

Editors' Forum

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Riot, Strike, Commune: Gendering a Civil War

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Abstract: This article departs from Joshua Clover's historical and theoretical schema that locates riots and strikes within the categories of circulation and production struggles, moving from the categories of capital's reproduction to the reproduction of the proletariat. Here it offers the commune as the exemplary form of the category of reproduction struggle. The commune is understood not as an intentional community of withdrawal but as something like counter-reproduction, able not just to reproduce itself but to strike at capital as an antagonistic force — striking at the vital exposure of an increasingly circulation-centered capitalism. Crucial examples are encampments against extractive capital such as Standing Rock or the ZAD. The article shows how political sovereignty and economic circulation are entirely entangled, pointing to the ways that social movements have looked upon them as separate domains. Therefore, the commune is a process at the crux of the political and the economic, overcoming the tendency to prefer one or the other. Finally, the article discusses the gendered aspect of the sphere of reproduction that makes possible the double confrontation of counter-reproduction.

Keywords: strikes, riots, gender studies, Marxism, commune

It has been a special pleasure to be working on this material in Argentina; when my comrades and I were developing the ideas of “circulation struggles” in Oakland after the collapse of 2008 and the riots of 2009 and the port blockades of 2011, the *piqueteros* were one of the most instructive examples. My own work is indebted to them. I am not going to repeat the argument found in *Riot. Strike. Riot* except in the briefest form, toward developing a simplified model of the situation that identified certain forms of struggle with certain spheres of capitalist social being. But I do wish to insist on something to which I now think the book does not give adequate weight. I want to insist on this approach as *methodological communism* or at least

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as methodological historical materialism. One needs constellations to understand the heterogeneity of any situation, but constellations are fundamentally synchronic; I think one also needs a diachronic theory of change. One cannot escape the question of historical causality, any more than one can escape the reality of development as an uneven global phenomenon. The most basic supposition of historical materialism is that *history is what changes*.

And so when people insist, and they are often communists, that an identification with the strike is true to some transhistorical essence of communism, while an identification with other forms of insurrection and uprising is the transhistorical essence of anarchism and/or the hopeless apolitical spontaneism of the immiserated, they are simply failing their own standard; they imagine that one need not grasp the underlying changes of history that can change the meaning, which is to say the politics, of these phenomena. They simply know what strike means, and riot; know with equal simplicity that communism goes with one, anarchism with the other. But capitalist development dissolves the petrified antinomy of communism and anarchism as it dissolves everything else.

As a general anti-normative aside about how to name forms of struggle, I will mention two things: first, that the tendency to call things strikes that do not resemble the traditional labor strike of organized wage-laborers often seems to draw on the accreted successes of the strike weapon, particularly during the height of the historical labor movement, and that as those successes recede, the charisma of the term is likely to wane. Two, I think people who are willing to get up in the morning or in the middle of the night and head out to confront the state and capital in ways that involve commitment and risk should get to call what they are doing pretty much whatever they want, and those self-understandings will always be instructive.

I mention this in part because one often hears debates over whether a given action is *really a strike*, and it is exactly these moments that raise the question of how one understands these terms and what has already been assumed. The debates over what counts as a strike often confuse me precisely because they accept what C. Wright Mills called the “labor metaphysic” and affirm, explicitly or implicitly, the (again) trans-historical notion that the labor strike is the horizon toward which revolutionary activity aspires – an unchanging horizon where the sun is always rising on the long day of industrialization. This is why I like the language that Verónica Gago has offered, of “overflowing the strike.” She writes, “The strike appropriated by the women’s movement is literally overflowed: it must account for multiple labor realities that escape the borders of waged and unionized work, that question the limits between productive and reproductive labor, formal and informal labor, remunerated and free tasks, between migrant and national labor, between the employed and the unemployed. The strike taken up by the

women's movement directly targets a central element of the capitalist system: the sexual and colonial division of labor" (Gago 2018).

