

Stephen Gill

Preface:

Political Protest in the Age of Neoliberal Austerity

The publication of »Prevent and Tame« comes at a crucial moment or turning point in world order. It reveals some of the essential governing features that are associated with the contradictions of contemporary capitalism – a system that I call disciplinary neoliberalism. This system involves the individualization of society allied to the extended surveillance, regulation and criminalization of dissent and protest in order to sustain a social order premised on the social reproduction of the affluent strata and the securitization of extended capital accumulation over time.

At the same time what seems to be under construction is a dystopian life-world—what Karl Polanyi called a ›stark utopia‹—in which social problems and questions of deviance (as well as problems of public health) are reduced to individual pathologies, and where collective action—even for purposes of legitimate protest—is construed by important elements of the ruling authorities as an attack not only on the state but also on society. To use Margaret Thatcher’s phrase, what is being constructed is a self-help society of atomized individuals, placing the responsibility on the shoulders of the individual for his or her fate, downgrading the importance of social or collective institutions to solve social problems. If this discursive shift towards individualization is successful, it would constitute a decisive victory for the neoliberal ruling classes, which, in Europe, include New Labour and many Social Democrats who believe, perhaps paradoxically, in the deep regulation of society, whilst reserving for capital, particularly financial capital, its capacity for self-regulation.

However many in society are concerned not only with the crises and dislocations associated with contemporary capitalism but also with the way in which neoliberal reforms not only discipline and render insecure the traditional working classes, but also the way in which they undermine the security of many of the professional middle classes. As such disciplinary neoliberalism is resisted. One form of resistance is political protest, and, particularly when protest is informed by not only a critique but also by the imagining of an alternative form of society, then the authorities will seek to prevent such protest, or indeed to tame it. What the authorities seem to also wish to prevent when tackling such protest or dissent, is the possibility of a more democratic, public and socially accountable surveillance of the activities, forms of regulation, and indeed the social and political links between ruling classes and the upper echelons of capital—as has been illustrated in the cascading financial and economic crises that have erupted across the globe since 2007. This then is some of the contemporary terrain of this book.

With such issues in mind, this collection analyzes the new doctrines and ideologies of ›preventionism‹, and assesses the degree to which it is able to prevent or to tame protest, and indeed to isolate political dissent—in the context of the intersecting crises of contemporary capitalist development, society and ecology. This book is a necessary read for all of us who are interested in questions of civil liberty, in the freedom to express one's political views, and in the basic right to tolerance of dissent and freedom of association and expression, all of which must be fully guaranteed rights in any democratic society. What is at issue is the degree to which formal constitutional rights are being subverted and supervened by ideologies of ›the emergency‹, or of ›the exception‹, justifying the deeper policing of social order, for example associating left wing political activism with terrorism, and by criminalizing such behavior.

Indeed, ›preventionism‹ involves far more than the simple surveillance of immediate protest since it is a concept that engages the idea of a deeper regulation of society—one that seeks to cast a shadow of the present deep into the future. One case in point, discussed in this collection, is New Labour's Britain, where youth deviance and dissent is associated with ›anti-social behavior‹. In Britain ›zero tolerance policies‹ are part of a moral panic which is used as a justification for policies that constitute minor offences as criminal activity. Social legislation, moral panics and new technologies of surveillance and panopticism (the UK's National Children's Database can also serve as a tool of policing) are therefore used to deeply regulate the present and to ›order‹ the future. In Britain, the surveillance of public space and society has gone much further than in most parts of the capitalist world: surveillance/video cameras are found on many public housing estates as well as in innumerable locations in British cities.

It is perhaps no accident that the birthplace of Foucault's dystopian vision of the Panopticon and the surveillance society was in Britain, with Jeremy Bentham as its architect. Bentham sought to construct the perfect prison which would not only incarcerate but also transform the behavior of its inmates so that they became more integrated members of the functioning and productive capitalist society. His design was also intended as an all-purpose institutional and architectural model for factories, schools, mental health institutions and hospitals. The Panopticon was never built. Bentham tried unsuccessfully to float his idea on the English stock exchange to raise the capital to construct a national system of Industry Houses, each of which would have put 250,000 idle workers and prisoners to productive work, thereby solving not only the problem of unemployment but also avoiding the need for the forced transportation of political prisoners and Irish dissenters to the penal colonies of Australia, whilst making a profit for his shareholders in the process.

