

A guide to the G20 protests for the not-yet-radical.

Chris Hayward.

A little more than a month ago, between the 21st and 27th of June, a week of protests against the Group of 20 Summit occurred in Toronto resulting in the arrests of more than 1000 people. I'm writing this piece for the friends and family in my extended network for whom the events were a bit of a shock. I'm writing especially for people who found the whole thing disturbing, who are uncertain about what they think, who are surprised and scared by what they've heard that police did, and put off by scenes of burning cars and broken windows.

My perspective is the view of someone who's participated in this kind of protest before, who's even helped organize some of them. I'm someone who has friends and acquaintances who were arrested and hurt over that weekend and in its aftermath. I'm someone who's been in several political "riots", been beat-on occasionally, pepper-sprayed and tear-gassed a fair bit more, but also never arrested. And I'm someone who thinks a lot about the role of protest in movements to change society. I have some sense of what motivates the people I know to get out on the street, some sense of how the police, courts and government tend to react to that, and some sense of the history that last weekend's events are a part of.

Before getting any further in, let me make clear that I wasn't in Toronto for the G20 protests. What I know about it I've read or watched in the media, and collected through my conversations with close friends who were there. I'll refer to some first-hand accounts throughout this article, and provide links to them, but my main job is to provide my analysis and my perspective, in the hope that you'll allow it to influence yours.

The Role of Protest in Changing Things

“Does protesting really accomplish anything?”

That’s actually a question I’ve heard a few times from people I’ve been talking to. I’ll take it seriously and answer it honestly.

I think it does. One of the best – and most current - examples I can offer to back up my conviction are the accomplishments of the Gay liberation movement, in its broadest sense.

I’m going to assume that everybody I’m addressing this to thinks that the North American movement for human and civil rights for Gay people has been a good thing. Even if you have some problems with it, I have to assume that you think it’s wrong for people to be discriminated against, made to feel ashamed, physically attacked or killed, and criminalized for their sexuality. The fact that those things happen a lot less now than 40 years ago is the result of the cultural and social change that the Gay liberation movement and all of its currents have achieved.

At this point, I’m going to start using the term GLBTQ - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer - instead of Gay, to reflect the fact that there has been a complicated movement to liberate all kinds of people whose sexualities and gender identities don’t conform to “normal”, but who also have differences with each other, too

The GLBTQ Liberation movement’s history is surely long and complicated, and I’m no scholar of it. But it is widely acknowledged that the pivotal moment was the Stonewall riots in June, 1969 in New York. In an environment where queer folks had to meet in secret, shady clubs that were subject to frequent police raids, and where cross-dressing was actually a crime, and you could be beaten and humiliated for simply being there, enough people one day just stopped taking it. They fought back against their arrests, made the police retreat, lit things on fire, and vandalized police vehicles. It was chaotic and destructive and probably frightening, but

when people decide to not get pushed around anymore – to assert their dignity as human beings who deserve to be treated with respect – in a moment when they are being physically controlled and humiliated by agents of their government, it sometimes is.

The commemoration of that “riot” the next year was the first Pride march.

Since then, the struggle for social equality for GLBTQ folks has taken many forms, from work in arts, culture, newspapers and books, to lobbying governments, to getting elected, to launching lawsuits, and yes, to marching and protesting. Imagine what the GLBTQ liberation movement wouldn’t have become, if there were no pride marches for people to join for the first time, no moments to be out in the street, asserting that your people are equal in dignity to all others. Those pride marches have been moments where the many campaigns of the GLBTQ-Liberation movement came together to show their strength, and to be strengthened.

If you’re glad that the GLBTQ folks you know don’t live with the kind of fear and shame they did 40 years ago, if you’re glad they get to not be attacked and harassed, or that they get to raise kids and have families, notice the role that protest played in that.

I like the fact that GLBTQ folks are oppressed less in my lifetime. I’m down with everybody and anybody getting oppressed less. I’m glad women can vote. I’m glad black people can’t be owned. I’m glad workers can go on strike without getting shot. I’m glad Native kids don’t get kidnapped and beaten in boarding schools. But if there is less oppression in my lifetime in our society than in previous generations, I’m pretty sure it’s not because it got given freely to people by the natural workings of our political system or the values of freedom and equality in our culture(s). It was struggled for. At some critical junctures, people stood up and fought for their rights against a society that was treating them badly. And people are still doing it.