Toward the goal of overflowing the strike, history has made the first move; one can now imagine overflowing the strike because the strike has shrunk to a size that cannot contain the sense that the world must change. The labor strike has become a marginal activity in the deindustrializing nations; its survival and even potential renaissance, via for example teachers' unions in the United States, is lodged in the comparatively small public sector. So the strike has in some sense *underflowed* everyone. The argument from which I begin is not that all must become anarchists (though many of my best comrades are anarchists, they never try to get me to join the party) but that one should understand the present via *the communism of riot*. By which I really mean that one should understand circulation struggles, wherein the terrain of context exists outside the sphere of production as Marx understood it, as both a leading form of political self-activity for racialized populations and in the same motion understand them as class struggle within a Marxist framework – but *communism of riot* sounds better. It is a good name for the present.

And yet the present will not last forever. The world will overflow the riot too. I must start from Frantz Fanon, from the global division of labor but especially the division of non-labor, of wagelessness. It is here that I discover a foundational difference between Marx and Fanon, in their conceptualization of the lumpenproletariat. Surely all remember the macaronic litany in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars – in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass," as Marx says, decisively counterrevolutionary, subject to the sway of whoever held the day, notably Bonaparte, "chief of the Paris lumpenproletariat" (Marx 2003, 170–71).

For Fanon, the matter appears contrarily. "These men," he writes, "forced off the family land by the growing population in the countryside and by colonial expropriation, circle the towns tirelessly, hoping that one day or another they will be let in. It is among these masses, in the people of the shanty towns and in the lumpenproletariat that the insurrection will find its urban spearhead. The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people." Lest one think he is talking about some other social fraction, he immediately conjures Marx's litany: "So the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed, and the petty criminals, when approached, give the liberation struggle all they have got, devoting themselves to the cause like valiant workers." You can hear in that last gesture that he is thinking about this same problem: "like valiant

workers,” and yet ... not workers at all. This sameness and ineradicable difference is the context for liberation struggles. It is hard not to understand that concluding simile as a specific demand on Marx, or on orthodox Marxism, to understand this surplus population as part of an expanded proletariat, as class revolutionaries.

Fanon understood lumpen insurrection as a necessary moment that must transform toward broader struggle, not the entire revolution. Nonetheless one finds in this a seeming disagreement with Marx. To state matters as clearly as possible: for all of Marx's contempt and Fanon's optimism, the divergence does not rest on some *variation of opinion* about the character of the lumpen. Nor need it be the case that one must be correct, the other mistaken. Choosing a side in this debate is to miss its historically concrete character. Rather, one might say that the lumpenproletariat has a different position in the metropole in 1850 than in the colony a century later.

The former scene is characterized overall by dynamism, by the rude expansion of adolescent capital on the march, and in turn by the impersonal domination of the wage whose grace would fall on more people each year. The latter is characterized by a peculiar motion, one whose truth is the real stasis of “A world compartmentalized, Manichaeic and petrified, a world of statues: the statue of the general the statue of the engineer who built the bridge” (Fanon 2004, 43). For Fanon, “The colonial subject is a man penned in; apartheid is but one method of compartmentalizing the colonial world.” In this situation, “The lumpenproletariat constitutes a serious threat to the ‘security’ of the town and signifies the irreversible rot and the gangrene eating into the heart of colonial domination” (81). Colonial rule is securitization. This security threat, this absolute proscription on any kind of integration, the racialized proscription which constitutes the colonized, will not be – *cannot be* – managed in main by wage discipline, which is the social form of integration. It will be managed rather by direct domination: “The colonized world is a world divided in two. The dividing line, the border, is represented by the barracks and the police stations. In the colonies, the official, legitimate agent, the spokesperson for the colonizer and the regime of oppression, is police officer or the soldier” (3).

