

Starodub, Alissa and Robinson, Andrew eds., *Riots and Militant Occupations: Smashing a System, building a World – A Critical Introduction*. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018.

This edited collection is a courageous and vital contribution to literatures on anarchism, autonomous social movement studies and participatory research. The book is comprised of two framing chapters co-written by the editors, and eleven chapters with multidisciplinary and international reach, split into three sections: ‘theoretical reflections,’ ‘expressions’ and ‘critical case studies.’ The topic of the book, as indicated by its title, is riots and militant occupations, although there are none of the protracted debates over the legitimacy of political violence one might expect from such a book. The framing chapters take a Deleuzian post-representational bent, drawing attention to affect, subjectivity/identity, space, and self-transformation, arguing that riots constitute ‘a different basis for social relationality’ to the dominant system and create ‘prefigurations, of another type of social connection’ (p3). This sets the tone for the book, which seeks to explore ways in which riots and militant occupations bring something new into the world, counter to the dominant narrative that they are destructive, nihilistic and apolitical events.

The first substantive section, ‘theoretical reflections,’ begins with two chapters by the editors. First, Starodub’s methodological chapter which extolls the importance of formulating a participatory perspective from inside a riot, rather than attempting mechanistic explanations from a supposed transcendental viewpoint. This is followed by Robinson’s theoretical chapter exploring the creation of new affects such as joy, empowerment and disalienation, giving momentary glimpse into an ‘other world’ of life without authority. Love’s third chapter theorises riots as insurrectionary theatre which is potentially consciousness-raising and decolonising. Souadis’ chapter that explores the spatiality of square occupations, drawing on experiences and interviews in Syntagma and Tahrir, drawing out the tactical and symbolic importance of occupying spaces, and the violent policing strategies that result when the status quo is threatened.

The short section on ‘expressions’ offers artistic expressions of experiences of riots. The introduction seeks to persuade readers of the relevance of these artistic contributions, which speak to the book’s emphasis on affective expression. The poems and pictures are mostly anonymously authored or attributed to pseudonyms, which left me somewhat curious as to the origins and particular riots or occupations they might refer to.

The section on 'critical case studies' is the longest and contains chapters on 'riots' in the Calais Jungle; collective learning and memory on the streets of Barcelona; a form of marching, Cortège de Tête as utilized in Nantes; the pressure on public workers to condemn the 2013 Stockholm Riot; the political economy of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests; grassroots alternative media in the Syrian revolution; and Chinese counter-insurgent (COIN) repression.

The book is replete with examples of creative and utopian aspects of riots. These include experimenting with new forms of emotion or affect (Robinson); constructing new spatialities and temporalities against the status quo (Soudias); creating new experiences of temporality (Mauvaise Troupe); working towards social recomposition through collective knowledge of struggle (Gelderloos); bringing people together to defy fragmentation and separation (Gelderloos; Soudias); practical learning such identifying and containing repressive technology and improvising tools from the landscape (Gelderloos).

Aside from the emphasis on expressive, affective and utopian aspects, the thread that ties the book together, there are several themes which recur through many chapters. The first is the need to critique the dominant construction of riots. Mainstream academic, media and colloquial accounts are shown to rest on a racist discursive construction, which delegitimizes the demands and organizing capacities of migrants (Calais Migrant Solidarity). Riots are often fetishized and portrayed as the fault of outside agitators.

Another theme concerns motivations, which surpass those ascribed by media. Rather than any single, mechanistic cause, there is often diversity and complexity of reasons. Riots are eruptions of needs/desires that are not being met and have no outlet, and may involve a revolutionary rejection of the entire social order (Robinson). Some speculations on contributing factors include: reaching the limits of pacifism; hatred of police or protest against their corruption, violence or racism; rising fuel prices, resulting in large numbers of people being physically trapped; frustrations with neoliberalism and colonialism; having nothing to lose; powerlessness against gentrification. What is certain is that each person in a riot will have their own reason.

Another theme is state response. There is always a choice for state and police whether to use 'soft' or 'hard' COIN measures. Softer measures operate through recuperation and co-optation or divide and rule tactics, but we are begged to remember that the same 'nice' cops who co-opt also don riot gear to repress.

The editors and some contributors take an active stance in exploring the role of social science and social theory in articulating the social field. While dominant social theory operates in the interests of power, radical theory should attempt to rupture the status quo and offer alternatives. This can involve revealing hidden narratives, stories, affects and emotions, creating a situationist reversal of perspective. Social science is used alongside art as a form of expression, for formulating collective memory and for consciousness-raising, and as rejection of neutrality and of perspectives that emphasise mechanistic causes. Dominant academic approaches might view this tact as unscientific, too subjective, or biased. However, the proposed reversal of perspective reveals that much 'debate' on riots is framed in terms that assume the need to suppress them and discredit participants: 'The good protester/bad rioter dichotomy should be understood as a counterinsurgency strategy rather than a viable analytical perspective' (p259)

I learnt a lot from this book about movements around the world. I also enjoyed reading it. It is fresh and exciting and accessible. It is not just for academics. I tend to keep any book I am reviewing on my coffee table in order to read a chapter each morning. For the first time, and on more than one occasion, some of my non-academic guests showed an interest: they were drawn in by the attention-grabbing and controversial title and started flicking through the book, reading sections and asking questions. This speaks highly for how accessible and entertaining the book is, and how unusual to see its subject matter spoken of in this way. It would work particularly well for students on social movement modules.

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