When I read and try to understand history, that’s what I see: sometimes in newspapers and books and the minds of people, sometimes through dialogue, sometimes in

the streets, sometimes even with guns, people demand dignity in the face of a society that is hurting them. These things change because the people getting hurt and their allies make them change.

If you can appreciate that view of history, and notice that most of my activist friends share it, you can start to understand why we do what we do.

So yeah, I think protest changes things.

Government, Police, Repression and Protest Movements

I've heard quite a few people, in talking about the G20 Protests, make statements that go something like "After the police told people not to come downtown, anybody who did knew what they were getting into." and "I'm okay with people marching, but once you start breaking windows, then the police have to shut things down and arrest a lot of people." Once again, I want to take these statements seriously and answer them honestly.

My opinion on this stuff is based on my understanding of the history of government and police reaction to movements demanding change, and also my direct experience – and the experience of people I'm close to – of participating in such movements.

First, my reading of history. It's really pretty simple. Having read a lot of the history of movements for social change, it's clear to me that the institutions that people are demanding change from always resist that change. Always. Not forever. But every single time.

It's not much more controversial than the general idea that powerful institutions and people tend to want to preserve and increase their power, and tend not to want to share it or give it up. From the peasant uprisings throughout history and around the world, to the French or American revolutions, to the end of British colonial rule in India, to the American civil rights movement, the struggle for women's equality everywhere, or the

struggles for safety, respect, half-decent pay, some security, and a weekend for workers (and the broader population), the people and institutions in power always resist. And though they are often eventually convinced or overthrown, they always resist with force, and coercion and repression. Sometimes it's less brutal than other times, or less long-lasting, sometimes political accommodations come more quickly and peacefully than others. But the state fights back every time.

Many examples of this fight back, which I'll refer to as the *repression* of movements for change, are common knowledge. Think about it. The British government didn't just agree with the American Revolutionaries that taxation without representation wasn't fair, and that self-determination is the right of all *people*. (Those revolutionaries of course said "men", and most of them meant "white men with property", underlining the fact that those same revolutionaries were in turn seen as oppressors by yet other people.) The British imprisoned the rebels, legislated against them, and then killed as many of them as they could in a war, in order to resist the movement for change. It is widely known that in resisting the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the authorities used fire-hoses and dogs and imprisonment to repress the freedom riders and lunch-counter sit-ins and other demonstrations, while the unofficial authorities used beating and lynching. It is widely known that the government of South Africa kept Nelson Mandela in prison for 27 years for his work against apartheid.

Less common knowledge is the broad pattern of often unpublicized repression that generally happens away from the spotlight of large protests or boycotts or campaigns. This repression is aimed at the most vocal advocates of change and at the organizations they are a part of. For any change movement you can think of, there is usually a long period in its history when its advocates and participants were being harassed, imprisoned, attacked or even killed. Though Martin Luther King Jr. is now regarded as an American hero, he was the target of a long, covert and hostile campaign by the FBI, designed to neutralize him as a civil rights leader, while he was actually alive and working for change. Movements for change take a long time to

build, and the institutions that they are trying to change fight back the whole time, targeting those individuals who are kicking up a fuss and organizing other people to do so.

In talking about repression generally, I'm trying to challenge the idea that protest happens and the authorities are fine with it, until it turns "violent" and then those authorities have to "respond". My brief sketch of political repression, combined with my thoughts about people fighting back against the violence and other mistreatment they experience daily in their societies, is designed to share my understanding that forces for change and the institutions and people that are hurting them are involved a long-term and often violent process of responding to each other. Before any demonstration or boycott or riot happens on the street, two things have been going on for years: the basic mistreatment and injustice that people are upset about, and the individual targeting of the most vocal advocates to change things.

The reason I'm sketching all this out is to try to influence your perception of the chain of events that happened at the G20 protests in Toronto, which gets simplified to "a protest happened, it got violent, and the police responded..." I'd like to convince you that the chain of events is much longer, that it is normal and has a history, and that police action can be best understood as not trying to curb violence in the moment, but as trying to repress protest generally over the long haul.

Let me explain why that seems true to me.

Pre-Arrests

There were one or two high-profile arrests before the protests even got started that got news coverage. What many people reading this may not know, however, is that 17 people (to my knowledge) had warrants issued for their arrest or were arrested before the protests started, many of them in middle-of-the-night armed raids. People were taken to prison in their underwear. Clearly, these early arrests are not a "response" to violence at all, since they happened before any violence took place.

