



Crowd(ed) Futures: A Conversation

MARK SCHMITT, SOLVEJG NITZKE

TU Dortmund University, Germany

TU Dresden, Germany

Coils of the Serpent asks for creative ways of conducting scholarship. We took this challenge to heart and, instead of writing a more formal introduction, tried to find a form that is open enough to start a conversation and still allows for a substantiated discussion. Being scholars (in 2020 at that) we fell back to the traditional exchange of letters or, in this case, e-mails. What we tried is to give insight into our motivation to work together, the questions which direct our attention and the discourses that we think are most important with regards to "Crowd(ed) Futures".

Solvejg Nitzke, 3 September 2020

Dear Mark!

I want to make good on my promise to begin the conversation that will start off our special issue "Crowd(ed) Futures". It might be a little unusual to have an e-mail thread instead of a "proper" introduction at the beginning of a collection of texts, but we are lucky enough to work with *Coils of the Serpent*, a journal that encourages different forms of academic and creative work.

What we attempt, however, is not as innovative as we might like to claim. Letters between people who try to figure out things together have a long history and are, at times, irreplaceable sources for the genesis of thought and ideas. But while we wouldn't want to pretend to be Goethe and Schiller working at a new concept of classicism or [insert famous British letter writers that we don't want to be], we chose this form, because it reflects on the way we work together and might help to make transparent the kinds of collaboration we want to achieve in, with and beyond this issue. The "issue" is another reason why a somewhat associative (and, yes, edited) e-mail-thread takes the place of a more traditional introductory text: "Crowd(ed) Futures" are in many ways the complement to the solitary act of writing and the conversational function of the letter and, not least, the e-mail-thread might well be suited to connect the two.

So why do we talk about crowds and futures and what does that have to do with literary and cultural studies? The reasons are as simple as they are fundamental: We were looking for a connection between our research areas because it has been so long since we



collaborated on a project. The last time we did, we edited a volume on catastrophes (Nitzke and Schmitt 2012) and, I notice now, the impulse for both the choice of topic and of the way in which we worked on it were very similar: *Katastrophen* was a kind of DIY approach to explore the ways in which you can connect topics and modes of thinking. Both in the very (!) early stages of our respective doctoral projects (yours on British White Trash, mine on the Tunguska-Event), we wanted a platform on which to discuss and develop research ideas, rather than to merely “present” them. Starting with a wish to collaborate and a mutual curiosity for the other’s research, we broadened the circle and invited, then and now, others to chime in and share the floor. This time it is not catastrophes that brought us together or, rather, allowed us to connect our respective questions, but futures. Especially the idea that population growth, rising economic insecurity and a global demand for a higher standard of living – all in the face of seminal ecological crises – changes the ways in which we can imagine futures.

As you are working on riots and their (intended and unintended) effects on the imagination of futures and I work on ecological storytelling as a means to produce the very environments we inhabit, it makes sense that we look to the places and stages where these interests connect.

For now, I’ll leave it at that – if only to resist falling into the very monologue this is supposed to prevent – I want to end with a question: what is it that connects riots and futures in your view and what is the role “crowds” and “crowdedness” play in this relationship?

Best,
Solvejg

Mark Schmitt, 14 September 2020

Hi Solvejg,

finally, here’s my (first) reply.

When I started my research on the imagination of futures, the history of utopian thinking and the general conceptions of time and historicity attached to these issues, I realized that one of the fundamental challenges of actually realizing ideas for better, maybe even “counter-hegemonic” futures rests in the question of who is capable of bringing about such fundamental change. This is a question of time, the passage of time, i.e., how long does it take from envisioning a (utopian/better) future and how does the question of time (and the experience of time) affect agency. Secondly, it is, quite simply, a question of numbers as well as of the individual vs/and the collective. It might be quite easy