Aimé Césaire famously says that “The fact is that the so-called European civilization – “Western” civilization – as it has been shaped by two centuries of bourgeois rule, is incapable of solving the two major problems to which its existence has given rise: the problem of the proletariat and the colonial problem” (Césaire 1972, 1). One sees in the worlds detailed by Marx and Fanon distinct solutions to Césaire's two problems of the proletariat in the metropole and the excluded in the colony, two forms of potential surplus. One solution is economic expansion, the capacity to take that potential surplus population into the circuits of accumulation, the thematic that Lukacs in discussing the eighteenth and nineteenth century novel names as “reconciliation.” This is the regime that I am

calling *absorption*. The other is open and immanent violence directed against those for whom every doorway is labeled NO ENTRY, a cruel ironic circumstance in that they are trapped in a colonial world itself forever labeled NO EXIT. This is the regime I am calling *coloniality*.

The opposition should not be exaggerated. Both absorption and coloniality feature racialized domination and the regulatory compulsions of value production. There is wage work in the colonial scene, and slavery in the industrializing core. Nikhil Singh's work, for example, in *Race and America's Long War*, is insightful in its relating of domestic racialization and raced domination in the United States as continuous with imperial, colonial projects across the globe (Singh 2017). There may nonetheless be a certain yield to drawing the distinction, to noting the differing orientations of these two regimes. While the former features and arguably depends on racialized exclusion, on moments of internal colonization, this is subordinated to capital's self-expansion and intensification at the scale of national economy. While the latter is subject to the constraints of global capitalist relations, it is not an absorptive capitalism, at least not absorptive enough to challenge what Fanon insists is the historical speciation which divides colonizer and colonized. And it is *from within these two regimes*, absorption and coloniality, that the lumpen appear differently: here as counterrevolutionary dregs, here as revolutionary edge.

But the further thing to note, and perhaps this is obvious, is that the distance between these two regimes is closing. This convergence was predicted in the nineteenth century – but it is not happening in the way expected. Rather than colonial regimes moving toward absorptive capitalism, the great promise of “development,” the reduction of all life to the homogeneity of “simple labor” where every proletarian is an exchangeable unskilled laborer, development has meant that the high-wage nations are losing their capacity to absorb. Surveying the technological development of Detroit, the consequences of automation, auto worker and theorist James Boggs noted in 1963, “Today in the United States there is no doubt that those at the bottom are growing in numbers much faster than the system will ever be able to absorb. America is headed toward full unemployment, not full employment” (Boggs 2011, 118).

I think this account of development and its transformations throws human beings onto the dystopian shores of the present. These nations where the regime of absorption has run up against historical limits are, one might say, *recolonizing*; at a minimum, as surplus populations increase and wage discipline contracts, these nations develop modes of domestic securitization premised on direct domination, most visibly in the policing and hyperincarceration of subordinated populations. But it is not and cannot be purely domestic. Silvia Federici has spoken of the “patriarchy of the wage”; one might speak as well of the *coloniality of the wage* that operates both domestically and especially internationally. One sees the

consequences of this coloniality of the wage in every *favela* and at every border, as nations that once promised to absorb every labor input – this is the explicit promise inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York’s harbor, given a poetic flourish – now devote all the powers of state violence and of law (a formal distinction at best) to limit immigration. When xenophobia and labor regimes are in alignment it is a dangerous time indeed; fascism is one politicization of this conjuncture. At the same time it is also the character of this historical moment, the moment that absorption is exhausted, that the lumpen, those excluded from the wage – consistently along racialized lines – take on the political significance seen by Fanon.

Let me now revisit the schematic version of the argument, by way of trying to get somewhere else. I will start from the beginning and move swiftly; I hope I will be forgiven for stating the obvious. The circuit of capital has within it, as Marx notes, two moments that form a perfect dialectic, at once unified and antagonistic, pulling toward and away from each other: the moment M-C wherein the capitalist purchases and combines the means of production, and the moment C-M wherein the commodities thus produced circulate in the marketplace. These moments orient the two spheres of capital’s being, paradigmatically the factory and the marketplace, but more properly production and circulation, on the one side abstracting out the universal equivalent of socially necessary labor time that is the measure of value, on the other, forming the universal equivalent of money that is the measure of price – value and price providing the two forms that provide commensurability and thus unity within each sphere and the contradictory unity of the two. Marx recalls that these spheres, in addition to being useful abstractions within the complex process of capital’s expanded reproduction, have their own *social existence*, one a hidden abode, one a noisy sphere.

