

13. On Shock and Organisation: Riots, Resistance and the Need for Consistency

The Free Association

La hora sonó, la hora sonó. NO permitiremos mas, mas tu doctrina del shock.

[The hour has struck, the hour has struck. We will allow NO MORE, no more your doctrine of shock.]

Lyrics to 'Shock' by Ana Tijoux
- the anthem of the 2011 Chilean student movement.

Shock can have debilitating effects on social movements. It can disorient us, it can be exploited as part of a concerted effort to discipline our thought and action, and it can prompt us to fall back on reactionary tropes. But, rather than seeking to avoid shock, **The Free Association** suggest that we need more resilient forms of political organisation that help mitigate these paralysing effects.

"Criminality, Pure and Simple", or The Death of a Princess

In September 1997 England was overtaken by mass hysteria. Following the death of the Princess of Wales ('Princess Di') on August 31 there was a 'massive public outpouring of grief' that would not have seemed amiss in North Korea. More than a million people lined the route of Diana's funeral cortege in London while the BBC reported that an estimated 2.5 billion people watched the funeral - an incredible number, implying that

just about every human being on the planet with access to a television tuned in to the event. Elton John's tribute 'Candle in the Wind 1997' challenged Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas' for best-selling record of all time.

Fourteen years later, England was gripped by a more malign form of hysteria, this time in response to the riots that broke out in London and a dozen or so other cities and towns in August 2011. While many of those who took part in the riots reported familiar feelings of excitement, intensity and festival, the dominant response of large sections of Britain's population was a profound sense of shock, not just on an intellectual or moral level but also on an affective one.¹ This shock was underpinned by a sensation of fear, and even panic, as some old certainties threatened to collapse. Reinforced by the endless looping footage of shops set alight with apparently little regard for those living above, this affective reaction was leveraged by political and media elites into a hysterical right-wing backlash.

The aim of this campaign was simple: to prevent any association of the riots with their socio-economic context - that is, crisis and austerity. And it was frighteningly effective. The widespread sense of shock was quickly mobilised into a prohibition on thought, which was then ruthlessly policed. Anybody asking if the events could be understood as a response to the economic crisis, and the subsequent imposition of austerity, was vigorously condemned: 'to understand is to condone', went the mantra. London Mayor Boris Johnson tellingly responded to a question about the shooting that sparked the first riot by declaring: "It is time that people who are engaging in looting and violence stopped hearing economic and sociological justifications for what they are doing."² Prime Minister David Cameron insisted that there was nothing to understand about the riots, suggesting that it was "criminality, pure and simple".³ (See also Pollard and Young, Chapter 14).

In the cold light of day this response looks rather ludicrous. Within a few months of Diana's funeral, the hysteria had given way to a mood of embarrassment as people recalled their absurd response to her death. The same process is under way now, as people attempt to excise from public memory the kneejerk reactions, the suspension of thought and the many untenable positions held over those few weeks.⁴ Just as the inner-city riots of the 1980s went down in history as a response to the austerity of that period (administered by a Conservative government led by Cameron's heroine Margaret Thatcher), it was obvious that the August riots would also be recorded as one event in a varied series of responses to the 'great recession' of the early years of the 21st century.⁵

There is a lot that can still be said about the causes of the riots and

the motivations of the participants, but we want to focus instead on the aftermath of the riots. More specifically we want to use these events to think through the political effect of *shock* upon social movements. While explosive events, like the riots or the 'Arab Spring', can cause the rapid unravelling of state power, they can be equally disruptive for social movements, exposing movements' limitations and isolation. In fact, shock can derail and destroy movements just as quickly as outright repression - and often far more effectively. Examining the nature of shock will draw out crucial lessons about how to respond to new social eruptions without falling back into positions that simply shore up the status quo. There are some differences between state-engineered shock and shock 'from below' (and also 'natural' shock, such as that visited on New Orleans by Katrina), and it's certainly the case that corporations and the state were not 'neutral' bystanders in the August 2011 events - it was corporate media that chose to endlessly loop the footage of the blazing shopfront, for example. However, we are more interested here in the way we can anticipate and counter shock, and thus evade the prohibition on thought.