for an individual to sit down at their desk and envision their idea of a better future. It is quite a different thing to actually accomplish and bring about change towards realizing this better future and translate your words and thoughts into material reality. This is where the collective becomes important. Most utopian futures since Thomas More's *Utopia* have always been visions of a human collective – actually, this is where some of the criticism of (literary) utopias starts: a pessimist like E.M. Cioran is skeptical about if not downright appalled by the idea of a homogeneous collective living in harmonious de-individualization. I think it's not arbitrary that his essay "Mechanism of Utopia" (Cioran 2015) starts with the question of living under conditions of modern civilization and the seeming improbability of this collective coexistence: "Whenever I happen to be in a city of any size, I marvel that riots do not break out every day: massacres, unspeakable carnage, a doomsday chaos. How can so many human beings coexist in a space so confined without destroying each other, without hating each other *to death*?" (2015: 80; see also my article in this issue) Cioran deconstructs the idea of utopia as an ideal that is unattainable in the light of his misanthropic view of humanity. At the same time, however, his text performs its own subversion, because he seems to suggest that the present form of urban coexistence already constitutes a realized utopia because, after all, not that many riots and massacres erupt, and humans seem to mostly succeed in living collectively despite their baser instincts and despite their supposed need for singularity and individuality.

To come back to your question and to stick to the idea of the riot for a moment: my interest in riots, and especially the history of riots in Britain, was sparked by reading Joshua Clover's book *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (2016) and Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History* (2012). Both Clover and Badiou propose that the riot is a necessary political force of history, born out of a moment of crisis, and catalyzing historical change. In my view, riots are therefore not simply momentary eruptions. Rather, they are events that disrupt our sense of time and history by opening up a window to the future in our present. They force us to re-think our present and our idea of progress. At the same time, each riot, in its own way, can be read as an echo of earlier riots. In that way, the riot also opens a window to the past. The rioting crowds might not always have a concrete agenda of what a better future should look like (even though with the current Black lives Matter protests, for instance, the agenda for a better non-racist future is very clear and unambiguous). But what becomes clear in the riot nevertheless is this: we may not have a concrete vision of what exactly the future should look like, but it definitely shouldn't look like the present. Riots, like strikes, are also representative of the power of crowds as political agents, which leads to Elias Canetti's arguments in his *Crowds and Power* (1984).

Generally, the question of crowds has always been a political one. As Raymond Williams observed in *Culture and Society*, the notion of the "masses" as a de-individualized multitude of people who, precisely because they cannot be distinguished in a "mass", must resort to their baser instincts and cannot be a force of civilization, is a conservative or



even reactionary idea that constructs the bourgeois, civilized individual vs. the impulse-driven working-class masses (cf. 2017: 413). This negative image of crowds or masses has been prevalent ever since Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud's theorization of crowd mentality. In contrast to this, recent theorists such as Jodi Dean (*Crowds and Party*, 2016) and Judith Butler (*Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 2015) have emphatically argued for the progressive political force of crowds and other collectivities. These are texts which look at contemporary mass movements and what I would call their futurological potential. But it should be noted that Marxist historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, George Rudé and E.P. Thompson have made similar arguments in their revisions of historical riots and strikes.

In order to hand over to you again, my question to you would be: where do you see the connection between these new approaches to crowds (and their political potentialities) and ecological questions?

Solvejg Nitzke, 22 October 2020

Wow, I'm blown away by the range of references that is already in here... I will start my reply with answering the question you asked me, or at least I will attempt to do it – and the answer is relatively simple: I don't see many connections between these new approaches to crowd thinking or thinking crowds and ecological questions. That is, I don't see them as explicit enough. In many ways thinking about crowds mirrors a general lack of connection in current politics and, for that matter, cultural studies between the 'ecological' and the 'social'. There are so many books about the end of the great divide between Nature and Culture (very big Ns and Cs) but the "modern constitution" (Latour: 13) still works. The modern constitution, if I may quickly paraphrase Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), runs on the fiction that you can neatly divide the social from the natural. Thus, there are subjects and objects, natural things and social things and, hence, different discourses and disciplines deal with different things. In his wonderful introduction, Latour debunks this 'constitution' – I would call it a very effective and strikingly operational myth – while reading the newspaper. He observes that there are still rubrics (politics, economy, culture, miscellaneous) but as soon as you look at the actual articles you see that there is no such thing (literally) as a natural or a social object. Take global warming: the only way to make this a natural problem is to call every single climate scientist a liar and a decades old scientific consensus false. Ridiculous! (Doesn't mean people aren't doing that.) To make it a social problem, you would need to completely ignore the erratic behavior of complex and global climate systems (cf. Hulme 2017; Nitzke and Horn 2020).