I'm sure there are people reading this who prefer to trust that the Police and Courts must have good reasons for breaking down doors and hauling away people in the middle of the night, that they must have had good intelligence to indicate that those people were planning something truly diabolical. I'm sorry to say, that's very unlikely. The police will often use the term "ringleaders" to describe the people they take, and there's truth to that: they are leaders. They call themselves more often by the term "organizers", and that is what they do. The people who got arrested, several of whom I know personally, are people who are central to organizing things like: providing food at demonstrations, organizing transportation and housing for the many people who come from out of town, providing sound systems, speaking at press conferences, organizing workshops so that people know their rights, and organizing legal support for the arrests and trials which invariably happen. In short, they are people who are doing the many everyday, entirely legal and sensible things you would do to organize a big event like this one. They are also almost always people who are active in several community organizations and political campaigns, in addition to their work organizing a mass-protest like the one in Toronto.

If you'd like, read this [article](#) from the neighbour of one of the arrested organizers. He talks about being awoken in the middle of the night with a gun pointed at him and his family, when police entered his apartment by mistake. Obviously, that's a pretty horrifying mistake. But who does deserve that? And please take a moment to ask yourself why the police, with all of the resources at their disposal, would need to break into people's houses at 4 am with guns drawn to serve warrants on people who are well-known to them.

It's possible that some of these 17 organizers would advocate or agree with vandalism as part of a political protest. (I'll go into my own views on that later) It's likely to me that some of them would find it appropriate, for instance, to attack a fence or even break windows. But I'm extremely skeptical that taking these people out of the action before a demonstration happens curbs any violence at all. And you should be, too. If anything, knowing that friends of yours had been pulled

out of bed at gunpoint the night before would tend to make a certain number of people more inclined to break windows or burn police cars. So while it's plausible to me that some of these 17 people might have participated in or approved of acts of vandalism, I am absolutely certain that they were all targeted because they are active community organizers with leadership roles in the organizations that were part of these protests. And I am also completely certain that arresting them in this way is terrifying for a lot of people, that it dis-organizes those things that these folks were working on, and generally interferes with the demonstration. It's my honest and sincere belief that that is what these arrests are designed to do.

These 17 people in positions of leadership are now going to have their lives tangled up in court proceedings for months or years. They've been charged with Conspiracy, generally along the lines of "Conspiracy to Commit Mischief". And they have all been given bail conditions that specify that they not associate with political groups. I believe that many of them are under house-arrest. Whether the charges against them are justified and will stand up in court or whether the cases eventually get dismissed is not really that important; if your aim is to demobilize their organizations and repress protest generally, either result is fine.

Harassment

I imagine that few of the people reading this – who aren't already in social contact with people who organize this kind of demonstration – know that the Toronto-based organizers of the G20 protests faced months of surveillance and harassment by Police forces while the demonstrations were being organized. Police cars and officers would wait outside of public meetings, taking video and making notes. People I know were visited at home by law-enforcement officers. If you're new to this, and maybe even if you're not, that's pretty frightening stuff.

Once again, if your tendency is to trust the motivations of law-enforcement, I'd urge you to consider the following: almost all of the organizing that happens for these demonstrations is open and public. It has to be. Organizers are trying to get thousands of people to

come to Toronto and participate. You can't do that secretly. If you want to know who's working on this stuff, you can get that information easily. So what's the point of taking pictures of people who attend a meeting? What's the point of visiting organizers at their homes? I believe it's to scare people. I believe it's part of a program of repression.

Policing at the demonstrations

There are lots of stories about demonstrators' experiences with police at the G20 demonstrations. I'll try to provide links to the ones I reference, but I'm not trying to give an exhaustive account. I'm hoping to list as many examples as I can of police action which, I believe, are not really consistent with curbing violence or protecting anything, but are very consistent with taking the wind from the sails of protest movements and groups.

Broken windows and burning cars

I'll talk in the next section about my own opinions on the burning police cars and the broken shop-windows. For now, let me just focus on how those events related to police action. There is mounting evidence that the Police allowed the vandalism of the cars and stores to take place. I'm NOT going to try to make all those arguments here. If you're interested, follow [this link](#), as a start. I'm fairly convinced from the first-hand accounts I've heard of the strange scenes that it's true. But you should make up your own mind.