These then provide the logic for the two modes of struggle that I name as strike and riot, though these headline events are metonyms for production and circulation struggles respectively. Now I have really simplified things, to a model so crude as to drive professional Marxologists mad. Still, it seems to do the one thing that I have asked of it, which is to provide a framework with some explanatory power regarding such shifts: the historical rises and falls within the repertoire of struggles that commensurate them with a theory of value, with the concrete unfolding of the law of value. I have to this point in my studies spent a lot of time meditating on the shift from the former to the latter, production to circulation, as capital, with its waning capacity for accumulation at a global scale and concomitant waning absorption of labor, relocates its own weight toward circulation struggles for profit (most notably via acceleration and economization of turnover times, and via zero-sum profit-taking schemes such as finance, insurance, and real estate speculation) – and how in a dialectical duet, the process of proletarianization also shifts away from

absorption into the wage and away from production, tilting over into the often-wageless life of circulation.

However, this schematization is incomplete, everything is always incomplete. I have given it too much space. I am always being reminded that production and circulation form a whole, so one should visualize the two linked spheres as forming one larger loop, the expanded circuit through which capital is reproduced, while still holding onto the poles of strike and riot. Now that I have completed this compression, there is room for what has been there all along: the sphere that is both of and not of capital, which is the sphere wherein the proletariat reproduces itself in their own circuit. The sphere has been given many names: subsistence, social reproduction, reproduction of labor-power, the last of which focuses on its function for capital. In any regard it is the circuit that follows the reverse course of capital's M-C-M, which is to say, C-M-C, the formula which formalizes the social existence of this sphere. If this circuit designates subsistence, it is subsistence within capital.

One will notice that I have recapitulated the famous diagram which shows the interlocking circuits of reproduction, capital and proletariat – the diagram known as the *double moulinet*, which refers to two millstones grinding against each other, and known also *zwickmühle*, or dilemma. What have I added to it? Well, I have added two things. One is the sense that this shape is a form whose historical content changes. Or, the content does not change so much as its arrangement, shifting its center of balance as the lives of the proletariat shift their being into different regimes of value production and its other, the *production of non-production* that is the secret of “development,” of the ceaseless transformation of production toward greater productivity. And the other thing that I have added is the dimension that provides the occasion for this forum, which is the idea that the different spheres imply, enforce, and enable different modes of struggle within the full repertoire of collective action conditioned by the full logic of the *double moulinet*.

So then, between these two millstones, there is a single question, which is quite obvious: what is the form of struggle adequate to the sphere of proletarian reproduction? It is necessarily distinct from the dilemma of capital with its two horns of strike and riot, production and circulation, expanding and contracting capital, one premised on wage dependency, one premised on market dependency, one centered by labor, once centered by lumpen, one arising from the exhaustion of the other. What is a reproduction struggle?

It may seem perverse to move beyond the riot just at this moment when, for quite good historical reasons, theories of riot are coming to the fore. So be it. But I would insist that the form of struggle I am trying to grasp will have a continuity with the riot, most evidently in that it is anterior to capitalist production. One can already see moments when the circulation struggle and the reproduction struggle are hard to distinguish – I think for example of the ZAD in France (*zone à défendre*),

No TAV in the SUSA valley, habitations designed explicitly to interfere with paradigmatic sites of circulation, airports and train lines, not just *while* but *by* reproducing themselves socially. The NoDAPL movement at Standing Rock or Tar Sands in Canada provide clarifying examples in the ways that these confrontations so evidently derive from *the entanglement of absorptive and colonial modes*, and give versions of what I am trying to think about: pipeline blockades that were also for a time self-reproducing communities necessary to preserve the blockade. Circulation struggle and reproduction struggle. Encampment as confrontation, confrontation as encampment. Care work as barricade, barricade as care work. I do not think that any of these, yet, has perfected some synthesis. But they are not charged with perfection. They have clarified the form and in what conditions it arises. One can develop clean models in scholarship; life is always provisional. It seems most important to affirm the simultaneity of these forms of social contest in the present, to affirm their coexistence within the heterogeneous and ambiguous course of capitalist and social development.