The social problem, then, would not be the political, economic and cultural (belief) systems that compel us to *not* change a single thing about our day-to-day life even in the face of a cataclysm, but the fact that we just cannot make up our minds to let the engineers fix it already. Although I'm being polemic, here, that is indeed the problem and both 'deniers' and 'technofixers' try desperately to *not* deal with the fact that global warming, biodiversity loss and ocean acidification are 'superwicked' problems. 'Wicked problem' comes from social policy (management and planning) and is almost self-explanatory: this is a problem that is so hard to entangle, if at all, that there are basically only wrong things you can do in reaction to it.

That leads me back to crowds and ecology. The newer theories you referred to seem to regard 'ecology' or 'environmental issues' as causes to assemble (similar to hunger, protest against racist police brutality, peace and so on) and they are, but they are more. Not only do crowds play an important role in environmental discourse, they actually could enhance and change our concepts of social and political organization to a notion of co-existence that even goes beyond the human. Latour, for example, suggests a "Parliament of Things" (1993: 144), which extends political representation to non-humans. However, I think more intimate ways of framing human-non-human relationships, e.g. through storytelling (cf. Tsing 2015), transcend political representation, and better grasp the difficulties of thinking together crowds and ecologies.

In environmental discourse, crowds become important when they are conceptualized to disturb a supposed balance or equilibrium, that is, when one species consumes so many resources that it threatens other species' lives. Interestingly that doesn't really apply to, say, swarms of locusts. The reverse is true, too: crowds of people that are perceived to threaten the livelihood of others, e.g. looters, are often characterized as swarming animals, such as locusts (let's be clear that most often happens in despicable political contexts). But the only species that might actually consume enough resources to threaten other species' existence (and its own) is, no surprise: human beings. Without recapping Malthus here (cf. Bergthaller 2018; cf. Krstić in this issue), it's well known that the fear of "overpopulation" has a long and wretched history leading to genocide and, presently, the racist declaration of unborn life as undesirable. However, the notion returned in the early 1970s when the Club of Rome published "The Limits to Growth". This report is a foundational text of 20th-century environmental movements and led to many a crowd protesting environmental degradation and ignorance.

There is a connection here to Judith Butler, not so much to her assembly book but to *Frames of War* (2010), because the notions of "limit" and "overpopulation" play an important role in the process of denoting some (Western, non-white, non-wealthy) lives as ungrievable. Look at the ease with which "Africa" and "Asia" are evoked when 'overpopu-



lation' is discussed. All of this connects to the idea of a biopolitics that, in turn, has ecological aspects which are well worth discussing with regards to "Crowd(ed) Futures". I am probably throwing too many things together but bear with me. I'm not going too deep into it, because I want to get to an example, but let me point out a couple of things: Biopolitics is, like overpopulation, a term that is pretending to look at one side of the 'modern constitution' but in fact is one of those dangerous hybrids that can produce as much good as bad. Both terms can be read as a way to naturalize politics (by looking at 'populations' not 'people' and by making decisions based on 'biology', i.e. 'objectified and free of emotions'). At the same time they anthropomorphize non-human "nature". A distinction between different forms of life (e.g. the opposition of *bios*, the good life, *zoe*, life in general, which Giorgio Agamben (1998) takes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and develops from it the concept of "bare life") do not really make sense from an ecological perspective. One only needs to look at the many symbionts doing nothing much but living in the mud of any given lake. Or look at plants: easily mistaken for non-moving barely living things, they nevertheless produce the very conditions on which most other lifeforms depend for their "good life". The distinction between grievable and ungrievable, good and 'general', wanted and unwanted life, thus, depends on a linear sense of control which does decidedly *not* think ecologically. And yet, it is deeply engrained in ecological and environmental discourse. Dipesh Chakrabarty conceptualized the *anthropos* of the Anthropocene (2009) as an agent of "species thinking" capable of uniting humanity in the face of climate change. This is a worthy attempt to think of human crowds in a hopeful way, but it also runs danger of reinforcing a notion of communities immunizing themselves against 'others'. Problematic crowds, masses even, are always cast as outside the body of (worthy) human community.