From the Millbank Boot to the 'Broom Army': 2011's Syncopated Rhythm of Resistance

In a blog post of February 2011, later expanded into a book, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere*, Paul Mason identifies three key social actors in the upsurge of militancy that swept across the globe in 2010-11: organised labour, 'the graduate with no future' and the urban poor.⁶ Situating these forces alongside an analysis of networked technologies, he asks, "What if - instead of waiting for the collapse of capitalism - the emancipated human being were beginning to emerge spontaneously from within this breakdown of the old order?"

Mason's argument is that these "three tribes of discontent" can be seen coming together at the most important points of social unrest during that period, from the 'Arab Spring' and the movement of the *Indignados* in Spain to the wave of Occupy actions right across the globe. In the UK, we can perhaps see this most clearly in the November 10 2010 demonstration against education cuts and the tripling of tuition fees, a demonstration which ended in the occupation of Conservative party headquarters at Millbank. The day's lasting image was that of a masked demonstrator kicking in the building's plate-glass windows, propelling a notion of antagonist street politics onto the front pages and, in so doing,

creating the space for the emergence of a more militant politics in the run-up to the 'March for the Alternative' anti-austerity demonstration on March 26 2011. In other words, the circulation of this image served to unlock a latent militancy.

Instead of traditional organisational politics, Mason conceptualises this movement as networked protest, with actions and spaces organised along horizontal lines rather than from the top down. But this approach is still limited to a fairly conventional notion of politics as something that proceeds mechanically by means of formal and informal alliances and agreements. Such a view has trouble accounting for the enormous speed of events in 2010-11. The formal and informal links between Tahrir Square, for example, and anti-cuts actions in the UK were minimal, yet many of those taking part were in no doubt about the connections. It is probably more useful here to think of the way that social movements spread by *resonance*. People see or hear something that speaks to their lives; they then interpret it, apply it and pass it on; their actions add further density to the movement, increasing its chances of being picked up and played out elsewhere. Building mechanical linkages, then, is less important than the task of enhancing the resonance and avoiding the *dissonance* between different struggles. That's precisely how the 'Arab Spring' worked. And it's equally true of the August riots.

Seen in this light, we can think of a *rhythm* of resistance in the spring of 2011. Those who were part of that rhythm were bound by weak ties, with the result that the rhythm was mobile, highly responsive and able to grow very quickly as new people adopted, and adapted, the beat. But in the absence of more coherent forms of organisation, those weak ties made the rhythm vulnerable to disruption, and that is exactly what happened in the aftermath of the August riots. If the enduring image of winter 2010-11 was of a boot going through a window, then the aftermath of the summer was captured in those photographs of the 'Broom Army'. Co-ordinated by the Twitter hashtag #riotcleanup, these volunteers were promoted as law-abiding citizens reclaiming the streets, and heralded as the 'Big Society' in action.

Of course it could be argued that the 'Broom Army' was not entirely reactionary (and it almost certainly included a number of erstwhile rioters in its ranks). But what concerns us here is the speed with which it emerged and the way it bulldozed through any other way of thinking about events. How did the "three tribes of discontent" fall apart? How was a rhythm of resistance so quickly transformed into its opposite - hundreds of people banging the drum for law and order with brooms, bin bags and dustpans? And how did we allow it to happen? Or, to put it

another way, if Millbank represented a moment of expansion, a point when it was possible to see the opening-up of possibility and a re-shaping of social relations, how did that moment get closed down? How did those shifting social relations contract into clearly defined, unmoving positions?

'Panic on the Streets of London, Panic on the Streets of Birmingham': Understanding Shock

Let's be clear: we are not concerned here with *avoiding* shock. Far from it. If shock is a break in the normal unfolding of life, then that disruption can be inflected in an anti-capitalist direction. After all, it is not inevitable that those suffering shock will fall back onto comforting old tropes, such as the innate criminality of the urban poor. Indeed it can often take a shock to provoke new thinking. The rupture offered by events like the August riots can knock us out of habitual patterns and make us question the usually unthought presuppositions of existing society. The problem is not how to avoid shock; it is how social movements can learn to respond to shock by opening up possibilities rather than allowing them to be closed down.

