



Mobilising Red, Black and Green? Contouring the Place of the Riot in Contemporary Environmentalism

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Introduction: Fractured Reputation? Riots and the Progressive Struggle Today

Riots prove elusive, their contemporary noisy ubiquity notwithstanding. One peculiar mode of protest in social movements' diverse repertoire of strategies, they are as prone to its undulations, where certain actions are privileged as effective, while others are disqualified as too blunt an instrument in the struggle for justice and equality. Puzzlingly, it hardly matters that the last two decades were characterised by forms of protest that insisted on civil society as the privileged site of resistance – riots remain a phenomenon ostensibly positioned on the edges of the political sphere. This elusiveness has not enhanced their reputation. Not unlike the riot itself, it remains fractured. Riots are frequently frowned upon, even demonised. Commonly associated with violence, devastating destruction, and the egoistic greed of looters, they become, it seems, maladies of the mob rather than (legitimate) protests of the people.

Things are more complicated, of course. Riots position themselves inside and outside of a theoretical enchainment with democracy, depending on who exactly the riots' subject is understood to be: Is it a class, as socialists have hoped? A suggestible mob, as conservatives have feared? A multitude, a mass, *the people* even? In this debate, there is a chance for rehabilitating the riot, but – mind you – this is merely a chance, far from being a foregone conclusion. Puzzlements abound, as the riot's temporality does not offer much to simplify things: its causes remain vague, its demands and aims enigmatic. Juxtaposed with the neatly organised demonstrations and marches with their intelligible banners, riots flaunt their opacity, often blissfully remaining in a state of perpetual spontaneity. At the moment they are placed between rehabilitation, renaissance, and defeat. No doubt, riots are contentious practices, but their political impact is an object of contention alike.

Riots, then, fit seamlessly into a political landscape that is infinitely more complicated than any commensurate narrative of linear cause and effect suggests. Thus, they capture (and are captured by) the contemporary conjuncture, in which the progressive Left's



struggle hinges on developing coherent, captivating, and collective imaginative landscapes for life after capitalism. Ideally, this means coupling an unrelenting critique of the systematic failures inherent in capitalist socio-economic structure with a reimagining of the political sphere and moving beyond the unflinching reverence for well-established political institutions. This struggle for the future has ushered in an “era of uprisings” (Clover 2016) in which riots occupy a pivotal place. The promise of the riot, then, is at its very best a promise of a coming and encompassing democracy, an egalitarian and just future. Here, the crowd appears as a subject ready to demand its inclusion within the empty signifier of ‘the people’ – a place too often cordoned off to encompass only the privileged few. While this democratic horizon remains messy, riots – far from unethical gatherings – can help articulate the proliferating ethical convictions of their time. Hence, riots, may allow the crowd to come into existence as a political force to insist on and demand *their* future. The crowd articulates its right to the future, its egalitarian promise, and its determination to create a different future. In Astra Taylor’s words: “Throughout history the ideals of freedom and equality emanate intensely from the ground up, with the most authentic and expansive dreams conjured by those who were most emphatically excluded” (2019: 29).

One dream proves a particularly effective catalyst: the “perhaps impossible vision of an ecologically just world” (Spivak 1999: 382), which persists in the collective (radical) imagination. While riots present a central component in the intricate texture of today’s political conflicts, they increasingly interact with questions of environmental justice. Recent emergences of the crowd, civil unrest, and civil disobedience are all but unthinkable without the mobilising trajectory of a fight against cascading ecological tragedy. These protests are, not least of all, a response to the urgency of the matter and the insufficiency and timidity of climate action so far. Climate catastrophe is increasingly understood as irresolvable within the current political grammar, the economic regime of the accumulation of capital, and the hegemony of contemporary cultural constellations of neoliberalism. If, as David Wallace-Wells has asserted, “the climate crisis demands political commitment well beyond the easy engagement of rhetorical sympathies, comfortable political tribalism, and ethical consumption” (2019: 186), the search for new, radical, and militant tactics is hardly surprising.

How do riots contribute to envisioning a new, ecologically just and sustainable world? Can they, in fact, reconsolidate the relationship between radical strategies, radical tactics, and a radical imagination (cf. Haiven/Khasnabish 2014: 209-231)? In an attempt at unearthing these complexities, this article embarks on visiting escalations of environmental and social struggles that lay bare their theoretical intersections, and that might be termed ecological riots. To that end, it questions the disavowal of the riot, and places its practice amidst the theoretical (occasionally heated) dialogue of Marxism, anarchism, and environmentalism. Focussing on the recent hegemonic staging that purges the narrative of climate catastrophe from excesses of an extractive economy, fossil capitalism, and “car-



bon democracy” (Mitchell 2013), helps to reinstate an encompassing critique of capitalism as the bedrock upon which ecologically just worlds can be built. Riots as a particular protest form are introduced as a modality enabling an articulation of such an ecologically just and sustainable world, while this article concludes by assessing the enduring role and the promise of riots in the context of configuring the crowd’s futures.

Abandoning the Riot? Critical Contestations

If riots have proved contested candidates as productive tactics of protest, then this critique rests upon two assertions: the notion of excessive violence and the notion of insufficient institutionalisation. Riots are not seen as political and politicised events in which demands, wishes, and desires can be articulated. Much less, they are understood as affective events which express the hunger and need for political agency. The image is clear: riots are discarded as militant festivals of destruction – willed into their disreputable existence by the criminal ‘underclasses’ of society. Hence, they are no cause for political consideration. At best, they might be a joyous rehearsal of democracy, ultimately meaningless and devoid of any substance in the world of politics proper. This narrative might border on caricature – and this text sets out to deconstruct why – but it remains a powerful perspective.

At the same time, today’s riot addresses a central question with respect to the overlapping, though structurally distinct, modes of resistant thinking of anarchism, Marxism, and environmentalism – the question of *scaling*, *institutions*, and the form of *organisation*. Much contention has been evoked by the discussion about whether larger scales are inevitably preferable. A forceful argument can be made that the rhetoric of unity in sections of the global Left has resulted in the silencing of particular groups and subjectivities – and the specific oppression they face – in order to retain the ‘purity’ of the struggle. At the same time, the riot complicates the idea of revolutionary identities. Critics of the riot assume that collective autonomy is the product of collective emancipation, which is only possible by virtue of a collective identity. The riot does, they argue, not express any such identity. Again, we encounter a sceptical reading of its elusive presence. Without doubt, the riot ties into a larger debate on where, moving forward, the Left should go.

Far be it from consensus, then, that riots prove an effective mode of resistance to fossil-fuel states and their enmeshment in neoliberal capitalism. Obviously, such objections against the riot are mobilised from different positions on the political spectrum. The liberal-democratic rhetoric claims that civil disobedience might be justifiable, but has to remain non-violent. The good protester and his family-friendly demonstration is favourably compared to the criminal rioter and his looting. Precisely this apodictic primacy of non-violence can be even more crassly utilised from a conservative perspective: Equipped with a “keen sense for the propagandistic power of language” (Vanderheiden 2008: 299),



this narrative establishes an accusatory and sinister semantics by framing radical environmental protest as ‘eco-terrorism.’ It conjures up the spectre of intersubjective violence, associating radical environmentalism with unlawful violence. While often referring to the idea of ‘ecotage’ – such as setting fire to research facilities of the fossil fuel economy or vandalising warehouses of car producers – as the central object of criminalisation, conflating radical environmentalism with terrorism does not stop with this particular mode of direct action. The image of “climate activism that crosses from peaceful protests, like marching in the streets, to civil disobedience – shutting down mines or monkey wrenching machinery” (Bartlett 2017) aims at indicting the credibility of environmental ends by characterising their means of protest as invariably tainted, illegitimate, and immoral. Irrespective of whether the description is intended to address ‘ecotage’ or – more classical – forms of civil disobedience and powerful as it may be, the misnomer ‘terrorism’ clearly serves as a preposterous phantom. Given how central the idea of fear is to most definitions of terrorism, it seems hardly adequate that violence against non-sentient beings should be characterised as inducing fear. Moreover, one of the central elements of most definitions of terrorism, the random selection condition, in which purposefully random civilian populations are targeted, does frequently not apply as the targets of radical environmentalists are usually highly selected. “Terrorism,” as Cas Mudde and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler have pointed out “goes beyond mere political violence; terrorists *terrorize*” (2014: 596; original emphasis). It is, therefore, “wrong to call a group which directs action only at property a terrorist group” (O’Kane 2012: 22). Thus, the violence most frequently seen in riots – a violence that is aimed at buildings, infrastructure, and inanimate possessions – does not suffice as a reason to demonise them. This criticism of riots remains woefully oblivious to the power asymmetry under which the riot manifests itself. The discursive operation of naming something as ‘violence,’ as Judith Butler reminds us, is a naming practice that needs to be critically situated “within political frameworks and their self-justificatory schemes” (2020: 140). The rioters’ violence necessitates this contextualisation, too. After suffering from the endemic violence of austerity and the alienating violence of capitalist reproduction, the dispossessed trying to reclaim the public space and the commons are often – almost invariably – met with the sheer force of state violence: the police. Systemic and structural violence, on the one hand, and interpersonal, intersubjective violence, on the other, succeed each other – both being firmly directed against the subaltern. Violence, then, has to be understood in the context of social relations and interdependency, a measure unfolding under conditions of inequality and power differentials.

Insufficient as these framings may be, there is, at the same time, a sustained critique on riots from the vantage point of the political Left. Jodi Dean, herself by far the most outspoken advocate for a new party form on the Left, has suggested that riots are necessary, though insufficient modalities of protest. Refuting contemporary social movement’s (alleged) infatuation with “an amorphous combination of multiple possibilities” (Dean 2018: 147), her argument rests upon the assumption that spontaneous politics and an ordered insertion into the existing network of political institutions are two enormously different



practices. The positive perception of insurrections, then, is tantamount to “mistak[ing] an opening, an opportunity for the end” (Dean 2018: 125). Such a perception, she emphasises, falls prey to prefer the “unleashing of the playful, carnivalesque, and spontaneous” over an organised form of struggle in that it is “taken to indicate political success, as if duration were but a multiplication of moments rather than itself a qualitative change” (ibid.). Thus, while Dean suggests that riots as well as other forms of militant direct action can shoot “a hole in the wall of expectations,” (2018: 123) enabling a glimpse into collective possibilities, they remain unable to give any adequate direction to these possibilities. While Dean’s critique is no doubt compelling, as she does not indulge in denigrating the masses as inherently apolitical, anti-political or in criminalising the crowd, her assertion that the charge of “the few dominating the many thrown about so vigorously on the Left illuminates *nothing* specific to Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, socialism or communism” (2018: 170, original emphasis) seems at least questionable. Not only because the existence of a problem – namely hierarchy and authoritarianism – in other movements does not negate the need to tackle it within the Marxist tradition, but also because any attempt at establishing a communist commune on the horizon must deal with the past atrocities of state socialism (cf. Dardot and Laval 2019: 48-52).

The strongest antidote to the problems of domination within progressive movements has undoubtedly resided in the anarchist tradition. Indeed, as multi-faceted as that tradition has historically proved to be, it has consistently championed the idea of revolution as an open process, in which its “principles are properly viewed as ongoing experiments and not finished products” (Amster 2009: 292). The challenge of conceiving of “power-together and in common” (Milstein 2010: 13) has been a central tenet of anarchism. Hence, anarchism rejects the idea of vertical leadership within social movements, and allows for horizontal flows of power and political agency. In doing so, it addresses the omission so resoundingly evident in Dean’s view on movement politics: horizontalism is the most effective tool of expunging discrimination *within* progressive movements. It offers the chance to abolish oppression that is legitimised as a side-effect of the struggle for a greater good. Importantly, it voices the desires of those building the movement. Not least of all, an anarchist perspective offers a fresh view on riots in their plurality. Seeing seemingly spontaneous eruptions as part of a larger trajectory – a movement of movements – suggests that the age of uprisings epitomised in the proliferation of riots is more than just a multiplicity of moments and a cacophony of voices – much rather, it is a chorus of related speech acts that refer to one another. Hence, the era of uprisings is also a potent testament to an “ecology of perseverance” (Haiven and Khasnabish 2014: 131).



Charting the Silences, Smoothing the Trajectory – From Socialism to Environmentalism to Anarchism?

The theoretical discussion moves beyond the role of the riot though. Or rather, it ties it to another set of problems on a higher conceptual plane. Here, the riot's disavowal has been an indication of the hegemony of socialist tendencies within the revolutionary movement – evidence of the primacy of wage-centred labour struggle over other, more encompassing forms of fights.¹ Following Joshua Clover's mapping of the riot through the centuries of industrialised capitalism, the trajectory unfolds along the lines of an era of the riot in the mid-to-late 19th century, followed by the predominance of the strike in the 20th century, and a renaissance of the riot from the 1990s onwards. As Clover himself is all too aware, modes of collective action are not mutually exclusive, and preserving "the creativity of antagonism" is a central and vital task (2016: 80). Yet, even this rough sketch demonstrates that the riot's prevalence waned precisely when the working-class was seemingly at its strongest. Institutionalised in the benevolent trenches of an embedded and regulated capitalism from the 1950s onwards, the strike became the preferred vehicle of interfering in exploitative modes of production.