A literary detour on overpopulation: While Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) mocks overpopulation as one of the leftover fads of obstinate older environmentalists rather gently (cf. Nitzke 2018), Dan Brown's thriller *Inferno* (2013) revives the idea and provides a chilling solution. With all the Cultural (again, very big C) force of Dante's literary hell, Brown designs another chase on which professor of symbolism, Robert Langdon, uncovers a bioterrorism plot involving a billionaire geneticist who – besides being a Dante fanatic and a fan of encryption and scavenger hunts – developed a "new plague". The scientist (who committed suicide) colluded with a secret organization to spread 'his' virus over the world. As it turns out his (at least in his mind) philanthropic mission to halt overpopulation aims not at killing swaths of people, but randomly causing sterility. A convenient solution that seems to avoid the racist aspects of most ploys to stop "overpopulation" or the horror of post-apocalyptic narratives in which the death of billions of people is casually narrated as a past event (cf. Becker in this issue). However, I am still concerned about the casual acceptance that the novel propagates when it turns out that the virus has already been unleashed. Like many disaster narratives, the relatively happy ending puts forth more questions than it answers. When billions of humans are rendered infertile,



won't the wealthy still find ways to reproduce? What about consumption habits, traffic and the exploitation of natural resources by global capital? None of this is addressed as a problem, as if you could just dial down global problems by limiting the number of humans possibly causing them.

The selection of worthy (individual) life from masses of 'general' life is a practice of exclusion often justified through political ecology: protection of the planet from too many (of the wrong) humans. This might hint at why so many of the new theory confine 'ecology' to 'environmental issues/concerns'. The youth movement Fridays for Future (FFF) might actually change that if they manage to sustain their combination of the form of protest with their demands. They give a face and voice to those who will have to live with the future consequences of present actions or lack thereof. In a way they turn the rioting dictum you formulated upside down: "we may not have a concrete vision of what exactly the future should look like, but it definitely shouldn't look like the present" sounds like a threat facing the uncertain futures of ecological crises.

This was longer than I planned. I am still not sure though whether we talk about the same crowds. I know that you are thinking about the connection of riots and embodiment, but did you find any connections/reflections of biopolitics or ecological exchange in the crowd-theory you are dealing with? And one more thing: What about that future that is not only part of our title, but seems to emerge (at least as an idea) from the masses we have gathered already?

Mark Schmitt, 23 November 2020

I am fascinated by the turn this conversation has taken. So to brutally paraphrase (and maybe inappropriately simplify) your argument, we could say that the connection between crowds and ecological concerns can be primarily found in questions concerning a biopolitical paradigm as well as in the aspect of overpopulation, which means to extend the thinking about crowds and bodies on a global scale. Or, in Timothy Morton's words, we have to think of crowds at "Earth magnitude" rather than merely in terms of localized crowd events (Morton 2016: 32).

To come to your first question whether there is a connection to biopolitics or ecology in the new theories on crowds that I'm dealing with, I think we should return to your prediction that Fridays for Future might actually be able to change the way we as a species relate to our place within a bigger ecological system. This might certainly be true even if a cynical part of me is worried that, at first, the structural makeup of FFF might have to make sure not to reproduce anthropocentric categories, and especially those from a white



Western/Eurocentric point of view and the potential bias that entails. But this might be a discussion for another day.

To stay with FFF for a brief moment, we can of course see Armin Nassehi dealing with FFF in his recent book *Das große Nein* (2020). However, he's not so much concerned with the validity of their positions or with the subject of their protest, but rather with their performance of negation. This certainly makes sense for what he wants to achieve with his study, but it is unfortunate for us, because I think it would be worth discussing the way FFF tackles a "hyperobject" (Morton 2013) like the climate and turns it into something operational that mobilises a significant number of people.

I think the best way to address your question is to once more return to Butler. You chose her *Frames of War* in which she outlines her concept of grievable and un-grievable lives and how these are unevenly distributed across the globe. I would suggest to return to her book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* because it's here that we find an update of her notion of precarious lives in connection to certain ecological aspects. Throughout the book, Butler keeps returning to her ideas outlined in *Precarious Life* (2006) and *Frames of War* and links them to issues of cohabitation. She starts by taking up her arguments about opposing war (in *Frames*), arguing that the question of livable lives cannot merely be reduced to human interaction alone. When someone opposes war, she argues, one does not only oppose the destruction of human life: one also opposes "the poisoning of the environment, and the more generalized assault on a living world" (2015: 44). Butler thus extends her ethical argument to a wider, and we could say, ecological scale: "Only in the context of a living world does the human as an agentic creature emerge, one whose dependency on others and on living processes gives rise to the very capacity for action" (2015: 44).

