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Killing Live 8, Noisily: The G-8, Liberal Dissent and the London Bombings

Sheila Carapico
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The organizers of Live 8, the week-long, celebrity-driven musical campaign for increased aid and debt relief for poverty-stricken nations, plugged their July 6 concert in an Edinburgh stadium as "a celebration of the largest and loudest cry to make poverty history the world has ever seen." By rush hour the next morning, four coordinated bombings in the London transit system had stolen the show from the well-orchestrated international extravaganza and handed the microphone to Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Talk about a vast right-wing conspiracy: the London terrorists could not have done more to strengthen the hand of the world's richest states against dissident voices in the West and beyond if they had actually been in cahoots.

The July 7 bombings in London interrupted the sanctimonious conversation between the British prime minister, the US president and other "world leaders" at a luxurious Scottish resort concerning global warming and what to do about those perennially poor Africans. Instantly, the podium at the Group of Eight summit became a pulpit, from which Blair and Bush preached against evil and claimed the mantle of the Live 8 concerts for themselves. "It's particularly barbaric," Blair intoned, "that this has happened on a day when people are meeting to try to help

the problems of poverty in Africa, the long-term problems of climate change and the environment." His American confrere concurred: "On the one hand, we got people here who are working to alleviate poverty and to help rid the world of the pandemic of AIDS and that are working on ways to have a clean environment. And on the other hand, you've got people killing innocent people. And the contrast couldn't be clearer." The moral of their story is: either you are with the G-8 or you are with the terrorists.

The us-against-them rhetoric relegated popular demonstrations against the G-8's managed haute finance to the sidelines, and muffled the cry of the Live 8 concerts attended by tens of thousands of rock fans and activists in cities across the globe and watched by millions more. Timed to coincide with the summit, and symbolically as much a strike at trappings of global capitalism as the attacks on the World Trade Center, instead the explosions silenced voices against forced debt repayment and the war in Iraq. Blair got to pretend to be the patron, instead of the target, of debt relief activists. The G-8 got to portray themselves as civilized governments magnanimously doling out charity to Africans, Palestinians and AIDS victims,

rather than a resented club of the geopolitically advantaged. Legitimate counter-narratives about what "the West" or "the civilized world" are and ought to be doing about pressing economic and environmental problems were hushed by another act of senseless destruction.

Not Exactly Revolutionaries

There was a time when peacenik rock stars glorified revolutionaries. In the old days of the Algerian resistance and the Viet Cong, the predecessors to the protesters outside the G-8 gathering had sympathy for the rebels. Some of the ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon found expression in the crooning of Bob Dylan, John Lennon and Bob Marley. Rock concerts resembled anti-war protests and protest rallies sounded like rock concerts. In what in those days was called a New Left analysis, which laced Marxism with anti-colonial nationalism, Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh were standard bearers; as the anti-war movement gained momentum, they became folk heroes. In counter-establishment pop culture, the armed vanguard of the anti-imperialist resistance had a real panache. This is because the revolutionaries offered a cogent and compelling analysis with wide appeal across continents and cultures, one that spoke intellectually to Africans and Europeans or Asians and Americans alike. There was a basis for solidarity, a sense of common cause.

Al-Qaeda is transparently not the spearhead of a progressive movement for peace and justice -- either in perception or in fact. Osama bin Laden is not Che Guevara, even if in places like Honduras and the Philippines one can buy T-shirts depicting him as such. There is nothing in the statements of al-Qaeda and the other jihadists that speaks to the G-8 protesters, nor even to the Afro-Asian masses for whom they sometimes claim to speak. Actually, they offer no coherent ideology at all, but only vacuous far-right incitement like "death to Jews and Crusaders." There is nothing romantic or righteous about blowing up London trains. Nor is there a shred of evidence that the bombers in London admire the protesters or sympathize with their goals.

Al-Qaeda, or whatever spinoff group planned and executed this none too daring exploit, is not lighting the way to relief of African debt. They are not fighting for Palestinian, Iraqi or Chechen independence, or for a revolution in Saudi Arabia, or to free political prisoners in Egypt. They do not respect or abide by Islamic law as understood by those who know what it is about. They are reactionary nihilist-anarchists with no positive vision or program: even the goal of an "Islamic state" per se is more imputed than articulated. They want to destroy the nation-state, the world system and the tourism industry. Issuing no manifestos, they are rebels without much of a cause at all. In post-Orwellian fashion, the medium -- detonating explosives -- is the message. The goal is not even killing, as is so often said, but the cheap thrill of making very loud noises, blowing things apart and letting horrified audiences watch the mayhem replay endlessly on television. The bombing tactic is not particularly directed against democracies. Nor are democracies particularly vulnerable, as targets in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kenya and other places show. Nor, it has now been widely recognized, is this a centralized operation: for all we know, the London bombers were trying to show up bin Laden for laying low these past few years. The tactic of randomly setting off explosions is not going to go away, whether or not al-Qaeda loses its patent.

The Live 8 musicians are not exactly revolutionaries, either. Bono and U2, the specially reunited Pink Floyd, Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Madonna, Elton Jon, Bon Jovi and other stars with a conscience hoped, in the words of Live 8 organizer and Irish rocker Bob Geldof, that their show-biz blitz would "tilt the world a little bit on its axis in favor of the poor." Their modest mission, in the Band Aid tradition, is to evince and thereby elicit some compassion for the rest of humanity.