The over-arching map, then, suggests historically specific emphases: a period of (more or less classical) socialist struggle giving way to the new social movements of the 1960s and their focus on environmental and ecological questions – including the peace movement whose struggle against nuclear weapons was often paralleled by a struggle against any civic uses of nuclear energy –, leading, finally, to the anarchist spirit of the 1990s. Nevertheless, this historiography is all too blunt, all too effortless and neat, evoking distinguishable periods where in fact there are none. After all, while the 1930s, 1970s, and 1980s all saw massive mobilisation for strikes in Britain, this time-frame also included the period most closely associated with a new struggle for the commune: namely 1968 and the (international) student revolts. Through counterfactual construction like this – here the strike, there the riot; here the working-class, there the mob –, we obtain a false sense of easily differentiated periods. This narrative wilfully obscures and remains oblivious to conflict and confusion as social facts, inherent features of social movements. Rather, all of these three movements had precursors and influenced one another. Their struggles have extended through time, often influencing later stages of protest and activism. To be sure, looking back at the last two decades it is certainly true that there has been a resurgent anarchist spirit, epitomised most notably in 1999 during the protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle and the insurrections that followed (from the

¹ One pertinent example is, for instance, Nancy Fraser's critical reflection that "the 'elders,' veterans of previous eras of anti-capitalist ferment who might have provided some guidance, are burdened with blinders of their own. They have largely failed, despite professed good intentions, to incorporate the insights of feminism, postcolonialism and *ecological thought* systematically into their understandings of capitalism" (2014: 56, emphasis A.K.).



Arab Spring to *Occupy Wall Street*) – yet, this has always coincided with and influenced the ecological tendencies of the period (cf. Price 2019).

This fissured trajectory provides its own set of problems. In fact, a peculiar array of theoretical and practical dissonances remains perturbingly evident: Where exactly is environmentalism's place in the current wave of radical activism and how does it connect to its militant strands, most notably the radical traditions of anarchism and Marxism? And: can the environmental question be understood as a common denominator of protest strands² or is it still considered an addendum to questions posited as more relevant – namely, revolution and resistance against the social and reproductive totality of capitalism? To phrase it into classical Marxist terminology: does the current state of activism revisit debates about the hierarchy of antagonisms in society, reaffirming the old cry for the economy as the final frontier of struggle, thus effectively silencing ecological questions as a secondary issue, and fortifying the difference between the main contradiction and the side contradictions?

Some evidence troublingly points to the latter alternative: the predominance of social movements revolving around ecological questions notwithstanding, environmentalism has been rather thoroughly disavowed in certain strands of contemporary Marxist theory. One of the more recent examples of this debate can be found in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams' *Inventing the Future*, where – besides the problems and possibilities, provocations and plans populating this manifesto in abundance – one silence is highly astonishing: apart from one small reference to “large sections of the green movement” in one of the endnotes (cf. 2016: 204), ecological concerns do not surface. In fact, the ostensible opposition between capital as the central antagonism and ecological protests and anarchist practices of horizontal, non-hierarchical organisation that are secondary or even futile is restaged.

Confronted with this predicament, any *solidarity-centred* call for resistance has to consider which role environmentalism and ecological struggle play in bringing about new worlds and modes of organising society. In the words of ecofeminist Ariel Salleh it seems rather simple and smooth: “environmental struggle is socialist struggle is feminist struggle” (2017: xxiii). Perhaps this is too simple, too smooth; perhaps the “mysterious hermetical clouds of unknowing” (Morton 2016: 6) profoundly complicate any easy syllogism. Finding an alternative, however, turns out to be an equally complicated and ambitious endeavour. Temporary and shifting alliances notwithstanding, the theoretical re-

² This has been a recurring assertion in social movement studies. The environmental movement has been described as “the most comprehensive and influential movement of our time” (Castells 1997: 67), and the truly global actor in a global civil society (cf. Wapner 1996). Indeed, as early as 1982, Robert Nisbet has claimed both authoritatively and with an optimism later arguments have both echoed and, at times, surpassed, that “when the history of the 20th century is finally written, the single most important social movement of the period will be judged to be environmentalism” (1982: 101).



sources bequeathed us over the centuries of revolutionary struggle are not easily reconciled. To be sure, there are instances of dialogue, but more frequently one finds soliloquising retreats ripe with reciprocal accusations between these (sometimes) “essentialist tribalism[s]” (Pinta and Berry 2012: 294). Bringing together the different intellectual histories of anarchism, Marxism, and environmentalism poses a plethora of problems – from questions of tactics and strategies, to the role of the state, the commitment to militancy and radicalism, the trajectory of how social change can materialise, to the causes of oppression and natural despoliation. Consensus is notoriously hard to come by. The theories and practices peculiar to each tradition are multi-faceted, frequently displaying deep distrust of one another and the theoretical assumptions involved.³

To be sure, ecological riots do not magically make those cleavages disappear. Yet, if there is a place for reconciliation it squarely revolves around the shared object of capitalism as a social totality, a hegemonic formation that reproduces inequality, maintains unsustainable modes of resource extraction and usage, and has been founded upon the reproduction of alienated labour. Riots are profoundly anti-capitalist expressions. They help articulating environmental questions as *situated within, intricately connected with, and struggling against* this framework of capitalism. In the riot, the theoretical strands may temporarily merge. Marxism, of course, has always proved particularly resourceful in mounting critiques of capitalism, whereas anarchism and ecological critiques – such as the degrowth paradigm – have been particularly helpful in reflecting on modes of organising a new world in the shell of the old and point towards a horizon of emancipation and new forms of sociality. They have also repeatedly acted as a remedy for economically reductive tendencies within the Marxist tradition. The impurity of the (ecological) riot, then, enables social struggles to come to terms with their profound overlap and mutually resonating echoes. In this respect, riots prove to be *interstitial practices*.⁴

³ A more spacious consideration would render it possible to delve into the histories of ideas characterising the dialogue between anarchism and Marxism, Marxism and environmentalism, and environmentalism and anarchism, respectively. I will not be concerned with revisiting these debates in detail here, but rather look at how the riot as a modality incorporates strands from each radical tradition. The emphasis is thus more on the side of the practical struggles and the ideas that resonate in those actualisations of protest and resistance, rather than on a meticulous elaboration of the respective theoretical heritage.

⁴ Drawing on the biological origins of the term, Eva von Redecker has helpfully described *interstitial practices* as practices that are both situated in the liminal spaces of (social) order as well as – often simultaneously – expanding and extending these spaces. With such an understanding, von Redecker is capable of emancipating the concept revolution from the image of “suspension and rupture” alone (2018: 209), transferring it towards an idea of processes of *regrouping*. In doing so and undertaking an “ambitious search for contexts and the conditions of contexts” (2018: 177), von Redecker highlights a conception of revolution that is eminently helpful when thinking about riots as a network of (re-)enacted, preserved, and performed practices.



Confronting Capital – On Challenging and Being Challenged

If crowds are a fundamental building block of the political and politics (cf. Dean 2018: 4), their recent emergence and mobilising potential has also proved both blessing and curse for progressive political alliances. As ecological and environmental questions have evinced increased political purchase and strengthened their hold on the public's political vocabulary and imagination, the focus on environmental issues as a capacious political signifier seems to be overwhelming – in the course side-lining more militant perspectives from the radical anarchist and Marxist tradition. The movement's heterogeneity does not improve things: from the *Fridays for Future* strikes and the British *Extinction Rebellion* campaign to the movements proposing a *Green New Deal* initiated by the socialist section of the Democratic Party and *Diem-25* in the US and Europe, respectively, the environmental movement takes shape – or rather evolves into a thin encompassing signifier – under a multifaceted sub-set of tactical, strategic, and political paradigms. This development of hopeful gatherings of green – empowering as it surely is – might render the movement susceptible to losing sight of more radical strands that aim at a systemic (and systematic) critique. This is not necessarily a novel point of criticism; instead, it illustrates a conflict that has plagued environmentalism ever since its incipience. As David Harvey has analysed, while the 'environmental question' undoubtedly functions as a common denominator of protest, the answers provided from the ranks of ecological and environmental theory and protest movements alike have "generated a vast diversity of antagonistic and mutually exclusive discourses" (1996: 375). So while the hopeful gatherings of green are evidently enabling, a rather nagging question remains: can they win?