Later, Butler offers a critique of Hannah Arendt's ethical argument against genocide and for human cohabitation by extending the latter on an ecological scale. First of all, Butler argues, we need to conceive of our lives being lived with other human beings "we never chose", but secondly, we have to conceive of our cohabitation with other human lives as well as with "the open-ended plurality that is the global population" (2015: 113). "The way I read this [i.e. Arendt's ethical argument about cohabitation as a "guideline for particular forms of politics], every inhabitant who belongs to a community belongs also to the earth – a notion she clearly takes from Heidegger – and this implies a commitment not only to every other inhabitant of that earth but, we can surely add, to sustaining the earth itself. And with this last proviso, I seek to offer an ecological supplement to Arendt's anthropocentrism." (2015: 113). This last part is crucial here, I think, because Butler stresses not to think of the earth (or the environment) merely as a habitat with a species-exclusive purpose (i.e. to nourish the human population). In a deconstruction of the notion of a "chosen people", she argues that in fact no one was ever chosen, that we all inhabit this earth



“without everyone’s consent” (2015: 116). And we might extend this notion of, as it were, non-consensual living, as the general condition of lives lived on this planet, whether human or otherwise. The members of my species didn’t give consent, nonhuman life and the earth itself didn’t give consent, and I myself didn’t give consent when I was born onto this earth: “We are all, in this sense, unchosen, but we are nevertheless unchosen together” (Butler 2015: 116).

And this brings us to your second question, I think: the question of the future. If we want to develop “a logic of future coexistence”, as Morton puts it in the subtitle of his *Dark Ecology*, we can start with Butler’s ethics of cohabitation. In that sense, what Butler has to say about the performative politics of assembly, implies that every local, time- and place-specific assembly – every moment in which bodies assemble and converge into one – is a prefigurative micro-representation of this larger notion of (future) cohabitation at earth magnitude.

Solvejg Nitzke, 4 December 2020

Butler’s attempt to formulate an “ecological supplement to Arendt’s anthropocentrism” (2015: 113) is intriguingly oxymoronic. Not only because Arendt is so explicitly anthropocentric that it doesn’t make sense throw that accusation at her (however affirmative) but also because this opposition seduces Butler to overlook her own anthropocentrism. There is much to criticize about what you might call the “posthuman turn” or “Posthumanism” (a brilliant intro which refers to much of the critique is Cary Wolfe’s book *What Is Posthumanism?*, 2010), but in this argument Butler seems to fall short of noticing that “ecology” is more than the interdependency of the “living world”. Isabel Stengers’ seven books long series *Cosmopolitics* (2010 and 2011) is not this long by accident. The philosophical, cybernetical and ethical entanglements not only of living beings but also of living and non-living, “natural” and artificial objects and subjects, discourses and social systems, in short: almost everything there is and that can be thought of connects in ways which we can barely grasp, if at all. “We do not know how to formulate the question of ‘value’ in general terms, in that it may refer to a particular trait or to generic properties of interconnected ensembles, such as those that characterize the ‘edge of chaos.’ [...] This is what needs to be *conceptualized*” (Stengers 2011: 267). I do think that while Butler shows great potential in extending her argument toward an ecological thinking, she has a way to go, and an “ecological supplement” might not suffice.

As much as I would love to go deeper into the questions of “coexistence” and “cohabitation”, I’m afraid, this is the point in our conversation at which we must talk about what is happening right now. Though not without mentioning Rob Nixon’s brilliant study *Slow*



Violence (2011) which, I think, gives much needed context to Morton's and Butler's observations. Nixon looks at the "slow", i.e. long term effects of environmental destruction – war, pollution and unjust resource extraction meet where they make invisible the cost to environments and the living beings inhabiting them. While catastrophic events, think: Bophal 1984, Chernobyl 1986, New Orleans 2004, might kill many people at once, their worst consequences often play out over time. Many environmental disasters don't even have an "event" to point to. Eva Horn calls climate change a "catastrophe without event" (2018: 55) and the same could be said for biodiversity loss, ocean acidification and pollution. However, what makes this such a big problem is that you can't see where the story begins and ends. Take New Orleans for example: What was the catastrophe? The flood, the lack of communication, the insufficient levees, the catastrophic social injustice? Who is the victim? The people who died during the flooding event? Who lost their homes? Those who are still traumatized and were unable to reconstruct – both emotionally and economically – their lives? The inability to point to a single responsible entity reflects the unwillingness to take responsibility by those who, without a doubt, would have the power to change the conditions and thus strengthen resilience. But for our topic the gut wrenchingly interesting thing is, where are the crowds? Is there a way to make them seen and heard without a riot, when they are not protesting in the streets? Do statistics represent crowds? (It seems these questions are terribly naïve, since it apparently is very possible to ignore crowds even when they are protesting in the streets – at least in terms of legislation and change of policy.)

