Riot. Strike. Riot

The New Era of Uprisings

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INTRODUCTION

A Theory of Riot

Riots are coming, they are already here, more are on the way, no one doubts it. They deserve an adequate theory.

A theory of riot is a theory of crisis. This is true at a vernacular and local level, in moments of shattered glass and fire, wherein riot is taken to be the irruption of a desperate situation, immiseration at its limit, the crisis of a given community or city, of a few hours or days. However, riot can only be grasped as having an internal and structural significance, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, insofar as we can discover the historical motion that provides its form and substance. We must then move to further levels, where the gathering instances of riot are inextricable from ongoing and systemic capitalist crisis. Moreover, the riot as a particular form of struggle illuminates the character of crisis, makes it newly thinkable, and provides a prospect from which to view its unfolding.

The first relation between riot and crisis is that of surplus. This seems already a paradox, as both crisis and riot are commonly understood to arise from dearth, shortfall, deprivation. At the same time, riot is itself the experience of surplus. Surplus danger, surplus information, surplus military gear. Surplus emotion. Indeed, riots were once known as "emotions," a history still visible in the French word: *émeute*. The crucial surplus in the moment of riot is simply that of participants, of population. The moment when the

partisans of riot exceed the police capacity for management, when the cops make their first retreat, is the moment when the riot becomes fully itself, slides loose from the grim continuity of daily life. The ceaseless social regulation that had seemed ideological and ambient and abstract is in this moment of surplus disclosed as a practical matter, open to social contest.

All these surpluses correspond to larger social transformations from which these experiences of affective and practical surplus are inextricable. These transformations are the material restructurings that respond to and constitute capitalist crisis, and which feature surpluses of both capital and population as core features. And it is these that propose riot as a necessary form of struggle.

"Any population has a limited repertoire of collective action," notes Charles Tilly, great historian of these matters. Writing in 1983, he takes the measure of a singular historical transformation, an oceanic shift whose tides spread late and soon across the industrializing world:

> Some time in the nineteenth century, the people of most western countries shed the collective-action repertoire they had been using for two centuries or so, and adopted the repertoire they still use today.[1]

The shift in question was that from riot to strike. Since the passage marked by Tilly, both tactics have existed within the repertoire; the question concerns which predominates, providing the primary orientation in the ceaseless war for survival and emancipation. The sense of the riot's receding character within this telling has been a commonplace. The

1 Charles Tilly, "Speaking Your Mind Without Elections, Surveys, or Social Movements," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 4, Winter 1983, 464.

opening sentence of the authoritative 1996 volume *Rioting in America* informs us, "Rioting is part of the American past."[2] But the past is never dead. It's not even past.

In truth, another transformation was already in flight: since the sixties or seventies, the great historical shift has reversed itself. As the overdeveloped nations have entered into sustained, if uneven, crisis, the riot has returned as the leading tactic in the repertoire of collective action. This is true both in the popular imaginary and the realm of data (insofar as such matters give of statistical comparison). Regardless of perspective, riots have achieved an intransigent social centrality. Labor struggles have in the main been diminished to ragged defensive actions, while the riot features increasingly as the central figure of political antagonism, a specter leaping from insurrectionary debates to anxious governmental studies to glossy magazine covers. The names have become ordinal points of our time. The new era of riots has roots in Watts, Newark, Detroit; it passes through Tiananmen Square in 1989 and Los Angeles in 1992, arriving in the global present of São Paulo, Gezi Park, San Lázaro. The protorevolutionary riot of Tahrir Square, the nearly permanent riot of Exarcheia, the reactionary turn of Euromaidan. In the twilit core: Clichy-sous-Bois, Tottenham, Oakland, Ferguson, Baltimore. Too many to count.

Theory is immanent to struggle; often enough it must hurry to catch up to a reality that lurches ahead. A theory of the present will arise from its lived confrontations, rather than arriving on the scene laden with backdated homilies and prescriptions regarding how the war against state and capital ought be waged, programs we are told once worked and might now be refurbished and imposed once again

2 Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, 1.

on our quite distinct moment. The subjunctive is a lovely mood, but it is not the mood of historical materialism.

Here we reach a sort of crossroad. Put in the most schematic terms, the association of Marx's analytic framework with a Leninist account of political strategy—one centered around proletarian organization toward the revolutionary party and the seizure both of state and production—is profoundly sedimented. The riot has no place in this conceptual landscape. Often enough riot is understood to have no politics at all, a spasmodic irruption to be read symptomatically and perhaps granted a paternalistic dollop of sympathy. Those who have accorded the riot the potential for an insurrectionary opening onto a social rupture come generally from intellectual and political traditions indifferent or even antithetical to the command of state and economy, most famously (but not exclusively) those of some strands of anarchism.[3]

This expresses a subterranean linking of communism, by skeptics as much as adherents, with "organization" as such, and further with a left party of order, with a scientific sense of history's progress, with modernity through which we must pass in all its machined barbarity. Contrarily, the riot, as is broadly agreed even among its partisans, is a great disorder.

The opposition of strike and riot thus comes to stand, via veiled syllogism, for the opposition of Marxism *tout court* to other intellectual and political trajectories, generally those that are antidialectical if not directly anticommunist traditions. Most if not all sides have taken part in this apportioning. There has been no shortage of books left and

3 The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2009, and its follow-up *To Our Friends*, trans. Semiotext(e), Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2015, are the most incisive versions.

right that inform us, in tonalities now melancholy, now celebratory, that the waning of the labor movement and of the revolutionary class-mass party sequence, or the alleged transcendence of any labor theory of value, means that we may finally leave Marx's analysis and his categories to the twentieth century, if not the nineteenth. You will be familiar with the narration. The home counties of capitalism no longer feature an industrial working class of rising power or magnitude such that it can stand as a fraction for the exploited classes in general, much less lay hands on the levers of production. Moreover, the original focus on the English factory worker, and the accounting of such labor as peculiarly productive of value and thus closer to the heart of capital, has inevitably figured the subject of politics as white and male. Given the globalization of capital, its leap into all corners of social existence, and the vital developments of anticolonial politics (to shorthand a series of crucial and complex interventions), a new revolutionary subject will be needed, and a new revolutionary unfolding.

This is surely caricature. For all that, such suggestions are in many regards instructive if not simply true. This poses not a refutation of historical materialism but a set of problems for it. The waning of the traditional labor movements in the west and the intensification of a more thoroughgoing dispossession augur the end neither of potentially revolutionary anticapitalist antagonism nor of historical materialism's analytical force. Moreover, we will still require the latter to grasp the former.

After all, historical materialism is a theory of transformation if it is anything at all. This is not to say that every turn on the historical stage ought be affirmed. But a Marxism that can understand the tendency of reality only as error is no Marxism at all. The meaning of the riot has changed dramatically. It will not be understood without

naming the determinations and forces according to which it takes on its new role, and by which it is driven forward irresistibly into the future, even as it looks backward on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This then is the most basic necessity: a *properly materialist theorization of the riot*. Riot for communists, let's say.

It is not clear that such a volume exists. Perhaps the closest approach is Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*. "I, too, am a Marxist—naively, completely and so naturally there is no need to reiterate it," he insists, reiterating it in multiple while noting that he is

> well aware of the problems that have been resolved, and which it is pointless to start reinvestigating; and of the problems that remain outstanding, and which require of us radical rectification and strenuous invention. Any living knowledge is made up of problems, which have been or must be constructed or reconstructed, not of repetitive descriptions.[4]

Having offered this promissory note, he does not thenceforth wrestle greatly with the problematics of capital, nor make much use of the categories bequeathed us by the critique of political economy. We are left with "the Idea" playing the role vacated by the party, providing a coordination of revolutionary spirit that proceeds at some distance from the dialectical developments of social forces.

Badiou orders his book as a taxonomy of riots organized around the Arab Spring. This is one among the overlapping generic approaches to such studies, dividing up riots according to political status, to occasion or proximate

4 Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliot, New York: Verso, 2012, 8.

cause, to coherence of participants. Another is the sociological study of rioters and their immediate conditions, and its close cousin the (generally first-person) phenomenology. Then there are the case studies of famous riots, alongside less glamorous surveys and atlases. Whatever its lacunae, the library of riot is dark and deep; only a fraction can be touched upon herein. This book has other promises to keep. It draws as well on Marx's value theory and the theory of crisis from which it cannot be disentangled, accounts of how urban cores hollow out, how entire sectors of the economy rise and fall, and how the capitalist world-system is ordered and disordered; the tradition of world-systems analysis provides a framework of both global breadth and *longue durée* within which to think the localized event of the riot.

There are limits to this extension, necessarily. It is evident that riots in India and China, to choose only two contemporary examples, have their own distinct characteristics (and their own developing scholarship). My claims mostly concern the early industrializing and now deindustrializing nations of the west. These places do not have a privileged claim on riots; they are, rather, the terrain in which a particular logic becomes visible, a logic of both riot and of capital in its catastrophic autumn. The claims are, I hope, somewhat portable for all that, embedded in political-economic changes that are themselves bound to travel.

Moreover, just as the new era of riots expresses capital's global transformations and thus bears capital's objective conditions, it becomes an occasion to peer more deeply into those transformations. If this book offers any novelties, they are these. First, clarified definitions of *riot* and *strike*, which suffer from more confusion than one might expect. Second, an explanation of why the riot has returned and why it takes the form it does in the present. And third,

once a logic of riot and its relation to transformations of capital has been derived, some forecasts about the future of struggle. A theory of the present, then. At a minimum, the theory should be able to explain why, following the failure to return an indictment against the police officer who murdered Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, there was a national wave of riots—and why, as if by a telepathy of the immiserated, the riots in city after city took the form of blocking the nearest available freeway.

Riot-Strike-Riot Prime

This book is arranged more or less chronologically, from the golden age of riot through the age of strikes and back again, with a particular focus on the transitional passages. However, it is not a chronicle. Rather, it takes the opportunity to develop a series of concepts and arguments about riot and political economy as it moves. It builds an explanatory model that can coordinate the basic facts of the present, such that they might testify a bit more eloquently. As it approaches the current era, the chapters inevitably get a bit more detailed. Nonetheless, the whole will necessarily be a simplification of reality's endless complexities; such are heuristic models. At least this makes for shorter books.

King George I's Riot Act in 1714, responding in part to the Coronation Riots attending his ascension, declares itself "An act for preventing tumults and riotous assemblies, and for the more speedy and effectual punishing the rioters." It raises a question about the riot's communicative status from the outset. It is in no small regard about declaration, about speech—it prescribes the language that must be read to declare an assembly unlawful (hence "reading the Riot Act"). With it, the term *riot* modulates decisively from its older sense of "Wanton, loose, or

wasteful living; debauchery, dissipation, extravagance" and even "unrestrained revelry, mirth or noise" to its contemporary meaning of "a violent disturbance of the peace by an assembly or body of persons; an outbreak of active lawlessness or disorder among the populace." Chaucer's usage, as so often, presages the word's modernity. "For thefte and riot, they been convertible," he writes in "The Cook's Tale," noting that the master pays the price for the apprentice's revelry.[5] He associates the word with the overturning of social hierarchies.

Transition from riot to strike takes hold unevenly. The arrival of the strike as social fact falls somewhere between 1790 and 1842, the date of the first massive strike in England. Like many sea changes, it is as hard to recognize at first as it will prove entirely apparent in later view. It will be useful to recognize the continuity as well as the opposition, the way that new content for struggle emerges from older forms of action and thus goes through periods of ambiguity. The same might be said of the later return to riot; it is early yet. With the waning of the labor movement in the west the riot ascends, both relatively and absolutely. Inevitably, there is an interval when the two tactics coexist alongside each other. From one perspective, they seem to vie for primacy; from another, the volatility of their dual presence during this second transition provisions a revolutionary situation, one known widely and not entirely accurately by the name "1968." The world-historical year of 1973 is the swivel, with the collapse of industrial profits signaling the onset of what should rightly be called the Long Crisis, with its recompositions of class and global division of labor that progressively undermine the possibilities for

5 "For thefte and riot, they been convertible." Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987, 85.

militant labor organization in the west. By the eighties, the transition is largely complete. If this first appears as part of a more widespread closure of revolutionary frontiers—as the end of history concomitant with the exit of twentieth-century communisms—that verdict is once again open to debate. The debate is inextricably wound up with the riot's return.

