



The Feral Underclass Hits the Streets

On the English Riots and Other Ordeals

Like a Summer With a Thousand Augusts?

The summer riots of '81 were the foretaste of the future for us. One day sooner or later the roof is going to blow off the UK. Faced with an assertion like this most people in pubs, streets, supermarkets or at work tend to nod their heads. The old phlegmatic reassurances that 'it can't happen here' have finally gone—let it be forever.¹

This overt optimism, that was the result of the riots that shook Britain in the early '80s, was absent in the aftermath of the August unrest. This time, it was ambivalence, perplexity and critical distance that followed the riots, rather than enthusiasm and hope. Numbness has been the prevalent feeling within activist milieus and militant circles, not to mention the reactions of whatever can be called 'the Left' in this country. Reading through many accounts, one gets the impression that the riots were now seen more as a 'necessary evil' than a foretaste of the future.

The chaotic and convulsive character of the August unrest, its huge distance from what could be normatively called a proletarian struggle, the impossibility for it to fit in a longed-for movement for working class empowerment, provoked a certain nostalgia for the early '80s. More than a few hurried to belittle the summer riots to something like a social defecation, as compared to the '80s riots that advanced beyond anger and

¹ *Like a Summer With a Thousand Julys... And Other Seasons...*, Wolfie Smith, Speed, Tucker and June, 1982.

frustration, into affirming a communal spirit and endorsing a political aspiration. This time, rioters fell behind as they are perceived not to have pursued what they could have ideally done, namely seek to lay the first stones for re-creating a strong, autonomous proletarian movement, through self-organisation and class solidarity. It is in the last instance a matter of the consciousness of the proletarian Subject to realise the forever given revolutionary Practice for the best, as Marlowe reminds us:

Anger is necessary to want to revolt against the system, but this mix of rage and opportunism had no perspective. For me it shows the absolute necessity for a class expression that can provide a context for the development of consciousness, and a focus for collective action. Outside of this, explosions of anger can be dangerously self-defeating.²

The Subject's recent shortcomings are seen as a result of contemporary symptoms of social pathology, such as individualism and consumerism. Looked at from an empirical/normative point of view, the summer riots appear in many respects similar to a number of other historical urban riots. Like many other waves of rioting before them they were sparked by inflammatory police behaviour and were characterised by people's outraged response; like other riots, they spread rapidly to encompass many individuals and activities with little connection to the initial protest out of which they emerged; like other riots, they did not seek to negotiate specific demands; like other riots, they included violent practices against the state and private property. The problem with such a normative approach is that it poses as its starting point 'riots' as an abstract category, whose concrete manifestations are each time a quantitatively varied mixture of practices which are considered typically constitutive of it. As such,

² And he continues: 'I don't know how this is to come about, and it has been frustrating not to have seen more explicit political expression. It certainly shows that immiseration on its own doesn't generate consciousness' (Marlowe, IP blog, August 2011). Nothing personal against Marlowe, he just summarises well what has been said or implied by many ultra-leftist or anarchist accounts of the riots. For an academic version of the same approach, see for instance the text *Feral Capitalism Hits the Streets* by David Harvey.

riots, rather than being seized as a concrete moment of class struggle, are singled out as a set of practices in the abstract, with its own relative autonomy. Their position within the totality they were removed from is then re-established as a relation to the context they emerge in, which is grasped as essentially exogenous to riot-in-itself. Riots were separated from their objectivity to be reunited with it, but to be reunited only in their separateness. History having been annihilated, what exists in reality appears as a concretisation (realisation) of the eternal abstract. Concrete practices are merely seen as occasional manifestations of Practice as an abstraction. And Practice as such, as an entity, acquires meaning relative to its equally abstract complement, class struggle as in the last instance historyless *antithesis* between two classes (a face off), an eternal present, a continuum without breaks, but only with ups and downs, successes and failures (history only provides the background colour to this antithesis). Hence the specific determinations of concrete practices are missed as incidental and inessential. The question of communism becomes then an issue of 'the return of the repressed' which has been striving to find its way into (class) consciousness.

Taking the position that class struggle is history literally, we mean that classes are bound together in an asymmetrical relation, which is a *contradiction* that develops, a contradiction in movement, at the core of an effectively—and equivalently moving—structured totality (capitalist society) as it is constituted, reconstituted—in the form of breaks and discontinuities (past revolutions and the counter-revolutions that followed them)—and reproduced as such in each historical period. The fact that the reproduction of the relation of exploitation is contradictory (labour is always necessary and always in excess/the tendency of the rate of profit to fall) poses communism as the real movement that resolves the contradiction through the revolutionary action of the proletariat that abolishes capital and itself. Taken this way, the August unrest was a historically specific event belonging to the totality that has the contradiction between classes at its core, as it exists today—(restructured capitalism and its crisis). Even further, it belongs to the present moment—what has been elsewhere called *the era of riots*—within the unfolding of the

crisis of restructured capitalism,³ as this present moment appears in the specificities of British capitalism, and this in the terms that defined the unrest, namely the composition of the people involved, the variety of their practices (and predominance of some practices over others), their temporal-spatial trajectory, the forms of organisation/coming together of the rioters, their goals and aspirations (or lack of aspirations), their relation to their social surroundings and the rest of the episodes of class struggle in this historical moment. The limit of the unrest was not external to riot-in-itself, but intrinsic to its very nature, the flip side of its dynamic. The August unrest calls for a theorisation of the issues it posed by its emergence and its relation to the rest of the manifestations of class struggle today with regard to the communist revolution produced by the current cycle of struggles. This is what is at stake!

Restructuring and the Making of the New Dangerous Classes

The August unrest was defined by the absence not only of immediate demands but also of any prospect for an improvement of conditions of existence. The rioters attacked, in what they are, the proletarian situation now, namely the precarisation of labour power. In the absence of demands and in their concrete practices, namely looting, arson of commercial and public buildings, attacks at the police and police stations, the wish to become an ‘ordinary proletarian’—a worker with a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work—was made obsolete. This was intrinsically related to the rioters’ specific situation. This situation’s genealogy in the historical development of the class contradiction, its place in the contradiction’s reproduction today, must be sought in the major contradictory dynamics of restructured capitalism and the upsetting its crisis caused to the relation of exploitation.

The restructuring re-defined the relation of exploitation. It aimed at abolishing all that had become an obstacle to the fluidity of the self-presupposition of capital. It upset the constraints in circulation and

³ See Woland, ‘The Transitional Phase of the Crisis: The Era of Riots’, *Blaumachen* no. 5, June 2011.

accumulation and created a new era of increasing rate of profit (roughly in the '90s and the first half of the 2000s). The financialisation of capitalism as a whole was the new architecture, the new design of the mechanism for the equalisation of the rates of profit. The negotiation of the price of labour power ceased to be integrated into the dynamic of accumulation as had been in the previous era (wages-productivity deal). By breaking down all that had become a rigidity in the crisis of the 'Keynesian period', capital has been trying to free itself from maintaining the level of reproduction of the proletariat as labour power, which has been increasingly dealt with as a mere cost—the wage demand has become asystemic. At the very core of restructured capitalism lies the disconnection of proletarian reproduction from the valorisation of capital—within a dialectic of immediate integration (real subsumption) and disintegration of the circuits of reproduction of capital and the proletariat—and the precarisation of this reproduction,⁴ which against the background of the rising organic composition of social capital and the global real subsumption of society to capital, has made the production of superfluous labour power an *intrinsic* element of the wage relation in this period.

