had not really been seen in American summit demonstrations. Barricades proliferated on side streets as groups began to move off main roads and into the twisted tangles that characterizes this part of Pittsburgh. Barricades limited police movement to major roads. When combined with the loss of tactical initiative, which forced them to respond to points of engagement in small groups, usually on city buses, police lost the ability to project through space. As the terrain became more resistant, as the movement of motorized units was constrained, and as the terrain of conflict widened, the police were forced to move through whatever space they could, as fast as possible in as many groups as possible, to as many points as possible, and lost their ability to occupy, to move, or to maintain logistical coherence.

A call went out over Twitter to meet in Friendship Park, on the border of the Bloomfield, Friendship, and Garfield neighborhoods. A trickle of people ballooned to hundreds. The park became a space to rest, get treated for injuries, and plan next moves. Cops began showing up in droves, hoping to surround the park, but again the crowd was too large for them to box it. That march began, and headed down Liberty Ave, away from downtown, in the direction of the Oakland neighborhood, or the university district. At the intersection of Liberty and Baum Ave the march turned right and began to speed up, with many groups breaking off. The police began to fire rubber bullets into the crowd, causing some affinity groups to spread out, resulting in a trail of broken windows all up Baum, including hits on Boston Market and various other chain restaurants. During these confrontations police attempted to target certain individuals (including the now famous footage of police in camo fatigues jumping out of a car, grabbing someone and driving off with them); these stopped after groups began to double back and pelt the police with chunks of concrete. As people filtered into Oakland the police presence increased dramatically, beginning the trajectory of conflict that would result in large scale rioting a couple of hours later.

This concentration of police was bolstered by contingents of cops tasked with protecting a State Dinner at Philips Conservatory (a building in Schenley Park), which borders the University of Pittsburgh in the heart of Oakland. Students began to be harassed by police who, in response to events earlier in the day, were attempting to clear the campus of any students not in their dorm rooms. This caused a conflict between students at Pitt and the police on their campus; a conflict that would set the stage for what was about to occur.

Bash Back!

As the cops were tear gassing the first groups of protesting students in Schenley Park, the Bash Back! march began to gather at the corner of Desoto and Fifth Ave, three blocks southwest of the Plaza. The march rolled out around 10, only a half hour after the disturbances began on Pitt's campus. The march began down Meyran Ave to Forbes and along the way picked up six dumpsters. The first police vehicle arrived and was stopped by four of the dumpsters being turned over in the intersection. Corporate shops were attacked, with windows busted out of Subway, McDonald's, and American Apparel, among others. While the cops were still stopped at the first barricade, two more dumpsters were overturned, one on fire, at the intersection of Forbes and Desoto, which created even more space away from the cops. Students and bystanders crowded the sidewalks as the police substation got its windows busted out. The march then saw its first police line, a line of vehicles, about a block ahead. Instead of engaging, the crowd began

to move through university property across the street from Schenley Plaza. The crowd took a right and headed up past a university vivisection lab, which got its windows smashed out, then a left, a right, ending up on a street with three banks and a Quiznos, all of which got windows broken.

At this point, you could begin to see the police cordon setting up at the intersections: a couple of cops per intersection, a car, and usually some form of wooden barricade with reinforcements of riot police down the streets. We did not know at the time that there was a much larger disturbance back at Pitt. In the wake of the crowd, students had swarmed the streets, chanting "cops off campus," "Go Pitt, Fuck the Police" and "we love Pittsburgh, fuck the G20." Contrary to media reports, students were not just swept up in the events but were actively participating.

The cops were split once again, trying to deal with dynamic situations moving in two different directions. Vehicles had caught up with the crowd again and were attempting to run it off the streets. Many small groups started to disperse down alleys and work their way back toward Schenley Plaza where cops had begun gassing students again. Around midnight, around when they called "All units to Oakland" over the police scanner, they decided to cordon off the area. They set up skirmish lines on Forbes and Fifth and pushed students away from the commercial district and back onto campus. They began by pushing people down the sidewalk but that quickly escalated into firing tear gas down the street and even gassing students trying to enter their dorms. This escalated the situation and brought more students out into the street. It took till 2:30 for them to finally quell the unrest in Oakland. What few of us knew was that when the march began, they were trying to get Obama out of Schenley Park, the entrance to which is Schenley Plaza, ground zero for the rioting, and at this point many units ran out of their gas requisition, freezing them in place for a period of time. This even further escalated the situation until they began to completely clear streets, driving vehicles down residential streets in Oakland, repeating the dispersal warning from loudspeakers.

The point when they ran out of gas is an important moment, the point where their security plan broke down completely. In a single day we had exceeded their projection of the worst possible scenario for the entire weekend. When creating a summit security plan, police will requisition supplies based on what they consider to be the worst possible scenario for the entire time of potential conflict (in this case, a weekend). The fact that they ran out of gas makes it clear that in a single day we exceeded the worst possible scenario projection for the entire weekend. This wasn't because of the volume of property destroyed or the magnitude of any individual action; it was a result of the speed of movement through terrain, the ability to limit police projection, and the multiplication of terrains of conflict that ruptured the coherence of police logistics and eviscerated any concept of tactical initiative on their part. As is often discussed in relation to asymmetric conflict, when conflict spreads throughout a terrain, gaps in police coverage open up, and these gaps are where conflict can proliferate; but in the creation of these gaps conflict becomes a potential in all space and police movement through space becomes uncertain and difficult. It was in specifically breaking the containment of the summit demonstration, breaking the planned demonstration zones, the containment strategy of police strategy, and the containment of political identity, that these actions pushed police logistics to the breaking point. The only tragedy of that day was that we did not push this further, through the night and into the following days, and in failing to pursue, to continue to amplify conflict. We allowed the police time to regroup, resupply, and call in reinforcements.

