The Powers that Be, stems from the last WSCF-Europe conference, Religion, Ethics and Politics: God and the Use of Power, held in Berlin, Germany. This issue provides a forum to examine how Christian faith demands a radical renegotiation of political relationships and how our faith, as student activists, interacts with power structures. The conference, my first WSCF-E conference, was an inviting community full of discussions about politics, the global political structure, and religion. But, more than that, it was a support network of passionate and active students trying to understand how to seek social justice in what sometimes appears to be a hopeless hierarchy of power, a tangle of political games and economics.

This past summer, I took a break from my post as the WSCF-E Office and Publications Intern to go home to Alberta, Canada for a short vacation. As it turned out, my visit coincided with the Toronto G-20 meetings. Though my home is across the country, the proceeding events have been stuck in my mind ever since. The world’s leading economic state representatives, once again, gathered to discuss economic stimulus, the ongoing effects of the world recession, financial reform, and open markets. Protesters also began to fill the city of Toronto in the name of Aboriginal rights, environmental concerns, poverty, globalization, LGBT rights, Human Rights, and the list goes on.

The city had been literally divided: a chain link fence and security perimeter locked down the centre. Though I wasn’t a personal witness to the security fence, its images and the empty, albeit police ridden, streets were ever present in the news. It was like nothing I had ever seen growing up in Canada. Friends living in Toronto were constantly updating their Facebook walls with images and updates on the life and feel of the now dead and highly secured city.

“Recovery and New Beginnings” was the theme of the G20, but it was not the theme of the images that were flying around the internet. As YouTube videos and personal accounts of the treatment of many peaceful protesters were passed among friends, I avidly awaited the national newscasts to see how the media would reflect on what appeared to be a war in downtown Toronto. However, in my opinion, this wasn’t the story portrayed. Protesters demanding that the agenda of the G-20 be refocused on issues important to those at the edges of society, perhaps bigger than the economy, were not shared with the public. Videos of peaceful protesters being stampeded by riot police, media representatives being harassed, and innocent bystanders being detained didn’t make the cut.

For me, the whole idea of these economic meetings is mind boggling. Over 1 billion Canadian dollars were spent on security. According to one account, this could have housed all 80,000 homeless people currently on the waiting list for community housing for over a year at average rental costs. Fitting, seeing as the area cordoned off for the summit is home to one of Canada’s highest concentrations of homeless people.

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Even with all this money spent, a group of more violent protesters were still able to rampage part of the city with little police presence. It raised more and more questions for me as time passed: How could the media not speak out against this unbalanced police action? How can governments justify spending this kind of money? Why is it that the same issues are raised by protesters at every G-20 and are still not on the agenda? What does this say about democracy? What does that tell us about Power?

It was more than a fence that was set up to protect government officials from the “violent” protests on the other side. It was a metaphor on so many different levels. A reminder of those who are on the outside. A reflection on how the powerful are protected. A barrier between those who are invited to the table and those who aren’t. Those who matter and those who don’t. There it was, a wall, built through downtown Toronto dividing us, rather than uniting us, giving power to a few.

After leaving Berlin this spring, I was jubilant, I had met so many wonderful and active students. They were passionate, smart, engaging, courageous, and more importantly they were excited about what they could do! Lectures challenged us to think deeply about Church and State relationships. History reminded us of how easy it is to fall in line with an unjust regime. Participants shared inspiring experiences of hardships. We were all motivated to act, and yet how easily I was discouraged by the way real life played out. But rather than wallowing after watching the G-20 take over my home, I was able to come back to work with WSCF-E more excited about the importance of this Mozaik.

I hope that The Powers that Be provides an opportunity to reflect on how we live in this political world. What does it mean to live in solidarity with those at the fringes of society? How can we seek social justice? How can we challenge those in power to be responsible for the whole of society? How would we act if we had more power? Vaclav Havel (Czech playwright, essayist, dissident and politician) once said, “I am not interested in why man [sic] commits evil; I want to know why he [sic] does good”. May the articles and contributions in this issue remind you why we do good, why we carry on.

In this issue, we have included a section reflecting on the Lingua Franca event Religious Freedom as a Human Right held in Lviv, Ukraine in May, 2009. Also, we have selected two opinion standpoints where the authors have provided shorter personal reflections. Continuing from the last issue we have also added a short editorial from the archives bridging WSCF-E’s work from the past to the future. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to Sofie, for her encouragement and dedication to the conference and theme; to Matt, for stepping up when needed; to Rosie, for editing her vacation away; and to Pip, for going beyond his call as illustrator.

Peace,
Jill Piebiak

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