The restructuring disintegrated traditional working class communities and modes of coming together (material belonging to a community), a process that in Britain went hand in hand with the dismantling of huge parts of the manufacturing industry and working class strongholds tied up with it. The trend was to transform the working class from a collective subject confronting the bourgeoisie into a sum of proletarians, every one of whom is individually related to capital and each other, without the mediation of the practical experience of a common class identity and workers' organisations that would represent the class as a recognised social partner, accepted to participate at the table of collective bargaining.⁵ This transformation was carried out through (and reinforced) a

⁴ See Screamin' Alice, 'On the Periodisation of the Capitalist Class Relation', *Sic* no. 1, November 2011.

⁵ This process of individualisation of the working class was accompanied by the ideological attack against the identity of being a worker, producing it as an unwanted behavioural identity, while glorifying wealth and private property. The working class ceased to be something to be proud of and became something to be despised.

huge mutation of wage labour, starting in the '80s: transformation of the technical composition of capital and labour processes, shift to services, flexibilisation and intensification of work, individualisation of employment contracts, discontinuity and dispersion of occupational paths and the rise of underpaid, precarious work against the background of enduring unemployment.

This disintegration of the working class did not mean ipso facto a universal impoverishment of the wage earners. Many workers saw their collective bargaining power undermined through the fragmentation of services, privatisation and subcontracting. But a lot of the remaining stable parts of the working class (to a large extent those still unionised) maintained their wages, while for many, mortgage-backed home ownership and consumer credit meant a rise in living standards. At the same time, new waged middle strata emerged that could aspire to claiming a share of the wealth produced by the increasing profitability during the ascending phase of the cycle of accumulation by working hard and flexibly in education-intensive jobs and maintaining easy access to credit. The mobilisation of cheap labour force in the new industrial zones in the 'developing' world (globalisation and global division of labour) permitted the increased consumer power not only of the executives, managers and consultants, but even of workers that saw their real wages stagnating or declining. The ideology that accompanied the individualisation of the working class was the glorification of private ownership and individual responsibility for success or failure: 'anyone can make it if they work hard enough'. All the more, individual workers should invest in their individual labour power, instead of capital (via the state) investing in the working class.

But on the wrong end of the stick, employment shifts from traditional working class occupations to deskilled services positions, the erosion of organised labour and the creeping unraveling of welfare into a springboard towards precarious employment have all brought on the pauperisation of significant numbers of proletarians, among whom proletarians from non-white/British ethnic or racial backgrounds were disproportionately represented. For them, economic restructuring has brought erratic employment in low-paid jobs, while for many it has meant a tendency

towards economic redundancy and social marginality. The management of unemployment (that came to be presented as the direct consequence of an inherently pre-existing personal 'unemployability') through workfare on the one hand has been aiming at pushing the dispossessed to the peripheral sectors of the labour market, thus blurring the boundaries between wage work and the dole while squeezing wages at the same time downwards, and, on the other, had the effect of recreating the market for low-end consumer commodities and by that means also the jobs which, for the most part, the long term structurally unemployed have been expected to aspire to. The polarisation of the class structure has been inherent in the restructuring and the ascending phase of restructured capitalism: redistribution of wealth upwards, sharp divergence of living standards between the lower strata of the proletariat and the redefined middle strata (let alone the bourgeoisie) as well as between different regions of the country and different areas within the same city, intense segmentation and stratification of the proletariat. The influx of women and migrants into the labour market was a significant contributor to this process.

The disintegration of the working class and the pauperisation of the lower proletarian strata went hand in hand with the re-drawing of the social map of the cities and the penalisation of poverty, the making of the contemporary diffuse ghetto, that is the spatial determination of the new dangerous classes. The entire social housing structure was transformed to encourage home ownership (right-to-buy policies and simultaneous drop in the state's spending on housing).⁶ This provided a chance for the more

⁶ The state prevented councils from building social housing to replace the stock that was being sold off. Rising demand for housing pushed prices up. Housing became increasingly unaffordable for huge swathes of the population and many were condemned to languish for years on council housing waiting lists. Those who remained council tenants tended to be poorer and in the worst quality housing. Over the years, local governments stopped maintaining to a good standard the council properties that remained, so that they would fall into ruin and then be 'condemned' and demolished. Private contractors would then get contracts to build new houses that would contain a high ratio of privately rented flats. This is still ongoing, and has been part of a 'regeneration' policy that aimed to replace the existing council states with new public/private-owned estates.

well-off workers to become property owners. At the same time, it was a most important tool for the ghettoisation of the poor and the transformation of many council estates into dilapidated 'no-go' areas. With the acceleration of globalisation, ongoing migration, especially from former colonies and Eastern Europe, has brought growing numbers of dispossessed to big cities. The new waves of immigrants were typically channeled into those very neighborhoods where opportunities and resources have been steadily diminishing, since in these areas housing is cheaper. In those areas, they could also more easily gain a foothold in the informal and entrepreneurial sectors of the economy and be supported by compatriots or co-ethnics. This ghettoisation, accompanied by a whole array of 'social and community services' / policing, would either render the dispossessed 'useful' by steering them onto the track of deskilled employment, or warehouse them in the sink estates.⁷ Gentrification accentuated the social and spatial polarisation of the cities, since the land in many inner city areas, especially in London, was too valuable to be left to the poor (in London, gentrification processes started with the regeneration of the traditionally working class Docklands and afro-Caribbean Notting Hill in the '80s, to proliferate in a number of different areas during the '90s and 2000s). It has rapidly transformed these areas and further disintegrated local working class communities. Not only have low-income residents been pushed away or squeezed into dilapidated estates by steep rent increases, but also the number of evictions of shops that used to serve a working class clientele, the policing of those areas to restrict street life, combined with the housing benefit cuts, have reached class cleansing levels.⁸ Located at the historically socially mixed and diverse geography

⁷ The whole process of dismantling social housing carries its own contradictions: on the one hand capital / the state would rather those council estates did not exist but be replaced by privately owned housing, on the other hand they have been necessary for the social reproduction and policing of (surplus) proletarian populations.

⁸ Take for example Hackney: entire streets have been transformed in a matter of 1–2 years. Hackney is the second poorest council in the country, with over 11,000 residents living on benefits. At the same time, a small one-bedroom flat costs something like £300,000 to buy or £1,000 to rent, as middle-class families move into the area, and expensive cafes and overpriced organic takeaways

of the British cities, these processes shaped the characteristically disperse and diffuse character of the ghetto in Britain.

The trends that replaced welfare with the obligation of workfare and the hypertrophy of the police/surveillance state are two complementary developments. The utility of the punitive apparatus in the era of workfare and precarisation has been on the one hand to bend refractory parts of the working class into the discipline of the new fragmented service wage-labour by increasing the cost of exiting into the informal economy of the street, and on the other to warehouse and control those rendered superfluous by the labour market's recomposition. The introduction and continuous refinement of disciplinary workfare programmes applied to the unemployed, the indigent, single mothers, disabled and others 'on benefits', and the deployment of an extended police and penal net across cities, have been two components of a single apparatus for the management of poverty. At the same time, the traditional business, shopping and entertainment districts and the newly gentrified areas ought to remain glamorous and unspoiled by the undesirable presence of the dangerous classes. Over the last decades, there has been a proliferation of laws, bureaucratic and technological innovations: crime-watch groups and volunteer community police officers; partnerships between the police and other public services (schools, hospitals, social workers, etc.); fast-track judicial processing; stop-and-search operations;⁹ video surveillance cameras

spring up like mushrooms among one-pound shops. Cheap Caribbean grocery stores have been replaced by boutiques; barbers (an important meeting place for afro-Caribbean communities) by expensive trendy bars; kebab shops and catts by fancy restaurants and modern furniture stores; butchers by delicatessens and estate agents. City squares have turned into 'plazas', designed in a way that disallows hanging out and street drinking. For the evicted small shop owners this has meant abrupt, devastating proletarianisation. For their punters and local working class social networks this meant less space, being unable to afford their neighbourhood, and being looked down upon by middle-class newcomers.