Whether or not the police allowed the vandalism to take place is important, but not overwhelmingly so. It's important, because the destruction is the pretext for the subsequent police actions. But I very much want to convince you that those subsequent actions speak for themselves as well; they are a part of a broader pattern, and don't entirely depend on whether or not the vandalism and destruction take place. That's to say, they are not really a *response*.

Allow me to offer a few examples. What I'm trying to do is tie a few threads together with stories that I've read or heard (many of them first-hand accounts), and show you why I'm convinced that the way that this

demonstration was policed had little to do with stopping violence, and a great deal to do with repressing and intimidating people.

Queen's Park

By now, the police action to clear Queen's Park of protestors has been pretty well documented. [Here's a link](#) to some footage of it. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the context, Queen's Park was designated as a Free-Speech and family-friendly zone. The police cleared it in a terrifying fashion. Seated and obviously non-violent protesters were kicked and struck, and crowds were corralled and surrounded without instructions.

Keeping people in the rain

On Sunday June 27th at Spadina and Queen, the police corralled a few hundred demonstrators for 4 hours and did not let them leave. [Watch it here](#), if you like. In the end, as far as I know, they didn't arrest anybody, although they did handcuff people, take away their possessions and detain them for a several hours. In the end reckoning, Police managed to keep a few hundred people standing in the rain for hours without charges or instructions to disperse, before simply letting everybody go. This technique is known as "Kettling", and was used repeatedly throughout the weekend. It strikes me as a terrifying, humiliating, and dis-empowering experience to go through. And although media accounts suggested the police were looking for specific people, or trying to disperse the crowd, or to prevent this group of protesters from meeting with another, I'm suggesting that the intention of this kettling is precisely that it be scary, humiliating, and dis-empowering for the people who are protesting.

Arresting Everybody

Similarly - but with a different ending - at sites in different parts of downtown, without any signs of violence, and removed in time and space from the violence that did happen by many hours and several kilometers, the police arbitrarily closed down blocks, refusing to let people leave, and then arrested everybody there: people at work or out for dinner or covering the event for the media. All of this happened on Saturday

evening and Sunday, when streets were quiet and no large demonstrations were planned

One particularly good documentation of these events can be read in [this article by Tommy Taylor](#), originally published on his facebook page. Tommy talks about being in one such situation where an entire block was detained and arrested. His article is very long, but well worth reading. It's especially important, and disturbing to read his accounts of his 23 hours in detention.

Detention

If you haven't already heard about what it was like in the temporary detention facility, I'd urge you to find out. In the article I mentioned previously, Tommy Taylor talks about the verbal abuse and humiliation, lack of water and food, overcrowding and utter disorganization. In [this interview](#), Amy Miller talks about sexually threatening behaviour, assaultive strip-searches, and abuse. Amy is a friend of mine. [In this article](#), two supporters of the protest recorded and summarized the stories people told as they were released from detention.

The accounts are disturbing, but I sincerely urge you to read and watch them. As you do, I'd encourage you to think about the amount of abusive behaviour that people experienced, and notice that it wasn't exceptional. A huge number of people were consistently treated with horrifying disrespect. In Tommy's story, he relates a few moments when some officers showed some compassion or decency. I'm always encouraged to see people act with decency in deplorable situations, especially against the tide of their co-workers or bureaucracies. But it's important to notice that the situation of exceptional police powers, lack of accountability, and hostility to protest generally, create an environment where disrespectful and abusive behaviour is allowed or even encouraged. I'd urge you to think about this disrespect and abuse, and ask yourself how it could achieve the goal of *curbing violence* or *protecting the summit*. And then think about it in relation to the goal of *repressing dissent* generally.

Search and ID

It was widely reported that police had search and ID powers near the fence that surrounded the Summit site and the downtown core. Less well known is the fact that, after Saturday afternoon, the police used their powers, likely illegally, to search and ID people throughout the city. [Here is a report](#) of several journalists being searched and detained. Judging by the number of stories I've heard, it was extremely widespread, and occurred wherever any gathering took place or might take place. For instance, a friend of mine was stopped on Sunday afternoon asked for his ID and searched as he was riding home. He gave it, and was told "we have your information. So if we see you at any other *gathering*, we will arrest you." This happened because he was riding towards the scene at the Toronto Community Mobilization's convergence centre in Parkdale, a long way from the downtown core.