Casualties of War

But yet another high-profile bombing in the Western heartland further limits the scope for even the Live 8 brand of consciousness raising, by casting global conflict in cultural or civilizational terms, not economic ones. That conflict, pace Blair and Bush, is not about the

wealth of the North perpetuating the poverty of the global South, or the G-8 riding herd over the G-88, or any material issues at all, but instead an ideological struggle that pits East against West and Islam against Christianity, equating this with those who love freedom against those who hate freedom, or the civilized world against barbarism. Blair ascribed the London bombings to people who "act in the name of Islam." Though he hastened to add that the vast majority of Muslims in Britain and elsewhere are "decent and law-abiding," his attribution of religious motivation can only leave non-Muslims wondering what in Islam could justify such acts even as every imam in the isles seeks to disavow any connection between Islam and "violence." The Islamist militants exaggerate their own power by claiming to be backed by a billion believers, princes and paupers alike. For their part, US, British and Russian leaders perpetuate this telescopic magnification of "the other side" in a "global war" because it positions them as defenders of the Free World against a transcontinental army "over there" rather than scattered cells of narcissistic anarchists in their own midst. So even when the bombers turn out to be homegrown Anglo-Asian cultural hybrids, as appears to be the case with the London attackers, the problem has already been classified as "foreign."

There is no evidence of a mass following or widespread public support in North Africa, the Levant or the Arabian Peninsula for a group calling itself al-Qaeda, much less al-Qaeda in Europe. To be sure, Islamist parties have flourished above ground and underground in many countries, often thanks to their governments' campaigns to obliterate what a generation ago was a flourishing Arab left. A number of Arab despots feel threatened by Islamism, as well they might, since nationalism and national solutions to the challenge of social order have been discredited by the likes of Saddam Hussein, the Palestinian sovereignty conundrum and downright crummy governance. A strong majority of Arabs and Muslims undoubtedly share European disgust with the Iraq war, and most deplore uncritical US support for Israel. So yes, they hate US and Western policies. But al-Qaeda is not representative of

Islamism and its pronouncements are not consonant with those of any major Islamist party. Nor do the political sentiments of Arabs and Muslims make them natural al-Qaeda constituents, and anyway many more Arabs than Westerners have died at the hands of the violent salafi fringe. There is no sense conjuring the jihadists as a vast military machine capable of inspiring masses of volunteers and conscripting huge infantries, comparable to the Third Reich or Communism.

If insight is the first casualty of this quasi-war, humanitarianism is the second. Those who would forge North/South alliances, challenge the economic tyranny of the G-8 or march against world hunger have been thrown back on the defensive after only a weak recovery from the blow of the September 11 attacks. The Islamic catchphrases on jihadist websites, the political reaction, especially in the United States, and the failure of progressive and/or Arabist scholars to publicize a more accurate analysis of the problems that face the world in the twenty-first century leave a broad swath of the Euro-American public unable to identify or sympathize with Arabs or Muslims at all. Instead, cracks from Thomas Friedman that "only the Muslim world can root out [this] death cult" again insinuate a pan-Islamic responsibility for the loss of innocent Western life. Friedman's confident, but completely erroneous pronouncement that "to this day -- to this day -- no major Muslim cleric or religious body has ever issued a fatwa condemning Osama bin Laden" puts off more heat than light. Meanwhile, scholars who write knowledgeably about Arabs and Islam, but not terrorism, are open to suspicions of sympathy or even collusion with the enemy.

Setback

When the G-8 summit concluded, Blair, who used to represent the once social-minded, left-leaning Labor Party, announced that loans and technical assistance from the world's wealthiest nations to Africa would be raised to a whopping \$50 billion by 2010. While reminding Africans that they alone are responsible for their impoverishment and must pull themselves up by their sandal-straps, he also promised future cuts

in the massive farm subsidies G-8 governments use to fertilize domestic agriculture in violation of their own free-market mantras and at the expense of farmers in poor countries. Fifty billion dollars sounds like an impressive sum until it is divided by five years and among three dozen countries, or until it is compared with the \$82 billion allocated by Congress in May for one more year's prosecution of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In any case, it is far less than activists had hoped for, and everyone knows promises are not budgetary appropriations or subsidy reductions. Summiteers acknowledged that global warming may be a problem, but bowed to the Bush administration's fears that doing something about it might interfere with wealth creation inside the world's richest economy.

It is too early to tell whether the British public will respond, as Spaniards did after the March 2004 Madrid bombings, by blaming the government that allowed such a thing to happen. Initial reactions indicate that, to the contrary, Blair's tarnished public image may regain its shine, as did Bush's after September 11, 2001. Bono himself blessed Blair's African aid pledges by saying that "the world spoke and the politicians listened." So much for liberal dissent from the G-8's poverty policy.

Already it would seem that death and destruction in downtown London have tightened central, self-interested management of global capitalism at the G-8 level and shored up the reactionary national security state within both the US and Britain while obliterating British, American and international voices calling for a more genuinely global sense of justice and fairness. Together, the violence and the rhetorical response sow distrust and "racial" fears within the West as well as between East and West, bolstering nativism and rationalizing the retraction of civil liberties. The attacks of July 7 ultimately strengthen, not weaken, the power centers of the world system their targets ostensibly represent. This episode, like the September 11 attacks and the Madrid bombings, set back the cause of peace and justice.

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