The question is all the more vital because of the problematic that has dominated and structured contemporary anti-capitalist movements. Neoliberalism's real strength is proving to be its domination of common sense, as this structures political possibility at a level that is difficult to reach in the normal course of politics. Put briefly, neoliberalism has colonised our sense of the possible. As Hardt and Negri put it: "Such transcendental powers compel obedience not through the commandment of a sovereign or even primarily through force but rather by structuring the conditions of possibility of social life."⁷ (See also Fisher, Chapter 2).

To put it another way, our capacity to act, as human beings, is very closely tied to our capacity to first imagine our actions and their likely effects. In the capitalist mode of production, as in all social organisations, we are imprisoned by our near horizons. The neoliberal mantra that 'there is no alternative' has become more than just dogma: it has been repeatedly applied and extended through every aspect of our lives, so much so that it has become part of our operating system. This has profound implications for emergent forms of dissent: when the market form, for example, is widely taken for granted as the best way of organising society, it is hard to develop alternative models that challenge

this notion. Anti-capitalist movements which do promote such a vision are quickly condemned as ‘unrealistic’, a problem compounded by the fact that it is a Tory-led government which is imposing austerity. It is too easy for activists to imagine that a Labour administration might be any different. A similar process happened in the aftermath of the riots where the terms of the debate were narrowly framed to exclude anything other than criminality: the only question on the table was the length of the sentences.

The problem then is how to challenge, exceed and change the sense of the possible without producing the type of shock that will disorientate a population to such an extent that it falls back on familiar but reactionary tropes. But first we need to clarify what we mean when we talk about ‘shock’ in a socio-political context.

In *The Shock Doctrine* Naomi Klein argues that neoliberal policies have consistently taken advantage of the disorientation that follows shock in order to implement policies that a more coherent ‘civil society’ might resist. More than this, Klein suggests that these shocks are often engineered, at least partly, for that very purpose and indeed are often caused by the speed and scale of the neoliberal reforms themselves. Her approach is structured around Milton Friedman’s famous quotation:

Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable.⁸

Such a model certainly fits the implementation of austerity in the UK. The sheer scale and diversity of the cuts in public services, for instance, has so far tended to produce political entropy. While the closure of a single library might serve as a focal point for opposition, when a whole range of services are being closed or constrained all at once, it becomes much harder for a coherent and collective response to emerge. In any case, the ‘need’ to reduce the deficit has been repeatedly hammered home by all politicians, with the result that it’s become part of everyday common-sense thinking. In this restricted space, closures, cuts and lay-offs come to appear as ‘politically inevitable’ even though they are nothing of the sort.⁹

Klein’s concept of shock is drawn from CIA torture manuals, which discuss how to rupture a prisoner’s “ability to make sense of the world around them”.¹⁰ One recommended technique is the literal application

of electric shocks; another is the use of sensory deprivation followed by overstimulation through recordings of barking dogs or endless heavy metal. This understanding of shock can be traced right back to the First World War: as thousands of shell-shocked soldiers returned from the trenches, the question of how an organism can protect itself against over-stimulation was taken up by Sigmund Freud and others.

We can think of shock as having two major consequences. The first is exhaustion - the body simply cannot cope with new stimuli and starts to shut down. In order to counter this, it is possible to embark on a training regime to get a body used to shock, and to help anticipate its arrival. We can think of the disciplining undertaken by soldiers or boxers, where they acclimatise their bodies to repeated shock by programming in autonomic sub-routines which are triggered at critical moments: soldiers often talk of 'the training taking over' as a reaction that prevents immobilisation and debilitation. But this sort of military training is, of course, designed for a particular command structure and depends on fixed notions of 'the body', 'the enemy' and so on. It is not a very useful model for emancipatory social movements (and in any case, acclimatisation is, by definition, a limited strategy for dealing with events that are wholly contingent or unexpected).

The effect of shock is the same whether those bodies are individual organisms (you, me, everyone else) or collective bodies of people (parties, unions, workplaces, local communities, etc.). But traditional hierarchical organisations are ill-equipped to cope with shock. They operate with a pre-conceived framework and strategy, and will try to squeeze new events into their pre-existing outlook. In this respect, they are more likely to seek to close down movements rather than allow themselves to be opened up to new stimuli. Of course, the rigid structure of such organisations also makes them brittle: like skyscrapers in an earthquake, they may simply shatter when pushed to the point of exhaustion.