Meanwhile, at the convergence centre, where people who had traveled from Montreal in order to attend the demonstration were about to get on a bus and go home, the police showed up and asked many of the people there for ID and searched their belongings. [Here is some video](#) reporting of the event. It's possible that the police were looking for specific people. But I need to point out again, that stopping and searching people *might* have the effect of finding a specific person, but *definitely* has the effect of scaring hundreds of people and humiliating them, and maybe discouraging them from protesting;

"If we see you at another gathering, we will arrest you." Repression doesn't get much more explicit than that.

Civil Rights

I'd like to talk briefly about civil rights here. I'm trying to directly address statements like "anybody who went downtown after the police told them not to, onlookers or protesters, got what they deserved. They were warned."

I need to say to that a right to assemble that disappears when you most want to use it - that's to say when you are upset and want to protest something - isn't a right. It's a myth.

And I want to reiterate my sincere belief that the rights which we do have come about from long social struggles, of which gathering and protesting was an important part. The right to assemble isn't about the right to get together for picnics or parties (though I like those as much as the next person), it's about the right to assemble *exactly* when the government or another authority doesn't want you to. And a moment when the police say "don't come downtown, you might get caught in a mass arrest." Is the *exact* moment when I think it's important to assert my right to assemble. The crucial moments to assert your rights are always when they are threatened.

To conclude this section on repression, let me just ask one more time for you to review the accounts of events I've written about - combined with the other stories that you have heard or heard about - and judge them against the normal narrative of how this stuff happens: that a protest turned violent and the police responded in order to stop the violence. Then try to think about it in the light of the government and the police trying to discourage protest and demobilize people. Which one makes more sense?

Burning Cars and Broken Windows

I think it's important to put some attention to the vandalism that happened at these demonstrations. I'm writing this primarily for people who found the scenes of burning cars and broken windows really shocking and incomprehensible. I don't know if anybody I know well participated in the burning of cars or breaking of windows on the weekend. But I do know that I'm not far removed, socially speaking, from people who did. I'm not actually glad it happened. I don't think it was a good idea, but I have some understanding of it, and I'd like to try to make it more comprehensible for some of you by sharing my perspective on it.

I'm not trying to argue here about violence and non-violence in movements for social change, and I'm especially not trying to engage in a debate with movement participants about the kind of property destruction that happened at the anti-G20 protests.

Those debates are important, but that's not what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to make what did happen more comprehensible for a wider audience.

But I think it's important that I position myself briefly: I think that the destruction that was carried out at the anti-G20 demonstration is a problem, most importantly because it scares and confuses a lot of people into believing that the police brutality and illegality are justified. It's also really divisive within protest movements, as it's carried out by a very small minority of participants and planned in secret. I'd prefer a movement that uses tactics that a lot of people can participate in, that are not secretly organized and that are still confrontational, demanding that things be changed and declaring a consequence. I'd prefer to carry out actions where people put themselves on the line with their faces showing, and that require courage and dignity and sacrifice, of the kind that most people would admire, rather than fear.

But that said, I feel like I may understand some of the motivation behind the vandalism that did take place. And I can offer that perspective.

Well-behaved protest has stopped working.

I believe that the advocates of property destruction are responding to a sense that the peaceful forms of protest are simply not working. And I have to say, having attended a hundred or so demonstrations myself, I agree. It certainly feels to me like governments are quite happy to ignore the demands of demonstrations, knowing that, in general, people will get together for a few hours, make some speeches, chant, follow an escorted and permitted route, and then go home. It's routine and ritualized. It appears to me that protest of any kind works when it is an implicit threat to misbehave; not just a moral appeal that says "please do the right thing", but an appeal that says "listen to us, or we will stop co-operating."

A small number of protesters have adopted the practice of property destruction, which most advocates distinguish clearly for themselves from violence towards people, and which is not random destruction, but targeted. At the G20 protests, somewhere between

100 – 200 people targeted police cars, bank offices and franchises of large chains, for the most part. This is purposeful. They are not just trying to sack a neighbourhood. The attempt, in my interpretation, is to fight back against the institutions seen to be oppressing people, to make the protest matter, to make it cost something and be harder to ignore.

A little Perspective

So despite the fact that I don't agree with the idea that this kind of property destruction is a good choice, we need to keep it in perspective. A few hundred people caused a few hundred thousand dollars worth of damage; probably comparable to or less than your average sports-victory riot, without the random violence against passersby! (I was way more scared when the Jays won the World Series and people were throwing bottles out of their apartment windows, than I have ever been in a political riot)

In comparison, more than a thousand people were arrested, hundreds of them violently, some truly brutally; hundreds of them were held illegally, humiliated and abused; rubber bullets, tear gas and pepper spray were fired at peaceful crowds, civil rights were suspended, and people were badly injured. Keep in mind, it's windows and cars on the one hand, and very real trauma and injury to lots and lots of human beings on the other.

Sometimes I feel violent, too.

Several years ago, one of my closest friends was very severely beaten by four police officers in a locked room after a protest. He was then charged with "Assault Police", placed under house arrest waiting for a trial, prevented from participating in activist groups, and generally had his life messed with for two years or so. In the end his charges were dropped because, of course, he was assaulted, not the other way around. He isn't the only person I know to whom something like this has happened.

When I think about it, I feel violent too. I want to make somebody hurt for what they did to my friend. But aside from the fact that I probably don't have the mettle to do that, I also don't think it makes sense; I want to stop that

from happening at all, not actually hurt the people who did it.

When you think about activists, including some of the people who might have broken windows and many who did not, consider that these are people who have either themselves been experiencing this kind of brutality, or who are close to people who have. And many of them, through their jobs or political work or daily lives spend a lot of time thinking about and being close to the people most deeply and consistently disrespected and hurt in our societies.

That kinda thing can make you really mad.

Why Protest the G20, Anyway?

With all the violence and drama surrounding the G20 protests, it's possible to lose sight of the fact that people took to the streets to protest the G20 for concrete reasons. I can't tell you all those reasons, but I can give you the reasons why I think that an event like the gathering of the G20 is worth opposing and demonstrating against. If you want to read a little bit about the G20 itself, and the reason that some people are opposing it, there's no better place than straight from the [FAQ of the Toronto Community Mobilization Network](#), one of the hubs of anti-G20 organizing.

Allow me to offer you my own reasons for disliking the G20 and for thinking that it's entirely appropriate to protest its meeting.

Neo-liberalism is bad for us.

The G20 is one international group in a long line of international economic organizations who have been pushing a particular agenda for more than 30 years now. That agenda is best described by the term neo-liberalism. Neo-liberal agreements and institutions have taken many shapes, from the bi-national, regional, or global free trade agreements to organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, or the World Economic Forum. Those institutions have different and complex aims and different functions. But they all have all, broadly

speaking, shared the goal of decreasing the power of governments and Courts to regulate and interfere with capital. That is the hard core of neo-liberalism.

Its proponents will claim that it increases wealth, lifts people out of poverty, and breaks down international barriers. It probably has sometimes done those things for some people, but that is not its intention. What it does every single time - 100% of the time - is change the rules of the international finance and trade in favour of investors and capitalists. And on balance, I believe that has been bad for the overwhelming majority of us, who are not investors and capitalists.

Coming to my opinion about neo-liberalism and the nature of the world economy has taken me 15 years and a lot of reading, listening and arguing. I won't likely be able to sum that up in a few paragraphs. But I can offer a couple of examples, and point you in the direction of the most influential sources of my opinions, in hopes that you might check them out.

The workings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) over the last few decades are probably the best example of neo-liberalism at work, and the reaction to it. Since the 1980's, the IMF, in its role as a last-resort lender to governments, has used its financial leverage to force policy and governance changes on the countries it is lending money to. That program was called "structural adjustment", and was characterized by forcing drastic reductions in government spending, the selling off of public assets like drinking water and electrical utilities to international investors, and by funding large infrastructure projects that were particularly geared toward facilitating global trade. Though the policies were justified in lots of complicated ways, and always promised to lift people out of poverty, what they did and always aimed to do was to open up economic opportunities for international investors. It's not rocket surgery. If you can convince a government to sell off its national or regional monopolies like electrical utilities or water treatment – vital services people simply cannot do without – at bargain prices to international firms who turn them into private monopolies, those firms will make a killing. If you lend a government hundreds of millions of dollars on the condition that they spend it on

development contracts almost invariably awarded to big international firms, those firms will make a killing. And when you cut half of your government's budget you lose schools, hospitals, and infrastructure and teachers, nurses, doctors, and engineers. That has predictable consequences for the majority of the population.

The chorus of research, scholarship and political organizing from the Global South about the immiserating effects of structural adjustment and other neo-liberal economic policies is overwhelming. The only way you can avoid being convinced that this kind of economic thinking has been devastating for the great majority of people is if you utterly ignore the everyday people and people's movements who are opposing it, and listen only to the economists who promote it. If you're interested, read Vandana Shiva, Arundhati Roy, David Harvey, Amartya Sen, Maude Barlow or a hundred others. Or listen to the very explicit political positions of people's movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico, or the peasant movements of Brazil, or the movements that have brought Evo Morales to power in Bolivia or Hugo Chavez to power in Venezuela. These folks know what has happened to their economies over the last three decades, and they are clear on how it happened. One of my favourite titles to recommend is "Confessions of an Economic Hitman" by John Perkins. If you don't believe a wingnut like me, maybe you'll believe someone who was actually trained as an Economist and employed in the structural adjustment industry.

From the folks who brought us the financial crisis...

The neo-liberal agenda was hard at work in the deregulation of the US and international financial industry that happened in the 1990's. There was no bigger champion, for instance, of neo-liberalism than US Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan. In his position at the Federal Reserve, Greenspan would have had a seat at the G8, the precedent for the G20. He was a big fan of financial deregulation. With the justification that less government regulation is better for business and the economy, the rules governing the financial industry were eviscerated, and everybody knows the rest: An absolute orgy of profits and bonuses for several

years in the financial industry, followed by the near collapse of the sector and a taxpayer bailout in the trillions worldwide. I've heard it described as the greatest transfer of wealth from the public to the private sector of all time.

I don't believe that these events are aberrations or mistakes. I believe that they are the predictable consequences of an ideology. They are the consequences of a deliberate campaign to change the rules of human economic life in favour of the people who own the economy. Although they have been justified in dozens of different ways, and there's always something in those justifications about how it will be good for all of us eventually, they are always good for a certain segment of the population right away.

Remember that the G20 is an ad-hoc organization of the Finance Ministers and Central Bank Heads of the 20 largest national economies. The G20 is made up of the same people – or their direct inheritors – who brought us the financial crisis. Henry Paulson, in his role as the last US Secretary of the Treasury, had a seat at the G8 and G20. And in his previous role as CEO of Goldman Sachs he made a killing personally and corporately from the deregulation of financial markets. That's who the G20 is. There has been no great change of ideology and personnel. These are the elites, currently at the helm of the most powerful public economic institutions in the world, many of whom have been or will become the people at the helm of the most powerful private economic organizations in the world. And they do what's good for them.

What did the G20 Summit do?

The commentary I've been reading generally suggests that the summit itself didn't accomplish much, underlining the ideological differences and lack of unity among participating countries. But here are two of the agreements it bragged about, and that the government of Canada was championing: The halving of budget deficits by 2013, and avoiding a new international tax on banks.

Wow. So the sector of the economy largely responsible for the economic crisis, and who just received trillions

of tax dollars, avoids a small tax designed to reign in speculation and pay back taxpayers. While, in a time of economic uncertainty, the stimulus spending or the services provided by government to those same taxpayers and the entire society will be slashed, which is what cutting the deficit in half will invariably do.

Why do I oppose the G20? Because I know what side my bread is buttered on. Protecting the enormous profits of Canadian banks will benefit me indirectly and very little, and in fact could probably hurt me. The tax cut I might receive from reduced government spending will also be barely perceptible. What I will notice is that my life will get harder, and my society will get harsher, as government spending is cut. My livelihood and well-being depends on the great majority of everyday people around me having good incomes, good health-care, good public education, good public transportation, and a clean environment. Banking profits don't get me that. I know who I want to have that money.

The messages and targets of the Anti-G20 protests

The many thousands of people who demonstrated against the G20 summit had a wide variety of reasons to be there. There were people protesting the wage cuts, job losses and privatizations of neo-liberal economics, people advocating indigenous sovereignty in Canada, and people protesting human-rights abuses in the countries whose heads-of-state and finance ministers were in town. There were anti-war messages, environmental messages, anti-mining activists, bicycle activists and many more. I've heard many people describe it as unfocused. Absolutely, it is. It would be great if there were thousands of people mobilized around a set of concrete demands which we could insist on getting, but that's not the case.