Riot-strike-riot, then. But that won't quite do. Such a formulation can't help but suggest a simple oscillation, or worse, an atavistic reversion. That story has its appeals, given the affective tonalities of the present, the intimations of civilizational collapse accelerated by ecological catastrophe. Still, it's just a shape, not a theory. It is neither explanatory nor accurate. The new era of riots in many ways does not resemble its predecessor. Previous to the nineteenth century, general difficulties faced by the poor in managing subsistence—including not just bread riots but the common anti-enclosure riot—provided the occasion for social antagonism to burst forth. Notably, these events included "export riots," episodes in which the shipping of grain out of county, especially in times of famine, was halted by concerted and coordinated efforts. By many accounts, this basic configuration of needs obtains today; positivistic studies linking food prices to riots remain common, and in some ways persuasive, particularly in low-wage nations. Nonetheless, riot after riot begins now not at the granary but at the police station, literally or figuratively, incited by the police murder of a young person with dark skin, or following on the failure of the legal apparatus to hold the police adequately responsible for their violence. The new era finds its paradigm in the Los Angeles riots of 1992, following the acquittal of the officers who were recorded beating Rodney King brutally after a traffic stop—riots which spread to numerous other cities and continued for

five days. Increasingly, the contemporary riot transpires within a logic of racialization and takes the state rather than the economy as its direct antagonist. The riot returns not only to a changed world but changed itself.

Riot-strike-riot prime. Better. These terms provide the book's three sections. Each has not just a proper period but a proper place. For the first era of riot, the market, but even more the port; for the era of strike, the factory floor; and, for the new era of riot, square and street. To make good on this tripartite sequence, this book will need to discover both the continuity of the two eras of riots as well as their difference: the unity of a tumult in the marketplace and the often racialized upwellings directed apparently against the state. Here then is the argument, in its condensed and abstracted form, to which the remainder of the book will add both particulars and digressions, as well as a political-economic framework and a glance forward.

The Marketplace and the Factory Floor

The primary difficulty in defining the riot devolves from its profound association with violence; for many, this association is so affectively charged in one direction or another that it is difficult to dispel and in turn difficult to notice other things. No doubt many riots involve violence —perhaps the great majority, if one includes property damage in the category, as well as threats explicit or *sub voce*. It is not altogether clear that such inclusion is natural or reasonable. That property damage equals violence is not a truth but the adoption of a particular set of ideas about property, one of relatively recent vintage, involving specific identifications of humans with abstract wealth of the sort that culminate in, for example, the legal holdings that corporations are people.

However, this insistence on the violence of the riot effectively obscures the daily, systematic, and ambient violence that stalks daily life for much of the world. The vision of a generally pacific sociality that only in exception breaks forth into violence is an imaginary accessible only to some. For others—most—social violence is the norm. The rhetoric of the violent riot becomes a device of exclusion, aimed not so much against "violence" but against specific social groups.

Moreover, across more than two centuries, strikes quite often involved violence as well: pitched battles between workers on one side and cops, scabs and mercenaries on the other, which at their zenith resembled military engagements. If one extends the category as above, violence is ubiquitous in the strike, even as a kind of defensive counterviolence. Reporting from France in 1968, the Italian poet Angelo Quattrochi noted,

> Workers can threaten to smash the machinery, and the threat alone can prevent an armed intervention. Masters of the factory, their condition of dispossession is their very strength. The machines, the Capital, owned by others and by others manipulated, are now in their hands.[6]

This passage intends to distinguish the limited strike, for Quattrochi a craven and choreographed event, from the factory occupation. It is suggestive that he chose to make the distinction in that moment, peering down at a Paris where riot and strike have entered into vivid collaboration and competition, each trying to transcend not just its

6 Angelo Quattrochi, "What Happened," in *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968*, eds. Angelo Quattrochi and Tom Nairn, New York: Verso, 1998, 49.

own but the other's limits. That said, the limited strike's gray servility is itself a particular historical development. The real situation he describes, the potential for workers to dispose of the gears of production as they see fit, is at the heart of the strike.

But this is already to have implied that we know the difference between riot and strike. If not violence, what then? E. P. Thompson, whose thought is this book's lodestone, provides the basis for an answer in his epochal "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." If this answer has gone curiously overlooked, it is almost certainly because the essay never quite formalizes the logic it makes available. Taking issue with the reductions and depoliticizing force cached within the term "bread riot," he produces a more systematic vision of the riot's political economy:

> It has been suggested that the term "riot" is a blunt tool of analysis for so many particular grievances and occasions. It is also an imprecise term for describing popular actions. If we are looking for the characteristic form of direct action, we should take, not squabbles outside London bakeries, nor even the great affrays provoked by discontent with the large millers, but the "risings of the people" (most notably in 1740, 1756, 1766, 1795 and 1800) in which colliers, tinners, weavers and hosiery workers were prominent. What is remarkable about these "insurrections" is, first, their discipline, and, second, the fact that they exhibit a pattern of behaviour for whose origin we must look back several hundreds of years: which becomes more, rather than less, sophisticated in the eighteenth century; which repeats itself, seemingly spontaneously, in different parts of the country and after the passage of many quiet years. The central action in this pattern is not the sack of granaries

> and the pilfering of grain or flour but the action of "setting the price."[7]

This is precisely the situation that will turn with the century:

> Economic class-conflict in nineteenth-century England found its characteristic expression in the matter of wages; in eighteenth-century England the working people were most quickly inflamed to action by rising prices.[8]

Thompson catches the texture of deep transformation in flight, elusive as it is immanent:

> We are coming to the end of one tradition, and the new tradition has scarcely emerged. In these years the alternative form of economic pressure—pressure upon wages—is becoming more vigorous; there is also something more than rhetoric behind the language of sedition—underground union organization, oaths, the shadowy "United Englishmen." In 1812 traditional food riots overlap with Luddism. In 1816 the East Anglian laborers do not only set the prices, they also demand a minimum wage and an end to Speenhamland relief. They look forward to the very different revolt of laborers in 1830. The older form of action lingers on into the 1840s and even later: it was especially deeply rooted in the Southwest. But in the new territories of the industrial revolution it passed by stages into other forms of action.[9]

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7 E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, no. 50, Feb. 1971, 107–8.

8 Ibid., 79.

9 Ibid., 128–9.

Prices and wages, this is the pairing. One the measure of the marketplace, the other that of the factory floor and the mine, of agricultural labor once commonly held lands and subsistence farming have gone down amid blood and fire. R. H. Tawney makes much the same point, in somewhat different terms:

> The economy of the mediaeval borough was one in which consumption held somewhat the same primacy in the public mind, as the undisputed arbiter of economic effort, as the nineteenth century attached to profits.[10]

But wages are themselves a special kind of price. Reminding ourselves of this, the formula becomes clear: In the first instance, *riot is the setting of prices for market goods, while strike is the setting of prices for labor power.* This is the first level or horizon of analysis required for understanding the history of riot, which we might call the practical level. The political practice in its fullest dimension is that of reproduction—of the household and the individual, of the local community. Around the turn from eighteenth to nineteenth century, the matter of reproduction shifts its center of gravity from one location to another, one struggle to the next.

Consumer and worker are not two opposed, much less successive, classes, it should go without saying. Rather, they are two momentary roles within the collective activity required to reproduce a single class: the emergent modern proletariat, who must make their way within the wage-commodity nexus. If one moment takes precedence over the other, this speaks to the given degree of technical and social development within that nexus, and the position

10 R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London: Harcourt Brace, 1926, 33.

the proletarian holds in relation. In the scene of riot, those setting prices in the marketplace may be laborers (note Thompson's "colliers, tinners, weavers and hosiery workers") but this is not the immediate fact that has brought them there. This recognition allows a refinement of our definitions.

The strike is the form of collective action that

1) struggles to set the price of labor power (or the conditions of labor, which is much the same thing: the amount of misery that can be purchased by the pound);
2) features workers appearing *in their role as workers;*
3) unfolds in the context of capitalist production, featuring its interruption at the source via the downing of tools, cordoning of the factory floor, etc.

The riot is the form of collective action that

1) struggles to set the price of market goods (or their availability, which is much the same thing, for the question is similarly one of access);
2) features participants with no necessary kinship but their dispossession;
3) unfolds in the context of consumption, featuring the interruption of commercial circulation.

This apparatus is simple but powerful, and suffices for the span first surveyed by our scholars, well into the twentieth century. It nonetheless poses problems for the present. The characteristic struggles of *riot prime*, the period beginning in the sixties alongside the strike's last flourishing, and continuing into the present, cannot finally be understood adequately within the framework of price-setting, even in

Thompson's expanded sense. But neither can it be understood without it. It is here that we will require a second level or horizon: that of periodization, concerned precisely with the degree of capital's technical and social development referred to above, in all its eloquent and ambiguous undulations.

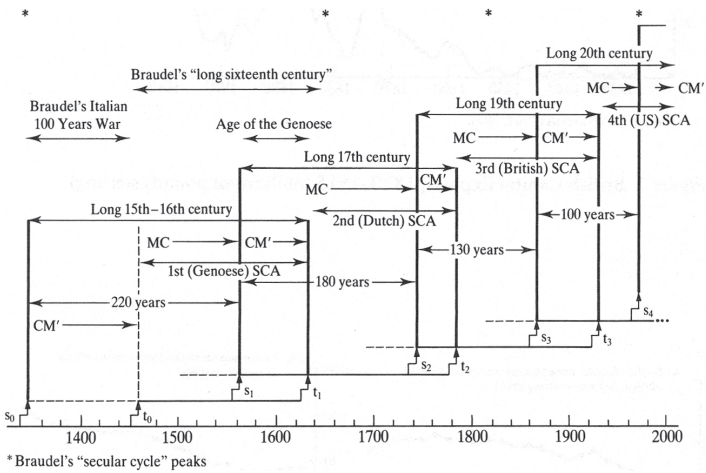
Circulation-Production-Circulation Prime

We have noticed already that the first transition, *riot-strike*, corresponds both historically and logically to the Industrial Revolution and its extension and intensification of the wage relation at the beginning of Britain's long nineteenth century. The second transition, *strike-riot prime*, corresponds in turn to the period of "hegemony unraveling" at the end of the United States' long twentieth century. A rise and a fall. A certain shapeliness amid the mess and noise of history delivering us now to the autumn of empire known variously by the terms *late capitalism*, *financialization*, *post-Fordism*, and so forth—that dilating litany racing to keep pace with our protean disaster.

These datings are drawn from the schema of Giovanni Arrighi, who describes four "long centuries and systemic cycles of accumulation."

"The main feature of the temporal profile of historical capitalism sketched here is the similar structure of all long centuries," notes Arrighi.[11] The recurrent structure is a tripartite sequence beginning with a financial expansion originally led by merchant capital; material expansion "of the entire world-economy" led by manufacturing or more broadly industrial capital, in which capital accumulates systemically; and when that has reached its limits, a final

11 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times,* London: Verso, 1996, 219–20.



financial expansion. During this phase, no real recovery of accumulation is possible, but only more and less desperate strategies of deferral. Historically, the financial sector of the leading economy has in such a situation found a rising industrial power to soak up its excess capital, thus bankrolling its own replacement. This new hegemon will form on necessarily expanded grounds, able to restore accumulation on a global scale but by the same token beginning from a position closer to its own limits for expansion—thus Arrighi's overlapping cycles, broadening and quickening as they go, the series of transfers once known as *translatio imperii*.

This schematization has been occasion for various inquiries about the transition to capitalism often found under the heading "Commerce or Capitalism?" Robert Brenner, Ellen Meiksins Woods and others have argued that the development of extensive trading networks and accompanying social reorganization should not be confused with capitalism proper, and particularly not with capital's "relentless and systematic development of the productive forces," which cannot be said to have started much before

the British cycle and industrial takeoff.[12] It is precisely this distinction that animates the argument herein. Markets inarguably predate capitalism and continue within it; they become part of capitalism's constitution only once they are transformed by the elaboration of the wage-commodity nexus and subjected to the disciplines of surplus-value production. This tracks the first transition, *riot-strike*.