It's December 2020 and crowds or, rather, the avoidance of crowds have become an issue with an urgency which – at least for white Westerners like us – is unprecedented. Even formerly unthreatening (or only potentially threatening) crowds have become a matter of concern: theaters, concert halls, even restaurants are closed around the world to avoid the worsening of the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. "Immunity" has turned into a national, if not global, effort. Everything revolves around organizing crowds – to herd them through vaccination lines for example – while at the same time many people are spending what is now the ninth month in isolation. What we see here, is, in a way, a paradoxical crowd: you are part of it because you must not be there. You know that millions if not billions of people around the world sit in their apartment alone, just like you do – but you cannot be part of a physical crowd because it might kill you or your grandma.

Without talking about the current pandemic (hopefully), Madeline Becker looks at the "Lonely Futures" in dystopian fiction. In light of the pandemic, her article, like many other texts in this issue and beyond, gain an eerie quality that surpasses the *Lustangst* many apocalyptic narratives play with. Independent of their (supposed) didactic intentions, the Last Man narratives Becker writes about, are part of a cultural imaginary that turns on its



head the fear of being part of a (condemned) future crowd and – I notice I’m getting biblical – instead offers existential loneliness. Adam, the first human, turns into a last man left in isolation without hope for salvation.

It’s possible that I spent too much time alone in front of my computer (interrupted by my daughter – luckily), but it seems to me that in the current situation the hope of a messianic singularity (e.g. Christ the Savior) is somehow diminished by the inability – or at least the ill-advised desire – to form crowds. To mention yet another paper in this issue: what about the Megachurches that Kate Pickering looks at? Not only would her research be near impossible at the moment, what happens to people when they cannot be part of a crowd anymore? Do the assemblies that claim to “resist” the pandemic measures change our notion of protest and riot (or are they just another PEGIDA)? What is the role of narrative in a crowdless world and time in which so many people are aware that they are living a life that is almost exactly like that of everybody else?

So back to your question – what can a future coexistence/cohabitation/congregation look like in the light of the invisible dangers, not only of the virus but of environmental as well as social toxicity?

P.S.: This is itself an assembly – of questions, but I am convinced that we as cultural scholars do better asking than explaining in the current situation.

Mark Schmitt, 8 December 2020

I agree that we need to see what the “now”, that is, our current global moment, means for the notions of crowds. As many commentators have mentioned throughout this troublesome year 2020, a tragic irony of the pandemic is that it has interrupted the Fridays for Future protests. Going into the particularities of this movement (including the question if it is actually a coherent movement large enough to be described as such, etc. etc.) would require an entire special issue of its own, but for the concerns we want to address with this special issue, I think it’s important to observe that what the pandemic and the resulting new fear of crowds shows us how crucial it is for a political movement to be visible as a collective entity. Apart from the visibility of Greta Thunberg as one of the major leading figures, it is the visibility of the crowds of FFF that was central to the impact of its movement (and in this case it doesn’t even matter whether the weekly local marches one might see in one’s own hometown might often have actually been neglectably small), and it is this visibility that’s currently missing from the scene (since the protagonists of FFF are doing the sensible thing and staying home).



Coming back to your question, what can a future congregation in the light of invisible dangers and catastrophes without events look like? I think it is important to mention Chantal Mouffe's recent book *For a Left Populism*. Mouffe's book is a proposal for how to mobilize people for a democratic project that can face the antidemocratic challenges of the current rise of right-wing populism – and it also offers suggestions on how to politically address invisible dangers. “[T]he future of the planet”, she writes, must be given “special emphasis”: “It is impossible to envisage a project of radicalization of democracy in which the ‘ecological question’ is not at the centre of the agenda. It is therefore essential to combine this with the social question.” (Mouffe 2019: 61) Mouffe argues that this democratic project at first necessitates the construction of a people. This in many ways goes against the grain of left thinking because it is feared that a “homogeneous subject, one that negates plurality” (2019: 62) will be the result – and this runs counter to the ideals of the left. Interestingly, Mouffe addresses this fear by referring to Gustave Le Bon, whose conservative, pessimist view of “the masses” was integral to not only Freud's theses on mass psychology, but has informed a general skepticism towards crowds and mass movements as something that must inevitably lead to an abandonment of reason and to chaos or totalitarianism. The trick, then, is to establish chains of equivalence (she is here of course referring to her work on hegemony and socialist strategy together with Ernesto Laclau, 2014 – an aspect that Steffen Wittig addresses in his contribution to this special issue) “between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group” (Mouffe 2019: 63). For this, you need an adversary.