So, the form I am looking for presupposes the impossibility of wage-setting as a means to secure any manner of emancipation, presupposes the surplus rebellion set within the sphere of circulation. But it also seeks to move beyond price-setting, beyond the street uprising, the political call that says “beneath the paving stones, sovereignty,” beyond the exhaustion of the riot’s capacity to secure subsistence for itself, an exhaustion enforced by the spatial disaggregation of capitalist production. The name I would give to the form of struggle which lies beyond both wage and market dependency can only be *commune*.

I do not think I am using the word in quite the same way as many others. All the accreted associations of the last 150 years are helpful only in partial ways; I am asking both to remember them and to forget them. It is not necessarily the same phenomenon as the Paris Commune, much less the very common sense of *il commune* or *la comuna*, and is certainly not the same phenomenon as the various retreats by groups of 10 or 50 people to the countryside to live communally, imagining they have delinked from capital though some continue to have jobs or to give over resources based on savings from previous work. All of these provide some coordinates; none of them exhausts the idea. It is helpful to notice that Kristin Ross, explicating the Paris Commune, and Bruno Bosteels, endeavoring to de-center it from its overwhelming exemplarity, both take the commune as a form which functions as a way to overcome a certain opposition. Their dual recognitions appear initially to be slightly different. For Ross, it is between worker and non-worker: “What the commune as political and social medium offered that the factory did not was a broader social scope – one that included women, children, the peasantry, the aged, the unemployed. It comprised not merely the realm of production but both production and consumption” (Ross 2015, 112). The closing

gesture is at first an odd one, seeming to preserve the basic categories of capital. And yet, I recognize the suggestion that the commune offers production and consumption of communal needs and communal pleasures beyond the measures of capital – beyond wage and price, all of it shifted into the sphere of reproduction. Communism in the present, no longer identified with worker command over production and distribution in the socialist mode, is *the breaking of the index between one's labor input and one's access to necessities* – the social activities regulated by wage and price respectively. It may preserve production and consumption in a general sense, Ross suggests, a non-capitalist sense. It does away with the mediations that bind production to consumption. Only then are the compulsions of value that organize social relations broken.

Bosteels, drawing on what historian Adolfo Gilly named the Morelos Commune in Mexico between about 1910 and 13, formulates matters thus: “However, there is one political form in which anarchists and socialists – even in Mexico – seem able to find common ground: the form of the commune” (Bosteels 2014, 178). So: worker and non-worker, socialist and anarchist. One sees immediately that these both reflect the ahistorical antinomy from which I began: socialists and their strike, anarchists and their riot. But rather than say that the work of the commune is to overcome this antinomy, one might say instead that its work in this regard is to make evident its historicity, make evident that the antinomy, insofar as it ever made sense, made sense within specific and temporary conditions, just as the commune is itself historical. Neither the Paris nor Morelos communes can be understood independently from the social catastrophes that preceded them, the dramatic overturnings of social existence that were the Franco-Prussian War and the Mexican Revolution, both of which threw the circuits of reproduction, both capitalist and proletarian, into extreme crisis. To the degree that the commune is a historical opening, it is as well a foreclosure, and this foreclosure is inseparable from its being. As Marx recalls, “The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence” (Marx and Lenin 1968, 65).