Confronting capital (and the totality of social reproduction) always runs the risk of being appropriated. And, in a well-rehearsed move, hegemonic forces have co-opted the hopeful disposition of the environmental movement. These narratives, finding their resources in state-based capitalism, suggest quite a different form of hope. Such a perspective remains predicated upon tales of personal change, massive state interventions and investments into green technology in accordance with a neo-Keynesian scheme – for instance, carbon capture –, or the regulatory power of the market (as rendered palpable in the debate surrounding a carbon emissions offset market). Evidently, the system of attachment in this case remains capitalism. Here, radical hope is exchanged for tame, affirmative optimism. Yet, while capitalism and climate catastrophe are not coterminous, their structural co-dependency nevertheless suggests parallel and overlapping developments. Put briefly, the genealogy of climate catastrophe is inevitably tied to the genealogy of capitalism; the latter's emergence – quite literally – fuelled the "unintended by-product par excellence" of global warming (Malm 2016: 1). This predatory form of extractive capitalism – extending its sway over more and more fields and areas of society – has asserted itself as the prevailing force of the last two centuries and has continued to accumulate profit and vulnerable victims alike. Neoliberal capitalism's ability to adapt, displace, and



modify its responses to ecological catastrophe thus never questions its foundations: capital accumulation, dispossession, alienating forms of subjectivisation, or a displacement of reproductive work.⁵ In Adrian Parr's words, "[c]apitalism adapts without doing away with the threat" (2013: 146).

These adaptations and mobilisations veil the root of the problem – and they do so rather successfully as evidenced by the proliferative tendencies to absolve neoliberal capitalism from its causal role in, for instance, evoking higher greenhouse gas emissions, creating food deserts for underprivileged and dispossessed groups, and rendering the subaltern excessively vulnerable to the effects of climate catastrophe (such as droughts or rising sea levels). Highlighting such a relationship, Jeff Diamanti has described the disavowal of capitalism's involvement in bringing about climate catastrophe and fortifying its calamitous effects thusly: "A political disarticulation of Energy from Capital is a negation of the latter's historical elasticity" (2016: 13). Forming and developing energy sources in alignment with capital means "compounding and intensifying capital's depredation," in effect, bringing about a "serial sabotage of proletarian counter-powers" (Diamanti and Simpson 2018: 6).

While there are numerous examples of this appropriation of energy sources and sabotage of resistant forces, one of the most notable at the contemporary conjuncture are biopolitical reconfigurations, once again merging the forces of the state and the market. These reconfigurations initiate new compositions of power. A hallmark of neoliberalism's sustained assault on democracy, corporate interests are gaining traction and forcefully dominate the discourses on climate catastrophe. The state remains wedded to the market here, while market forces infiltrate the channels originally reserved for political decision-making. Following Mann and Wainwright's typology of the relationship between the state and climate politics, this hegemonic constellation can be described as *Climate Leviathan*: here, the "expansion and accumulation of capital requires the constant conversion of the planet into means of production and commodities for sale and consumption" (2018: 100).

⁵ Unsurprisingly, Marxist ecology presents itself as the most obvious choice for an anti-capitalist ecological analysis. Its vantage point can be summarised as a reflection on the role of fossil energy in generating value and profit. Fossil capital is understood as being integral to the production process and the regimes of accumulating capital, for fossil energy is inherent in the means of production, which are requisite for the production of commodities. Thus, capitalist need-satisfying activities entail appropriations from nature. Fossil capital, as Andreas Malm points out in his exhaustive account on the matter, rests upon a triangular *relation* between capital, labour, and a certain segment of extra-human nature (cf. 2016: 290). Implicitly, this understanding is already reflected in Marx's original assertion that "labour is the father of wealth and earth the material mother" (1976: 134). Importantly, then, both spheres form a relational whole – thus eschewing the twin traps of economic reductionism and esoteric essentialism. This theoretical strand does not form a monolith – far from it. Side-stepping exegetical debates about the actualisation of Marxian theory, fallouts about the precise role and desirability of growth, and the question of how to achieve a just transformation, the guiding impulse offers a valuable theoretical lesson: the Marxist view seems particularly helpful in bringing about a structural analysis and critique that is capable of illuminating the "systematic and revolutionary nature of the needed ecological change" (Foster and Burkett 2016: 240). In other words, the Marxian critique highlights how capital (as a structure and a social principle) acts as a "flying bio-physical omnivore with its own peculiar social DNA" (Malm 2016: 326).



Fixing markets and the implementation of mitigating and adapting strategies has been identified as the primary function of the capitalist state (cf. Mann and Wainwright 2018: 105) – in all of this, the market remains the ruling abstraction. Climate Leviathan, therefore, appears compelling precisely because of its claim to being the only sovereign and effective system in play. While the work of progressive forces such as *Fridays for Future* is oriented

toward an open, just future for those to come, particularly the descendants of the world's less powerful, [...] this future is so undeniably bleak (and the world's present political arrangements so undemocratic) that any informed rational response is likely to pull us toward Climate Leviathan. (Mann and Wainwright 2018: 173)

The corporate construction of a discourse in which climate catastrophe is seen as a risk substantially contributes to this political imaginary. It indicates an inherently political activity. Yet this articulates the politics of the governing – not those of the subaltern. Corporations, here, either fall into the category of *corporate environmentalists*, who conceive of climate catastrophe as a business risk, while emphasising its character as an opportunity, highlighting innovation, technological fixes, marketisation, and self-regulation as their preferred responses (cf. Wright and Nyberg 2015: 73); or corporations use their status to exacerbate the recession of state regulation under neoliberal capitalism. These corporations act as a “climate-change denial machine” (Dunlap and McCright 2011: 147), untainted by and dismissive of the thorny realities of climate science. Their marketing, lobbying, and funding influences render them a key actor in a ‘war of position,’ in which they build upon their “corporate citizenship” (Dunlap and McCright 2011: 23) to exert pressure over governments thus inevitably undermining democratic principles.

Their impact is particularly evident when it comes to narratives of green consumerism. Mobilising particular subjectivities these narratives betray an unflinching reverence for capitalist consumption – and the primacy of generating profits. While it is true that social transformation entails individual actions and that “systemic change is a deeply personal endeavour” (Figueres and Rivett-Carnac 2020: 50), this does not suggest that personal transformation should act as the privileged site of social change. There is a soothing moment when the feminist slogan of the 1970s – ‘the personal is political’ – is re-invoked in current debates. Nonetheless, scrutinising its discursive effects, such a narrative may tend to stabilise existing structures. For not only are these discourses part of corporations’ attempts at presenting themselves as green “ecopreneurs” (Phillips 2012: 795), but they also mobilise subject positions which are obfuscating the endemic violence inherent in the production of carbon pollution and its subsequent transformation into a commodity. When 100 corporations are responsible for 71 per cent of global carbon dioxide emissions (CAI 2017: 5), the call for private and individual action rings ludicrously hollow. This does not necessarily entail that individual actions should be scoffed at. However, as long as they are imagined as a sufficient ripple effect (cf. Morton 2016: 9), in which practices



simply migrate from one person to the next without shifting the infrastructure in which those occur, they can only be understood as another moment of neoliberal recuperation. Of course, the focus on the structural power of economic actors does not negate the possibility of individual actions to work in concert. However, it clarifies that the opponent of a struggle for a sustainable way of living and a future is not just a single corporation – or even 100 of them –, but a socio-economic and cultural system. Hence, structural change and movement towards a radically different future are imperative. Especially in the contemporary social and political composition of society, questions of appropriation, recuperation, and complicity are of paramount importance (cf. Parker 2017: 187-91) – and devoid of an attempt at structural change and reimagination, a primacy of individual actions often renders capital restoration all too easy.

The Riot: A Rehabilitation

Any such attempt at positioning the riot as a relevant, connected site of protest in which the crowd, the future, and the end of the capitalocene (cf. Moore 2015) are struggled for, necessitates at least an outline of a theory of the riot. As of yet, there is no such thing, though the mounting literature on the topic suggests that contours are emerging, even if, as Joshua Clover has pointed out, the riot as a form of political, collective, and antagonistic action is notoriously hard to define (cf. 2016: 77-88). In light of this, Clover has resorted to ontologising the riot: “[A]ny gathering on the corner, in the street, in the square can be understood as a riot. Unlike the strike, it is hard to tell when and where the riot starts and ends.” (2016: 123). This is a laudable move, for it politicises the riot. Extending scope and definition of the riot like this, however, also renders it vulnerable to simply encompass any action and lose its analytical precision. Thus it might be helpful to supplant Clover’s definition with the one provided by Stephen D’Arcy, who suggests that riots “mean an outbreak of civil defiance, in which a crowd openly, directly, and persistently rejects the authority of the established legal order and its enforcers” (2013: 145). While Clover’s definition is useful for disentangling the riot from its understanding as mere form – as opposed to a modality *joining* form, demands, and actors –, D’Arcy helpfully stresses the character of the riot as an anti-state protest and its position in the anarchist lineage of a struggle for non-hierarchy.

The normativity of the riot, then, becomes essential. Riots are not necessarily connected to progressive political ideals, and the environmental movement is not only susceptible to recuperation by capitalist structures, but has also been equipped historically with a damning association with fascist ideology. Rather than uncritically celebrating any riot, its substance as a mode of social defence and social transformation has to be assessed in order to ascertain its potential as a progressive force. In other words, not every riot inaugurates the Commune. One crucial aspect is temporality: As Stephen D’Arcy has argued, it is pivotal whether the rioters “launched [their actions] in response to an urgent,



compelling concern that non-confrontational means had proven unable to address” (2013: 62-3). Considering the entanglement of neoliberal democracy with exacerbating climate catastrophe as well as the cautious response to climate calamities all over the world, the resort to the riot as a particular mode of civil disobedience is somewhat logical. It presents a form of militancy that responds to the exhaustion and corruption of more classical political channels, while providing an insurrection that symbolically traumatises the well-entrenched modes of how arguments should be framed in political discourse. In this respect, riots act as privileged sites of struggle insofar as they offer a form of protest in which an “emphasis on visibility, physical embodiment and connotation” (Szerszynski 2002: 54) manifests itself. Such a repertoire can be placed in stark contradistinction to most forms of established political procedures. Riots, then, function as an outbreak of exhilarating and often contagious local performances of militant protest. They have a role to play as civic virtue: “It is a type of civil engagement that should be admired, because of its salutary effect on public affairs” (D’Arcy 2013: 33). Their courageous insurrections confront the unreasonable power of existing politico-economic institutions thus reimagining and enabling novel democratic life forms, practices, and cultures.

Tracing the relationship of Marxism and anarchism, the riot is not a practice susceptible to vulgarly regurgitating the fetish of the working class. And while anarchism’s ostensible hostility to Marxism is well established (though often superbly exaggerated) (cf. Marshall 2010: 661-4), the riot might be capable of forcefully interfering in these dynamics, bringing together a Marxist structural critique of capital’s influence on climate catastrophe with an anarchist insurrectionary practice that remains opposed to the state – all the while voicing ecological sensibilities. The riot refocuses on the destitute, precarious, dispossessed, exploited, and alienated subaltern subjects. Their gathering expresses a more encompassing idea of collective actors that resonates with contemporary formations of surplus populations under carbon capitalism. They act as the subject of these riots, throwing into sharp relief its intersections with gender, race, species, and other subject positions that suffer from exclusion by hegemonic constellations. Constituted by such a heterogeneous crowd, the riot divorces itself forcefully from a crude economic determinism, in which a *class-for-itself* (a group conscious of its collective position as class, whose labour power is exploited) simply seizes the means of production, thus overcoming their economic exploitation (understood, somewhat narrowly, as the only repressive constraint to their personal fulfilment and a good life). Instead, the crowd that materialises itself in the riot, has many heads.⁶ It brings together subjects suffering from a multitude

⁶ The riot also has many bodies, for the history of its composition is uneven — for instance, Vicky Osterweil has persuasively pointed out how organically riots are connected to anti-racist struggles, since they emanated specifically as integral elements of anti-capitalist *and* anti-racist repertoires from the Black and *PoC*-communities in the United States during the 19th century (2020). In this respect, Osterweil has provided an invaluable contribution to the aforementioned theory of the riot. The recourse to Osterweil also addresses an analytical shortcoming of this paper: namely, the lack of detail when it invokes ‘the subaltern’ and its many heads. The emphasis of this analysis is placed on the general political importance of militant



of differential vulnerabilities that are incessantly reproduced within the social order of capitalist totality.

The emergence of such a crowd might prove helpful in understanding the phenomenon of climate catastrophe beyond the assumption that it relates to every individual in similar and equivalent forms. Taking the cue from Malm, it can be argued that the climate crisis poses the result of the accumulation of fossil capital, which has brought about “the very negation of universal species-being” (2016: 390). However, this does not at all mean that everybody is equally vulnerable. Such a perspective – while rhetorically powerful – remains woefully ignorant to global differences, in particular the ones between the Global North and the Global South. Indeed, if the fossil fuel industry seems totalising, this is better understood as an effective veiling of its social (re-)construction than an actual transhistorical fact. The infrastructure nourishing the use of fossil fuels needs to be reproduced in social relations. In these relations there is a varying degree of complicity with the prospect of climate catastrophe – depending on geography, social status, and the agency afforded by structural constraints. Thus, the “we responsible for climate change is a fictional construct, one that’s distorting and dangerous” (Gunther 2018, original emphasis).

In addition, the rioters complicate any primacy of the economy, even though they are – as Clover maintains – deeply and inextricably embedded in the spheres of circulation and consumption, which remain central battlegrounds for the riot in the 21st century (cf. 2016: 141-4). The precariat and the planetary boundaries appear in alignment here, as capital accumulation and the growth imperative exacerbate processes of dispossession, precarisation, and ecological vulnerability in equal measure. This suggests a crowd that is characterised by new solidarities, enabling a heterogeneous group of subjects with diverse interests to find common denominators in their belief in the necessity to sustain the future inhabitation of the earth. Such an account dovetails with the manifold strategic elements that converge within environmental protest, characterising the environmental movement as “a multidimensional and amorphous political phenomenon” (Parr 2018: 65). The various variants of subaltern groups form “spectral unities” (Clover 2016: 72) and “bastard solidarities” (Parr 2018: 89), in which different tactics are explicitly endorsed and rendered productive. In fact, this multitude of tactics, in which the occupation of a particular space – often involving setting up a protest camp –, the building of walkways between trees, or the lock-ons with which protesters connect themselves to areas that are about to be evicted, can be thought together as protests that utilise “forms of action that are in some sense charged, marked-out from life as normal” (Szerszynski 2002:

protests and the riot; the exact make-up of the crowd that constitutes the subject of the riot will thus not be at the centre, even though the lineages of feminist, queer, or anti-racist struggles and movements forcefully intersect in the modality of the riot.



55). Riots and their mobility relate to the shift in systems of infrastructure, which are becoming increasingly mobile and dispersed, too. As the centres of power are becoming less stable or disappearing in total, protest has to take new shapes to remain effective.

Creative Cities or City-as-Commodity? On the Direct Politics of the Ecological Riot

The theoretical allure of the riot does not force it into existence. While there is a possibility of understanding the riot as a relevant umbrella term for various tactics – all of them aligned with the goal of fighting the corporate Climate Leviathan that usurps the political landscape –, the ecological riot's empirical evidence is quite another issue: Are there ecological riots, for instance in Britain? In 2011 – the year of global protests, the Arab Spring, and the England Riots no less –, Derrick Jensen, the renowned co-author of *Deep Green Resistance*, thought otherwise: “People aren't rioting over the toxification of the total environment and their loved ones dying of cancer” (qtd. in Keith 2011: 28). Jensen, it would seem, has not paid much attention to the British islands – or if he has, he has chosen to suppress this recollection. In fact, the British environmentalist movement has been characterised by direct action since the 1970s when *Greenpeace* and *Friends of the Earth!* were established and played a vital role in British civil society. Additionally, British environmental activism has – especially when contrasted with its American variety – often unabashedly committed itself to incorporating a variety of social justice issues, and (at least partly) refrained from too individualistic a notion of socially transformative action.

These forms of overlapping struggles are most pronounced in the heartland of capital's appropriation. While riots are not, *per se*, confined to urban spaces – the recent German protests at the Hambacher Forst come to mind –, they frequently take shape on the terrain most emblematic for industrialised climate catastrophe: the city. As cities have been reshaped by the enclosure characteristic for contemporary biopolitical climate regimes, riots interfere in challenging the infrastructure of enclosure, exploitation, and dispossession. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attempts of *Reclaim the Streets (RTS)*, a British anarchist movement, heavily influenced by the Situationists' philosophy. Initially envisioned as an ecologically rooted protest movement focussing on the struggle against motorisation in the UK, it rapidly encompassed wider political issues, including resistance against globalisation, corporate capitalism, and the privatisation of public space. Undoubtedly, it posed an ambitious endeavour:

The project of RTS was to create a link between resistance to environmental destruction, the public pleasures of carnival, the critique of social privatisation processes, the desire for alternatives to the individualised culture of auto mobility and a general critique of neoliberal capitalism as such (Carmo 2012: 109)

Extensive but genuinely radical, the point of RTS's action – the critique of the city-as-commodity – “could have had no more graphic or eloquent expression” (Klein 2001: 314).



The performativity and the focus on direct action – a somewhat stable, albeit insufficient, criterion of anarchist resistance – gestured towards a multiplicity of practices of bringing about social transformation, while acknowledging that “no form of action is revolutionary in itself” (The Invisible Committee 2015: 142). These forms of direct action were closely connected to modes of prefiguration understood as an equivalence of ends and means: the riot as a direct action transcends a mere attack on an enemy – the state in its multifarious forms –, and instead refutes passivity and apathy in its “commitment to individual and collective possibilities” (Ordóñez 2018: 79). Here, the riot as embodied in the recreational raves of *RTS* aims towards a direct, unmediated realisation and embodiment of the conditions of freedom.⁷ One of the most notable forms of direct action *RTS* undertook was the ‘Carnival against Capitalism’ in June 1999. Drawing on sources from anarchist sensibilities to rave parties, the street was envisioned as a space enabling dwelling and interaction – a disalienating force, when re-functioned by the collective of the crowd. Notably, these protests also aligned with forms of militancy delineated by D’Arcy: they were defiant, disruptive and destructive (cf. 2013: 29-30). The carnival’s actions were *defiant* in that they ignored the authority of the police to enact surveillance and control in the streets. The carnival also proved *disruptive* in that the smooth functioning of the machinations of the neoliberal city was disturbed. Blocking streets by virtue of bikes “brought the city to a standstill” (Ibrahim 2015: 35), thus interfering with the pulse of (predominantly) single-person-vehicle mobility and actively asserting a world without cars – the uncontested signifiers of a consumerist lifestyle depending on carbon emissions as the precondition for consumption. And the *destruction* brought to the city centre was not only materially significant – amounting to £2 million worth of damage (cf. Wall 2000: 82) –, but also challenged the symbolic status of London as the metropolis of global financial capital. Accentuating the “festive and celebratory” act of these forms of protest (Wall 2000: 82), it is possible to understand them as utopian desire breaking through the monolithic matrix of the neoliberal city. These protests, then, are an expression of a “right to the city” (Harvey 2012), a contestation of privatised space, which acts as a counter-measure to neoliberal appropriation. They envision radically different relations in radically different spaces.

⁷ It is possible to cast the development of *RTS* subsequent to their headline-grabbing street parties as a failed attempt at reclaiming the future and developing a coherent message. In these accounts, then, *RTS* enabled a rupture by offering the public a genuinely different glimpse of an alternative city landscape. Yet, even sympathetic accounts like de Waal’s have voiced their scepticism about the utopian ventures of *RTS*, stating that “[h]owever much I wish to make more of the Reclaim the Future idea, the balance between protest and party has completely shifted” (2010: 5). To some extent, this is a valid criticism of *RTS*’s development after the 1990s; nonetheless, the exact relationship between utopian thinking, solidarity, the establishing of new forms of community life, and the street raves should not be neglected, as *RTS* combined modes of protest and social inclusion in the *prefigurative* element of their protests. Indeed, *RTS* highlighted that the desire for change and the concrete steps of building something better are irrevocably and inextricably connected. Hence, rather than failing *tout court* *RTS* was not fully successful, yet “decomposed itself into the soil from which new flowers sprung” (Solnit 2016: 82).



Situated in urban environments, the riot as gathering particularly reflects upon the processes of urbanisation which proves, time and again, to be driven by finance, investment, and speculative markets. A growing rate of profit is presumed and the processes are all premised upon the notion that urbanisation will, in turn, facilitate the rate of profit to grow (cf. Parr 2018: 102). Projects of urbanisation – often also conceived of (and rendered palatable) in terms of ‘green cities’ –, are increasingly managed at the nexus of public-private partnerships throwing into blatant relief the enmeshment of state institutions and private actors and corporations in designing the landscape of human infrastructure:

[G]overnment entities and the corporate sector work together to distribute the costs and benefits of the urban commons. This is carried out largely through policy, zoning, property markets, speculative investment and finance, and development projects. (Parr 2018: 103)

In these circumstances, the riot appears to be a particularly adequate form of protest in that it contests the unquestioned authority of the state and of its monopoly of violence. They echo David Harvey’s assertion that “the revolution in our time has to be urban – or nothing” (2012: 25). This is indicated in the ongoing wave of urbanisation; after all, more than half the world’s population now live in urban centres. The city functions as a pre-eminent model, for it is the site in which two affective utopian/dystopian desires conflicttingly contrast: on the one hand, there is the idea of urban identity, citizenship, and belonging, “a coherent urban politics” (Harvey 2012: 15); on the other, there is the “spreading malaise of the individual, neoliberal ethic” (Harvey 2012: 15) rendering this dream ever harder to sustain. The riot firmly positions itself on the former side. In Mike Davis’s words, a single unifying principle can be distilled, which mobilises and reappropriates the resources inherent in the urban space as a site of resistance, “namely that the cornerstone of the low-carbon city, far more than any particular green design or technology, is the priority given to public affluence over private wealth” (2010: 43).

While the riots actualise Davis’s demand for the primacy of public affluence, these protests also emphasise two aspects positioning the riots as pivotal for a democratic project: Firstly, they are in accordance with Stephen D’Arcy’s *principle of agency*. Here, D’Arcy argues that militancy should encourage those most pertinently and directly affected by the problem that is protested against should be the leading figures in the struggle (cf. 2013: 68). The focus environmental riots place on questions of territory, enclosure, and infrastructure, firmly aligns them with this principle. The anchor that connects the protests with the specificity of the local cause are the subjects that are disproportionately affected. Secondly, urban ecological riots also conforms to D’Arcy’s *principle of autonomy*. Here, D’Arcy asserts that militancy’s aim is empowerment. Noting the numerous enclaves and republics – in fact, temporary autonomous zones – that are constituted in these protests, the overlap is evident. In the protests concerning the M11, for example, some protesters established themselves as the “autonomous free area of Wanstonia” (cf. Bloom 2010: 469). Whereas there are destructive elements to these riots, they also go hand in



hand with normatively founded attempts at establishing new forms of sociality and community.

Burning Desires, Burning Cars, and a Burning Planet – Prefigurative Promises of the Crowd's Future

Thus, the modality of the riot expresses two distinct relationships between the crowd and the future. Firstly, they present a future *for* the crowd: the crowd can exist because of its battles against the systematic production of vulnerabilities and the violence endemic to capitalism, and because of its expression of an egalitarian right to being shielded from these vulnerabilities. Secondly, the riots are a future *of* the crowd, as they prefigure, demand, and authorise the future. The crowd *prefigures* the future in its insistence on a democracy that is present rather than merely direct – a democracy without mediation, divorced from the framework of traditional institutionalised politics –, it *demand*s it in its emphasis on radical political action, and it *authorises* it in that it performatively legitimises it and acts as the future's collective author and agent. The riot bursts open the restrictive, limiting, and narrowing imagery surrounding contemporary (ecological) political agency: it perturbs the primacy of the parliament. Weary of becoming part of “the reigning professional ethos of depoliticized expertise” (Fraser 2009: 105) that characterises parliamentary procedures of technocratic democracy under neoliberalism and – in particular – the various incarnations of the Green Party (for instance, in Germany or the UK), they engage in rupturing and mobilising behaviour.

The riot, then, serves as an instrument of political imagination; its transformative potential prevails in reigniting the emancipatory potential of imagination. Responding to the hegemonic narrative of capitalist realism, it accentuates that capitalism is in fact “pregnant with *what could be*, a deployment in the conditional tense of given productive forces (Bernes 2018: 322, original emphasis). To be sure, the riot's reconfiguration from – as it were – predatory to pregnant capitalism, is an unfinished gesture performed by imagination. It “de-forms reality by realizing desire without completely satisfying it” (Parr 2018: 185). Arguably, the riot reacts to a crisis, and it cannot possibly sustain itself as a mode of protest: “Crisis is the exclamation point of profound social reorganization. Riots express this changed social organisation, address themselves to it, and seek to abolish it *and thus themselves*” (Clover 2016: 129; emphasis A.K.).

Often, though, such a view obfuscates the way in which riots relate to each other, sometimes spanning over years. The riots' opacity makes it all too easy to dismiss them. Again, such a reading actively depoliticises the riots: the British student protests 2010, England Riots 2011 or protests against the G20-meeting in Hamburg 2017 were – ostensibly – not motivated by ecological questions at all. But not only did they address questions that climate catastrophe conjures up – the mode of sustainable living in which a safe



existence for nature and humans alike is possible; the enactment of an inclusive democracy that attends to the planet's and populace's grievances and vulnerabilities; the establishing of egalitarian relations; the possibilities of a mode of human life producing social wealth and dignified existences rather than exchange value – in their criticism of institutions' austerity politics, but they also used tactics that prefigured such a world. Most notably, they burnt cars. The riots – while not *directly* testifying to an ecological consciousness – relied on tactics and performed actions that can be read as forms of ecological protest – in this case: envisioning a city without cars. Hence, burning those cars participated in a repertoire of historically aggregated militant practices of property-damage, while gesturing towards the future that was collectively (though perhaps latently) envisioned. In his compelling analysis of the history of the idea of prefiguration, Uri Gordon has suggested that it is worthwhile differentiating between prefiguration as a *recursive* means that aims at (retrospectively) legitimising certain actions by perceiving them as a figure pointing to a fulfilment in later events, and a *generative* form of prefiguration in which “visions for the future are themselves things of the present” (2018: 532). Privileging the latter over the former, Gordon emphasises a building of the future over excavating one. And drawing on Reinhart Koselleck, he impeaches a recursive logic for remaining indebted to the notion of a planned future set in stone as the teleological endgame of every revolutionary action. To some extent, this is understandable. It avoids the trap of using the recursive logic as a means of reassurance. Yet in the particular case of riots, a recursive logic might, *pace* Gordon, be helpful as it enables observers and activists alike to look at the connections between riots, rather than seeing single riots as ineffective forms of protest that are all too easily absorbed into capitalist relations.

