

# Rattling the bars

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A huge gathering in Paris at the weekend showed the young don't reject politics, just politicians

**W**hen a few hundred elderly people converge on a seaside town for the annual conference of the Conservative party, all leave for Britain's journalists is cancelled. Every stave and quaver of the death rattle of a moribund movement is recorded and drummed into our ears. But when 51,000 mostly young people converge for a conference on the future of politics, they are ignored. The European Social Forum, which ended in Paris on Sunday, generated just one report in the printed editions of the British mainstream press. Doubtless the papers will inform us again this week that young people have lost interest in politics.

In one respect it is true. The young in their millions have turned away from the solipsistic pomposities of parliament, the point-scoring and willy-waving of men who have spent their lives in quadrangles and who know as much about the people they govern as George Bush knows of higher mathematics. The young have not lost interest in politics. Politics, of the kind represented at Westminster, has lost interest in the young.

One of the reasons why events like last week's conference are not reported is that they do not exist inside a capsule, so they cannot be easily encapsulated. The forum was a vast, messy, rambling affair, spread out over four distant suburbs and some 300 meetings. There was no leader whose speech could be dissected, no party whose splits could be anatomised, no single manifesto whose implications could be discussed. It was messy and rambling because it reflected the messy and rambling realities of the lives

of its participants.

But despite the complexity, it was not difficult to see that something remarkable is happening in European politics. The delegates were, on the whole, far better informed about the big issues than most of our MPs and journalists. While our newspapers can tell you everything you were too bored to ask about the relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, they have nothing to say on the trifling issue of the future of humanity. But the young people in Paris have worked it out for themselves. They have become fluent in the complexities of the European constitution, of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, of the North Atlantic thermohaline shift.

It was also clear that few people in this movement of the disenfranchised are content any more simply to document the problems we confront. The question now is no longer what, or why, or when, but how? How do we threaten power? How do we recapture the political processes which have excluded us? We don't yet have all the answers, but 50,000 Europeans have now joined the search party.

These numbers are staggering, but they are drawn from a bottomless reservoir of discontent in Europe. Democracy everywhere looks as if it has been hit by a neutron bomb. Its structures - the parliaments and their committees, the elections and referendums - remain intact, but the life within them has died. In hardly any European country is there now a real choice between the policies of the governing party and those of the main parliamentary opposition. The big issues - such as the kind of economy we want and the extent to which the state should provide for its people - are scarcely debated in parliament; all that is left is the jostling and posturing.

No one at the European Social Forum seemed to be in much doubt about why this is happening. The real decisions are being made at the continental or the global level - in Brussels, the White House, the boardrooms of the banks and corporations - and handed down to national governments for implementation. This is why the movement is obsessed with globalisation: until citizens can seize control of global politics, we cannot regain control of national politics.

But there are other questions which we seem to have neglected. Our movement has a tendency to fetishise new forms of participatory democracy, such as the "consultas" developed by the Zapatistas in Mexico, or the participatory budgets drawn up in Brazil. These are useful models, but we must also ask ourselves what we can do to recolonise and revitalise parliamentary politics. It is not enough, as many advocate, simply to turn our backs on the system for which our political ancestors lost so much blood. True democracy surely involves a combination of participation and representation. Our task is to find the means of rattling the bars of our enclosed and corrupted parliaments without succumbing to their enclosure and corruption.

The biggest question of all is the one concerning the c-word. We have little difficulty in dealing, in theory at least, with the medium-sized issues: What should be done about the World Bank? How can the anti-union laws be reversed? But we have scarcely attempted, as a movement, to tackle the big issue: what should be done about capitalism? Whenever anyone in Paris announced that capitalism in all its forms should be overthrown, everyone cheered. But is this really what we want? And, if so, with what do we hope to replace it? And could that other system be established without violent repression?

In Paris, some of us tried to tackle this question in a session called “life after capitalism”. By the end of it, I was as unconvinced by my own answers as I was by everyone else’s. While I was speaking, the words died in my mouth, as it struck me with horrible clarity that as long as incentives to cheat exist (and they always will) none of our alternatives could be applied universally without totalitarianism. The only coherent programme presented in the meeting was the one proposed by the man from the “League for the Fifth International”, who called for the destruction of the capitalist class and the establishment of a command economy. I searched the pamphlet he gave me for any recognition of the fact that something like this had been tried before and hadn’t worked out very well, but without success. (Instead I learned that, come the revolution, the members of the Fourth International will be the first against the wall, as they have “obscured the differences” between Marxism and its opponents.)

It seems to me that the questions we urgently need to ask ourselves are these: is totalitarianism the only means of eliminating capitalism? If so, and if, as almost all of us profess to do, we abhor totalitarianism, can we continue to call ourselves anti-capitalists? If there is no humane and democratic answer to the question of what a world without capitalism would look like, then should we not abandon the pursuit of unicorns, and concentrate on capturing and taming the beast whose den we already inhabit?

But however these questions are resolved, something big has begun which cannot now be stopped. Parliament and the media may ignore us, but they will not make us go away. On Thursday, when George Bush is in London, we will begin to show our strength. But this movement is no longer just about protest, about ticking off the long list of things we do not like. It is now engaged in the troublesome and deeply serious task of building a better world. #