

Riot. Strike. Riot

The New Era of Uprisings

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Contents

Acknowledgements xi

Introduction: A Theory of Riot i

A theory of riot. Riot-strike-riot prime. The marketplace and the factory floor. Circulation-production-circulation prime. Riot and crisis. Circulation struggles.

RIOT

Chapter 1: What Is a Riot? 35

What is a riot? The economic and the political. The dilemma of reproduction.

Chapter 2: The Golden Age of Riot 49

The golden age of riot. The world market. Riot and class struggle.

Chapter 3: The Swing, Or, Riot to Strike 61

The swing: riot to strike. Machine-breaking. The many.

STRIKE

Chapter 4: Strike Contra Riot 77

Strike contra riot. Spectacle and discipline. Too much and too little.

Chapter 5: The General Strike 89
The general strike. Engels and Sorel.
The inversion of Rosa Luxemburg.

Chapter 6: Crossed Wires, Or, Strike to Riot 103
Crossed wires, or riot and strike. Struggle
and profit. Revolutions per minute. Riot
as modality.

RIOT PRIME

Chapter 7: The Long Crisis 129
The Long Crisis. The arc of accumulation.
The spatialization of struggle. The end of the
program. Overdetermination.

Chapter 8: Surplus Rebellions 153
Surplus rebellions. Proletarianization and
racialization. An agenda for total disorder.
The public riot.

Chapter 9: Riot Now: Square, Street, Commune 175
Riot now: square, street, commune. The
square and class alliance. The street and the
rift. Commune and catastrophe.

Index 195

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

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

5 Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 54.

6 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 783.

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

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

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

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

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59, Winter 1992, 6–7.

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

While attentiveness to traditional class struggles may

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

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

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

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

This is especially the case for those formerly employed in the manufacturing sector, which has shed millions of jobs. It is also true for youth who recently entered the labor force for the first time and, above all, for workers of color.

Between 1947 and 1973, the unemployment rate was 4.8 percent on average; after 1973, it rose to 6.5 percent. Since 1973, there has been one exceptional period, 1995–2001, when the unemployment rate returned to its pre-1973 level. Excluding these years, the post-1973 unemployment rate rises to 6.9 percent, or 43 percent above the previous average. This rise is not only due to the fact that unemployment levels have been higher during recessions. Economic

¹⁰ Bremen, *Outcast Labour*, 366.

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

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

Proletarianization and Racialization

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surplus Rebellions

This expansion is not, however, neutrally quantitative.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁷ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 26–7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15, 113.

Surplus Rebellions

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

An Agenda for Total Disorder

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

21 Fanon, *Wretched*, 3.

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

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

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

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

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

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

The Public Riot

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

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

²⁵ Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.

²⁶ Chen, “Limit Point,” 205.

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Surplus Rebellions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

31 Fanon, *Wretched*, 1.

Surplus Rebellions

Neither, however, can the subjects of *riot prime* imagine meaningful subsistence in the marketplace, in the manner of the previous era of riot. The separation of production and exchange and the presence of the police is the absence of that possibility. The great class recomposition and the abstraction of the economy are one and the same. Price-setting even in its contemporary form proves the most transient of palliatives. The public whose modality is riot must eventually encounter the need to pursue reproduction not just beyond the wage but beyond the marketplace.

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

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

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

RIOT PRIME

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