It is rather challenging to picture an adversary when the danger that you want to address is invisible and without event. The construction of a radically democratic people of the future therefore needs the “creation of a different regime of desires and affects through inscription in discursive/affective practices that will bring about new forms of identification” (Mouffe 2019: 76-77). In other words, people will need to *feel* something, and through that shared feeling people will need to develop a common subjectivity. It is not enough to logically grasp the catastrophe without event – you need to feel it. I am tempted to say that riots are collective events that carry the potential of such a “regime of desires and affects”, and this is also why this special issue features several contributions to different forms of riots, including ones that are related to ecological questions (see Alexander Kurunczi's contribution).

I'm afraid I haven't answered all of your questions, nor do I have additional questions. How do we wrap this up?



Solvejg Nitzke, 9 December 2020

Well, how do we, indeed? We might do so by doing a typical literary and cultural studies thing by asking what we have to contribute. That is, as I wrote in September, as fundamental a question as it is trivial. It is trivial because we could give the Mount Everest-Answer: we climb it “because it’s there” (George Mallory’s famous answer. See MacFarlane 2003: 95). That is, we talk about crowds and futures because books, movies, documentaries and people talk about them. But I think what this issue shows is that there is much more to it. The creative and critical approaches Niall Griffiths and Igor Krstić take not only complement the scholarly explorations, they prove that there are different ways – each as valid as the other – to approach these issues. Of course it is naïve to assume that writing about anything changes everything, but it would be missing the point to deny that it is doing *something*. Whether that is to evoke feeling or intellectual reflection. What I mean to say is, showing the variety of discourses and historical situations in which “Crowd(ed) Futures” are discussed, the ways in which they are perceived as troubling and/or exciting as well as promising, is not a small feat. We notice and categorize, examine and, most importantly (to me), we question.

The constant drive to question and criticize is, and here I can refer back to Mouffe, something that unnerves and enrages especially those on the so-called left. Why would you instead of homogenizing or, more positively, unifying movements, crowds and political goals under one umbrella, go on dissecting each other’s every word? Well, there are surely different answers, but the one I would propose and the reason why we decided to have this conversation instead of a neater and more conclusive intro, is that it continues to give faces to crowds. Take FFF for example – if we don’t criticize Greta Thunberg and, moreover, the messianic air that is attached to her, we might fail to see Vanessa Nakate. The incident, where in favor of featuring an all-white group of young female activists, AP cropped the Ugandan activist out of a photo at the World Economic Forum in Davos (CNN 2020), can serve as a *pars pro toto* for the political and ideological desire (maybe it’s even a technique) of rendering groups and crowds “faceless”. The more homogenous a group *looks*, the easier it is to instrumentalize it. Rather than taking account of individual (if representative) demands and desires, this practice makes it easy to “sum up” a group by way of invective. In this case, you might say, the cropped photo suggested that climate activism is an idle pastime of white girls from Europe.

This is, of course the opposite of the emancipatory group identities that e.g. “workers” claim in order to make themselves heard. Collective plurals (if chosen freely) might enhance the narratives that need to be heard (or really desperately want to) but it needs a mode to express the ambivalence of those crowd markers in terms of characterizations that can come from either inside or outside of the crowd. Most importantly, that mode must not resolve ambivalence or opposition but must point it out. Is that too much pathos?



I really do think that, by examining the relationship between riot and protest, “last man” and crowd, future and futures, the articles in this issue do contribute to an ethic of diversifying the imaginaries of crowd(ed) futures.