Networked forms of organisation, by contrast, have proved far more effective at adapting to new information. Naomi Klein points to the example of Latin America where movements are learning to "build shock absorbers into their organising models" by adopting forms which are "less centralized than the sixties, making it harder to demobilize whole movements by eliminating a few leaders."¹¹ More importantly, the weak ties of these more diffuse forms of power have made these movements very elastic, able to flow around potential blockages and recombine forces with greater power. Closer to home, we can see an example of such viral adoption and adaptation in the case of UK Uncut. A small group of Camp for Climate Action veterans imported the direct action techniques developed there into the anti-austerity movement by blockading and

occupying shops and businesses that had avoided large tax bills. The tactic had an immediate impact on the public debate by revealing austerity as a political decision and not the result of a 'law of nature'. The model quickly spread across the country, self-generating groups who identified with the tactic. This viral method worked because the story of the action was instantly understandable, because the actions were easily replicable and because participation carried a low entry level of risk.

However, shock does not simply produce exhaustion. It can also create disorientation and panic. The Italian writer Bifo talks about "an epidemic of panic" amid the hyper-productivity of modern capitalism:

The mental environment is saturated by signs that create a sort of continuous excitation, a permanent electrocution, which leads the individuals, as well as the collective mind, to a state of collapse.¹²

We can think of shock as a massive intensification of this 'chatter' of everyday twenty-first century life. Politicians, experts, church leaders, talking heads... everyone had their answer for the riots yet very little thought was involved. Faced with such a sensory overload, the most effective counter-strategy is to slow things down, to allow time and space for sudden and unexpected bursts of stimulation or information to be absorbed and processed. For social movements, this reflection has to happen on a *collective* level, at the level of *organising*.

But here we come up against the weakness of the network model. The weak ties it generates have only seemed capable of generating a weak coherence, one that is very vulnerable to disruption. In the aftermath of the riots, social bodies across the UK were literally disoriented, losing their bearings along with any sense of direction. In many cases it seemed as if social media were acting to *reinforce* the affect of shock and thus police the prohibition on thought. Computer-mediated social networks proved a poor medium for dealing with shocked metrosexuals who had suddenly discovered their inner fascists, realising their sympathies lay with the state's draconian clampdown. One tweet we received summed it up. It suggested the day after the riots be henceforth known as "The Great Day of De-Friending and De-Following".

'Live Fast Die Young': On Speed and Consistency

If social movements are to become shock-resistant, the weak ties of network forms and social media need to be supplemented by the stronger ties that are formed through sustained engagement with a political project. We have to develop forms of organisations that are open enough to allow resonance but also coherent enough to collectively receive, analyse and process new stimuli. We need to develop repertoires, techniques and technologies which can help set the conditions for collective analysis. This may well involve techniques and organisational forms that slow down the pace of events and lower the level of intensity so reflection and analysis can take place. Finally, we need to find some sort of consistency or coherence, one that enables bodies to come together and stay together, so that we can sustain political organisation across the ebb and flow of distinct waves of protest.

There are two reasons why this is especially important now. First, we have to take a long-term view of the economic crisis that engulfed the world in 2007-8. Even in simple fiscal terms, we are going to be living through its consequences for at least the next decade. And politically its impact may be even greater, as austerity becomes the new normal. In 50 years' time, people might look back and see Keynesianism and social democracy as temporary blips in the normal, brutal functioning of capitalism. Over the next few years, then, there are bound to be waves of resistance followed by periods of quietism and troughs of defeat.

And when we take this long-term view, we need to think again about how social movements *move*. Events like Millbank, the 'Arab Spring' and the August riots highlight the incredible speed of politics organised on a virtual plane, via Facebook, Twitter and internet memes. But as longterm anti-capitalist scholar, George Caffentzis, has pointed out, the experiences of the last year have also shown that speed is not enough for political effect.¹³ We need momentum as well. In physics, momentum is mass multiplied by velocity, so it can mean a small group travelling very fast. But if we're serious about change, it must also mean a much larger number of people moving at a slower pace. In the 'