

Reassessing the Riots: Navigating Capitalism, Complicity, and Resistance

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Introduction: Neoliberal Totality versus Anti-Complicity

In her somewhat polemical challenge to the French theorist Michel Foucault, American philosopher and socialist-feminist critic Nancy Fraser asked the following question: If power is ubiquitous, why is resistance preferable to submission?¹ Her question exemplifies a variety of common misunderstandings of Foucault's work, not least of all an inadequate grasp of his dialectics of the "omnipresence" of power;² but I see the need to rephrase Fraser's question for a different reason: if we assume that power is everywhere, that there is a totality of structure, then the more pressing concern is not *why* we should resist, but rather how we *can* resist. Is it

¹ Nancy Fraser: Foucault on Modern Power. Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions. In: *Praxis International*. Vol. 3 (1981), pp. 272-287, here p. 283.

² Michel Foucault: *The Will to Knowledge. The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. London 1990, p. 93.

fathomable that the totality that is postulated presents an insuperable obstacle regardless of our normative reasons for resistance?

That theories of totality are sociologically fashionable seems hardly debatable: at least since the emergence of Critical Theory in the 1930s, questions of society as a form of powerful totality have gained theoretical relevance. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer explicitly refer to their notion of the culture industry as a “totality”³, and Adorno understands society in general as a structure that exceeds mere individual desires, while subjugating them to its rules as well as producing them in the first place. There is a “putty” that unifies society by means of a coherent ideology.⁴ A similar sense of the inevitability of capitalist imperatives pervades contemporary analyses of neoliberalism: David Harvey, for instance, contends that capitalism’s primary incentive is the incessant need to expand, subjecting ever more forms of social and political life to its rule.⁵ Neoliberal capitalism has become a hegemonic, pervasive force of today’s – Western – societies. Most notably, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued that a new form of governmentality has been emerging, which they term *Empire*. Their conception of Empire is characterised by a deindividualised and deterritorialised rule of neoliberal imperatives, in which the state is endowed with entrepreneurial and managerial functions: “In this new historical formation it is thus no longer possible to identify a sign, a subject, a value, or a practice that is ‘outside’”.⁶ Capitalism, the argument goes, absorbs even its critiques.

As a result, the notion of (anti-)complicity becomes a quintessential instrument in conceptualising and grasping modes of revolt and resistance against capitalist hegemony. Preventing a perspective of resistance and

³ Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectics of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford 2002, p. 45.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno: Gesellschaft. In: Rolf Tiedemann et al. (eds.): *Gesammelte Schriften VIII*. Frankfurt am Main 1972, pp. 9-19, here p. 18.

⁵ David Harvey: *A Companion to Marx’s Capital*. London 2010, p. 23.

⁶ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri: *Empire*. Cambridge 2000, p. 385.

power as diametrically opposed elements, it enables more nuanced understandings of the entanglement in forms of totality. At the same time, it avoids, *pace* Fraser, a desperate stalemate. Such an understanding indeed follows Foucault when he postulates that there is no longer a “single locus of great Refusal [sic!], no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions”.⁷ The analytical tool of complicity enables us to differentiate multiple forms of resistance by placing them on a continuum of ontological complicity; the notion of power and the notion of resistance are becoming increasingly dialectical, and thinking in terms of complicity renounces more antagonistic configurations of resistance in which an absolute binary between rulers and ruled is established.⁸

This article delineates how the London Riots of 2011 offer a very specific, yet universally relevant, answer to Fraser’s melancholic and resigned stance. I argue that it is necessary to attribute a dialectical quality to the riots which remains finely attuned to the specific context in which they occurred, while trying to understand them as distinctively local responses to the global phenomenon of capitalist totality. In order to explore the conceptual political ruptures these protests produced and performed, I will focus on several interrelated elements: firstly, the notion of the *underclass* and the entailed social abjection; secondly, the issue of race relations in both, the emergence of and the discourse about the riots; thirdly, the question of violence; fourthly, the roles and allocations of gender throughout the riots and their aftermath, and lastly, the question of state sanctions.

The Underclass: Consumerism and Social Abjection

Given the neoliberal focus on capital as the mediating force between desire and its satisfaction,⁹ it is hardly perplexing that class is one of the most

⁷ Foucault, *Knowledge*, p. 95-96.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman: *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. London 2005, p. 23.

relevant factors throughout the genesis of the riots. Clearly, the processes of subjectivisation inherent in neoliberal narratives of social mobility are instrumental in legitimising the social sanctions stigmatising individuals as part of the social body that requires hygienisation. Abjection, as Martha Nussbaum argues, is one of the strategies of establishing a regime of disgust essential in denying parts of the population fundamental human rights; it acts as a “powerful weapon in social efforts to exclude certain groups and persons.”¹⁰ The so-called underclass, then, is constituted as a group of underprivileged individuals who are out of the state’s reach and both “eminently disposable”¹¹ and “beyond redemption”¹². At the same time, their configuration within a neoliberal paradigm of meritocracy makes it possible to focus exclusively on their individual responsibility – any state influence can be negated, its lack of support exculpated. This paradigm offers the possibility of ignoring the effects of neoliberal governmentality, that is “the material deprivation, family hardship, temporal uncertainty and personal anxiety”¹³. The notion of class is expunged from the neoliberal vocabulary and imagination. In neoliberalism’s rhetoric, descent in the underclass is a matter of choice.

However, the rioters in London withstood these forms of subjectivisation and stigmatisation; they were capable of developing a performative form of protest¹⁴ in which they questioned their ascribed role in society and highlighted their exclusion from its regime of human dignity. Their mobilisation can only be understood as the result of an insightful realisation in which their anger and exasperation were translated into a reflective moment of class-consciousness – in which a heterogeneous ensemble of

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum: *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame and the Law*. Princeton 2004, p.107.

¹¹ Bauman, *Work*, p. 65.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 71.

¹³ Loïc Wacquant: *Urban Outcasts. A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*. Cambridge 2008, p. 25.

¹⁴ Judith Butler: *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard 2015, pp. 220-229.

individuals became a 'class for itself', i.e. aware of its position as one strategically allied group. This forms the *sine qua non* for their revolting actions. Hence, their actions can be seen as political. They reacted to their expulsion from the cathedrals of commerce in which consumerism has gained an "eschatological dimension"¹⁵; their looting and their attacks on symbolic spaces of consumerism critically echoed the neoliberal understanding of fluid modernity in which one can only validate oneself by choosing from the variety of options one is offered. As Bauman has pointed out, their revolt was one of "defective consumers"¹⁶ in a time when hyper-consumption has become the "passport to personhood if not citizenship"¹⁷, the very condition for social dignity. While the riots were indeed shopping riots, their aim were not flat-screen TVs and sneakers per se; they rather functioned as a performative demand for a subject-status the underclass had been denied.

Race Relations: Alliances and Coalitions

A similar moment of mobilisation can be observed with regard to the multi-racial character of the protest. The police shooting of the black youngster Mark Duggan in Tottenham proved instrumental in igniting the riots. This state-sanctioned exercise of violence against a black person occurred under opaque circumstances, though the killing was declared lawful two years later.¹⁸ The obvious point to make is that the shooting reflected the disproportionate danger of people of colour to become victims of police force – in Tottenham, for instance, a person of colour is 28 times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than a white person.¹⁹ The ensuing

¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman: The London Riots: On Consumerism Coming Home To Roost. *Social Europe*. 2011, <https://www.socialeurope.eu/the-london-riots-on-consumerism-coming-home-to-roost> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Loïc Wacquant: *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*. Durham 2009, p.29.

¹⁸ Matt Prodger: Mark Duggan Inquest: Why killing Was Deemed Lawful. *BBC*. 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-25321711> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

anxiety fosters mobilisable subjectivities. But race relations were also instrumentalised in an effort to delegitimise the protests: this stymying function of the epistemic category of race became emblematically evident in the remarks of historian David Starkey, who claimed that white people “[had] become black”.²⁰ Not only did such utterances enable a racialised discourse to unfold, in which black people were deployed as the scapegoats of the escalation, but they also offered the possibility of further racialising criminal actions as those of a ‘tainted group of whites’. As Lisa Maria Cacho has observed, what is palpable here is the idea that the concept of the criminal *necessitates* the black body and the black agent in order to be intelligible.²¹

One of the central insights the riots yield for anti-complicit action, however, is the caution not to emphasise one category of the politics of recognition over the other. It is not about class or race or gender; their intersectional relation is pivotal. The fact that the protest neither organised along purely economic lines nor asked for an essentialist solidarity amongst blacks indicates that its incentives were non-exclusive. The riots illustrated the potential of alliances consisting of revolting subjectivities, without negating their heterogeneity. These forms of protest echoed Judith Butler’s assertion that “[p]erhaps a coalition needs to acknowledge its contradictions and needs to take action with those contradictions intact.”²² Thus they had a unifying function as they represented “a collective insurgency against authority in its myriad forms”²³. Understanding the riots through the lens of anti-complicity deconstructs the fantasy of allegedly unified and monolithic resistant movements and enables a perspective on the “divergence, breakage, splinter, and fragmentation”²⁴

¹⁹ Vikram Dodd: Police up to 28 Times More Likely to Stop and Search Black People – Study. *The Guardian*. 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/jun/12/police-stop-and-search-black-people> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

²⁰ qtd. in Imogen Tyler: *Revolting Subjects. Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London 2013, p. 188.

²¹ Lisa Maria Cacho: *Social Death. Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*. New York 2012, pp. 1-5.

²² Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble*. London 1990, p. 20.

²³ Tyler, *Revolting*, p. 204.

²⁴ Butler, *Gender*, p. 20.

that characterise the emergent group. The idea of anti-complicity offers the possibility of enfeebling the expectation of having to articulate universally coherent positions without the slightest hint of contradiction. One does not have to have clear and cohesive and spelled-out demands in order to be offered a seat at the table of political debate. Indeed, not speaking with one voice might shatter the very parameters which govern what is intelligible as productive political protest. As a result, this emphasis on heterogeneity confronts the inherent power structures within resistant and revolting movements, in which particular groups and segments might feel it necessary to speak for others in order not to jeopardise the coherence of any movement. Thus the emerging epistemological foundations on the basis of which subjects are mobilised are unstable; these “contingent foundations”²⁵ open up the possibility of forcefully materialising one’s position as a multitude of marginal and particular actors and groups. This framework enables a more nuanced understanding of the riots and equips analytical perspectives with the toolkit that renders the subjective landscape of the riots intelligible.

On Performance and Affects: Violence and Legitimacy

Yet, this intelligibility seemed to be overshadowed by the issue of violence. In order to demonstrate that violence in fact poses an eminently salient issue for a reading of the riots as meaningfully politicised and political forms of protest, its relation to other forms of force has to be rendered visible. Slavoj Žižek’s somewhat boisterous claim that the riots represented “violent action demanding nothing”²⁶ was representative of a condemning stance on the rioters *because of their violence*. Violence posed an eminently salient obstacle for a reading of the riots as meaningfully politicised and political forms of protest, for the discourse about the riots established violence as the

²⁵ Judith Butler: Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of “Postmodernism”. In: Judith Butler, Joan W. Scott (eds.): *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York 1992, pp. 3-21, here p. 8.