This is a good quotation to end on, but I think these accounts of the commune leave out two fundamental matters that might first allow me to circle back to where I began, with a feminist international, and from there to leap toward the future. The first matter is that of gender. The sphere of reproduction is home to all humans, if one understands that capitalists are demons. It is the dwelling place of laborers recognized by traditional Marxism, but also “women, children, the peasantry, the aged, the unemployed,” as Ross says. For all that, the sphere is historically gendered. This has happened not through the misbegotten belief that some aspect of the biological or essential feminine pushes women toward care; not quite through the ideological affirmation of woman as the guarantor of the family; but in the material sense of gender as something first seized upon and then reproduced by capital to assure

unwaged reproductive labor toward its own reproduction and expansion. Indeed, just as the sphere of circulation is not only a place of racialized exclusion and domination but a site where race is produced, the sphere of reproduction is both, a place of gendered exclusion and domination; and a place where gender is produced, an argument I first encountered in the work of the Italian Marxist feminists. It is worth noticing that when Judith Butler called her breakthrough work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she was leaning heavily and without citation on Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James' *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*. One can hear it in the titles.

So the sphere of reproduction is the place where gendering happens. At the same time it appears to be the route of withdrawal, of retreat for those damaged by capital and thus the space of care work which thereby becomes gendered. From these two features one understands gender under capitalism as involving a double ration of misery that *in inverted form* provides the basis of the commune, of reproduction beyond wage and market.

One understands through this double ration how the commune of withdrawal is an inadequate horizon. The foreshortened logic of withdrawal from capital's damaged life is a withdrawal that demands care, care which has not yet been transformed, care that comes already-gendered. But how might one reject this foreshortened withdrawal from capital that leaves its gendered division of labor undisturbed? And this leads me to the other fundamental matter of the commune, which might be formulated as a further question: how can the commune organize itself as a war machine, transcending the fantasy of passive delinking so as to confront state and capital directly? For one can be sure the confrontation is coming. Though capital will no doubt smile on the rebirth of subsistence gardens for its reserve army, it cannot allow large-scale withdrawal. A commune is a war machine whether one wishes this or not; the commune as I understand it necessarily pushes toward civil war. Perhaps it is simply the name for the push toward civil war, toward reproduction as self-activity in a way that capital can neither tolerate nor survive.

So now there is a full schema. One might say it is an argument with the contemporary and debased formulation of intersectionality theory: if it seems that the spheres are divided according to separate identities of class, race, gender, instead the schema insists that each sphere features a unity of the three, each sphere appearing to have a differing orientation toward a given "identity" because of capital's necessarily multifaceted operations toward extracting surplus value.

But I do not mean for this schema to offer an academic debate. I am not sure yet what the commune is. That is okay because I think that the dynamic within the repertoire of collective actions will move toward the commune just as it has recently moved toward the riot. Perhaps there was a hint in Oaxaca in 2006, even if it could not yet become the civil war that was potentially within it.

The term I want to try out, gently, tenderly, that seems to name the becoming-civil-war of the commune, is something like *counter-reproduction*. This counter-reproduction that one starts to see is not understood as a complement or adjunct to the blockade; it *is* the blockade. In its own working existence, its operation as commune, it makes a claim of sovereignty, a claim on territory. In so doing, it takes its place as well within the ascending significance of “circulation struggles,” as projects that strike at the vital exposure of an increasingly circulation-centered capitalism, tactics meant to intervene in circulation of value and circulatory infrastructure (here again one can think of port blockades, freeway blockages, transport strikes, public occupations) – the commune as a mode of proletarian reproduction that makes the smooth reproduction of capital difficult if not impossible.

These matters, of political sovereignty and economic circulation, are entirely entangled. One problem regularly confronted by social movements has been their division into separate domains. The commune is a process at the crux of the political and economic, overcoming the tendency to prefer one or the other that haunts strategic decisions. And it is, I think, the gendered aspect of the sphere of reproduction – seemingly non-economic through the appearance of wagelessness, in truth the doubly hidden abode of capital’s reproduction – that makes possible the double confrontation of counter-reproduction. When I spoke of gendering a civil war in my title I did not mean to suggest a war between or among the genders, but instead this idea of commune toward which I have been reaching.

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