In a similar manner, the ideologies of ›preventionism‹ that are explored in this volume seem to tolerate little in the form of deviance or make few distinctions between dissent, protest and terrorism. Moreover the governing technique of the

›anti-social‹ involves not only the public face of power but also its private dimensions: surveillance not only in the prison, but also in the family, in the home and in the workplace. These elements of capitalist ruling strategy were identified by Antonio Gramsci in his notes on »Americanism and Fordism« in the 1930s. To put this theoretically it means that strategies of preventionism are not simply productive of a certain type of society; they form important aspects of capital accumulation. Henry Ford's strategy was not only to create a mass production/mass consumption form of capitalism so that all workers would be able to own a model T Ford but also to discipline the workers so they became effective appendages of the mass production assembly-line. Expanded consumerism was paradoxically dependent on the moral regulation of workers and their families. The Ford Motor company tended to recruit its employees from the ranks of new immigrants to prevent them from communicating with each other (they spoke many different languages and thus in a sense were atomized and less likely to engage in collective action). It was also partly to encourage them to observe sobriety and sexual abstinence at home. These forms of ›preventionism‹ were buttressed by the scientific management of the production process along the lines of Taylorism (the rhythms of the assembly-line were tuned to the body rhythms of the workers so that they always tended to work at the maximum speed possible at different times of day) as well as through batteries of industrial and social psychologists, all of which were intended to produce the compliant, productive and morally regulated worker-families. Such dystopian efforts continue and, as in the time of Henry Ford, they are intended to stifle worker organization and protest, to maximize productivity, as well as to indirectly limit worker rights.

Nevertheless, when organized protest does occur, as it recently did at the recent G8/ G20 economic summits in Toronto, it seems consistently to be met by paramilitary policing strategies, in which innocent onlookers as well as protesters are incarcerated, often without charge, denied their political and legal rights, and clearly in many cases with no apparent reason and in an arbitrary and often brutal manner. These policing strategies, which caused considerable public disquiet in Canada in June 2010, however are not new since they have been consistently deployed at many G8 summits over the past decade, and in many different national locations, such as Gothenburg, Genoa, Edinburgh and Heiligendamm. Indeed at the 2001 summit in Genoa, even cultural protest was not tolerated: a theatre company involved in the demonstrations was subjected to harsh treatment and detainment by the Italian police. In the public representation of these moments, which normally show shop windows and other property being damaged and sometimes police cars bursting into flames, protest is associated in the eyes of the onlooker, mediated through the gaze of television, with acts of violence and is thereby delegitimized. It may be that these strategies of representation could themselves help to tame the nature of protest by causing factions within political movements to self regulate, so that some factions or groups ›tame‹ the others.

This volume is therefore very timely and important. It addresses—from a variety of different critical perspectives—some of the governmentalities, strategies of representation and forms of action that mutually constitute the relations between rulers and ruled, or the forces of order and the forces of dissent. It addresses a moment when global capitalism, and the political systems that govern it, have entered into a period of deep and intersecting crises, all of which are provoking questions about not only the stability of capitalist societies, but also their legitimation. Capitalism is premised upon an extrapolation of present values and activities into future flows of profit and revenue, refracted through the prices of stocks and bonds in the financial markets. For such a calculus of the future to take place, contemporary capitalism, in the vein of Bentham, has developed a series of mechanisms to define, assess, contain and if possible to eliminate risks. For capital, risk means an opportunity for higher profits, but it also means danger of loss. Indeed the calculus of risk, reflected for example in the activities of the credit rating agencies, is itself an activity that generates profits. The credit rating agencies assess the likelihood that individuals, firms, local governments and sovereign states will continue to be able to service their debts over time and repay what is owed, with interest, to creditors. Of course, given the vast and complex scale of industrial production and its interface with society and the environment, societies are always open to catastrophic risk, such as those risks associated with the meltdown of nuclear reactors, the collapse of deep sea oil wells beneath the oceans, and the growing and cumulative risks associated with ever-increasing levels of consumption premised upon fossil fuels, and thus with the threat of climate change and other forms of ecological catastrophe. These examples, however, as well as the specific G8/G20 macroeconomic responses to the financial implosion of global capitalism since 2007 show that the crisis management structures of contemporary government are principally premised upon socializing the risks of the most powerful corporations. At the same time, capitalist restructuring under disciplinary neoliberalism has involved consistent efforts to create more flexible labor markets and greater workplace surveillance—different aspects of the individuation of subjects, the privatization of their social risks, and increasing insecurity.

This is why many of the protest movements are asking the question: »who pays for the crisis?« The dominant neoliberal response is that the people will pay for the crisis. In order to pay for the gigantic bailouts of wealthy banks and powerful corporations this will mean higher taxes, the privatization of public services, reduced pensions and lower public sector salaries. This indicates that the present moment is one of supremacy rather than of hegemony, and it is a moment when we can expect protest and contestation to intensify. The question is can it be preempted and contained, and if so by whom and with what results? This volume provides some invaluable clues and guides us as we look at this question in the immediate future.

Toronto August 31, 2010.