²⁶ Slavoj Žižek: Shoplifters of the World Unite. *London Review of Books Online*, 2011, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/2011/08/19/slavoj-zizek/shoplifters-of-the-world-unite> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

criterion and threshold differentiating rioters' – seemingly – destructive anger from – equally phantasmatic – ideas about productive political protest. Violence is understood as incompatible with constructive demands. Revealingly, this only pertains to an already categorised cluster of people. It is exclusively *their* violence which is seen as destructive. For when the British public was asked about possible police responses to the riots, more than 80 per cent favoured the use of water cannons, two thirds supported sending the army in, and about one third suggested – in quite an atrocious gesture of liberal cynicism, one might add – that the police should use live ammunition on the rioters.²⁷ In an equal spirit, remarks such as Justice Secretary Kenneth Clarke's that framed the rioters as a "feral underclass,"²⁸ or, more crassly, Richard Littlejohn's statement indicating that the rioters were forming "a wolfpack of feral inner-city waifs and strays," calling for them to be "clubb[ed] [...] like baby seals"²⁹, were characteristic of the attempts to reimagine the rioters as removed from the category of genuinely human individuals.

A reading of violence as Frantz Fanon suggests might be more in tune with the dialectic understanding of resistance and complicity conceptualised earlier.³⁰ Fanon's awareness of the hybrid and unresolved contradictions between culture and class, ethnicity, and gender disturbs the familiar alignment of ruler and ruled and problematises the antagonistic view of power and resistance. It is, therefore, more adequate to understand violence as a rupture that opens a space outside the discursive order of neoliberal formations of the state. Perceiving it as inherently illegitimate is tantamount

²⁷ William Jordan: Faced with Riots, British Support Harsher Policing than Americans. *YouGov*. 2011, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/08/22/faced-with-riots-british-support-harsher-policing> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

²⁸ Kenneth Clarke: Punish the Feral Rioters, but Adress Our Social Deficit too. *The Guardian*. 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/sep/05/punishment-rioters-help> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2018).

²⁹ Richard Littlejohn: The Politics of Envy Was Bound to End up in Flames. *Daily Mail*. 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2025021/UK-riots-2011-The-politics-envy-bound-end-flames.html> (last viewed on 03. Jan. 2018).

³⁰ Frantz Fanon: *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York 2004, here pp. 1-62.

to a confirmation of the state's exclusive monopoly to violence.³¹ As Beatrice Hanssen points out, Fanon's take – while certainly problematic – denaturalises this very monopoly of violence predominant in Western humanism.³² Following Fanon's analysis, it is possible to conceptualise violence as an affirmative force that stems from a psychological location of subjugation and abjection, and counters the feeling of dehumanisation one is confronted with in the "zone of nonbeing".³³ Violence that reacts to these modes of oppression becomes the clarion call for a vulnerable and precarious population.

The Dialectics of Agency: Gender and Neoliberalism

It was particularly this moment of vulnerability and precarity which played a central role in the scenes of mobilisation that pervaded these intersectional insurgences. Focussing on the ontological complicity of existence, Butler asserts, "there is no escape from the vulnerability and mobility that appearing in the world implies"³⁴, but that clearly does not translate into a symmetrical allocation of vulnerability. Neoliberal structures inevitably manifest in hetero-patriarchal capitalism. Mobility and vulnerability increasingly take shape in specifically gendered expressions and discursive formations. As Angela McRobbie has argued, the keyword of "post-feminism" is often invoked to pre-empt potential reinvigorations of feminism, "absorbing some of its elements, which in turn can be used to replenish and appear to update the fields of gender and sexuality"³⁵. Inherently, this term already conveys the idea of dealing with an antiquated phenomenon, which it can

³¹ Beatrice Hanssen: *Critique of Violence. Between Poststructuralism and Critical Theory*. London 2000, p. 27.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Frantz Fanon: *Black Skins, White Masks*. London 2008, p. 2.

³⁴ Butler, *Towards*, p. 87.

³⁵ Angela McRobbie: *Feminism and the New 'Mediated' Maternalism*. *Human Capital at Home*. In: *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*. Vols. 80/81 (2013), pp. 119-137, here p. 120.

progressively transcend³⁶. Utilising the rhetoric of utopian thinking and advance, it simply negates the possibility of social movements that are feminist. This mode of alleged liberation, however, entails conformity with neoliberal paradigms of upward social mobility and – once more – makes individual responsibility the categorical imperative of the time. Similarly, it emphasises the connection between empowerment and consumerism,³⁷ culminating in the myth of the “top girl”³⁸.

In a paradigmatic fashion this very myth has been violently reinvigorated in the case of Chelsea Ives, a talented athlete and Olympic ambassador in the London 2012 campaign. Her seemingly symbiotic relationship to the city space has been interpreted as a sign for London’s multiculturalism and commitment to diversity. After she had participated in the riots, this status was unveiled as mere aesthetic surface. Her black body became a target of pathologising discourses of the rioting subject. Access to the stable centre of idealised models of self-regulating and aspiring women, epitomised by the white, middle-class heterosexual girl, can be easily withdrawn, as success and aspiration make the embodied discursive others only palatable, not firmly positioned. The repercussions are more fervent: those on the periphery are “more emphatically condemned for their lack of status and other failings than would have been the case in the past”³⁹; thus “[Chelsea Ives’] exemplary status is used against her”⁴⁰. In neoliberal hetero-patriarchal ideology, not living up to the expectations and one’s potential is a cardinal sin; the “failed femininity”⁴¹ of a successful athlete in particular has

³⁶ At the same time, post-feminism also renders subjects susceptible to understand, for instance, the consumption of certain articles as “feminist” actions, thereby utilising a seemingly empowering rhetoric, while this empowerment by virtue of consumption is clearly still complicit with a capitalist logic of exploitation and commodification.

³⁷ Rhian E. Jones: *Clampdown: Pop-Cultural Wars on Class and Gender*. Winchester 2013, p. 5.

³⁸ Angela McRobbie: Top Girls? Young Women and the Post-Feminist Sexual Contract. In: *Cultural Studies*. Vol. 21, No. 4-5 (2009), pp. 718-737.

³⁹ McRobbie, Top Girls, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Kim Allen, Yvette Taylor: Placing Parenting, Locating Unrest. Failed Femininities, Troubled Mothers and Riotous Subjects. In: *Studies in the Maternal*. Vol. 4, No. 2 (2012), p. 15.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

to be negotiated differently in order not to jeopardise the logic of empowerment and equality of opportunity. In their statements Ives (and her mother) contrast the transgressions of her rioting with the actions of “normal people”, while asserting their family’s social respectability: “We are not on benefits, we have a dinner table we sit round. She is not from a broken home. We work.”⁴² Framing their life as diametrically opposed to the deviance of the underclass, their gender performances remain highly classed and are immersed in material possessions. Replete with confessional tones and suffused by a repentant rhetoric, they stress their accountability and respectability, unable to develop a radically ruptured aesthetic mode of existence and instead being blackmailed to enter into a mode of complicity with normalised femininities and families. Indicative of the fragility of secure positions for gendered subjects in meritocratic post-feminism, the episode of Ives thus illustrates how non-hegemonic subject positions are only tolerated as long as they epitomise futurity and potential. The evident flexibility functions as a mode of potential crisis as well, in which support and tolerance can be withdrawn. The recognition of such a subject’s humanity is utterly conditional.

Granular Surveillance, Spectacular Punishment: Political Implications

The excessively drastic reactions by the British government were not only legitimised in gendered discourses, but also formed a reaction to the violence constitutive for the protests. The government resorted to modes of “penal pornography”⁴³, i.e. penalisation as a spectacle central to punishment.⁴⁴ Central to the government’s reaction were rationalities of neoliberal governmentality: As Foucault indicates governmentality does not only operate along the axis of the “micro-physics of power,” in which disciplinary power is directed at the individual body, disciplining it to

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Tyler, *Revolting*, p. 193.

⁴⁴ This also entails a re-surfacing of the spectacle of punishment; however, the fact that modes of sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power intersect is hardly foreign to a Foucauldian analysis of power.

internalise certain forms of behaviour and creating “docile bodies”⁴⁵; instead, there is an element of biopower, which focusses on the question how the body of a population can be kept governable; “it is directed not at man[sic!]-as-a-body but at man[sic!]-as-a-species”⁴⁶. Foucault stresses how these two forms of power do not replace one another, but how they intersect, how the individual is disciplined in order to keep the entirety of the population in check.⁴⁷ The British government’s reaction to the riots represented such a double gesture.

These structures were visible in the cooperation between government agencies and the press, which ran numerous pictures of rioters taken from CCTV footage in a manner resemblant of a media pillory. As for the state, it resorted to materialising the effects of its panopticism and its infrastructure of surveillance. But while the panopticon aims at internalising discipline through self-surveillance and self-control, the spectacle that was unleashed made abundantly clear that transgression was to be violently sanctioned. Similar practices of deterrence can be found in the excessively long prison sentences: Nicolas Robinson, for instance, was sent to prison for six months after having stolen several bottles of water – the accumulated value of these bottles amounted to £ 3.50.⁴⁸ As Rodriguez emphasises, the government’s authority and its legitimacy to coerce had to be “enacted, ritualized, and signified [...] and massively performed on target bodies [...] to become ‘real’.”⁴⁹

The biopolitical dimension of this agenda was thrown into sharp relief by the backlash against the rioters, who were seen as an inherently contaminated population. In his original conception, Foucault accentuates that biopower

⁴⁵ Michel Foucault: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York 1977, p. 138.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault: *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*. New York 2003, p. 234.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Tyler, *Revolting*, p. 196.

⁴⁹ Dylan Rodriguez: *Forced Passages. Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. Minneapolis 2006, p. 145.

entails the pathologisation of groups on the basis of an innate eugenicist thinking: “the modern state can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism”⁵⁰. Unsurprisingly, then, deviance was framed as a hereditary condition, underscoring the apolitical quality attributed to the riots. This was transparent in David Cameron’s insistence that the riots were “criminality, pure and simple”⁵¹, and it invigorated the caveat not to search for economic or sociological explanations. As Imogen Tyler stresses, the rioters became “the symbolic and material scapegoats for the social decomposition effected by market deregulation and welfare retrenchment”⁵². The government’s focus on family structures also echoed Critical Theorist Erich Fromm’s assertion that the family is “the psychological agency of [...] society”⁵³. The moment the family became an unreliable, anti-complicit agent in forming subservient, submissive subjects, the state’s interference on an institutional level – especially in education – could be justified. The family, then, constituted a further, finely-tuned mode of surveillance in which the norms and beliefs of neoliberal capitalism could be performed, trained, and internalised, and in which complicity with capitalist consensus could be cemented.

Concluding Remarks

Evidently, the London Riots can only be critically conceptualised when they are understood in their relation to the “totality” of society and as a response to processes of stigmatisation, stereotyping, and social abjection. In this respect, a critical analysis that itself operates from a paradigm of anti-complicity is indispensable. Crucially, the riots provide an intricate topography of the affective landscape of subject positions and intricacies of

⁵⁰ Foucault, *Society*, p. 254.

⁵¹ David Cameron: PM’s Speech on the Fightback after the Riots. Transcript. 2011, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-speech-on-the-fightback-after-the-riots> (last viewed on 03 Jan 2018).

⁵² Tyler, *Revolting*, p. 192.

⁵³ Erich Fromm: *The Method and Function of an Analytical Social Psychology*. In: Andrew Arato, Eike Gebhardt (eds.): *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. New York 1985, pp. 477-496, here p. 483.

identity-formation, unravelling the multi-dimensional conflicts that have permeated British society under neoliberalism. They can be read as a forceful cooperative challenge to this neoliberal hegemony; indeed, in light of the enormous political repercussions they evoked they demand being read with an emphasis on their transgressive, resistant, and anti-implicit potential.

Whereas the riots were met with significant forms of objective, systemic violence by the state, they were not futile in invigorating new modes of thinking: In that spirit, I would – very briefly – suggest a vantage point that drills down on the effects on the other side of the political spectrum: how did the riots influence the left? They were integral in perforating and puncturing the hegemony of “capitalist realism”⁵⁴; they fractured the naturalised order of consumption and commodification; they questioned the totality of an amoral, politically flexible neoliberal regime. In short, they offered a negation of what was taken for granted. Their reverberating impact should, therefore, not be underestimated: what if these riots were – albeit not as the exclusive factor – pivotal in opening up an imaginative space on the left? What if they helped to reinvigorate the understanding that there are proliferating unrest and dissatisfaction conceivably ushering in a significantly more leftist Labour Party, which succeeded – while not winning – at the General Election of 2017 especially by mobilising young voters?

While these questions cannot be unfolded in detail here, it is certainly indispensable to understand the riots not as irrational outbursts of violence. The oft-cited enigmatic quality of the riots is dissolved when one conceptualises them as an attempt at transgression, at establishing a position – however ephemeral – external to the discourses of neoliberal consumerism and neoliberal hegemony in its multiple expressive dimensions. At the same time, promulgating an analysis of the riots with respect to their politically resistant potentials enables a stance within the academic discourse that participates in questioning neoliberally influenced

⁵⁴ Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* Winchester/Washington 2009.

methodologies and effects. An analysis which remains uninterested in utopian reconfigurations of what is encompassed in the “reality” it describes and, in effect, constitutes, might paradoxically be understood as *being complicit in being non-complicit*; indeed, it has to respond to the supreme challenge any analysis of totality and social injustice poses, namely to conceptualise modes of resistance. This resistance is not confined to either an active sphere of physical protest or a passive sphere of terminological analysis – rather, resistance has to productively and creatively reimagine the relationship between these two elements and search for synergies in these “hybrid collectivities”⁵⁵.

What seems certain, then, is that academic approaches to social phenomena cannot remain objectively distanced and dissociated from the objects of study – that would amount to an alienated affirmation of ideological hegemonies. Instead, it is as desirable as it is necessary to question the established grids through which protest is conceptualised. In the context of the London Riots this would surely also entail examining which social and political formations are enabling the current neoliberal hegemony and its constitution of affluent, mobile elites. Research, inextricably intertwined with political practice, could function as an “engine of equality”⁵⁶ advocating unconditional recognition. Only such a theoretical approach can – in Max Horkheimer’s words⁵⁷ – be critical rather than traditional, reflective rather than positivist. It is essential for a defence of society.

⁵⁵ J.K. Gibson-Graham: *Diverse Economies. Performative Practices for ‘Other Worlds’*, In: *Progress in Human Geography*. Vol. 32, No. 5 2008, pp. 613-632, here p. 632.

⁵⁶ Jensen, Tracey: *Riots, Restraint and the New Cultural Politics of Wanting*. In: *Sociological Research Online*. Vol. 18, No. 4 (2013). <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/18/4/7.html> (last viewed on 03 Jan. 2017).

⁵⁷ Max Horkheimer: *Traditional and Critical Theory*. In: *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. New York 1975, p. 188-243.

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Bio

Alexander Kurunczi holds a B.A. in English/American Studies and Media Studies from the Ruhr-University Bochum, where he currently pursues his M.A in both of these subjects. This paper derives from a talk given at a student conference, which was part of the seminar *Complicity and the Politics of Representation* (Summer Term 2017).

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