⁹ Stop-and-search under the Criminal Justice & Public Order Act of 1994 was introduced for football hooligans and allows the police to search anyone in 'designated' areas without grounds for suspicion. Stop-and-search incidents increased from 7,970 in 1998 to 149,955 in 2009, while between 2005 and 2009 the number of searches of blacks rose over 650%, unrelated to football. It is also worth adding here the outraging figures that, since 1998, 333 deaths have

and computerised mapping of offenses; enlargement and technological modernisation of prisons; multiplication of specialised detention centers.¹⁰ At an ideological level a punitive approach to social behaviours was promoted and new social types emerged: 'feral youth', 'scum' and 'yobs'. At an early stage of its development, the punitive management of poverty ended up in a burst of a small wave of rioting in deprived urban areas in the early '90s (as in Bristol in 1992), which continued as sporadic incidents of conflict between the dangerous classes and the police over the years (the most eminent incidents were the race riots in Bradford and Leeds in 2001); this very trend was reinforced by these conflicts being managed as aspects of 'antisocial behaviour'.¹¹

In the Whirlwind of the Crisis: Lumpenisation of the Wage Relation

So, the making of the dangerous classes in the diffuse British ghetto, whose modality of reproduction has been that of *inclusive exclusion* (the transition from labour power to variable capital, or in other words from

occurred in police custody (Independent Police Complaints Commission), and since 1990, 1,433 people have died either in police custody or following other contact with the police (950 deaths took place in custody, 317 following a police pursuit, 112 were the result of a road traffic incident involving a police vehicle and 54 were police shootings), a quarter of them in London (*The Guardian*, data by Inquest).

¹⁰ By the end of 2011, the number of prisoners in the UK reached 87,000. Every year, around 100,000 people are convicted to community work. Practical consequences of being convicted in the UK: The employer has the right to ask for access to one's criminal record, and turn down applicants with prior convictions. Convicted students can lose access to the health services and can even be expelled from their school. At the same time, those coming from outside the EU have serious difficulty in renewing their visas, while everyone faces obstacles in accessing credit. It is obvious that the criminalisation of poverty adds one more active factor to its self-reproduction, while at the same time it seeks to create a 'sanitary zone' around it.

¹¹ For more on these riots, ghettoisation and the penalisation of poverty, see Wacquant, *The Return of the Repressed: Riots, 'Race' and Dualization in Three Advanced Societies*, 1993/2007.

being a proletarian to being a worker, produced as problematic), has been intrinsic to the disconnection between valorisation and proletarian reproduction in the development of restructured capitalism, as the flip side of an increased profitability and the creation of new middle strata out of the disintegrated traditional working class. The restructuring resulted in an accentuated social polarisation. On the one hand, many enjoyed a significant social mobility, within an all the more flexible and competitive labour market, principally through the remodeled education system, and were able to enjoy relatively good incomes in skilled jobs in the service sector and easy access to credit. On the other, the increasing number of urban poor would mostly make ends meet in a constant move between low-paid crap jobs and the informal economy (various exchange activities, petit criminality, local gangs), vocational training, pay day loans and the shrinking and transformed but still existing welfare system. In this context, further education would maintain a prospect of a more secure survival on wage earning activities, while some could hope to get themselves out of the shithole working hard to find a place in higher education (an aspiration that became more and more distant after the introduction of university tuition fees in 1998 and their increase in 2004).¹² But there is no healthy equilibrium state, no 'normal', fully functional condition at the core of capitalist society. The contradictions of restructured capitalism exploded on a global scale in late 2007. To understand the August unrest in its historical specificity we cannot dismiss the turning point that was the burst of the capitalist crisis. The riots last summer were not just the repetition on a larger scale of the pattern of ghetto riots that this country saw during the '90s or early 2000s. The capitalist crisis, having started as a housing bubble and a slump in the financial sector in 2008, has been transformed into a global recession and a severe sovereign debt

¹² In 1998 students were required to pay up to £1,000 a year for tuition and fees were means-tested. Later, means-testing was abolished and everyone was obliged to pay fees by means of loans from the state. In 2004 the government increased the level of tuition fees that universities were allowed to charge, to £3,000 a year. By 2010, maximum fees had increased to £3,290. Tuition fees were tripled to up to £10,000 a year with the higher education reform in 2010, which sparked the student movement.

crisis, without any indications of an imminent recovery on the horizon. At a strategic level, the bourgeoisie—with all its internal conflicts—is struggling to preserve the present (highly financialised) mode of global accumulation by accelerating the core dynamics of restructured capitalism itself, aiming at increasing the rate of surplus value. The crisis of overaccumulation, which in abstract terms means that there are at the same time too many workers and too many factories, is concomitantly a *crisis of proletarian reproduction*. Of course, every capitalist crisis is a crisis in the reproduction of labour power, but the historical novelty of this crisis is that the wage demand had already become asystemic in the preceding period of prosperity. The effort to increase the rate of exploitation, in itself very doubtful whether it can restore the production of adequate surplus value without a massive devalorisation of capital, accelerates all the contradictory dynamics of restructured capitalism, those very dynamics that resulted in the current crisis. The August unrest broke out amid this whirlwind: it was a concrete manifestation in action of the crisis of proletarian reproduction, as epitomised in the specific situation of its protagonists: ‘It is, to be sure, a coincidence that these specific few days have seen at once the riots, the lowering of the US credit rating, and severe turbulence on stock markets. But it is not incidental’.¹³

Against the backdrop of conditions of recession, with a shrinking labour market, workers being made redundant, a steep rise in unemployment, a strenuous casualisation of employment contracts and creeping increase in the prices of basic commodities and (especially in inner London) rents, the transition into the period of the crisis has seen an austerity-led intensification of the attack against the wage.¹⁴ For the new generation coming from the lower strata of the proletariat this is trans-

¹³ ‘An Open Letter to Those Who Condemn Looting’, Parts I & II, *Socialism and/or Barbarism*, August 2011.

¹⁴ At the level of the spectacle, a very British sort of austerity nostalgia has been rediscovered and reappropriated, as the flip side of an all-powerful social surveillance and policing apparatus. ‘Keep calm and carry on’, which has spread in the wake of the demise of the Blair-era boom on posters or other artifacts whose aesthetics refer back to the turbulent Blitz era, exemplifies the call for a stoic acceptance of the hard times ahead. See Owen Hatherley, ‘Lash Out and Cover Up’, *Radical Philosophy* no. 157, 2009.

lated into an almost outright denial of future in the most actual terms. Already a year before the riots, the official youth unemployment rate was 20.3%, which is the highest level since records began in 1992.¹⁵ Over and above, the sharp increase in university tuition fees and the abolition of the EMA in 2010,¹⁶ together with a further scrapping of welfare/social services (youth clubs, community centers and local health services) and the re-imposition of workfare (e.g. mandatory work experience schemes—meaning unpaid work—for one to claim jobseekers allowance), have pushed youngsters from the estates further away from the official labour market, more and more towards the highly hazardous activities of the informal sector.

In the August unrest it was all the contradictions of inclusive exclusion in the form of the ghetto—in the peculiarity of its historical formation in the British context, namely its diffuse character—that exploded: the contradiction between the retreat of welfare and the turn to workfare and the need to warehouse and manage superfluous labour power and control unemployment rates, between a highly flexible labour market with its unrestricted flow of labour power (under the banners of multiculturalism and equal opportunities) and the penal management of poverty, between consumption as a passport to personhood and exclusion from consumption, between regeneration (gentrification) and degradation. And all these contradictions exploded exactly in the face of the radical affirmation, in the unfolding of the crisis, of inclusive exclusion and precarisation. So, the August unrest produced the ghetto as a ghetto-in-crisis, itself a specific instance of the crisis of proletarian reproduction.

