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The Wisdom of Rioters

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Having a phobia of butterflies, for example, is to be frightened by their erratic flight. It's to be unable to stand the entirely singular way they have of twirling about. Butterflies have no regularity in their movements, they seem to go in all directions, we can neither predict their curves nor anticipate their resting places. Nothing is more hazardous⁴ than the orientation of a butterfly.

As there is the concept of the butterfly, there is the concept of the sage. And the sage is also determined by a set of dynamisms, she is a silent being, who shows her face only in emergency situations and thus appears only rarely in the city, who descends to tell the truth, and to say what is only by means of riddles, her public appearance is always the result of a courage in which she places herself in danger. To the long classification phobias today we must today add a new nomenclature, the phobia of wisdom, or "sophiaphobia". For people do not have a phobia of rioters, they have the phobia of wisdom, and rioter exudes the schema of the sage. The rioter is an example of wisdom that takes place outside of the traditional figure of the sage. Sophiaphobia is the real name of those who experience a repulsive shudder at the sight of rioters.

"Solon, for example, who, at risk and danger to himself, intervened in the city to tell the truth, but who intervened only occasionally, the rest of the time remaining silent in his wisdom. The sage intervenes only when his intervention is called for as a matter of urgency."⁵

4 The French term *hasardeux* comes from the term "*hasard*", meaning "chance". -Trans

5 Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 85.

"The Wisdom of Rioters" was published on the sixth of June amidst the tail end of the Nuit Debout movement against the "Loi Travail," or the Labor Law proposed by Myriam El Khomri (Labor Minister of President François Hollande's Socialist administration). People often cited sociological reasons for the rage against the Loi Travail, such as France's 25% youth unemployment rate (10.6% generally). Ironically, the solution proposed by the Loi Travail amounted to a familiar series of neoliberal reforms that included reductions in redundancy severance payments and overtime pay, along with the easing of restrictions on layoffs and minimum work hours—to name but a few. The effect would be the same as what we've seen in the U.S and elsewhere: a cosmetic reduction of official unemployment figures and an increase of precarity and exploitation.

However, something political emerged in Nuit Debout ("Rise Up at Night") that was irreducible to its social conditions, namely, a general refusal of the alternative between the failed paternalism of the social welfare state and the proposed future of heightened neoliberal precarity. As the two roads offered by the French government were both premised on continuing to ensure the subjection of the population to work, what emerged was a breakaway from government altogether by refusing work as a way of life.

On March 24th, two weeks into the movement, the police violently evicted the student occupation of Tolbiac High School and, in a separate incident, brutally pummelled a 15 year old student demonstrator. At that moment, the predominantly student-led movemnt clearly saw how the neoliberal future on the horizon had its own footsoldiers on the ground in the here and now—and thus that to accept order in the streets was already to accept defeat. Two days later, the 26th of March saw students go on the offensive by rioting at police stations near Bergson High School in Paris. The social movement against the Loi Travail had become a political war against the police state.

Fast-forward to June 6. Two and a half months of intense rioting and high-pitched street fights against the cops had produced what the philosopher Michel Foucault called a "subjectivation": a new way of being in the world that emerges by bending power relations in a new direction. Of course, riots are nothing new. But when they take on a protracted consistency in space and time, they attest to the emergence of rioters: not just bodies exploding with rage, but battle-forged subjectivities that have learned how to fight and won't be able to return to the daily life from which they've broken away by risking themselves in combat. This emergence of the rioter and its wisdom is the subject of the following text.

The Wisdom of Rioters

Lundi.am

Since the beginning of this movement against the loi travail(le) [El Khomri labor law] not a day goes by in which we don't hear about those "rioters" [casseurs].¹ Reading the news, one gets the impression that the rioter is some sort of separate species that the humanities and social sciences have set out to try and comprehend. Psychologists want to pry open the black box behind the mask. The rioter must be psychoanalyzed, their biography dissected, the idiosyncrasies of their familial history brought to light, in particular those which led them deviate into so-called "radicality". The paper *Le Figaro* has claimed that the "psychology of the rioter is hard to seize upon", nevertheless proceeding to advance their own hypothesis, i.e. that these people are "adrenaline junkies." The arts and music website *Les Inrocks* conjures up the devilish mind of a sociology PhD, who glimpses in the rioter something like a "common DNA with the autonomes". Everywhere, the media and its helpful academics ask themselves the same question as the cops: "who are these rioters?" It is our turn to offer an answer: the rioter is the sage who descends into the city.

¹ The term "*casseur*", which literally means "smasher", is used in the media and by the state to refer to rioters in a derogatory way, implying valences of "hooligan", "thug". In the Anglophone context, it would be associated with "the black bloc". We have translated the term throughout as "rioter", and its cognate, "le casse", as "smash-up" or "ransack". Thanks also to RH and La Onda for their suggestions. —Trans.

it will resurface in all its radicality; the rioter knows it as well. She does not expect that her gesture durably transforms the course of things. Rather, she manifests energetically her passion for the real: to destroy the symbols of power, and thereby to reach the hard kernel of the real. The urge to smash is a political way by which reconquer a certain contact with reality, to rediscover the reality of the world. The latter is not destroyed. It is marked, scarred, damaged. Anger is anchored in the gutted windows. Here, perhaps, is a form of pure enjoyment, in which the incarnation of the negativity of the world is in motion. The lamentations of the prefects, mayors, and police contribute even more joy to the reversal of the balance of power.

Finally, what the rioter has also won, is the impossibility of the use of instruments of capitalism: the ATMs are out of service, bank branches closed sometimes for weeks at a time. Whereas we are accustomed to being worldly spectators, to understanding little to nothing about the world that surrounds us, the rioter clears a space of possibilities. In the place of an illegible world, she offers us an uncluttered version of it. Public space is finally rid of the arrogance of those institutions which had proudly displayed their power, and now offers other perspectives, such as those spoken through tags. These last few days, a stroll through the streets of Rennes was infinitely more delicious. It is possible to stop, pause, to rest, to wander, to contemplate and meditate on the consistency of the world that protesters sketched out with the points of their bombs.

The Phobia of Wisdom

Still, in spite of his generosity and his great virtues, many people experience a violent fright at the sight of rioters. More dramatic and more numerous are those who, having never had the sensible experience of a demonstration, are averse even to the simple mention of the word "rioter". Just to raise the topic in a conversation means risking an anxiety attack in your interlocutor. Such knee-jerk reactions can't help but remind one of the symptoms of phobia. There are dozens of names by which to designate the phobia of spiders, butterflies, water, forests, birds, etc. But it would be wrong to reduce this affect of dread to a story of forms. Phobia is also and above all a story of schemas, i.e. of spatiotemporal dynamisms.

resides here. These destructions carry in them a charge of reality. The usual course of events is interrupted. The eternal Sunday of our lives momentarily comes to an end. The landscape is transformed. In these streets, it is easy to identify the exact path of the rioter, and the sight of each fragment of power scratched or properly exploded communicates this desire to explore a world. Thus does the smashing of symbols of power communicate itself. It lays bare the fragility of power, despite itself, as an act we can and must engage in.³ Power is forced to board up its windows to prevent further smashings. It is here that power becomes naked; the images of such voluntary destruction present us with the disorientation of power [égaré], one vacant and empty, fighting in the mode of retreat. The institutions that became victims of this overflowing joy of the happy rioters even ended up abandoning their vain attempts at marketing, by which they had hoped to direct overwhelmed individuals to choose the right bank, insurance, or financial investments.

Here it is precisely the pride of power that is affected. Its loss is visible, and there is nothing it can do. Sometimes, it sends its workers down to passively oppose the friendly rioters. Such a situation is even more amusing. The collapse finds its passive and powerless witnesses, of which the rioter could only barely have dreamt. The next day, the landscape is lightened. With their ridiculous wooden boards, banks and insurance companies become interchangeable, indistinct and homogeneous. Only their dull logos survive, often crossed-out by the wisdom of the demonstrators. These institutions typically evade the public gaze. Hence, the first victory of the rioter is here: he has momentarily erased the haughty pride of the establishments that organize our dispossession and who have no fear of showing themselves in public space.

The Rioter Exhibits Existence

The riot tends also to kill boredom. It momentarily exhibits existence [elle dispose à l'existence], for it exhibits power's defeat. We know

³ The French reads: "Elle s'offre au regard, à la fois ce qui rend visible ce qui peut, et doit, à tout prix, traduire cette fragilité « malgré tout » du pouvoir". This sentence is tricky. -Trans

The Eloquent Silence of the Rioter

The one who smashes takes no great pleasure in speaking. She loathes microphones and flees cameras. This would seem a logical enough fact. Yet it would be too easy to explain the reluctance to talk and be seen by simply invoking the prudence of the masked person living in a state of emergency. We propose instead that the rioter is a sage, and as such is essentially mute. The crowbar, the hammer, and the baton are the instruments of her public speeches, her silent language. The rioter has many reservations about language and meaning that is aimed to render the ensemble of her gestures coherent. To remain silent displays a disdain for the intellectuals and others who still dare to defend an alleged "democracy" that demands dialogue, with its strategies of producing consensus. Her verbal silence is courageous. The truth that she carries with her has only a physical language. In the style of Heraclitus, the rioter is content to say, "if I smash things, it is because you chatter idly". Foucault spoke of the sage in similar terms:

"The sage...keeps his wisdom in a state of essential withdrawal, or at least reserve. Basically, the sage is wise in and for himself, and does not need to speak. He is not forced to speak, nothing obliges him to share his wisdom, to teach it, or demonstrate it. This accounts for what might be termed his structural silence. And if he speaks, it is only because he is appealed to by someone's questions, or by an urgent situation of the city".²

The Mysteries of the Smash-Up

An emergency situation that brings about the descent of the sage into the city: here we are in a strange proximity to the ancient Greek scenario described by Foucault, with the difference that in our day the sages are masked. Like the rioter, the sage appears in the city only rarely, and in an ephemeral way. She descends only briefly, just long

² Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 17

enough to exhibit and uphold a truth. For the sage and the rioter alike, truth does not manifest itself through lengthy prevarications. It is not the job of the sage to be clear. Her words are full of opacity. The sage and the rioter are not rhetoricians. They do not seek to convince or persuade, for they speak only in riddles. The truth sparkles with the silence of sages. What explains such a fascination with the rioter, is precisely that her silence carries such a mystery within it. Since the beginning of the movement against the Labor Law, no fewer than 527 articles have attempted to discern who these “rioters” are. What fascinates is not the hammer hitting the ATM screen, nor the identity of the one doing it, it is the mystery that gesture carries with it. To understand the rioter, we must see that she offers us perfectly enigmatic answers. She leaves those to whom she speaks in a state of ignorance and uncertainty: “The sage speaks in enigmas”, Foucault said.

Visibility and Truth

Like the sage, rioter appears to act only for himself. He speaks in no one else’s voice, and demands nothing. He is hardly even a person. The rioter advances more like an atmosphere. Bystanders don’t always understand what the rioters mean to say—“Why do that?” “C’mon, stop that! There are other ways to express yourselves!” “It’s crazy to go off that way!” “They don’t care about the demands of the movement, they smash things just to smash things.”

They’re not likely to understand any better tomorrow. The smash-up is the mute explication of truth. It is an act of silence that enunciates the very being of things. Broken windows, tags and paint bombs are so many marks through which what is concealed - corruption, lies, theft – comes to appear in perceptual life. Through a tactile act, the rioter makes visible the truth. But those in the position of the bystander or third party cannot help but have a confused relationship to this truth, for it contains nothing resembling an easily-assimilable knowledge. The rioter is not seeking the best argument, for he neither possesses nor circulates any knowledge in which we are supposed to self-identify. This explains why the truth he produces generates so many misunderstandings, for people do not like relating to enigmas, and have little tolerance for opaque truths. An old lady picks up a

piece of broken glass: she holds in her hand the entire statement, but she can have only an oblique relationship to the truth therein, because this shattering has nothing to teach. The freedom of the rioter lies in not being subjected to any obligation of speech. He returns truth to the terrain of sensation: the thermal sensation of burning dumpsters on the pavement, the olfactory sensation of paint splashing the wall, the auditory sensation of the sound of broken glass. The metamorphoses and the scars his journey leaves behind are the terms of his truth-telling. It matters not who smashes, for the truth-telling of the sage is impersonal.

Smashing and Joy

Understood in this way, the rioter may come across as arrogant and irritatingly sober. Yet her act is generous. The sensory experience of the “beautiful” riot is always a moment of shared celebration. First, there is the beauty of the gesture: as she hurls herself towards her (normally quite carefully-chosen) targets, her gesture no longer retains its angry content. As the window resists her blows, she ratchets up the intensity with firm perseverance. Not far away, the audience awaits the felicity of the gesture. The window explodes. Everyone applauds, relieved and triumphant.

In this sense, the riot is joy. It is the joy of transforming a faceless power. And if this joy is won only through a largely symbolic act, this is because this power is accustomed to separating people from what they can do, that is to say, from their capacity [puissance]. Not satisfied with its privileges, power has for some time now prided itself on inhibiting our essential forces. Its greatest satisfaction is to make men impotent, that is to say, to act so as to ensure that they cannot act [*faire en sorte qu’ils ne puissent pas faire*], that they can not exercise their own capacities.

And it is in this way that the rioter confronts power. Clearly, her action does not make her powerful. It does not take control of the course of things. Instead, it expresses what we cannot do. It manifests this loss of control over the course of things. It expresses this lucid vision of what we cannot or can not do [*ce que nous ne pouvons ou pouvons ne pas faire*]. The consistency of the action of smashing