

500 word position paper for Royal Geographical Society conference panel, 'Critical Territorial Politics', 30 August 2007.

David Chandler, University of Westminster (D.Chandler@Westminster.ac.uk)

When we do politics nowadays we are less likely to participate in the 'old' politics, of self-interest, political parties, and concern for governmental power, than the 'new' post-territorial politics which, lacking in social mediation, are both more global in outlook and more individualised in practice. This new politics, has three key attributes: 1) it is much less concerned with power, its concerns are free-floating and in many ways, existential; 2) it is more likely to take a private and individualised expression; 3) its practice tends to be non-instrumental, we do not subordinate ourselves to collective associations or parties and are more likely to give value to our aspirations, acts, or the fact of our awareness of an issue, as an end in-itself.

High-profile examples of post-territorial politics include radical protests, such as the 2003 anti-war march, anti-capitalism and anti-globalisation protests, the huge march to Make Poverty History at the end of 2005, involvement in the World Social Forums and the promotion of environmental concerns. These new forms of engagement and protest are highly individualised and personal ones - there is no attempt to build a social or collective movement. It appears that demonstrating, badge and bracelet wearing and green consumption are ethical acts in themselves: personal statements of awareness, rather than attempts to engage politically with society.

This is illustrated, for example, by the 'celebration of differences' at marches, protests and social forums. It is as if people are more concerned with the creation of a sense of community through differences than with any political debate, shared agreement or collective purpose. It seems to me that if someone was really concerned with ending war or with ending poverty or with overthrowing capitalism, then political views and political differences would be quite important. Is war caused by capitalism, by human nature, or by the existence of guns and other weapons? It would seem important to debate reasons, causes and solutions, it would also seem necessary to give those political differences an organisational expression if there was a serious project of social change.

Rather than a political engagement with the world, it seems that radical political activism today is a form of social disengagement – expressed, for example, in the anti-war marchers’ slogan of ‘Not in My Name’, or the assumption that wearing a plastic bracelet or setting up an internet blog diary is the same as engaging in political debate. In fact, it seems that political activism is a practice which isolates individuals who think that demonstrating a personal commitment or awareness of problems is preferable to engaging with other people, who are often dismissed as uncaring or brain-washed by consumerism. The socially corrosive aspects of the practice of this type of post-territorial politics are expressed clearly by individuals who are obsessed with reducing their carbon footprint, deriving their idealised sense of social connection from an ever increasing awareness of themselves and by giving ‘political’ meaning to every personal action.