¹⁵ Rates of unemployment are even worse in poor areas; for example, in Tower Hamlets young adult unemployment was 27.7%, while in Tottenham there was one job opening for every 54 jobseekers. In addition, one has to keep in mind that only those claiming jobseekers allowance are counted as unemployed, not those on other kinds of benefits (e.g. income support or disability allowances) or those surviving from activities in the informal sector.

¹⁶ 80% of the 650,000 high school students who used to receive the maintenance grant come from homes where household income is less than £20,800. The EMA enabled youngsters from poorer background to continue to further education and nearly a third of them to go on to higher education.

The crisis of proletarian reproduction is not a crisis of the reproduction only of the proletariat thrown into the social margins. It is a crisis of the reproduction of the proletariat as a whole. It is at the same time a squeeze and increasing insecurity of the more stable workers (as manifested in sporadic industrial disputes over the last years) and a crisis for the middle strata as well. The student movement in late 2010, and the resurgence of rioting in central London that came with it, revealed the crisis in the reproduction of the middle-strata-to-be within the development of the capitalist crisis. The temporal affinity between the student movement and the August unrest, as well as the invasion of students prepared to confront the police and smash windows into the unions' demonstration in March 2011, made evident that the youth appears as a subject of revolt, to the extent that the crisis affects first and foremost those who enter the labour market, *according to the modalities of their entrance* (it is *the future* that is principally blocked by the crisis).¹⁷ The presence of school kids from 'the slums of London' within the student movement, however peripheral, created an internal contradiction, which in a few cases was manifested in confrontations between school kids and students or militants. It declared the very content of the movement (defending the right to higher education) an inanity, in that on the basis of its demand it sought to expand beyond the university (expansion was necessary for the struggle to win), but this very expansion (as it appeared in the involvement of school kids) eroded the core demand.¹⁸ This internal dichotomy between students and school kids within the student movement and the latter's distance in terms of content from the August unrest reflect the *differentiated character* of the crisis of proletarian reproduction.

If the crisis of the ghetto, as manifested in the August unrest, condenses the crisis of proletarian reproduction *par excellence*, it is because the dangerous classes represent *par excellence* what has become universal *as a dynamic* for the proletariat at large: the worldwide precarisation

¹⁷ For a previous elaboration of this idea see *The Glass Floor* on the 2008 riots in Greece by Theo Cosme.

¹⁸ 'Forget university, I can't even afford college anymore. Where's my future?' (from banners that appeared during the student movement).

of labour power (capital's utopia to do away with labour, which has been a defining element of the reproduction of the class contradiction within restructured capitalism and its crisis). The dangerous classes of the 21st century are not the traditionally defined lumpen-proletariat which,¹⁹ as a permanent fringe of the reserve army of labour, used to live in its own world, and therefore represented from the start an 'outside' from the central capitalist relation. The new 'lumpen-proletariat' (the new dangerous classes) is encroached by the normality of the wage relation, precisely because the 'normal' proletariat is lumpenised. The crisis, on the one hand, causes an abrupt pauperisation of many workers (as is the case in the whole western world), under the burden of increased unemployment/casual employment and debt (loans which they are now unable to repay, which is aggravated by the fact that those who have mortgages cannot always claim benefits to cover their housing costs) or restriction of access to credit. Even more, though, it produces the increased lumpenisation of the proletariat itself—a lumpenisation that does not appear as external in relation to wage labour but as its defining element. Inclusion increasingly tends to be by exclusion, especially for those who are young. It is a dynamic, a continually regenerated movement. It's not only about the exclusion from the labour market, which may well apply to many, but also about the exclusion from whatever is regarded as 'normal' work, 'normal' wage, 'normal' living.²⁰

The crisis of the ghetto as epitomising the crisis of proletarian reproduction par excellence does not mean that the proletariat is becoming the ghetto. The production of the revolution is not a question of absolute immiseration. The crisis of proletarian reproduction is differentiated which means that it is a crisis in the reproduction of each part of the proletariat depending on the modalities of its reproduction, and at the same time a crisis of the stratification within the proletariat. The latter is very important because this stratification is a hugely necessary element of the reproduction of restructured capitalism. Not only has the social ladder

¹⁹ Violent outbursts by lumpen-proletarians have been a constant theme throughout the history of capitalism.

²⁰ See Blaumachen and friends, 'The Rise of the (Non-)Subject', *Sic* no. 2.

been blocked, but everybody is being pushed downwards. This results in each part trying to erect barricades to protect their position on the ladder and prevent their downfall. This is more so for those closer to the top. The crisis in the stratification of the proletariat sharpens all its internal contradictions and conflicts. The wage relation is being more and more lumpenised indeed, but remaining a wage worker and surviving as one is increasingly posed as a pressing matter. In this context, the rioters' practices in August, as intrinsically bound to their specific situation, were at once—exactly because of the place of this specific situation within the reproduction of the class contradiction—produced as an internal distance, a *rift*, within the necessarily dominant stake of class struggles today, namely the wage demand (acting as a class).

To be Done With the Community

What in August was immensely different from the riots back in the '80s was that the latter had an 'affirmative' dimension—rioting could be the explosive expression of a movement to end racial discrimination, the 'sus' (suspected person) laws, stop and search—i.e. a movement for a certain integration. In 2011 we did not have that; we did not have black communities struggling for integration. The '80s riots could be considered in the context of the beginning of the restructuring and the defeat of the class, Thatcher taking on and defeating the printers or the miners, but this defeat was perhaps not considered inevitable at the time. In contrast, in 2011, there was an a fortiori illegitimacy of any integrative demands. Now, one cannot 'request' (even violently) to be treated as an 'ordinary proletarian', as this has been swept away by the crisis of restructured capitalism.²¹ Together with this horizon, it is the affirmation of the working

²¹ Of course, many historical riots did not involve directly making demands. The '80s riots in the UK or the Watts uprising earlier in the USA, for example, lacked any specific immediate demands, but the rioters' actions were embedded in a movement, which historically aimed at the equitable integration of blacks (as blacks) in civil society. Today, there is not such an affirmative movement.

class community as epicentre of proletarian recomposition that has been made obsolete and was revealed as such.

The working class community has never been a call to unity, but the actual space-time of proletarian reproduction outside (and closely linked to) the workplace (the factory, in its prototype), permeated by relations of solidarity and common class interests. The trajectory of this community in Britain dates back to the powerful local working-class communities usually spreading out from the surroundings of industrial districts. The working-class community has never been a revelation of an essence, but the concretisation of a specific historical existence of the class relation, when class for itself was produced as the overgrowth of class in itself. To that extent, the working class community was segregation as much as it was unity, its cohesion as a specific modality of proletarian reproduction being provided by a central figure, the white male skilled worker initially and the white male mass worker later on—class consciousness was the horizon of the overcoming of segregation/divisions (gender, race, sectors, skilled/unskilled, natives/immigrants, etc.), the horizon of a universal equality, itself produced as impossible in the impossibility of the revolution as the affirmation of the class. With the big waves of migration from the West Indies in the '40s and '50s, and other parts of the Commonwealth in the following years, there was a proliferation of local ethnic minority communities—also including new poor shopkeepers (see the various local shops and markets as places of a communal coming together)—based on shared culture, language, traditions and histories, which would offer a protective social network in the 'Mother Country'. Such proletarian communities remained significant spaces of reproduction and struggles up to the '80s, which was evident in the role they had both in the black urban riots and the miners' strike.