Nevertheless, these reflections are not at all intended to suggest that riotous actions are immune to relocations and restorations of capital accumulation. For example, the anarchist direct actions of *Reclaim the Streets* were co-opted when the cosmetics company *Lush* tried to capitalise upon the green consciousness expressed in *Reclaim the Streets'* protest, not only by publicly endorsing the protest groups, but also by introducing the 'Charity Pot' with which it supported small campaign and activist groups. To top it off, it also introduced a product line called 'Go Green.' While riots are “not situations where any final overcoming is possible; they are where struggles begin and flourish desperately” (Clover 2016: 48). Clover's assertion hints at the very vulnerability of such forms of protest. Without doubt, even their crystallized desperation can be taken up and packaged in a consumer-friendly fashion – but to tap into rage that so clearly defies the expected horizon of what political protest should look like in the liberal imagination proves at least more difficult. Moments of complicity notwithstanding, the riot as a specific modality is



an act of resistance that evokes a particular language, which is in various respects incompatible with classical political channels.⁸ This shift in register helps to offer new avenues of imagination; the riot is averse to “answering the demand to obey with grudging or resigned compliance” (D’Arcy 2013: 13). Instead, it acts as an “admirable vehicle for the excluded and ignored” (D’Arcy 2013: 144). Vulnerability is differentiated here; it remains locally fixed – in that particular groups are immediately concerned with questions of environmental policy –, while also hinting at the potentiality of these events under capitalist structures. This potentiality of being rendered vulnerable offers the possibility of solidarity. The riot’s fury is the fury of the dispossessed (and – in particular in regard to ecological riots – the future and potentially dispossessed and vulnerable) struggling for a voice. This change of the playing field is pivotal: it is here that consciousness about public power actualises itself. Riots act as “the explosive self-assertion of the oppressed, through which the oppressed themselves can come to understand their own power” (Ciccariello-Maher 2015).

The riot, then, theorises, evokes, claims, performs, and mobilises the “eternal temptation of anarchism” (Critchley 2004). It does so, however, in a more productive, positive, and hopeful sense than the one suggested by Critchley. In searching for new relations in which to experience nature and one’s interaction with the world, it responds to the epistemological challenges capitalism poses to human interaction with the world, engaging the “real that lies outside neoliberal language” (Parr 2018: 207). Riots are capable of catalysing utopian desires, merging them into a form of action that is attuned to the specificities of the object of resistance as well as open enough to incorporate hybridities and heterogeneous affects and experiences. As Nancy Fraser has put it: “Having watched the neoliberal onslaught instrumentalize our best ideas, we have an opening now in which to reclaim them” (2009: 117). One of these openings is the convergence of the riot and the ecological turn. The riots reassert the right to reclaim. But the ecological turn does not simply conjure up a novel master signifier under which all other movements for social justice can be subsumed. Rather, it fosters techniques and tactics which help correct certain blind spots of more entrenched social movements, while tapping into new potentials for resistant subjects, and forging new and productive chains of equivalence between struggles.

Commons and Communes: Riots between Red, Black, and Green

Riots are not revolutions in the iconic sense of the oft-invoked conquest of the Bastille in France in 1789; they are, however, a vociferous rejection of political consequentialism, on

⁸ This is thrown into sharp relief by framing riots as chaotic moments of violence and criminality, which almost ritually and invariably populate the aftermath of militant forms of protest in an attempt of disavowing those protests’ political dimension and salience.



the one hand, and revolutionary vanguardism, on the other. Hence, riots are part of a revolutionary imagination that is collectively shared and performed, amongst current hegemonic attempts to render unrest and fury more palatable by transferring these affects onto the level of the personal and the consumer, the shared moment of riots proves (more) difficult to disperse.

Riots, furthermore, mark a significant emphasis in the tactics utilised in environmental activism. First and foremost, they inaugurate a shift towards a more radical criticism of existing structures of fossil extraction that is mindful of the relationship between capital and ecology. They are active rather than defensive, reconfiguring and prefiguring the places in which they occur. Radicalising the social movements' tactics and strategies, they are an event that breaks with the hegemonic logic of what Mark Fisher has termed *Capitalist Realism* (2009). In terms of ecological protests, the riot are a site where two disavowals merge: the disavowal of capitalism's systematic contribution to climate catastrophe and the disavowal of the social unrest, the irreconcilable fury that stems from the precariat's position as social abject. Riots rearticulate and centre both of those disavowals. They overcome the alienation endemic to contemporary forms of subjectivation under neoliberal capitalism. They also forcefully demand alternatives; their radicalism should be applauded as a gesture of a radical revolutionary imagination. Read this way, riots transform the idea of impossible resistance – because any act of resistance is only read with respect to its outcome –, and are closer to the insurrectionary ideal so central for anarchism. Most eloquently this understanding has been expounded by Michel Foucault, who famously asserted that the mode and ethos of critique entail “counter-conducts” and “the art of not being governed quite so much” (1997: 45).

In conceptualising riots as productive in the context of ecological struggle, one might, perhaps, fall prey to overly optimistic readings of the riot. Its spectrality and temporality, its tendency to dissolve despite its furious materialisations remains the central moment of distinction when juxtaposed with the iconic image of revolution. Yet, the riot places itself in the liminal spaces where debates surrounding horizontal and hierarchical modes of organising of counter-hegemony reside; it is collective, but (usually) not the result of top-down hierarchy; it is deeply affective, but not exclusively spontaneous. One might be inclined to ask for more coherent demands then, for clearly articulated ideas, for a singular aim where diverse movements can – and should and have to – converge to bring about a profound transformation (as, ever the committed Marxist, David Harvey has argued). Or, on the contrary, one might vociferously oppose such a view as inaugurating the form of centralised and hierarchical thinking that renders monolithic and authoritarian the inherently progressive plurality of ideals that constitute social movements. The debate between horizontalism and the informality of civic life, on the one hand, and hegemony and working-through institutions, on the other, is not to be solved by the modality of the riot. Nor is it solved by the inflection the ecological question offers. This might be dissatisfac-



tory. The riot, however, represents the predominant form of protest at a particular conjuncture in the 21st century, in which the strands of anarchism, environmentalism, and Marxism can converge and explore their affective resonances, the hybrid subjectivities in which they can take effect as subversive and progressive moments of social struggle. Seeing the modality of the ecological riot as the embryonic stage in which these strands inform one another may indeed evoke hope for an emancipatory future. This brings together the empowering fire of solidarity and collectivity and the fury and rage of critique. Evidently, that does not entail that the riot stands immutable as the only revolutionary tactic; it just indicates that many of the riots visible during the last three decades indeed successfully mobilised red, black, and green. At its best, the riot equips these critiques with a programme of radicalism and the longing for a different future. Yet, form and content of these riots cannot be divorced from their hybrid influences. The riot, seamlessly shifting between attacking scenes of consumption, scenes of production, and scenes of the commons, provides us with an outlook on the encompassing character of the revolutionary commune. Capitalist composition of the political, the social, and the economy always entails that “[t]hings fall apart, core and periphery cannot hold” (Clover 2016: 191). The riot contributes to this productive destruction – it sets the scene for a just world to emerge. At the riot’s heart lies the promise of communism and the coming commune – a horizon of a radical, anti-capitalist, anti-state, future-oriented, collectivising, egalitarian and communitarian crowd.

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