The world economy is affecting people in diverse ways. And our response to that is diverse. A meeting of the people who are steering the global economy is an opportunity to say "These are all the ways that you are hurting people. Cut it out." And there is an attempt made to target particular institutions that are seen as key advocates for or beneficiaries of the policies that the G20 is pushing.

The Royal Bank of Canada came under attack by activists for its sponsorship of the Vancouver Olympics and as the single largest financier of the oil extraction from Alberta's Tar Sands. There are lots of reasons to object to the Olympics, including social dislocation, corruption, the out-of-control-spending, and its relationship to unceded indigenous land. There are even more reasons to hate and fear tar sands development. Taken together, tar sands development is the largest industrial project on earth, appears to me to be guaranteed to devastate the landscape and ecosystem of the places where it takes place, is already giving people (most of them indigenous people) cancer, also ignores the claims to land and livelihood of native people, is the largest single greenhouse-gas producer in Canada, uses up fresh-water at alarming rates, and depends on migrant labour kept in lousy conditions. I don't need a lot more reasons to think that this is a terrible idea. The long-term social and environmental cost is actually unfathomable. But in the short-run it's gonna make a lot of money for some people, and for a few years provide several thousand of us with something I think we should have as a right anyway, that's to say a job.

So while I'm not glad that an RBC branch in Ottawa was burned, I understand why RBC is being targeted. And I approve of the idea that regular people, who will pay the true cost of these terrible ideas for generations, have to somehow convince those among us who will derive the incredible short-term benefits from them, to cut it out.

Why do I think it's sensible to protest the G20 meeting? Because the interests of the owners of banks and oil companies are well represented at the G20. They have a seat at the table. It's even plausible to me that these folks believe that what is in their interests is actually in the interests of the rest of us. But I - and a rising chorus of several hundreds of millions - don't. And it doesn't appear to me that we have a seat at the table. Our seats are many kilometers away, behind a fence and lines of riot police.

How do you see the world?

In the end, it's about how we see the world. It's about a vision of society. I'm clear on the kind of world that the leaders of the G20 are steering us toward, and on the interests that they are representing. I'm clear that they are utterly failing to tackle the environmental crisis, have no clear plan for our economies in crisis that will help regular people, are not resolving the armed conflicts in the world, and are worsening the poverty that much of the world faces. They are steering us toward a world of fighting over the dwindling resources of oil and water, amidst a tidal wave of displaced and disappearing people, where even the few who can protect themselves from that stuff will be victims to the toxicity of the environment and the unpredictable new climate we're creating.

The policies being advocated for and instituted by the G20 will be surrounded by the language of the alleviation of poverty and misery through economic growth. And it's possible that the people pushing these policies believe that they're doing good. I am not confused, though, about what those policies will actually do. I am clear that they are working out compromises between the competing short-term best-interests of the owners and managers of the most powerful corporations in the world. I know that policies that make it easier to move your investments from one country to another looking for the cheapest labour and laxest environmental standards, are good for profits and bad for wages. I know that financial bubbles make a few people rich and destroy vast amounts of real wealth.

This is not weird, and it's not a conspiracy. It's how we've organized the majority of the productive work on Earth; we've set it up so that there is a small class of people whose short-term interest is best served by employing the fewest people possible, getting those people to work as hard as possible, selling what those people create for as much as possible, and cleaning up as little as possible of the mess that is made. Regardless of the personal views of some individuals in that class of people about the impacts of their actions, their short-term best-interests are clear. It is also in the best interest of that small group to use the money they can make in

this way in order to influence the rules that govern our society, allowing them to make more money. And so they do it.

I have a different vision of society. So do the people who took to the streets to protest the G20, including the folks who broke windows. We don't all agree on the details of those different visions, but I will be so bold as to suggest that we are united by ideas like: the protection of the environment, decent incomes and health-care and education for all people, a better distribution of the wealth that we all create, less violence, and - importantly - more egalitarian and democratic forms of decision-making and leadership.

Creating that kind of world will require lots of people with courage and passion to get together and demand it. It will require people to stick their necks out. It will require the kind of people who took to the streets in Toronto for the G20. And although I disagree with their actions, some of the people who wrecked stuff are among the most committed and courageous and passionate people I know. And I know I need them. I believe you will too.