Local communities as spaces of concrete everyday relationships have been disintegrated, together with the liquidation of working class identity, by all the dynamics of the restructuring. Less and less can one find the feeling of belonging in a local community, the sense of affiliation, communal relationships and class solidarity, in the (penetrated by gentrification) ghettos, even if this process has been uneven. It is true

that white working class communities, and to a large extent black afro-Caribbean communities, have declined at a much faster pace, while communities of other racial/ethnic minorities (e.g. Turkish-Kurdish or Asian ones) have been more resistant to this disintegration. Ethnic networks are an important determinant of the modes of survival for the different fractions of proletarians who come from abroad—allocation of jobs, religion, mafia-run money lending—and this is reflected for example in the composition of the petit-bourgeois elements or local gangs in various neighbourhoods. But even here, local communities do not actually represent unifying spaces of proletarian reproduction and struggles, loci of an affirmative self-identification of proletarians with each other. One could probably say that the new sense of collectivity in the deprived areas is that of a collective experience of disintegration and decline. At the same time, the very notion of ‘the communities’ has been more and more integrated into the political/ideological discourse of the state to refer to managerial/administrative apparatuses—participatory decision making, local job centers and training schemes, cultural groupings, etc.—and electoral sites.

So, in the August unrest, it was not a case of communal proletarian bonds (or bonds of common racial/ethnic origins) providing the background of a proletarian subject in struggle and, in their affirmation, the content of its struggle. We should not be misunderstood; apparently, there were instances of solidarity on a local/communal level during the riots. However, this merely confirms the fact that capital can never fulfill its utopia of transforming all modes of social intercourse to pure relations between commodities. What is significant though is that rioters did not find the *raison d'être* of their actions in the affirmation of their belonging to a local community, which is also an affirmation of their class belonging. It is indicative that the unrest traveled rapidly from one area to the next, unlike the riots in the '80s, when the battles were focused on defending a specific area against the police, which was the defending of the local community, the ‘us’ as the defining element of an affirmative movement against racial discrimination and police repression.

Whenever there was an attempt to affirm a common belonging to a local community during or after the August unrest, it was only against the very content of the unrest itself. The notion of local communities was, on the one hand, part of the repressive language of the state, aiming at addressing the objective unease of the middle classes and petit-bourgeoisie, as well as the discourse of local community leaders and bourgeois or petit-bourgeois elements feeling let down by the short-lived inability of the state's repressive apparatus to protect property. On the other hand, it was part of the political language of many militants (citizens' coalitions, leftist and anarchist groups), aiming at blunting the convulsive unfolding of the unrest into a politically meaningful strategy for social change.²²

This Was Not a Movement

In the August unrest, nothing in the situation of its protagonists was worth defending: neighbourhood, residency, community, ethnicity and race, were all revealed as aspects of capital's reproduction, which produces these proletarians as actual paupers: their class belonging was made an external constraint, an ever more pressing imperative of discipline, submission and acceptance of mistreatment without any offsetting guarantee of an acceptable survival. The language of the riots was not the positive language of the 'movement', social change, demands or politics,²³

²² 'However, a riot destroys what little we have in terms of our community assets, it also places the rioters, as well as bystanders at great risk. ... Burning, destruction, and putting the lives of members of our community at risk is not the way to express your legitimate anger at being left behind in the boom years and expected to pay with your future when the economy crashed. You are capable of more imaginative and more effective ways of demanding economic and social justice' (Leaflet by Hackney Unite). 'Our communities need a united response to both the riots and the causes of despair and frustration that can result in riots' (A North London Unity Demonstration).

²³ It is a mistake to claim that there were 'implicit demands', in the sense that demands may not have been articulated, but in later interviews with young rioters, many said that it happened as a result of the cuts, unemployment, policing,

but the negative language of vandalism. What happened was a lot of destruction, nothing was built, no plans, no strategies. The unrest was a 'fuck you all' to 'respectable society'. This very dynamic of the unrest, intrinsically bound to the place of the specific situation of its protagonists within the reproduction of the class contradiction, was at the same time its limit, which was revealed in the lack of any perspective for generalisation and was immanent to each one of its practices.²⁴

Probation offices, courts and job-centres were attacked as symbols of the penal management of poverty. Expensive cars, restaurants and commercial properties were destroyed because they represent a wealth which is inaccessible. Estate agents saw their windows smashed because they represent unaffordable rents in areas being gentrified. Pawnshops were smashed as 'the kind of cunts who'll charge you twenty quid to cash a Housing Benefit cheque'. The indisputable limit of this kind of destructive activity was that it could in no way be an activity of actual *negation*, that is, a removal of the social relations that in reality sustain what was attacked.

In the shooting dead of Mark Duggan and the attacks against the cops that followed, police were revealed as the last word in the self-presupposition of capital, which for the unrest's protagonists is the guarantor of their specific modality of reproduction (inclusive exclusion), an enemy in itself, to the extent that the moment of repression is becoming more

etc. If young hoodies talked about what they considered as some of the causes of their actions, this only proves that they are not feral idiots, as presented by the media. This is not making 'implicit demands'.

²⁴ Due to the diffuse character of the unrest, it is impossible to estimate how many people were involved in total. Unfortunately, the only available source of information in terms of total numbers is the various state-commissioned articles, studies and reports. According to the Sunday Times of 21st August 'police are seeking 30,000 rioters' and according to the Guardian 'up to 15,000 people took to the streets in August'. In most epicentres of the unrest, a few hundred people would actively participate, although there were a lot of people hanging around watching the events, in many cases passively supporting what was happening, or at least hindering the efforts of the police to gain control. In a few cases, the number of rioters was bigger, such as in Tottenham, Hackney, Salford, Birmingham and Manchester (crowds of more than 1,000 people appeared in these cases).

and more central within the reproduction of the class contradiction (the role of the police itself to prevent the non-rule-abiding reproduction of the proletariat). Exactly because of this specific relation of the dangerous classes with the police state, the targeting of the police as an enemy in itself tended to substitute the moment of repression within the presupposition of capital for the relation of exploitation itself. This makes a point of departure out of what is only a result. In revealing the cops as an enemy in itself, what becomes obscured is the fact that they are only the bourgeoisie in fighting position.

Looting was undoubtedly the predominant practice and the most outrageous scandal in the unrest. With approximately 2,500 shops looted, the scale of looting characteristically makes the August unrest outstanding. In all its manifestations—appropriating high value goods (e.g. electronics and jewelry) mainly for re-sale; looting garment stores, supermarkets and other high street shops for ‘personal’ use; storming bookmakers and pawnshops for money; or appropriating low value stuff such as cigarettes, water and alcohol for sharing among peers in the street—looting was a practical questioning of the terms of inclusive exclusion. In no case were retail shop fronts smashed as a mere symbolic action. People did not want just to ‘send a message’ but to get stuff they needed, or get money in order to buy stuff. Against the backdrop of the absence of demands, rioters directly claimed and re-appropriated means of subsistence which they are excluded from, and this was their main target. Appropriation of goods or money was a transient practical critique of the commodity form, as those proletarians offensively took what they need but are objectively banned from acquiring, and in this respect the act of looting was just as important as the loot.²⁵

²⁵ ‘Let’s not mince words. The great Catford loot was funny as fuck. Shopping at Argos will never seem the same again. Hundreds of local people were out on the street, with the mood varying from elation, barely disguised amusement and occasional tut-tutting as people of all ages struggled home with wide screen tellys. For ages there wasn’t a copper in sight. The discerning looters in JD Sports were trying things on before deciding which pair of trainers to take home. The smell of skunk hung heavy in the air. All it needed was a sound system and the carnival atmosphere would have been complete. The looting of Blockbusters

In the appropriation of goods, rioters momentarily questioned the commodity form but did so only at the level of exchange because this was the scope of their revolt. By definition, their practices could not have questioned the commodity form at the point of its genesis, namely the sphere of production. This could only end up in the affirmation of exchange itself in the very act of reselling appropriated goods or in the appropriation of money, the form of value par excellence. Understanding looting in that way does away with a frustratingly moral discourse that emerged after the riots among militants who are always seeking to water proletarians with class consciousness, a discourse aligned in the last instance with the state's repressive monologue. Quite a few protested against what was perceived as individualistic behaviour, a symptom of the so-called consumerist degenerations of the class, saying that 'they have no right to do this, this isn't how one protests'. As somebody said, of course they had no right to do this and it is for that reason that it was not a protest.²⁶ This moral critique at its best would excuse the appropriation of low value commodities (stuff that people 'really need') but condemn the appropriation of stuff that is considered luxuries or money itself, suggesting that proletarians thrown into social margins should only aspire to goods that correspond to their marginal position. Looting as the practical critique of the commodity form at the level of exchange is not the abolition of the commodity form. For looting for sale to be overcome, the existence of exchange has to be widely questioned in a generalised communising struggle. Insofar as exchange is the only means of reproducing oneself, one can only expect individual consumption and resale to be the prominent aim of the appropriation of goods. This is not fortunate or unfortunate, this is how it is.