The Permit March

The next morning the permitted march began to gather. At the gathering point itself there were relatively few police, but just blocks away were hundreds of riot cops, spaced out in groups of 30-50, surrounding vehicles so that they could be mobile, and accompanied by K-9 units. These mobile units were to deal with anyone who diverged from the agreed-upon plan for the day. As the march moved downtown we noticed more and more cops, in higher concentrations, 'til we got downtown and then they lined the streets, standing in front of barriers that held back crowds of people who had gathered along the march route. When the march stopped in front of the City County Building, the cops began to show a little of what they had in store for later that night. The crowd stood in a downtown street while 50-100 riot cops began to move off a side street, one (backed up by one of the LRADs) even moving into the crowd. The bloc assembled and moved towards the cops to form a buffer between the cops and the rest of the crowd.

As the march moved the police presence thinned out. They moved squads of riot cops into the positions that we had occupied minutes before and drove Hummers with fences attached to their fronts to block off the bridges to everything but foot traffic. As the gathering in the park wore on, and as the time for the permit to expire approached, we noticed lines of riot police beginning to surround the park and a large contingent getting off a school bus and gearing up in the southwest corner of the park. These shows of force were further foreshadowing of the actions later that night.

Go Pitt, Fuck The Police

That night a large group of Pitt students, along with assorted anarchists and activists, gathered in Schenley Plaza to demonstrate against the police brutality from the previous night. Hours before the gathering, we could see large groups of riot cops gearing up in the Oakland neighborhood and hiding down side streets, particularly around Forbes between Meyran and Desoto. As people began to gather, the park became immediately surrounded. After 45 minutes the dispersal warning was sounded and the LRAD blared, but there was nowhere for anyone to go. The cops began to move in but not as a unit. They sent small tactical teams into the crowd to secure an area, while cops behind them gassed that area, and pepper sprayed or attacked anyone in range. Those they caught were cuffed and arrested. Larger lines would move in behind them to secure the area and process the arrestees. Groups managed to break through and head both out of the area and further into Pitt's campus. Those groups that ended up on campus were chased down by riot cops and beaten if caught. The cops beat and gassed people indiscriminately, including at least one instance of launching tear gas canisters into open dorm windows.

The gathering in itself was relatively innocuous, being largely people playing drums and giving speeches, but that is not the point. The police response was meant to send a message not only against causing disturbances that night, but to make anyone present think twice about stepping out of line again. The response was meant to psychologically damage and generate fear, not just to stabilize a situation. And this is a good lesson to learn. If we are going to be successful we have to be ready for and expect this type of response in subsequent gatherings. While difficult to deal with, it is inevitable. The police are trying to stabilize a situation, and for them that means preserving control. That means constructing us as subjects to be organized, to be positioned to

preserve the flows of the city, and if we can't be organized, to be forced back into stability. The police actions on Friday night accomplished their goal. There were few popular actions Friday night and the energy of the actions dissipated quickly, but we doubt the resonance of those actions will fade as easily.

The End... or The Dawn of New Beginnings

There is little doubt that these were some of the most successful actions that we have undertaken in recent memory. Not because anarchists barricaded streets and created space, or because we fought back against the cops and actually held our ground. Not because we forced the cops into a stalemate by the middle of Thursday or the scale of the property destruction. Rather it is that we were able to glimpse a form of action. Unlike past summit demonstrations, isolated in downtown areas like the summits themselves, these actions were both visible and invisible simultaneously. They engaged on a plane of daily life that our actions rarely touch (outside of our own lives). The actions were dispersed and mobile, escaping the ability of the state to impose order on them.

During the Greek uprising a government minister complained most about the inability to have an object of group to negotiate with, no demands to mediate. Those actions existed on a different plane than the state. Against the state's imposition of sameness, people in the streets created divergence and multiplicity. The streets became indefinable as actions proliferated, changing the environment with the participants themselves. It became a terrain impossible to define, impossible to limit as the very structures of control had broke down. The inability of the state to mediate these actions was precisely due to the existence of the actions of a plane that could not be mediated. It was not for anything specific but for the possibility of possibility, the very energy that destroys limits. This is a strategy of disappearance unable to be defined, unable to be categorized, and therefore unable to be policed. It was a fight over the possibility of control.

Not that the G20 was anywhere close to the intensity of Greece, but that type of situation can only exist to the degree that it is invisible to the state, that there are too many dynamics, too many actions to stabilize. But this disappearance from the plane of the state, from the state's gaze, is also an appearance on the level of daily life, a level where life and action link up in ways that can only create dynamic situations. Resistance struck a chord, it resonated, and that resonance built itself into an energy that shook the city. It escaped the bounds of the removed specialists of political action and broke out, it became social war, or at least a glimpse of what that resonance may feel like. It opened a window into something else. What that is, is up to us to decide.

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