And yet it is hard to dispute Arrighi's finding that protocapitalist commercial empires followed much the same developmental parabola as their more realized versions. The two great capitalist empires of Britain and the United States preserve and transmute the developmental forms, filling them with new content. Within the spiraling reach of capital, each cycle features a phase dominated by the logic of production, here meaning the valorization of commodities, which Arrighi generalizes as M-C. Bracketing this are phases dominated by circulation, for such is the character of merchant or finance capital, which Arrighi defines as the realization of values, or C-M. It is never either/or. Both processes must be in conjoined flight or capital would cease to move altogether (and immobile capital is not capital at all). The description here concerns the balance of forces within the expanded circuit of capital.

We have therefore a periodization to match our practices: *riot-strike-riot prime* maps onto phases of *circulation-production-circulation*. True, the period bracketing the beginning of the twentieth century was for Britain, still at the time the leading capitalist economy, a financial or circulation-centered period. Here, the reasoning of Arrighi's overlap-based schema comes clear. While the United States experienced its own "Long Depression" corresponding to Britain's economic shift at the heel of the nineteenth

12 Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, London: Verso, 2009, 13.

century, it nonetheless oversaw in this period a notable expansion of production driven by a second Industrial Revolution able to counterbalance the British decline. Our current phase of circulation, however, lacks much evidence of such systemic counterbalance; for all the attention paid to China's role as the new workshop to the world, e.g., it is already shedding industrial labor.[13]

Indeed, this gestures toward what is unique, at least provisionally, about our moment within a world-systems frame. The spiraling reach of long centuries may have run out of room to expand; reformation on a larger scale does not seem to be in the cards (though we should not too easily dismiss capital's ability to rescue itself from seemingly total crisis). Productive capital held sway from, say, 1784 to 1973. It may yet again. For the moment, this seems uncertain. Far from underwriting a rising hegemon, the United States in its decline is—despite its hypertrophied financial sector—ending its run as a massive debtor nation. It is now possible to argue that, even at a global or systemic level, capital finds itself in a phase of circulation not being met by rising production elsewhere—a distinct phase we will inevitably have to name *circulation prime*.

Accordingly, the British and U.S. regimes can be melded into a single metacycle following the sequence *circulation-production-circulation prime*. Again, this requires a certain heuristic smoothing of the capitalist world-system's volatile trajectory. It is an argument, not a plain truth. Still, we think it is a suggestive one: it is possible to map Arrighi's three phases onto Brenner's periodization of capital in what can be seen as an "arc of accumulation," at least in the west, rising from commerce with the Industrial Revolution

13 Alan Freeman, "Investing in Civilisation: What the State Can Do in a Crisis" in *Bailouts and Bankruptcies*, eds., Julie Guard and Wayne Antony, eds., Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2009.

and descending into finance with widespread deindustrialization, with no reversal in view. The coeval sequence of *riot-strike-riot prime* becomes therefore a history of capitalism and an exposition of its current form, of the contradictions of the present.

Riot and Crisis

For the return of the riot to serve as testimony about the status of capitalism as such, there must be more than a coincidence between the two sequences. There must be a theoretical enchainment. This is the third and final level or analytical horizon, that of history itself, by which we mean the dialectical twining of lived struggles with the compulsions of capital's self-moving motion, understood as a real movement of social existence. What within the objective motion of capital joins riot to circulation, strike to production, and moves us from one to the next?

This question has already been given a preliminary answer. Phases led by material production will issue forth struggles within production, over the price of labor power; phases led by circulation will see struggles in the marketplace, over the price of goods. This is a synchronic account, lacking a dynamic that drives us from phase to phase; moreover, it does not yet address the peculiarities of *riot prime* and *circulation prime*. That requires a swift pass through the Marxian theory of crisis.[14]

Value, for Marx, has both a qualitative existence as a social relation and a quantitative existence in exchange

14 It is frequently noted that Marx did not leave behind a completed theory of crisis. His value theory in general, however, provides the logical basis for an elaborated theory. For the best summary of this, see Anwar Shaikh, "Introduction to the History of Crisis Theories," *US Capitalism in Crisis*, New York: URPE, 1978.

value.[15] The exchange value borne by a commodity allows for surplus value, the "invisible essence of capital," valorized in production and realized as profit in circulation. Circulation, Marx is at pains to decipher, can never itself be the source of new value for capital as a whole. The idea that it could receives an extended and scorn-laced treatment in *Capital* that ends:

> However much we twist and turn, the final conclusion remains the same. If equivalents are exchanged, no surplus value results, and if nonequivalents are exchanged, we still have no surplus-value. Circulation, or the exchange of commodities, creates no value.[16]

These categories are endlessly troubled, not least by the limits of "circulation." The extraordinary development of transport, one of the hallmarks of our time, would seem at first to fit the bill, circulating products toward realizing as profit the surplus value valorized elsewhere. The change of location, some argue contrarily, increases the value of a commodity. In its most restricted sense, "pure circulation costs" might be limited to activities that make nothing but exchange itself, the abstract transfer of title: sales, bookkeeping, and the like. Moreover, financialization and "globalization" (by which we mean the extension toward planetary limits of logistical networks and processes, coordinated by advances in information technologies) should also be understood as temporal and spatial strategies respectively to internalize new value inputs from elsewhere

15 For the most eloquent gloss of this portion of Marx's theory, see I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*, trans. Fredy Perlman and Milos Samardzija, New York: Black Rose, 1990, 120–21.

16 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy,* vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1992, 266.

and elsewhen. But this can only affirm the proposition that the current phase in our cycle of accumulation is defined by the collapse of value production at the core of the world-system; it is for this reason that capital's center of gravity shifts toward circulation, borne by the troika of Toyotaization, information technology, and finance.

Here, practical facts prove illuminating. As Brenner notes:

> Between 1973 and the present, economic performance in the US, western Europe, and Japan has, by every standard macroeconomic indicator, deteriorated, business cycle by business cycle, decade by decade (with the exception of the second half of the 1990s).[17]

Global GDP growth from the fifties through the seventies remained higher than 4 percent; since then, it has rested at 3 percent or lower, sometimes much lower.[18] Even the best of times during the Long Crisis have been by and large worse than the worst of times in the preceding long boom. Were we to stipulate that transport may be part of valorization as well as realization, we would nonetheless confront the fact that the great build-outs of global transport and the acceleration of turnover time since the seventies are concurrent with the retreat of industrial production in the leading capitalist nations. This lockstep march is in turn concomitant with exactly what value theory projects from a shift toward circulation: less value production, fewer systemic profits. By any measure, shipping and finance do not seem to have arrested the stagnation and decline in

17 Robert Brenner, "What's Good for Goldman Sachs," prologue to Spanish edition of *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, Madrid: Akal, 2009. Made available to the author in typescript, 6.

18 Ibid., 8.

global profitability. Borrowing a term from Gilles Chatelet, we might call their collaboration "cybermercantilism," cognate to the preindustrial mode in which no amount of buying cheap and selling dear or selling more and more can lead to expansion.

But this is not to say they have not bolstered the profits of individual firms, which can gain competitive advantage by decreasing their own circulation costs in a game of beggar-your-neighbor for the age of information technology. Similarly, firms can enter into schemes that recirculate and redistribute already extant value, skimming a portion as it passes. Without going too far into the Marxological maze, we can affirm rather uncontroversially about the period in question that capital, faced with greatly diminished returns in the traditionally productive sectors, goes looking for profit beyond the confines of the factory—in the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate), along the lanes laid out by global logistical networks—yet finds there no ongoing solution to the crisis that pushed it from production in the first place. Instead, ever more frenetic churning, more elaborate schemes, larger bubbles, bigger busts.

In a motion of dialectical despair, the very thing that has sent capital into the fratricidal zero-sum sphere of circulation does much the same for a rising portion of humanity. Crisis and unemployment, the two great themes of *Capital*, are both expressions of capital's tragic flaw: that, in seeking profit, it must destroy profit's wellspring, careering into objective limits in its unrelenting drive for accumulation and productivity. The *Grundrisse* offers the most concise formulation:

> Capital itself is the moving contradiction, [in] that it presses to reduce labor time to a minimum, while it posits

> labor time, on the other side, as sole measure and source of wealth. Hence it diminishes labor time in the necessary form so as to increase it in the superfluous form; hence posits the superfluous in growing measure as a condition—question of life or death—for the necessary.[19]

The "moving contradiction" is nothing but the law of value itself in motion, presenting itself in various forms. One might see it as the contradiction between value and price, the measures of production and circulation respectively—which will turn out to be as well the contradiction between capital as a whole and individual capitals. The latter do not concern themselves with the overall health of the capitalist system, nor are they compelled to do so. They are compelled, rather, to outcompete other capitals in their sector. So, whereas the need to expand, to generate new value leading to systemic accumulation, is an existential absolute from the standpoint of all capital, individual capitalists do not think in terms of value and accumulation. They measure their existence in price and wealth, and are compelled to seek profit wherever it may be found, regardless of the consequences for the whole.

No less is this unitary phenomenon a contradiction between absolute and relative surplus value. Intercapitalist struggles to economize all processes iteratively replace labor power with more efficient machines and organizational forms, and so over time increase the ratio of constant to variable capital, dead to living labor, expelling the source of absolute surplus value in the struggle for its relative form.

Crisis is development of these contradictions to the breaking point. This features not a shortage of money but

19 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, London: Penguin Books, 1993, 706.

its surplus. Accrued profit lies fallow, unable to convert itself into capital, for there is no longer any seductive reason to invest in further production. The factories go quiet. Seeking wages elsewhere, displaced workers discover that labor-saving automation has generalized itself across the various lines. Now unused labor piles up cheek by jowl with unused capacity. This is the production of nonproduction.

Here, we have returned under somewhat different cover to the matter of class, in the form of what Marx calls "surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labor. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class, and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*."[20] As *Endnotes* points out in the most incisive treatment of this issue: "This surplus population need not find itself completely 'outside' capitalist social relations. Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work. They are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty production and services —identified with informal and often illegal markets of direct exchange arising alongside failures of capitalist production."[21]

It cannot be surprising that this surplus population is racialized across the west. Capital's capacity for profit has always required the production and reproduction of social difference; in slack labor markets, the apparatus of wage differentials makes the leap from quantitative to qualitative. Alongside the "jobless recoveries" since

20 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 798 (emphasis in original).
21 "Misery and Debt," *Endnotes* 2, 2010, 30, fn15.

1980 that lend support to underlying theories of growing surplus, the unemployment rate among, for example, black Americans has consistently approached double the going average, if not higher, arranging among other things a vast expansion of the prison-industrial complex to manage this human surplus. The process of racialization is itself intimately entangled with the production of surplus populations, each functioning to constitute the other according to varying logics of profound exclusion. As Chris Chen argues:

> The rise of the anti-black U.S. carceral state from the 1970s onward exemplifies rituals of state and civilian violence which enforce the racialization of wageless life, and the racial ascription of wagelessness. From the point of view of capital, "race" is renewed not only through persistent racialized wage differentials, or the kind of occupational segregation posited by earlier "split labor market" theories of race, but through the racialization of unwaged surplus or superfluous populations from Khartoum to the slums of Cairo.[22]

This operates in turn at the level of the contemporary riot, a surplus rebellion that is both marked by and marks out race. Hence a final distinction from the strike, which in modern form exists within a legal framework (even if this is often enough exceeded). Here, we begin to understand the kind of ideological work being done by the insistence on the peculiar illegitimacy of riot. The illegality of *riot prime* is among other things the illegality of the racialized body.

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22 Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality," *Endnotes* 3, 2013, 217.