In the actions that appeared during the unrest, the 'gang' offered the elemental organisational form, in all its fluidity and ephemerality, not only in the sense of the participation of gangs strictly speaking, but

was not so successful. The playstation boxes turned out to be empty as were the DVD cases that ended up littering the pavement. Discarded electrical goods were also amongst the debris, their value abruptly wiped out in the free for all. The act of looting was just as important as the loot.' Johnny Void, *Rioting for Fun and Profit*, August 2011.

²⁶ *Socialism and/or Barbarism*, 'Open Letter'.

mainly as informal groupings in the street, stemming from pre-existing direct relationships between peers or schoolmates, usually on the basis of residential proximity or randomly formed in the street to carry out specific actions only to dissolve soon after. But one must not forget that petit-criminality and gang activity have a significant role for many youths in the ghetto to make ends meet. The involvement of actual gangs of youngsters in the riots, although minoritarian,²⁷ questioned the function of gangs as business organisation, because the diffusion of criminality in the form of attacks against private property was a questioning of gang activity as organised crime. Since the primary purpose of gangs is to make money from selling drugs, riots are the last thing they want. You can't sell drugs when there's a riot because there are cops everywhere. For the younger members who make a few tenners a day selling drugs, participation in looting was pretty attractive, while for those higher up, the upheaval and pervasive police presence inhibited true profitable activity, the drug trade. The temporary questioning of the workings of gangs as business organisations was reflected in the fact that for four nights in August, they suspended any ordinary hostilities between each other to focus on common actions. Strict territorial divides preventing young people from slipping into 'rival areas'—sometimes defined by postcode—were temporarily forgotten. But, of course, although the involvement of gang members in the unrest created a dichotomy between gang as an affiliation group (everyday relationships of support, micro-identities hostile to the police and 'the system'—although heavily mediated by machismo, an aggressive masculinity and many times outright idiocy) and gang as a business organisation, the latter was re-affirmed in the affirmation of exchange as the limit of looting (apparently gang channels were used for the re-sale of appropriated goods), and with the unrest subsiding, a perceived collective strength fell apart back to 'business as usual', without leaving any enduring bonds behind.

²⁷ Clearly, the state and the media used the involvement of gang members (in the strict sense) in the unrest to facilitate their ideological attack against the riots, presenting the latter as organised crime. After initially claiming that as many as 28% of those arrested in London were gang members, the police later revised the figure to 19%, a figure that dropped to 13% countrywide.

The 'us' of the riots in August was a transient and volatile 'us', created in the actions of the proletarians involved, initially defined by the very act of shooting Mark Duggan dead by the police as the culmination of the ongoing experience of military urbanism, only to dissolve thereafter as the shockwaves of the unrest subsided. There was no organisational continuity or prospect of building a movement. By revealing their class belonging as an external constraint, as capital's horizon, the unrest's protagonists found themselves in conflict with society itself, which having been really subsumed by capital is only capitalist society. This was the anti-social character of the unrest. They engaged in a convulsive activity which had an end date, and—in the radical absence of politics—plans and strategies, issues of expansion, building links or embracing 'the people' were not posed at all. Whoever was prepared to join would be part of an 'us' momentarily constituted against 'them', the police, the state, the government, the rich, shop owners, society. In the August unrest, the issue of the generalisation of the struggle was posed only in its negative, as a lack of any perspective of generalisation. The issue of the generalisation of the struggle is not posed in terms of the recomposition of the proletarian community, but in terms of the multiplication of rifts within what has become the limit of class struggle, namely acting as a class.

The Era of Riots

With respect to its practices (its content), the August unrest was the third major instance in a series of events in Europe, the other two being the riots in the French banlieus in 2005 and in Greece in 2008. The particular unfolding of the events in each one of these instances was shaped by the respective position of each state within the global zoning of capitalist accumulation and (clearly interrelated with the latter) its specific history of class struggles, as well as the temporality of the burst and development of the capitalist crisis: in the case of France the crisis was only anticipated while in late 2008 it had just erupted. Both in France and Britain, where the population is much more diverse and there are more profoundly established class and social divides, which means that the crisis

of proletarian reproduction is much more differentiated, the ghetto was the undisputed protagonist of the riots. In Greece, on the other hand, a socially quite broader figure of school kids were the ones that pushed the riots forward in coming together with a strong activist milieu (a coming together that made many activists question for a few days their activism and alternativeness) and other young precarious proletarians.²⁸ Only on this ground did the outcasts—recently arrived migrants inhabiting central Athens, hooligans and junkies—find themselves involved in the most scandalous aspects of the events, namely looting and arson. In France, the riots were geographically isolated in the ‘banlieues’ since the dangerous classes are spatially segregated as a result of the preceding social policies and population control strategies in the country (‘HLMs’ and ‘cités’). This maintained a ‘safety’ distance between the rioters and the rest of the population. In Greece, the social composition of the rioters and the social geography of Athens and the rest of big cities made city centers the major terrain of the encounter of subversive actions. Britain’s model of social integration has resulted in a geographically diffuse ghetto, which in the current temporality in the development of the crisis provided the inflammable material for the riots to spread quickly all over London and for the characteristically larger scale of looting compared to both France and Greece. But despite all their respective particularities, or better exactly within these particularities, in all three instances the protagonists of the riots revealed and attacked class belonging as an external constraint in an outburst of destructive activity which sought to negotiate or defend nothing, and this was bound to their specific situation and its place in the modalities of the reproduction of the proletariat in each respective case.

So, as an instance in these series of events, the August unrest finds itself within the era of riots, the present moment that defines the transitional period of the crisis. But this present moment could not be understood,

²⁸ Kids came from families of Greek workers, petit-bourgeois or middle strata and second generation, integrated, mainly Balkan, immigrants. It’s worth not forgetting that the teenager shot dead by the police—which was the trigger of the riots—came from a middle class white Greek family residing in a wealthy suburb of Athens.

in the way it is particularised in the first zone of capitalist accumulation, without taking into consideration the significance, within it, of the 'indignados' or 'occupy' movements, as appeared mainly in Spain, Greece and the US. The latter have been constitutionally linked to the pushing downwards/ proletarianisation of the middle strata (or middle-strata-to-be) and as such were defined by inter-classism. This was expressed in their democratic discourse, either in the form of an appeal for real/direct democracy, as was the case in Spain and Greece, or in that of the 99% as in the US. The real democratic discourse in Spain, the direct democratic discourse in Greece or the 99% discourse in the US were an effort to affirm a common belonging (the vast majority of society; the citizen, not the proletarian) in the face of the absence of the ground for the affirmation of class belonging within the objective reproduction of the class contradiction. It sought to affirm the universality of the effects of the crisis as a universal community of struggle. The broadness of this belonging stemmed from and reinforced the inter-class/democratic character and to a large extent posed financial capital and its political functionaries as the opponent 'class' (it was the Wall Street in the 'imperialist' US or principally foreign financial capital in 'anti-imperialist' Greece).

Faced with the generalisation of the crisis of proletarian reproduction and the intensification of the dynamics of the restructuring, protesters could not practically find any way out, any concrete way in which their lives could be different. Engaged in a struggle waged at the level of politics, the 'indignados' or the 'occupiers' put forward (real/direct) democracy as representing their aspirations for a better life, but which was a mere form in the absence of the content of an alternative way of living and reproducing oneself. In that sense, the democratic discourse of the 'indignados/occupy' movements was not the radical democratism of the '90s and early 2000s, the radical democratism of the antiglobalisation movement. Now there were no visions for an alternative society, for a capitalism with a human face. The fact that they were waged at the level of politics (their democratism) was the absolute limit of the 'indignados/occupy' movements, a limit which in Greece was questioned by proletarian violence during the general strikes and in the US by calls to occupy

everything and the invasion of the ports, only to reaffirm itself as the abrupt end of the movement in Greece and the alternativism (unable to materialise itself as such) of the communes in the US, sanctioned in both cases by the police.²⁹

In that sense, the 'indignados/occupy' movements and the riots are the two aspects of the same crisis of reproduction. Even within the democratism of the former there was little scope for any actually negotiable demands: the voting of the new bailout in Greece was more a 'call to arms' rather than a ground for negotiation (nobody really believed that it would be withdrawn), while the multiplicity of micro-demands put forward by activists in the US only reflected the absence of negotiable stakes that could be pursued. Or it would be more accurate to say that it was exactly the crisis of struggling for immediate demands that brought forth (real) democracy and it was the real democratism of the movements that made the search for demands necessary. In the 99% discourse there was an illusory aspiration for an oncoming unity as a result of the universal character of the crisis. The eagerness to expand, to make people join was constitutional for the movement. Even the cops had to be produced as enemies in the development of the movement in the US (maybe with the exception of Oakland where the memories of the murder of Oscar Grand are still fresh), when a few months earlier in London they were presupposed as such. On the other hand, the riots in Britain were produced as the total negation of any positive prospect, either in the form of real democracy or the communes. The August unrest had announced the 99% discourse, expansion as unification, as bankrupt in advance. The intrusion of the riot into the square would have destroyed any illusions of unity under the banner of democracy.³⁰ But reversely, the August unrest

²⁹ See 'The 'indignados' Movement in Greece', *Sic* no. 1, November 2011.

³⁰ It is important that in New York the ghetto remained in the ghetto; they did not find themselves in the square. Only a few paupers in the most literal sense, namely homeless or beggars, found themselves in the occupation, more in a charity-like interaction (provision of food and shelter), and even this very fact caused tensions within the camps, as filth, alcohol and non-participation in the commons (what was called opportunism) were hostile to the political character

acquires a historical significance only in relation to the ‘indignados/occupy’ movements. Only in this relation was class belonging revealed and attacked as an external constraint, within class struggle today as a totality.

The rioters’ practices in August were produced as an internal distance, a rift, within the necessarily dominant stake of class struggles today, namely acting as a class. This internal distance penetrates all the major current revindicative struggles. We could say that the riot invades the movement. This has been the case in France, Britain, Italy, Spain and most recently Canada (it is important that in all these movements the youth, students or young unemployed, are produced as a subject of revolt, because as we’ve said it is the youth that first and foremost see their future blocked). Riots invade the movements because of the inability of struggles over immediate demands to renew their revindicative dynamic (the case of the student movement in Quebec is very indicative in that respect), and in that sense we are talking about the era of riots. This encounter between the riot and the movement reached a state of paroxysm in the osmosis of practices within an inter-class crowd that appeared in Athens on 12 February, because of the acuteness of the crisis in Greece: in a massive outburst of rioting that followed a 48-hour general strike with minimal participation, ‘those who are already trapped in the precarity-exclusion continuum invaded a movement that still tends to invoke ‘normal’ employment and a ‘normal’ wage; and the (non-)subject’s invasion was successful, because the movement had already been invaded by capital’s continual assault on ‘normal’ employment and the

of the movement. The disgust of the middle strata for their proximity with the lowest ones was even more central a dynamic in Santa Cruz. In Oakland, on the other hand, the geographical proximity of the camp with the ghettos and the radical class struggle tradition of the city brought quite a lot dispossessed in the square, with a double effect: the cops were on the opposite side of the barricade by definition; the participation of the more marginalised strata from the ghettos was defused by black civil society organisations which have a significant influence on black or brown populations, committed in a transfer of radicalism from one generation to the next (for more on the Oakland commune and the occupy movement see ‘Under The Riot Gear’, *Sic* no. 2).

‘normal’ wage’.³¹ This osmosis reproduced the internal distance between practices at another level, between the mass that confronted the police and those who torched buildings and looted. In all the instances of the movement being invaded by the riot, the production of class belonging as an external constraint affirms the police as what tends to become a central moment in the reproduction of the contradiction between classes.

The era of riots is at the same time the dynamic and the limit of class struggle in the current conjuncture, namely the production of class belonging as an external constraint in the face of the inability of class struggle to conclude its class dynamic and produce a renewed position of proletarian power. It is only a transitory phase in the development of this contradiction (the contradiction between classes in the current cycle of struggles) that seeks a resolution. As the crisis progresses, the proletariat struggles for its reproduction as a class and at the same time is confronted with its own reproduction (class belonging) externalised as a constraint in capital, i.e. it struggles at the same time for and against its own reproduction.³² The generalisation of the struggle is not posed today as class unity (under the wings of a central figure), because for the proletariat being and acting as a class only means being a part of capital and reproducing itself as such (together with the opponent class). There is no ground for a revolutionary affirmation of class belonging, no workers’ identity or proletarian community, and there is nothing to be liberated, no craftsmanship or human nature. In an environment that produces surplus populations and violently attacks the historically defined value of labour power, anchoring on the wage relation is lost together with the ability to demand better living standards. The much-anticipated Subject loses the ground beneath its feet. The ephemeral ‘us’ of the rioters, this transient subject of destructive practices that appears momentarily only to rapidly dissolve, is the impossibility of a permanence of the Subject (the impossibility to imagine the revolution as the result of an ‘accumulation’ or overgrowth of riots). In the differentiated character of the crisis

³¹ Blaumachen and friends, ‘The Rise of The (Non-)Subject’, *Sic* no. 2.

³² See the Introduction to *The Transitional Phase of the Crisis: The Era of Riots* by Woland, September 2011.

of proletarian reproduction, the *crisis of the stratification of the proletariat*, each part is struggling to defend its respective level of reproduction (its position on the social ladder) while they are all pushed downwards. This makes the issue of the generalisation of the struggle an issue of conflictual encounter between different practices. This is revealed in all the cases of riots invading movements. It is what was anticipated in the aforementioned dichotomy within the student movement in 2010, which was very similar to the one that had appeared within the anti-CPE movement in France in 2006. It is what was also prefigured when the encounter between the rioters and the petit-bourgeois poor was posed as conflictual in the August unrest (when shopkeepers—themselves to a large extent exploited by serfdom-like bonds to various ethnic mafias—defended their shops in many times armed), in the absence of a unifying common belonging to a local community.³³

What seems to be absent from the invasion of the riot into the movement, as it appears in the current conjuncture in the first zone of capitalist accumulation, is the struggle in the workplace. In the movement over pensions in France, where a large number of workers participated, there was no major wave of strikes. The movement's connection with the workplace was mainly expressed in the form of the blockade (blockades

³³ In that sense the attempt for a reconciliation of opposing interests between rioters and small shop-owners by the Turkish and Kurdish communities of North London against police repression in the aftermath of the events is a political attempt to resolve a contradiction which cannot have a political resolution: 'Let's not forget that the Turkish and Kurdish youth are also a part of the youth in this country and therefore Turkish and Kurdish youth and their future are also at stake as a result of such cuts. ... We are witnessing the development of an instinctive tendency to protect their small shops and at times attacking the youth. Surely the traders have the right to protect their shops. But such events should not be ... used to strengthen the prejudices that the oppressed and migrant communities have against each other'. These interclass fraternity call sought to substitute a 'community of the poor' for what only the direct attack at the means of production and subsistence can achieve: the confrontational posing at stake of the coming together of different parts of the proletariat and poor small proprietors. At any rate, a 39-year-old mother among the rioters stated: 'We won't shed any tears for the shops; they never contributed to the community, now they only care about their middle-class hipster customers.'

of refineries). Similar was the case in the US, when the occupy movement saw the step forward in blocking ports in the West coast, while during a week of workplace occupations in the public sector in Greece last autumn, occupiers were very careful not to be strikers (nobody was really prepared to lose their wages). The posing of the contradiction between classes in this cycle of struggles at the level of their mutual reproduction is in the present moment unable to cross the barrier of production, namely enter the field which is at the core of this mutual reproduction, as, in the face of the precarisation (lumpenisation) of the wage relation, being a proletarian today is not identified with being a worker and even those who are actually workers do not identify in any positive way with the condition of being a worker. This has in a way been expressed in scattered factory occupations over redundancies and compensations in Europe during the last few years, which as such are a flight from the workplace, from the worker's condition (itself a moment of the production of class belonging as an external constraint). In the absence of struggles or actions that will put the production of value at stake and their relating to them, those who find themselves reproduced in the modality of inclusive exclusion will be unable to question the dependence of their survival on activities of exchange, as became evident in the August unrest. However, in the practices of blockading, in the invasion of 'outsiders' into workplaces, two important issues arise: a) putting value production at stake will not necessarily take the form of the strike (which does not mean that strikes will not happen, but that the crucial significance of productive labour is not posed anymore as the centrality of the figure of the productive worker); b) the practices of blockading anticipate the practical questioning of self-organisation in the conflictual encounter between workers and 'outsiders', to the extent that this invasion will tend to question the privileged relation of certain workers with the specific means of production they work with.

The capitalist crisis is a flight forward, an acceleration of all the dynamics of the restructuring. It is a radical affirmation of the illegitimacy of the wage demand amidst the unraveling of guarantees for survival, the proletarianisation of middle and petit-bourgeois strata and the accentuation of the production of surplus populations. The attack against the price of

labour power is crystallised as austerity measures (similar to the structural adjustment programmes of the '80s) that are now implemented everywhere in the first zone of capitalist accumulation (the supervisors of this process are Moody's and Standard & Poor's). As this process develops amidst a severe sovereign debt crisis in Europe, the implementation of austerity in the South is of utmost priority not only for the PIIGS (austerity is the mechanism of the restructuring which mystifies itself in the coercive language of access to international financial markets), but for the core states as well, in order to prevent the acute devaluation of their own financial assets, which would rapidly send them deeper into recession, making contradictions in the internal front even more explosive (somebody called that uneven de-development at a discussion in London). Amidst the whirlwind of intensified intra-capitalist competition, the multiplication of proletarian struggles and riots, the police is everywhere affirmed as a central moment in the reproduction of the contradiction between classes, as exemplified in the banning of protests in the US and Spain, with new laws voted following the 'occupy' movement and the appearance of riots in Barcelona, in the recent emergency law in Canada, brought into action when riots invaded the student movement, or in the army taking to the streets in Italy and the new detention camps for illegal migrants in Greece. In Britain, the August unrest was followed by around 5,000 arrests and legal modification that led to hugely increased sentences for riot participants. Apart from the publication of various studies on the events and the shortcomings of the state's response which explored ways of preventing similar unrests in the future, a number of committees and bodies announced that widespread riots are quite likely to erupt again and have been working hard to supply the state's arsenal with more effective ways of dealing with similar unrests.³⁴ The form of the ghetto, of intensified spatial seg-

³⁴ Police should consider using live ammunition to halt attacks on buildings when the lives of those inside might be at risk. The use of 'protected' vehicles advancing against rioters, rubber bullets, water cannons and military backup were also suggested. On the occasion of the Olympics, the technological repressive arsenal of the state is being reinforced as well, with new face recognition cameras and other gadgets, while the condition of the army patrolling in the streets is being normalised.

regation secured by innovated surveillance methods, police special forces or even the army, is anticipated as the dominant modality of reproduction for rapidly increasing proletarian populations, a trend that has been more advanced in the US. The recently voted for housing benefit cap and the massive ‘regeneration’ of the traditionally poor districts in East London on the occasion of the Olympics, which cause a renewed social cleansing, point to this direction in Britain. In these trends as well as in the cases of technocrats being directly appointed as heads of the state to temporarily relieve serious political crises, as has recently been the case in Greece and Italy, a tendency towards totalitarianism is evident, which, not being though in any case an incorporation of the working class into the state across national lines, is not a repetition of the historical totalitarianisms of fascism and Nazism (historical repetitions are without meaning anyway).

Of course, all of the above dynamics that increase precarisation (the lumpenisation of the wage relation) cannot in any case resolve the contradictions of restructured capitalism because they are these very contradictions the ones that led to the current crisis, and are themselves already in crisis as solutions. The ghetto is already a ghetto-in-crisis and the August unrest was this crisis in action. The internal distance that appears within class struggles today aggravates all social contradictions and creates a self-reinforcing process of growing conflicts—that includes more and more categories—and the intensification of state repression. As we’ve said, the dynamics of the struggle in the era of riots cannot produce any stable results. The limit of these struggles, now, is that they are class struggles. The overcoming of this limit is a practical attack against capital, which is identical with the attack on the very existence of the class of proletarians.

From demand struggles to revolution there can only be a rupture, a qualitative leap. But this rupture is not a miracle, not a change that happens in an instant, neither is it merely the realisation by proletarians that nothing else is any longer possible except the revolution, as everything else has failed. This rupture is produced positively as struggles unfold.³⁵ It

³⁵ See *Théorie Communiste, Self-Organisation is the First Act of the Revolution; it then Becomes an Obstacle Which the Revolution has to Overcome*, 2005.

is prefigured in the multiplication of rifts within struggles. The generalisation of the struggle can only be the generalisation of practices that question proletarians' existence as proletarians. The capitalist crisis as a crisis of the reciprocal implication between classes will be the backdrop of this generalisation, and precisely because of the latter the crisis will become paroxysmal.³⁶ The generalisation of the struggle, as a coming together of *conflicts* within struggles, will immediately bring multiple aspects of surplus value production / capitalist reproduction to a halt, thus putting at stake proletarian reproduction itself, necessitating simultaneously the intensification and expansion of what will then be an open insurrection, or probably multiple insurrectionary fronts. Obviously, the coming together of proletarian practices will not be peaceful. On the contrary, we should expect a violent process in many instances. If the generalisation of rifts produces a new kind of 'unity' of practices, this will not be the old class unity, but multiple practices objectively establishing different camps within the fighting proletariat that will however be unable to crystallise (lest the revolution be defeated) into particular political forms; they will be volatile by definition, precisely because for the 'communisation camp' there won't be an end. The production of rifts is the production of class belonging as an external constraint within the class struggle. The dynamic of class struggle today can never be victorious, because it will keep finding class struggle itself as its limit, up to the point when the multiplication of rifts will become the overcoming of class belonging (and therefore of class self-organisation), as a revolution within the revolution, as communising measures, that will either de-capitalise (communistise) life further and further or be crushed.

Rocamadur/Blaumachen, August 2012

³⁶ The link between everyday struggles and the revolution ceases to be a theoretical abstraction and becomes direct in the crisis of the capitalist relation of production.