Mark Schmitt, 11 December 2020

An exchange like this one, and one about nothing less than the future, must inevitably be inconclusive. But maybe we can have yet another look at the current global situation and what it holds for the future and by juxtaposing them with the images of a fictional scenario of crowd(ed) futures: Alfonso Cuarón’s dystopian film *Children of Men* (2006). Set in a future rather close to our present, the year 2027, Cuarón’s film shows humanity on the brink of extinction. Total infertility of the species, global economic crisis and climate disasters have devastated most countries on earth; commercials encourage the purchase of suicide kits; Britain tries to protect what is left of its prosperity by securing its borders from refugees from the rest of the world. In its harrowing images of border control, the film challenges our present-day conception of refugees within the racialized imaginary of Self and Other: white European refugees from what used to be the so-called first world are as likely to be executed on the spot as those from the global South.

Re-watching the film in 2020 produces an eerie sense of timeliness and immediacy. The global challenge of the pandemic might have changed the meaning of crowds, but it has also made pre-existing issues of politics around crowd phenomena even more pressing. While the Covid-19 pandemic might affect the entire human species, it has without a doubt most dramatically affected those whose lives had already been rendered precarious. Yet, at the same time, it has tragically averted attention from precisely these issues. The urgent challenge of the climate crisis is one of these; the ongoing refugee crisis is another that gives the notion of “crowd(ed) futures” another inflection. The situation of refugees and forcibly displaced people has worsened dramatically throughout 2020, with many countries closing their borders to slow the spread of the pandemic, camps lacking proper protective measures and exposing their inhabitants to the virus, making the situation of asylum seekers worldwide even more dire.

Crisis and pandemic management as well as border management are, at the end of the day, crowd management. All three have the capacity to shape the future of populations by rendering lives either worthy of protection or precarious, that is, socially and existentially abject. Thus, crowds and how societies choose to deal with them, are indicators for what future co-existence will look like.

**Works Cited:**

- Agamben, Giorgio (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Redwood: Stanford University Press.
- Canetti, Elias (1984). *Crowds and Power*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Cioran, E. M. (2015). *History and Utopia*. New York: Arcade.
- Clover, Joshua (2016). *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings*. London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain (2012). *The Rebirth of History. Times of Riots and Uprisings*. London: Verso.
- Bergthaller, Hannes and Margarita Carretero González (2018). "Population, Ecology, and the Malthusian Imagination: An Introduction // Población, ecología y la imaginación malthusiana: Una introducción". *Ecozon@ 9.1*
<<https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2018.9.1.2484>>. [accessed 11 Dec. 2020]
- Brown, Dan (2013). *Inferno*, London: Bantam Press.
- Butler, Judith (2006). *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- (2010). *Frames of War. When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2009). "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35: 197-222.
- Children of Men* (2006). Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. Featuring Clive Owen, Julianne Moore and Michael Caine. Universal Pictures.
- Dean, Jodi (2016). *Crowds and Party*. London: Verso.
- Franzen, Jonathan (2010). *Freedom. A Novel*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Freud, Sigmund (1990). *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: Norton.
- Horn, Eva (2018). *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hulme, Mike (2017). *Weathered: Cultures of Climate*. London: SAGE.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe (2014). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Latour, Bruno (1993). *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Le Bon, Gustave (2002). *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Mineola: Dover.
- Morton, Timothy (2013). *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (2016). *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press 2016.
- Nassehi, Armin (2020). *Das große Nein*. Hamburg: Kursbuch.



- Nitzke, Solvejg (2018). "The Adaptation of Disaster. Representations of Environmental Crises in Climate Change Fiction." *Komparatistik Online* 2018: 38-58. <https://www.komparatistik-online.de/index.php/komparatistik_online/issue/view/15>. [accessed 11 Dec. 2020]
- and Eva Horn, eds. (2020). "Cultures of Climate: On Bodies and Atmospheres in Modern Fiction." *Ecozona* 11.1. 2020. <<http://ecozona.eu/issue/view/191>>. [accessed 11 Dec. 2020]
- Nixon, Robert (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Macfarlane, Robert (2003). *Mountains of the Mind: Adventures in Reaching the Summit*. London: Granta.
- Mouffe, Chantal (2019). *For a Left Populism*. London: Verso.
- Stengers, Isabelle (2010). *Cosmopolitics I*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- (2011). *Cosmopolitics II*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tsing, Anna (2015). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (2017). *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. London: Vintage.
- Wolfe, Cary (2013). *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Woodyatt, Amy (2020). "Ugandan Climate Activist Cropped Out of Photo Taken with Her White Peers." CNN 25 Jan. 2020. <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/25/world/vanessa-nakate-cropped-intl-scli/index.html>>. [accessed 11 Dec. 2020]