Circulation Struggles

A population, then, whose very being—its possibility for reproduction—is recentered by economic reorganization from the sphere of production into that of circulation. This is not "consumer society" in the popular sense, "the definitive victory of materialism in a universal worship of the commodity-fetish."[23] But it is a consumer society nonetheless: surplus population confronted by the old problem of consumption without direct access to the wage. Not absolutely, not evenly across the globe, but enough. We speak of tendential shifts. When the basis for capital's survival shifts sufficiently to circulation, and the basis for the survival of the immiserated shifts much the same, there we shall find *riot prime*. It thus names the social reorganization, the period in which it holds sway, and the leading form of collective action that corresponds to this situation.

It is a somewhat technical way of talking about exclusion and immiseration, doubtless, this use of categories from classical political economy and its critique. The virtue of this language lies in its power to explain the linkage between *riot* and *riot prime*—to disclose that bread riot and race riot, those paired misnomers, retain a deep unity. In a summary formulation, crisis signals a shift of capital's center of gravity into circulation, both theoretically and practically, and riot is in the last instance to be understood as a circulation struggle, of which price-setting and the surplus rebellion are distinct, though related, forms.

The new proletariat, which must now (in keeping with the original sense of the word) expand to include surplus populations among those "without reserves," finds itself in

23 Tom Nairn, "Why It Happened," in *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968*, eds. Angelo Quattrochi and Tom Nairn, New York: Verso, 1998, 136.

a changed world. We have already detailed some of the changes. The situation can be limned as an epochal chiasmus. In 1700, police as we recognize them did not exist; the occasional bailiff or beadle watched over the marketplace. At the same time, most of life's daily necessities were made locally. In short, the state was far and the economy near. In 2015, the state is near and the economy far. Production is aerosolized; commodities are assembled and delivered across global logistics chains. Even basic foodstuffs are likely to originate a continent away. Meanwhile, the standing domestic army of the state is always at hand—progressively militarized, on the pretext of making war on drugs and terror. *Riot prime* cannot help but heave itself against the state; there is no way not to.

The spectacular encounter with the state should not, however, suggest that there is no directly economic form to the contemporary riot, in addition to its underlying political-economic content. The two manifest forms are economic destruction and looting, one often following on the other in a conjoined negation of market exchange and market logic. Despite the universal appearance of this aspect of the riot, it is unfailingly treated as a deviation from, and compromise of, the initial grievance that might have granted the riot legitimacy. What ethical claim could outright theft possibly make? That this seems at all mysterious points to a moment of ideological closure and supreme historical ignorance. Looting is not the moment of falsehood but of truth echoing across centuries of riot: a version of price-setting in the marketplace, albeit at price zero. It is a desperate turn to the question of reproduction, though one dramatically limited by the structure of capital within which it initially operates.

If the riot raises the question of reproduction, it does so as negation. It stands as the reversal of labor's fate in late

modernity. Labor's historical power has rested on a growing productive sector and its ability to seize a share of expanding surplus. Since the turn of the seventies, labor has been reduced to defensive negotiations, compelled to preserve the firms able to supply wages, affirming the domination of capital in return for its own preservation. The worker appearing *as worker* in the period of crisis confronts a situation in which "the very fact of acting as a class appears as an external constraint."[24] This dynamic, which we might call the affirmation trap, has become a generalized social form and conceptual framework, the rational irrationality of our moment. The riot's very disorder can be understood as the immediate negation of this.

Such struggles, in turn, cannot help but confront capital where it is most vulnerable. There is no need to impute a kind of consciousness to this latent form of conflict with capital. Compelled into the space of circulation, the riot finds itself where capital has increasingly shifted its resources. The riot's more or less simultaneous arrival on the freeways of St. Louis, Los Angeles, Nashville, and more than a dozen other cities is as decisive a verdict on the circulation thesis as could be imagined. Easy enough to say that such an interruption is largely symbolic: How much of capital is elsewhere, globally distributed, resilient, dematerialized? The freeway takeovers of late November 2014 are nonetheless an index of the real situation in which struggle will take place. They demonstrate moreover the limits of the various categories of riot. They are self-evidently descendants of the premodern export riots. No less are they siblings to the 2011 port shutdown in Oakland and the

24 Théorie Communiste, "Communization in the Present Tense," in *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles,* ed. Benjamin Noys, New York: Minor Compositions, 2011, 41.

long No-TAV blockade of the planned Susa Valley tunnel. To recognize this is to recognize that the riot is a privileged tactic insofar as it is exemplary of the larger category we designate "circulation struggles": the riot, the blockade, the occupation and, at the far horizon, the commune.

"We are coming to the end of one tradition, and the new tradition has scarcely emerged," Thompson wrote about the transition of two centuries ago.[25] Even the bourgeois press catches a glimpse of this: In 2011, *Time* magazine featured a Tottenham rioter on its cover, tracksuit and mask, flames behind, with the headline THE DECLINE AND FALL OF EUROPE (AND MAYBE THE WEST).[26] Something has ended, or should have ended; everyone can feel it. It is a sort of interregnum. A miserable lull, backlit everywhere by the sense of declension and fires flaring across the planetary terrain of struggle. The songs on the radio are the same—awful, astonishing. They promise that nothing has changed, but they never keep their promises, do they? The fissures in the organization of society that has obtained for some while widen weekly. And yet this anxious persistence, this uneasy suspension. Will there be a restoration? Greater catastrophe? Which should we prefer? This is the tonality of the time of riots.

25 Thompson, "Moral Economy," 128.
26 *Newsweek*, August 22, 2011.

CHAPTER 8

Surplus Rebellions

There is much conjecture, some of it government-funded, on how riots spread.[1] This is true in no small part because individual instances are subject to real contingencies and local determinations; mechanistic explanations generate their own exceptions as swiftly as they do confirmations. The most common language is that of contagion, the vectors being individual agents or mass media. In 1793, William Godwin wrote,

> The conviviality of feast may lead to the depredation of riot. The sympathy of opinion catches from man to man, especially in numerous meetings, and among persons whose passions have not been used to the curb of judgment … There is nothing more barbarous, bloodthirsty and unfeeling than the triumph of a mob.[2]

Two centuries later, the authors of *The Coming Insurrection* propose that "revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by resonance."[3]

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1 For example, The U.S. Department of Defense–funded Minerva Institute. See "Program History and Overview," minerva.dtic.mil.

2 William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, vol. I, London: G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1793, 208.

3 Invisible Committee, *Coming Insurrection*, 12 (emphasis in original).

Sam Greenlee's 1969 novel *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* contains a vision of the race riot transcending its spatial barriers and becoming a guerilla race-war that threatens the nation-state. "Oakland blew first, then Los Angeles, then, leap-frogging the continent, Harlem and South Philadelphia … Every city with a ghetto wondered if they might be next. The most powerful nation in history stood on the brink of panic and chaos."[4] Leaps, leaps, leaps. It is a fiction, of course. Moreover, in Greenlee's story the generalization is orchestrated by Pantherine "Freedom Fighters." This is very much an artifact of 1969, of the idea of the vanguardist party still persisting in that moment. But the implicit logic is less metaphorical than contagion, less idealistic than resonance. Above or below the fiction, Greenlee's account accords with the spread of riots in France in 2005, England in 2011, the U.S. in 2014 and 2015. Riot goes looking for surplus populations, and these are its basis for expansion. This is not to deny the agency of rioters, of looters, of people shooting at cops. Nor is it to suggest that such spreading rebellions have no basis in various kinds of conscious and collective vision. It is simply the same movement seen through the other end of the telescope, seen from the perspective of riot itself. From this perspective, one might begin to synthesize the categories of crisis, surplus population, and race that seem enduring aspects of *riot prime* in the west.

All three aspects are comprehended in Ruth Wilson Gilmore's compact summary:

> Crisis is not objectively bad or good, rather, it signals systemic change whose outcome is determined through struggle. Struggle, which is a politically neutral word, occurs

4 Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969, 236.

> at all levels of a society as a people try to figure out, through trial and error, what to make of idled capacities.[5]

It is this change in struggle we have been tracking. The riot is precisely such a reckoning with idled capacities, with the surpluses generated by the production of non-production that characterizes the descent along the arc of accumulation.

Among these surpluses, the most dramatic in its historical development, and the one which most invites a reconsideration of social class, is that part of the population most the subject of the riot: relative surplus population. The logical argument regarding the "progressive production" of this immiserated layer of society, much of which has been touched on already, unfolds over the entirety of the first volume of *Capital* through Chapter 25. It is here we arrive at the summary of the moving contradiction that blooms into both crisis and surplus population, differing aspects of the same process that compels the increasing domination of constant over variable capital, undermining accumulation by expelling labor from the production process: "the working population therefore produces both the accumulation of capital and the means by which it itself is made relatively superfluous; and it does this to an extent which is always increasing."[6] That this completes the book's theoretical argument is signaled by the way Marx then shifts modes entirely, leaping backward for a historical reconstruction of the so-called primitive accumulation and the origin of capital.

Surplus population has multiple strata within it. Perhaps the most significant membrane lies between the reserve army of labor (which remains conceptually within the logic

5 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 54.
6 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 783.

of the labor market, driving down wages, moving in and out of the wage with shifts in the supply of and demand for labor), and stagnant surplus population chronically outside the formal wage, or "structurally unemployed," in conventional parlance. For this tranche, the problem of reproduction still presents itself. People finding themselves in this circumstance neither enter into suspended animation nor survive on air. Rather they are pushed into informal economies, often semi- or extralegal, giving them only derivative access to the formal wage. It is this portion of humanity that earns less than subsistence amounts. Informalization can be understood as "ways to organize economic activity with a high return for capital and an excessively low return for labor."[7]

Here we might note the relation of expanded global surplus population and swiftly rising indebtedness over the course of the Long Crisis. It is about this period that Gilles Deleuze dramatically declares, "man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt." This has been seized on recursively by those anxious to suppose a new economic ontology of debt. Generally forgotten is what Deleuze writes immediately afterward:

> It is true that capitalism has retained as a constant the extreme poverty of three quarters of humanity, too poor for debt, too numerous for confinement: control will not only have to deal with erosions of frontiers but with the explosions within shanty towns or ghettos.[8]

7 Jan Breman, *Outcast Labour in Asia: Circulation and the Informalization of the Workforce at the Bottom of the Economy*, New Delhi: Oxford India Press, 2010, 24. For another systematic treatment of surplus population, see Aaron Benanav, *A Global History of Unemployment since 1949*, London: Verso, forthcoming.

8 Gilles Deleuze, "Postcript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59, Winter 1992, 6–7.

This effectively undermines the strong distinction of Deleuze's initial claim. But it leaves in its place a more incisive recognition, regarding *the unity of the excluded and the indebted*. They are the same global surplus. The explosive growth of the indebted sector is another face of informalization in which finance capital's need to find debtors dovetails with the explosion of populations driven below subsistence wages. The microloan, student loan, and payday loan are parallel instruments, equally unsustainable, in the project to stabilize this growing surplus and somehow preserve them within the circuits of profit.

These are expressions of surplus population within a structural trend of real superfluity. Even as population expands, capital's relative capacity to absorb labor contracts, engendering both a relative and absolute increase in populations "set free" by what we are pleased to call progress, liberated from the burden of work and eventually the burden of life itself. Some scholars have of late noticed that the increase in global struggle draws its force from these populations. Researchers from the Global Social Protest Research Group, working in the tradition of Arrighi and Beverly Silver, detected in the wake of the 2011 wave of uprisings a source that could be located neither in what they call "Marx-type" struggles nor in "Polanyi-type" struggles—based on recent subsumption to the working class and in loss of class privilege, respectively—but instead demanded a new classification: "Protest of the Stagnant Relative Surplus Population."[9]

While attentiveness to traditional class struggles may

9 Sahan Savas Karatasli, Sefika Kumal, Ben Scully, and Smriti Upadhyay, "Class, Crisis, and the 2011 Protest Wave: Cyclical and Secular Trends in Global Labor Unrest," in *Overcoming Global Inequities*, eds. Immanuel Wallerstein, Christopher Chase-Dunn, and Christian Suter, London: Paradigm Publishers, 2015, 192.

have obscured such developments for some until recently, they have long been central to and evident within the Long Crisis. Bremen writes,

> In the 1960s and 1970s, western policymakers viewed the informal economy as a waiting room, or temporary transit zone: newcomers could find their feet there and learn the ways of the urban labor market … In fact, the trend went in the opposite direction.[10]

The absorption of labor on a global scale concomitant with a renewed ascent along the arc of accumulation does not seem to be in the cards.[11] In the U.S., rising superfluity has been a basic feature of the Long Crisis. The historian Aaron Benanav notes,

> This is especially the case for those formerly employed in the manufacturing sector, which has shed millions of jobs. It is also true for youth who recently entered the labor force for the first time and, above all, for workers of color. …
>
> Between 1947 and 1973, the unemployment rate was 4.8 percent on average; after 1973, it rose to 6.5 percent. Since 1973, there has been one exceptional period, 1995–2001, when the unemployment rate returned to its pre-1973 level. Excluding these years, the post-1973 unemployment rate rises to 6.9 percent, or 43 percent above the previous average. This rise is not only due to the fact that unemployment levels have been higher during recessions. Economic

10 Breman, *Outcast Labour*, 366.

11 For a thorough assessment of rising surplus population and informalization, see Ibid., 361–8; and Jacques Charmes, "The Informal Economy Worldwide: Trends and Characteristics," *Margin: The Journal of Applied Economic Research* 6: 2, 2012, 103–32.

> recoveries are increasingly *jobless recoveries*. Reductions in unemployment have taken longer every decade. Following the 1981 recession, it took 27 months for employment to attain its pre-recession level; following the 1990 recession, 30 months; following the 2000 recession, 46 months. After the 2007 recession, a labor market recovery took 6.3 years.[12]

It is by now impossible to suppose that these phenomena are simply cyclical equilibrations of a labor market that tends toward "full employment" (even as that target has been revised upward). The long-term tendencies are apparent, and the signs we might expect to indicate a secular reversal nowhere to be seen. There are no sails on the horizon. In this context, class might be rethought in ways that exceed the traditional model encountered in the previous chapter, with its relatively static and sociologically positivistic "working class" and accompanying forms of struggle. Given the relative dwindling of this form of labor, Marx must mean something else when, arriving at this conclusion regarding surplus populations, he proposes that "accumulation of capital is therefore multiplication of the proletariat."

Proletarianization and Racialization

The weakness in the static model of the "working class" is not simply in some abstract failure to track capital's restructurings, but in a practical inattention to changes in the subject of struggle. How might we think about riot as a form not just of collective action but of class struggle, when racialization seems to be a core characteristic

12 Aaron Benanav, "Precarity Rising," *Viewpoint Magazine*, June 15, 2015.

of *riot prime* in the U.S. and more broadly in the deindustrializing west? It is here that surplus population plays a mediating and deeply explanatory role. Given the ongoing relative and absolute increase of those beyond the productive sectors and beyond the formal economy in general, it may no longer be useful to conceptualize surplus populations as adjuncts to, special cases within, or those excluded from a workforce the image of which we inherit from the era of strong accumulation. We might instead understand *proletariat* not as designating those who labor directly for capital, but in its original sense, a distinction here marked by Gilles Dauvé:

> If one identifies *proletarian* with *factory worker* (or with the manual laborer), or with the poor, one misses what is subversive in the proletarian condition. The proletariat is the negation of this society. It is not the collection of the poor, but of those who are "without reserves," who are nothing, have nothing to lose but their chains, and cannot liberate themselves without destroying the whole social order.[13]

Dauvé presents this as a truth that has been misrecognized, rather than a revision of the category compelled by historical metamorphoses. It is those metamorphoses that matter. The greater the extent to which the historical working class is compelled to affirm capital for its own existence, and the greater the development of "idled capacities," the more we confront the political significance of the expanded proletariat and in particular the role of passive proletarianization, the "dissolving of traditional forms of (re)production."[14]

13 Gilles Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement*, Oakland: PM Press, 2015, 47.

14 Thomas Mitschein, Henrique Miranda, and Mariceli Paraense, *Urbanização, selvagem e proletarização passiva na Amazônia: o caso*

This expansion is not, however, neutrally quantitative.

Here we might return to Stuart Hall's clarion formulation, "Race is the modality in which class is lived."[15] This proves even more persuasive and descriptive when envisioning a proletariat that includes surplus populations and thus one that must abandon the sociological model of "worker identity" as an essential component of class belonging. We have already encountered the divergence in rates of wagelessness in Detroit; it is, alas and unsurprisingly, a generalized phenomenon. However, it is not organic. Like chattel slavery itself, it is socially produced. In the span from 1880 to 1910, during a period of labor undersupply, black and white unemployment rates were at parity. The gap opens in the interwar years with "the movement of blacks across industries, especially out of agriculture, and the shift in demand away from the industries in which blacks were employed."[16] The shift toward an industrial and then deindustrializing economy has had, that is to say, a racialized component; since the sixties, black unemployment has been at least double that of white, and in times of crisis this is only intensified. In recent years, black youth unemployment in the cities named in Greenlee's novel has floated near 50 percent; the overall employment profile of these cities is on par with, for comparison, the ongoing disaster of Greece, that crisis without end.

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de Belém, Belem, 1989, quoted in Mike Davis, *Planet of the Slums*, London: Verso, 2006, 175.

15 Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order*, London: Macmillan, 1978, 394. While the cited source is collectively authored, this formulation is generally attributed to Hall, in part because it appears in later single-authored works under his name.

16 Robert W. Fairlie and William A. Sundstrom, "The Racial Unemployment Gap in Long-Run Perspective," *The American Economic Review*, 87: 2, May 1997, 307, 309. Note that most data in this study refer to male employment.

Gilmore suggests that we understand transformations of the state apparatus as ways to manage this irremediable surplus, focusing particularly on incarceration:

> In my view, prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis. Crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists. The instability that characterized the end of the golden age of American capitalism provides a key, as we shall see. In the following pages, we shall investigate how certain kinds of people, land, capital, and state capacity became idle—what surplus is—what happened, and why the outcomes are logically explicable but were by no means inevitable.[17]

From this alignment of crisis and surplus, she considers the populations subject to this new regime of state violence, reflecting "on prison demographics, in particular, their exclusive domination of working or workless poor, most of whom are not white." Eventually she concludes:

> The correspondence between regions suffering deep economic restructuring, high rates of unemployment and underemployment among men, and intensive surveillance of youth by the state's criminal justice apparatus present the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution.[18]

The riot, we might note, is the other of incarceration. That is to say, it is a consequence of and response to inexorable

17 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 26–7.
18 Ibid., 15, 113.

and intensifying regimes of exclusion, superfluidity, lack of access to goods, and state surveillance and violence, along with the state's inability to apportion resources toward the social peace. Indeed, these are the specific and local conditions for almost every major rebellion in recent history. If the state's solution to the problem of crisis and surplus is prison—carceral management—the riot is a contest entered directly against this solution—a counterproposal of unmanageability.

An Agenda for Total Disorder

The relation between riot and racialization is among other things an element of the debate regarding who might be the revolutionary subject of the Long Crisis. The significance of surplus populations to this debate arises however not in the early industrializing nations but rather in the decolonizing world, most famously described in Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. He notes that "the formation of a lumpenproletariat is a phenomenon which is governed by its own logic, and neither the overzealousness of missionaries nor decrees from the central authorities can check its growth." Populations are pushed by demographics and expropriation from family lands to the city, where they discover there will be no entrance to the formal economy, and "it is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead," for this cohort "constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people."[19]

This shared condition of superfluity, based in dominated populations subjected to ceaseless racialized state

19 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Atlantic Press, 2005, 207, 81.

violence, becomes the framework through which Black Power movements achieve mutual recognition with international anticolonial struggles. The coming into maturity of this dispossessed and colonized subject as political agent in the U.S. will be narrated through global antagonisms in a kind of *Bandungsroman*. Groups like Revolutionary Action Movement and the Black Panthers would make careful studies of Fanon among others. It is the logic of the lumpen, of the excluded, that underpins a grasp of colonization as a global process whose terrain of contest is not that of the classical working class. This is fundamental for Newton as he develops his theory of struggle. In keeping with the ambiguity of the situation during the transitions of the sixties, Newton vacillates between seeing the ghettoized black population of the U.S. as the most exploited of a traditional working class, generating superprofits that allow the global projection of the colonial project, and as Fanon's excluded lumpen. "Penned up in the ghettoes of America, surrounded by all his factories and all the physical components of his economic system, we have been made into 'the wretched of the earth,' relegated to the position of spectators," he writes. This situation is ensured by "the occupying army, embodied by the police department," the domestic management of black populations as internal colonization.[20]

Here his argument begins to triangulate with the collapse of the civil rights framework, with its progressive gains that seemed winnable during a period of expansion, and with thinkers like Gilmore regarding the rise of the carceral state as a management of surplus. Capital both sustains and drives colonialism while ensuring the proliferation of surplus populations, in a combined dynamic we

20 Newton, *Newton Reader*, 135, 149.

might have called the global division of nonlabor. But it is not capital in a direct sense that disciplines or expropriates surplus populations. Nor is capital able, in the end, to purchase the social peace. The global *classes dangereuses* are united not by their role as producers but by their relation to state violence. In this is to be found the basis of the surplus rebellion and of its form, which must exceed the logic of recognition and negotiation. "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world," declares Fanon, "is clearly an agenda for total disorder."[21]

In light of this we must note that *riot prime* has its origins no more in the marketplace of early modern Europe than in the slave rebellions and anticolonial uprisings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, among those for whom servitude was already enforced by direct and sanctioned violence. Ranajit Guha insists on both the organizational aspect of such struggles and the consequences of effacing it. "Insurgency," he notes, "was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of the rural masses." He continues,

> Yet this consciousness seems to have received little notice in the literature on the subject. Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted a praxis called rebellion. The omission is dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, infect like epidemics.[22]

21 Fanon, *Wretched*, 3.

22 Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, 46.

The insight enters into the familiar debate between agency and determination. If it limits itself to one side of the dialectical pairing, that is surely in an effort to disclose the pernicious rhetorical effects of the opposite one-sidedness and its supposed objectivity. Guha captures eloquently an effect noted earlier, in which the purported spontaneity of such rebellions becomes an ideological opportunity to treat rebels as reflexive and natural, lacking in rationality, unsovereign, socially determined but not determining, not fully human—which in turn allows the ongoing racialization of riot's participants, and implicit justification for racialized domination. To riot is to fail the measure of the human. To fail to be the subject.

One can see examples of this antagonistic debate over proper subjects at the very outset of the Long Crisis. In 1972, Alain Badiou dismisses with no little sarcasm "the brilliant novelty of the dissident marginal masses," a dismissal earned through their association with disorder (under the usual theoretical rubrics of flux and free play and so forth), in favor of Marx and Engels's "finally coherent systematization of the revolutionary practices of their time."[23] Of the many proponents of this view, Badiou is particularly suggestive for his later shifts in sympathy to the side of the "rabble," in his *Rebirth of History* (in which he sympathetically adopts the racially coded term "*racaille*" for his protagonists, the word for "rabble" weaponized by then Minister of the Interior Sarkozy against the French rioters of 2005). It is an incomplete shift, however: for Badiou's "generic communism," order is still the order of the day, although now under the rubric of the Idea rather than the

23 Alain Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction*, Paris: Librairie François Maspero, 1972, 72. Translated by Eleanor Kaufman in "The Desire Called Mao: Badiou and the Legacy of Libidinal Economy," *Postmodern Culture* 18: 1, September 2007.

Party. Nonetheless, his traverse does register a more thoroughgoing change in the material basis for understanding these actors that dissolves any antinomy between the "dissident marginal masses" and a view of how revolutionary possibilities might unfold.

This is the vital content of the recomposition of class at a global level. Guha's insistence on the conscious and reasoned aspect, the revolutionary subjectivity, of seemingly spontaneous uprisings in what has sometimes been called the "periphery" exemplifies one retort to those who would dismiss such struggles. Alone, it remains partial. Fanon's account of the remorseless arrival of surplus populations onto the political stage, and their intransigent relation to certain forms of collective action, is its necessary complement. The trajectory he traces has only intensified as "the cities have become a dumping ground for a surplus population working in unskilled, unprotected and low-wage informal service industries and trade."[24] The scope of this development is compassed in Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*, an overwhelming summary of global surplus populations. One aspect of this dynamic is the certainty that these developments will make their way ever more dramatically to the deindustrializing core as racialized superfluity progresses.

There has been, then, a sort of double arrival of riot to the deindustrializing west. Or, rather, of the conditions in which the struggles that will be called riots are inevitable. It has come down from the export and marketplace riots of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and come inward from periphery to core. The double motion is a convergence of colonialist and capitalist logics, their disorders coming home to roost.

24 United Nations Human Settlements Program, *The Challenge of Slums: Global Reports on Human Settlements, 2003*, London: Routledge, 2003, 40.

The Public Riot

Early on we encountered the first weakness in the category "race riot": the ambiguity of "race" itself. Gilmore, along with many other scholars, argues that race has no autonomous existence. But neither is it a figment. Rather, it is produced through a process that she calls "racism" and which we have been calling "racialization," which she defines as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."[25] Chris Chen argues for focusing not on "race" but on racial ascription, the structural processes though which race is produced, as distinct "from voluntary acts of cultural identification—and from a range of responses to racial rule from flight to armed revolt."[26] Concurring with the larger argument, we would, however, suggest that preexisting ideological assignments of meaning (and nonmeaning) to uprisings and riots take part in such ascription. The riot, for all its systematically produced inevitability, is one of the moments of vulnerability of which Gilmore speaks; it is the form of struggle given to surplus populations, already racialized. To enter into riot is to be in the category of persons whose location in the social structure compels them to some forms of collective action rather than others. Thus we might finally argue that the term "race riot" has an inverted sense: not that of race as cause of riot, but of riot as part of the ongoing process of racialization. It is not that race makes riots but that riots make race.

This formulation must return us once more to the discovery that "race is the modality in which class is lived." The phrase has become so well known that it has evaded

25 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.
26 Chen, "Limit Point," 205.

its context. It turns out to be a claim about, among other things, riots. In a generally overlooked earlier passage of the same coauthored text, we find a more expansive formulation grounding the phrase in concrete struggles. "It is in the modality of race that those whom the structures systematically exploit, exclude and subordinate discover themselves as an exploited, excluded and subordinated class. Thus it is primarily in and through the modality of race that resistance, opposition and rebellion *first* expresses itself."[27]

The "*first*" is significant. It implies that the confrontational encounters open eventually onto other modalities—onto class, we conclude, given the later epigrammatic formulation. At the same time, "modality" seeks to overcome the hierarchy of appearance and essence, wherein what might appear to be an experience of race is later revealed as the truth of class. Rather, there is a continuity and a commingling. Here we must recall that Hall's formula originally centers itself on blackness, and difficulties arise when this is casually adduced to race more broadly. In the U.S. and U.K., in differing ways, a historical antiblackness has constituted hierarchies of racialization such that poor black populations approach absolute exposure to superfluity and to state violence. Along this hierarchy, we find a shifting interplay of exploitation and exclusion, impersonal dominations and directly violent management. The logic of a structurally racialized surplus informing a new proletariat traverses the seeming antinomy of race and class to reveal racialization as both feature and engine of class recomposition.

At the same time, the category of surplus allows for a flexible and even capacious means of assessing ongoing transformations. Surplus is not synonymous with race;

27 Hall et al., *Crisis*, 347 (emphasis in original).

neither is it easily extricable from it. We are in the midst of an ongoing exodus to the overdeveloped world driven by geopolitical volatility and by capital's incapacity to absorb adequate labor in emerging regions of the world-system—a diaspora inseparable from expanding superfluity. This cannot help but put pressure on protocols of racialization as well, on the forms and framings of exclusion. In light of this contemporary emergence of surplus populations and of the politics of surplus we might now advance from the previous suggestion of riot as a modality of race to an expanded proposition: *riot is the modality through which surplus is lived*.

To say this is to say that *circulation prime* is the era of *riot prime*, and not simply in the sense that it features an increase in riot events both absolute and relative to strikes. *Riot prime* is the condition in which surplus life *is* riot, is the subject of politics and the object of ongoing state violence. Within the social reorganization of the Long Crisis, the public of surplus is treated as riot at all times—incipient, in progress, in exhaustion—not out of error but out of recognition. As the philosopher Nina Power writes in her contradictory inventory "Thirty-One Theses on the Problem of the Public," "The public has never existed"—but also, "the public does not always coincide with the nothing it is supposed to be." Surplus is nothing and must be everything. Thus Thesis 31: "The public is a slow-moving riot."[28]

Power also notes that "the police are the public and the public is the police." The ambiguity arises no doubt from the phrase's source with Robert Peel, founder of modern policing in the UK, and with his vision of policing as

28 Nina Power, "Thirty-One Theses on the Problem of the Public," *Objective Considerations of Contemporary Phenomena*, MOTINTERNATIONAL, 2014.

expression of a more general social will rather than being a force imposed from without. A noble thought no doubt. The desultory truth of this sense lies in the way the public, as a population made civic, takes up a kind of liberal self-policing, which is always passively present and often comes forward during active riots as freedom-loving citizens hurry to discipline their compeers with pleas for an ethical pacifism that, if at first ignored, are repeated with the accompanying threat that a uniformed officer will be summoned to help with the agitator's emancipation. The riot in this regard bears its police within itself.

This is doubly true, for another possible sense, encountered earlier, lies in the integration of the state's police function with *riot prime*. Given the ways that state violence now exists in the place of the economy, the public of surplus exists in an economy of state violence. But this acts as a limit. Such ongoing exposure provides a unity and self-recognition, and thus cannot be easily done away with. This is a conundrum for the public of surplus, for *riot prime,* one that becomes apparent when open riot bursts forth:

> The police, in this sense, are not an external force of order applied by the state to an already rioting mass, but an integral part of the riot: not only its standard component spark-plug, acting via the usual death, at police hands, of some young black man, but also the necessary ongoing partner of the rioting crowd from whom the space must be liberated if this liberation is to mean anything at all; who must be attacked as an enemy if the crowd is to be unified in anything; who must be forced to *recognize* the agency of a habitually subjected group.[29]

29 "A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats," *Endnotes* 3, 2013, 98.

One cannot help encountering in this relationship the Hegelian recognition scene, the police-riot dialectic so characteristic of *riot prime*. Immediately we recall Fanon's transposing of the same scene to the colonial situation—as well as Susan Buck-Morss's contention that Hegel drew on the anticolonial struggle of Haiti for his original formulation, so that Fanon's rendering is less a transposition than the completion of a circuit.[30] The struggle for decolonization, in Fanon's telling, must transcend recognition, given that the colonized can be absorbed neither into the state as free citizens nor into the economy as free labor. Thus it must come down to "quite simply the substitution of one 'species' of mankind for another. The substitution is unconditional, absolute, total, and seamless."[31]

We must be clear that the situation of the Long Crisis in the deindustrializing nations is not assimilable to the scene of anticolonial struggle. Neither, as noted above, is it unrelated to it. The conceptual separations of core and periphery, first and third worlds, and so on have less purchase than ever. The juncture, as has been suggested, is in the rising presence of a population whose labor can never be objectified. Redistribution is off the table as the haves cling ever more implacably to the world-system's dwindling wealth, concentrating it still further. The structurally excluded gather in the streets and the square, in the holding areas and outer rings of the gleaming, dying cities. *We are the crisis*. Historically, the regimes of accumulation in the U.K. and U.S. have found ways to absorb these populations, to provide a route to their self-reproduction that is also the reproduction of capital. Now the question of proletarian reproduction increasingly looks beyond the wage. Neither,

30 Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26: 4, Summer 2000, 821–65.

31 Fanon, *Wretched*, 1.

however, can the subjects of *riot prime* imagine meaningful subsistence in the marketplace, in the manner of the previous era of riot. The physical separation of production from exchange, the intervening space larded with the presence of the police, now renders the absence of such a possibility. The great class recomposition and the abstraction of the economy are one and the same. Price-setting even in its contemporary form proves the most transient of palliatives. The public whose modality is riot must eventually encounter the need to pursue reproduction not just beyond the wage but beyond the marketplace.

It is in this regard that the riot is the sign of a situation that must in the end absolutize itself. Not because of some wild and affective nature of riot, though those who have had such experiences know that this is an astonishing force, but because of the still unfolding and still deteriorating situation in which it finds itself. *Riot prime* is not a demand but a civil war.

We have, then, something like a last contradiction. On the one hand, the riot must absolutize itself, move toward a self-reproduction beyond wage and market, toward the social arrangement that we define as the commune, always a civil war. On the other hand, the riot is entangled both internally and externally with the police function that seems a blockage to any such absolutization. This contradiction offers some ways to think about the riots, rebellions, and uprisings of the years since the global market collapse of 2008—the historical particulars they embody, the failures they bear, the future they suggest.

Lacking the scope of surveys, models will have to do. Two examples will be particularly suggestive in considering the current situation of *riot prime* in the overdeveloped world. Two landscapes, then, the square and the street. Just as the port and the factory were the place of riot and strike

respectively, these are the natural homes of *riot prime*. They are places of circulation, the circulation of bodies and goods. They at once valorize the logic of circulation struggles and display this dynamic's incomplete historical development. One landscape is the 2011 series of plaza occupations known as Occupy, the U.S. iteration of the international movement of the squares. The other is the 2014 riots, first local and then national, following, respectively, the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the decision not to indict his killer, the police officer Darren Wilson. When those riots escape from their suburb, they leap to twenty cities, including each locale named in the passage from *The Spook Who Sat by the Door.*

Afterword

As this is an afterword it seems appropriate to reflect on what has come after the original publication, both in what can be gleaned from its reception and far more significantly what has illuminated the political landscape.[1]

The book attempts to theorize an empirically observable set of facts toward fairly straightforward ends. In the first instance it is to rescue the riot from its longstanding bourgeois delegitimation—one premised both on excluding racialized populations from the regime of the political and on preserving the state monopoly on violence—to make it politically thinkable as a particular expression of

1 The book has been fortunate to find a receptive audience, in no small part because the sorts of phenomena it describes and predicts have continued. It has had thoughtful readers from a variety of political orientations who have helped both expand and refine book's categories and concepts. Now is perhaps a good time to thank some of those who have provided such opportunities. Among others, I am grateful to the organizers of Historical Materialism conferences in both New York and London; to editors and respondents at the journal *Viewpoint,* especially Amanda Armstrong, Alberto Toscano, and Delio Vazquez; to my hosts at the A. E. Havens Center for Social Justice, led at the time by Erik Olin Wright (1947–2019) and orchestrated by Lenora Hanson; and to the organizers of "Riot as a Global Political Concept" in Buenos Aires, especially Niccolò Cuppini and Alejo Stark. I am grateful as well to various translators, including Julien Guazzini, Ogün Başẗurk, Oskar Söderlind, Achim Szepanski, and Dennis Buescher-Ulbrich. I am indebted to a far larger cohort for kindness and intellectual company.

capital's contradictions rather than merely a spasmodic cry of the immiserated. In the further instance it is to do so by locating it within that broader category of the "circulation struggle" which has developed as the signal form of collective action in the present: most simply a struggle that intervenes within the sphere of circulation conducted by those who find themselves there, a dynamic shared with if not inherited from leading struggles in the pre-industrial west. In the final instance it is to propose an explanation for this trajectory of the circulation struggle according to what the book calls the "arc of accumulation" for capital as an uneven but global phenomenon, returning us to a foundational contradiction as capital expels its very source of value in living labor, accumulation wanes, and capital reinvestment shifts toward schemes for capturing profits within the sphere of circulation.

Here is another presentation of these matters. The lumpen appear first in a fairy tale. It begins, as fairy tales do, "Long, long ago …" At their earliest chronological appearance in *Capital* Vol. 1, Marx writes with his coruscating sarcasm, *In einer längst verfloßnen Zeit gab es auf der einen Seite eine fleißige, intelligente und vor allem sparsame Elite und auf der andren faulenzende, ihr alles und mehr verjubelnde Lumpen.* "Long, long ago there were two sorts of people," runs the standard translation, "one, the diligent, intelligent, and above all frugal élite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living."[2] We do not hear this origin story until quite late in the book, at exactly the moment that Marx has leapt from his logical argument back into the depths of history so as to explore "The Secret of Primitive Accumulation." The narrative strategy is much remarked. This could have been the first chapter;

2 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, London: Penguin, 1992, 873.

it is where the *fabula* begins, after all. But then it would be some seven hundred pages away from "The General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," where the all too real fate of the lumpen is disclosed. Having been driven into labor and transformed into the proletariat, setting forth a logical sequence that organizes the first twenty-five chapters, some increasing fraction are expelled from production according to the rising technical and organic compositions of capital, and thereby sediment into informal labor, absolute pauperism, and superfluity at depths below even the relative surplus population's misery. In this way the beginning and the end of the lumpen's traverse are found adjacent, as if to insist that we reflect on this trajectory directly. We might simply say that this book concerns the politics of that arc.

Point of Circulation

The skeptical responses to the book, often appearing in legacy socialist journals, have been magnetized almost without fail according to the principle that the strike must be defended. Some fraction of these defenses have been little more than oaths of fidelity to what C. Wright Mills called sixty years ago the "labor metaphysic." They are regularly compelled to remind us of the truism that capital remains vulnerable at the point of production. These readings have often required the misapprehension of arguments in the book, imagining nonexistent claims that production has come to an end and that we are in an era of "pure" or "autonomous" circulation (as if such a thing were possible). Or it is imagined that the book rejects class as a decisive category; in fact it argues the opposite, though it asks us to recognize the political self-activity of those excluded from the formal wage as itself a form of class struggle (given the racialization of these class actors in the west, the blindness

toward this fact takes on rather dire significance). These responses occasionally provide the self-evident point that riots are not always emancipatory, rarely noting the same of labor actions. They regularly tut over the assured political inefficacy accompanying a failure to "organize" in the manner with which they are familiar, seemingly incognizant of the fact that this opinion too has a racial history. As Alys Weinbaum notes about *Black Reconstruction*, "Du Bois shows us that slaves need to be neither consciously nor collectively organized in the traditional Marxist sense to make history."[3] Du Bois's "black general strike" of slaves during the Civil War designates an ensemble of events that were, per Cedric Robinson's summary, "a consequence of contradictions within Southern society rather than a revolutionary vanguard that knit these phenomena into a historical force."[4] On this basis, lacking party or movement, Du Bois famously concluded that the slaves freed themselves. This is not, however, a verdict on Marxism but on a thin stratum within it, blessed to recognize one concrete and historical mode of organization, damned to treat it as abstract and universal. Of course we are not in the era of chattel slavery anymore; neither are we in the era in which formal employment is centered by industry and manufacture, and those unable to reckon with its waning and all that has waned with it should not detain us.

Several responses, however, have offered nuanced and serious engagements, ones able to engage the dramatic transformations in the composition of class and capital on

3 Alys Weinbaum, "Gendering the General Strike: W. E. B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* and Black Feminism's 'Propaganda of History,'" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112: 3, Summer 2013, 452.

4 Cedric Robinson, "A Critique of W. E. B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction*," *Black Scholar* 8: 7, 1977, 48.

which the book is premised.[5] Investigating the shifts among employment sectors, particularly in relation to logistics and transport, they conclude that strikes in those sectors are still viable, necessarily powerful, and therefore highly desirable (these proffers periodically add the suggestion that these sectors are themselves part of production, abandoning the distinction between productive and necessary labor and, intentionally or not, abandoning a Marxist framework in the process; it bears repeating that were these growing sectors generally productive labor, we would have seen a concomitant growth in accumulation which has been by any measure decisively absent). The attention to logistics and transport expresses a burgeoning common sense among that portion of the labor left attentive to structural changes: in the face of postindustrial labor markets, we have over the last few years begun to see advocacy for a shift away from classical point of production struggles and toward what we might call the "point of circulation."

These arguments fundamentally concede the book's analysis, accepting that global capital, at the far end of the long twentieth century, after the collapse of profits in manufacture and industry around the seventies, has shifted its center of balance into circulation in search of profits to be found there (with logistics/transport being one fulcrum, finance another)—and that with capital's shift to circulationist strategies, employment has followed.

This reduction of circulation to the logistics and transport sector risks obscuring the character of circulation itself, which like production is a complexly variegated category.

5 See for example Kim Moody's "Organize. Strike. Organize," *Jacobin*, May 22, 2018, jacobinmag.com. The title gives the programmatic game away with its abandonment of historical actuality for the imperative mode, but his approach is serious, full of both care and thought, and I count him as a comrade.

It includes formal circulation (the transfer of ownership); the physical circulation of commodities already valorized in the production process and now in search of that value's realization as price; labor toward these ends; the space of the marketplace where these things happen; and the consumption of goods and services. Most of all, an account focused on how formal employment has followed capital's movements tends to neglect the ways that informalization and unemployment have followed: the ways in which capital's shift to circulation indicates *discumulation* and the end of an adequately expansive labor market able to absorb within the service sector those dropped from manufacture and industry, assuring in turn an increase in those lacking formal access to the wage and left shipwrecked in Marx's "noisy sphere of circulation" which is above all, like the sphere of production with which it is conjoined, a social relation rather than a technical activity.

Program and Materialism

But let us return to the further workerist insight that the strike is likely to leap into those sectors where capital increasingly seeks profits, rather than vanishing in favor of riots. This too is a site of agreement. Though the book tries to show the work done by the opposition of riot and strike within ideological and juridical frameworks—particularly concerning the consequent entangling of criminalization, racialization, and exclusion from the political for the riot—it does not itself set its two title terms in opposition. It traces the emergence of strike from riot and the recent reversal of this, artifacts of developing contradictions along capital's long arc rather than competing strategic visions. Indeed, the book arrives at much the same point as do proponents of the logistics strike:

> There is no argument here against such organizing. The 1997 UPS strike shows such things are possible. It is inevitable that a growing percentage of the vanishingly few strikes will be in circulation, and that labor actions will shift toward circulation struggles, as a practical matter. Consider the illustrative tactical shift on the part of French trade unions, for example when French oil refineries and petroleum depots were blockaded for two weeks in 2010.[6]

I myself am a great admirer of the strike weapon, particularly when it is directed toward emancipatory ends rather than managing capital's metabolism toward equilibrated preservation, as has become increasingly conventional in the early-industrializing nations since the seventies.

So then: if we are all partisans of the strike, what are the stakes of the disagreement? They are methodological. These defenses of the strike are, sometimes implicitly but frequently with great openness, programmatic. They insist that strikes are something we still *could* do, and finally something we *should* do. They are inclined, further, to project their own prescriptive approach onto what they find before them—including this book, despite its demurral from advocacy. Imagining a demand to riot, they pose against it the insistence that we must strike, as it remains a peculiarly powerful lever within the repertoire of struggles for bending power toward the needs of the proletariat and even toward the end of the proletariat that remains the horizon of revolution.

Perhaps so. For many this remains an inspiring thought. It is not the thought of historical materialism, which concerns itself with the recondite definite relations into which we have entered, and with grasping how these relations

6 Page 144.

operate independent of our will. All of which is to say that any account of the repertoire of struggles in the present must first have a clear account of material changes which can explain actualities: why the labor strike has waned so dramatically over the last four or five decades while the riot has multiplied over the last five or six, a historical reversal moving in tempo with deindustrialization and declining profits within productive sectors, with massive migration into technologically stagnant fields where the absence of productivity gains bars the concomitant labor gains which together formed a double-motion during the Long Boom.[7] Why, in short, have circulation struggles—not just riots, but land, plaza, and building occupations; road, port, and pipeline blockades; and so on—come to the fore while production struggles have receded, and what can this tell us about the political-economic terrain which dialectically forms and is formed by these struggles?

Here we must note that there are reasons to be optimistic about at least certain labor actions. Considering the United States, in 2018 and early 2019, teachers strikes proved charismatic and effective; labor threats and withdrawals of labor in the air travel sector effectively ended the 2019 government shutdown that followed a budgetary deadlock. These form an exception to extended decline. From 1947 (when the Bureau of Labor Statistics records for the United States begin) through 1981, there were, on average, around 310 large-scale labor actions every year, with no fewer than 145 in any year. The downward trend began in 1974. From 1982 forward, the threshold of 100 large-scale actions is never surpassed. In 2017, there were seven. In the great rebound of 2018 there were twenty, with the most energetic of them having arisen within the

7 Regarding this last feature, I am grateful to Jason Smith for his elucidation of this history and have learned greatly from our exchanges.

nation's comparatively diminutive public sector. Even in the most optimistic view, we are confronted with a long-term decline whose scale is greater than an order of magnitude. Against the weight of historical data, it will take prolonged and vast intensification of labor struggles to turn the historical ledger red.

This transformation asks us to reground a methodological Marxism such that, rather than indexing class struggle purely to the forms of the classical labor movement, it can understand the category more sinuously and capaciously. Except that I would argue that it already does, and that what is at stake here is not the opposition of strike and riot but, on the one side, the reduction of Marxism to a narrow conception of class struggle and organization, to the programmatic preference for a single tactic, and to the programmatic as such; and on the other, an inquiry into capitalism's "laws of motion" attentive to historical change.

The data above does not form an argument against the strike, or against any other confrontation with capitalism's permanent counterrevolution. It is not a prescription. All the antagonisms will be needed, and will need to be concatenated; as Amanda Armstrong argues in an insightful essay, it will be vital to be attentive to struggles such as the mass picket, which she convincingly presents as a hybrid form developed in the nineteenth century but suggestive for our present moment.[8]

The real tendency of history does, however, leave historical materialists with an analytic burden. It is a burden that cannot be discharged, moreover, via deference to "political will" in any of its forms, via any version of the proposition that on some dark day in the seventies, capitalists, peering

8 Amanda Armstrong, "Disarticulating the Mass Picket," *Viewpoint Magazine*, September 16, 2016, viewpointmag.com.

at their quarterly reports, simply started trying harder to impose their interests, or that labor unions around the same time just battened onto a bad belief. That is the moment at which political thought risks finding itself trapped in the amber of idealism. As the book notes immediately following the passage cited above, "More broadly, normative arguments about what people who struggle *should* do miss the most basic truth. People will struggle where they are." If struggles have moved, on balance, within the elaborated social arena that is the expanded circuit of capitalist reproduction, changing their nature in transit, this sets forth first and foremost not a judgment but a research program.

Immigration, Ecology, Circulation

The book's contribution to this research, to the extent that it is future-facing in the way that it adduces forms of collective action to political-economic developments along a historical trajectory, might be understood as predictive rather than prescriptive. It is instructive to consider concrete struggles of late for the ways that they affirm or challenge the book's framework. One might suggest that the sudden intensification of social conflict around airports and air travel does both. Exemplary among these are the US airport shutdowns of 2017 in defiance of the Trump administration's "Muslim ban"; blockages of access roads, runways, and service personnel to prevent immigrant deportations, notably but not exclusively in the UK; and work withdrawals actual and threatened, notably by air traffic controllers and flight attendants, in the face of the longest budgetary shutdown in US history. This last example underscores the enduring power of labor struggles, though we should be attentive to the ways that this incident was wage-related only in the sense that the Federal employees

involved were temporarily not receiving pay; there was no negotiation of wages, work conditions, or better footing for future bargaining (notably, the action summoned the repeated description of a nascent "general strike").

At the same time, this gathering of actions underscores the airport as a site of transport struggle (here we recall the parallel work stoppage by taxi drivers during the 2017 airport occupations). Even more significantly, these mark the airport as both fact and figure of global circulation; if there is a further theme uniting these actions it concerns immigration and refugees. We might see these actions aggregately as a discontinuous front opened against the remaking of border regimes that design to limit the free flow of people while preserving the free flow of capital, scarcely a new project but one that has come to dominate state strategy in the overdeveloped world. The wall along the Mexican border that possesses Donald Trump's imagination is the paradigmatic representation of a global project, elsewhere prosecuted through legal regimes, surveillance practices, political relation to the European Union and Schengen Area, and further measures—the state's very own circulation struggle.

One might set in suggestive relation to this the most sustained and ambitious social contest since the book's original publication, certainly in the US: the Standing Rock encampment against the Dakota Access Pipeline (the so-called NoDAPL movement), a circulation struggle of extraordinary scale and intensity that located its politics in relation to land sovereignty and to environmental despoliation while understanding its tactical power to lie in the interruption of infrastructural development, of fossil energy flows, and of profits. NoDAPL demands a more sustained treatment than is allowed by this afterword; it will nonetheless be useful to briefly trace its history.

It may be the case that the most successful deployment of circulatory strategies in recent decades is that of the *piqueteros* in Argentina, who succeeded in breaking multiple governments during a period of sustained political-economic volatility while metastasizing into a broad movement of the unemployed (*Movimientos de Trabajadores Desempleados*), always the most dialectically insistent subjects of the shift into circulation. That said, one fundamental prehistory of the present circulation struggle lies in Indigenous resistance to the colonial projection of power, wherein economic imperatives for resource extraction and distribution become the justification for state imposition of sovereignty claims which will be necessary for further profit-taking and so on in a cycle that elucidates the particular synthesis that Glen Sean Coulthard calls "settler capital."[9] Within this history of extractivist settler-colonial economies it is somewhat more difficult to speak of a *shift* to circulation, as they have by and large not followed the same developmental path to deindustrialization worn by the early-industrializing nations. There is a prolonged tradition of infrastructural blockades, occupations, and encampments in First Nations territories that would provide the framework for NoDAPL.

The most immediate precursor, the Idle No More movement that peaked in 2012–13, originated as a hunger strike in protest of omnibus Bill C-45, whose salient features delivered economic development and settlement of reserve lands while degrading environmental protections. Shortly, as Coulthard describes it, "Idle No More tactics began to diversify to include the use of blockades and temporary train and traffic stoppages, the most publicized of which

9 Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014, 170.

involved a two-week railway blockade."[10] This falls within a longer tradition that seeks "to impede or block the flow of resources currently being transported to international markets from oil and gas fields, refineries, lumber mills, mining operations, and hydroelectric facilities located on the dispossessed lands of Indigenous nations [so as] to have a negative impact on the economic infrastructure that is core to the colonial accumulation of capital in settler-political economies like Canada's."[11] Coulthard understands these land-based forms of direct action to be longstanding as they lead toward the formation of what Naomi Klein will describe, in her book on ecological crisis, as "blockadia." At the same time, writing in 2014, Coulthard specifies that such actions, with blockades taking pride of place, have been the pivotal feature of "all negotiations over the scope and content of Aboriginal peoples' rights in the last forty years," reaching back to the 1970s.[12] The correspondence is remarkable.

Pipeline and airport blockades together insist on the two themes of immigration and ecology, which is say, antagonisms around borders and climate catastrophe. These provide in coordination with the classical and modern aspects of the riot (that is, from the preindustrial era and the age of racialized surplus populations) something approaching a full orientation toward the future of circulation struggles. It is in part for this reason that the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France, haunted by all of these features and in turn demonstrating their achieved and contradictory unity by drawing all of them into a single sustained episode, offers not just inspiration according to its volatile and ambitious contestation, but a prospect onto what is to

10 Ibid., 161.
11 Ibid., 170.
12 Ibid., 166.

come, a prospect charged with both dire presentiments and cause for hope.

The Roundabout Riots

Much has been written about the *Gilets Jaunes* movement beginning in late 2018 and ongoing at the time of this writing—about its development, its achievements, its internal conflicts and limits. I will not linger on these other than by way of getting to a particular elaboration. The movement took its name from the high-visibility safety vests required of all motorists by the government. It arose in protest against a rising gasoline premium (particularly diesel, common in France) imposed by the technocratic centrist government of Emmanuel Macron, a carbon tax purportedly meant both to push people away from fossil fuel usage and to fund ecological remediation; this last claim was rendered particularly unpersuasive by parallel cuts to corporate taxes. Its initial participants agreed broadly that this additional consumption cost made it impossible to get through the month. The protests appeared first in the form of provincial traffic blockages; they swiftly spread to urban areas, diversifying in form and consolidating into weekly *actes* each Saturday. Three images, arranged chronologically, begin to capture the breadth of activities that have characterized the movement.

The first, taken from the *New York Times*, shows two figures in yellow vests standing down a looming delivery truck, its intermodal shipping container hunched behind the cab, in the predawn hours in provincial Guéret. Its significance could not be more plain: it takes few people and only the most minimal coordination to halt commercial transport. One need simply wake early, call a friend, and head down to the roundabout. Or stay there all night,

as seemed often to be the case across France, combining the occupation and the blockade. In this moment, taken alongside the origins of the movement, we can see the genealogical persistence of the medieval and early modern riot, one defined by struggles to set the price of market goods, its participants brought together not by shared labor status but by dispossession, set in the context of consumption and featuring the interruption of commercial circulation. This is the definition of the traditional riot provided at the book's outset; surely no one in the movement needed such reading to know what to do next in order to prosecute a modern bread riot. Were there any doubts that this particular form drawn from the repertoire of popular struggles not only persists but is renascent, the scope and intensity of this national riot, some 300,000 at peak, which by all accounts brought France closer to revolutionary conditions than anything since 1968 or before, ought lay such doubts to rest. At the same time, we must clarify that to identify this and future movements as direct descendants of the classical riot, their choreography drawn precisely if not consciously from the history of circulation struggles, is not to rob from them their improvisatory possibilities and potential for tactical and strategic innovations. It is rather to clarify the conditions within which history is made.

The second, a video taken in the town of Narbonne, shows an enterprising soul, having acquired use of a forklift, hoisting a flaming car on high and ramming it into a tollbooth. The flames recall that global yet peculiarly French habit, the *voiture brûlée*, and invoke the *banlieue* riots of 2005 illuminated ceaselessly by such fires. The racialized riot and the price-setting riot are not so distinct, I have tried to argue, and in this moment one can see their contiguity but also their non-identity (and indeed, despite tentative efforts, it remains a project for these two riots to

converge). The scene in Narbonne is, among other things, fixated on physical circulation with an arcane purity which nonetheless stands for the whole impure movement. Everywhere circulation is not the terrain but the enemy: something to be commanded before it commands you and to be ruined straightaways, as the machine-breakers two centuries earlier grasped about the engines of production.

This leads us to the third, in truth any example drawn from thousands of images showing a furious Parisian crowd, having tried already to storm Macron's residence at the Élysée Palace, laying siege to the Arc de Triomphe while nearby their colleagues sack shops along the glittering Champs-Élysée. Here the remaining constituent features of riot converge: looting, command over the *agora* as both marketplace and public space, direct confrontation with the state. It is worth recalling that the Women's March on Versailles began as a riot over food prices; where once were pitchforks, now there are forklifts. The Arc de Triomphe, meanwhile, might be taken as a symbol of state to be seized and duly decorated with graffiti. This would be to overlook the avenues radiating out from the former *Place de l'Étoile,* the roundabout at the heart of the world to which the national version of the circulation struggle must aspire.

In the Riot of the Present

Now we have something close to a complete ensemble leading us into the most current orientations. The movement, in its swift pivot from economic to political demands (with Macron's demission, that most limited of demands, inevitably at the head), almost immediately raised the issue of immigration. The demand comported with the disease infecting Fortress Europe, the disease that causes both left

and right (if the French spectrum still obtains) to dream of a revivified national economy requiring, among other things, closer immigration control. This illness comes with two fever-dreams: first, the xenophobic imaginings of the reactionary fraction, and second, the economic misunderstanding that there can be some return to the general conditions of the *trentes glorieuses*. There is cause for concern over this aspect within the movement, particularly in the context of Europe's ethnonationalist drift. At the same time there is little cause for surprise. Every mass movement necessarily features a struggle within the struggle. Antagonism concerning the enforcement or abolition of immigration and border regimes will be integral to many uprisings over the coming years, both externally as a response to nationalisms and internally as a matter of competing claims.

At the same time, the *Gilets Jaunes* movement was from its outset colored by ecological concerns, given Macron's alibi for what is otherwise evident as a straightforward austerity policy toward shifting ever more costs of social reproduction onto the backs of the poor. Fuel in particular, in cars and buses, in pipelines, in gas heaters, in worksites, has become the subject of a violently contested and double-sided social struggle. On the one hand, the attempt to think ecological and capitalist crisis as a single fact directs us again and again to fossil fuels: the constraints and path dependencies and political forms of carbon capitalism, and the catastrophic consequences of the great burn. The *Gilets Jaunes* movement grasped this instantly with their slogan, *fin du monde, fin du mois* (sometimes continuing, *même coupables, même combat*). There can be little doubt that an epochal change in energy regimes will be necessary if there is to be a further epoch wherein the full history of humanity might begin. It's communism or *glub glub glub*. On the other, fuel's role as a necessary item in the reproduction of

the global proletariat guarantees that it will be the object of price-setting riots, whether or not price increases are provided an ecological excuse. The *Gilets Jaunes* follow directly on Brazilian insurrection sparked by an increase in the price of transport tickets in 2013; Mexico's *gasolinazo* protests in 2017, centered by roadway blockades against a fuel increase; and Haitian riots over rising fuel costs in 2018, to select only a few examples.

So then: proletarians are cast on either side of both matters, immigration and ecology. But again we must recognize that these two matters are one. While border regimes will continue to provide a way for the capitalist class to manage labor markets, the international labor flow is already in the process of converging with the increase of climate refugees, a current which the inundation of coastal cities over the near future will only accelerate. When this phenomenon is viewed from the counterposition, the seeming need to husband diminishing "natural resources" provides a readymade rationale for intensified policing of borders. It matters little whether one conceives of climate collapse as cause of refugees, or refugees the source of resource burdens. In the present world, immigration has become an ecological fact, ecology a matter of immigration.

This is simple and absolute: *immigration battles and climate collapse share a single basis in what we might call "exhaustion capitalism,"* a capitalism worn thin, its engine casting off labor as the exhaust of hyperproductivity, voraciously exhausting resources necessary for its survival.

One can begin to imagine the political forms this will take. What if the US state, adopting the reasoning and rhetoric of the very antagonists it so diligently endeavored to crush at Standing Rock, declared that a planned border wall with Mexico was not meant to deter the threat of terrorists, gangs, traffickers, and other imagined malefactors, but

rather was a project along the lines of NoDAPL's "water protectors," preserving resources against destructive consumption and indifferent despoliation? Here the historically xenophobic framework of the Malthusian "population bomb" is buttressed by the pseudo-ethical demand of ecological preservation, underwritten by a practical competition for survival resources. From the perspective of nations wealthy enough to afford even a minimal bulwark against climate collapse for some privileged fraction of its citizenry, the floods of rising seawater and of refugees will run together, both figured as inundations.

This dystopia is already here. The exigencies of declining living standards and life chances, the *Gilets Jaunes*' end-of-the-month desperation entangled already with Macron's ecological claim, disclose this sequence as the early history of *climate riots*: uprisings which, whatever their declared theme, are conditioned by threat of climate collapse and grim panic over population control. What is already apparent and will no doubt become more so is the state's willingness to seize this situation on behalf of capital and of its own consolidation of power, a Green Nationalism which leverages climate management regimes toward hard borders, xenophobic violence, differential citizenship, protectionist labor pacts, further intensifications of militarization and surveillance. In both the labor market and the sovereign nation, the axis of inclusion/exclusion will structure social conditions in the first instance. Against this, against the varied impositions of immiseration, climate riots and their cousins are likely to ascend in significance, riven by contradiction and driven by immediate requirements for survival. Thoroughfare, public square, pipeline, railway, dockside, airport, border, these will be our places.

9 February 2019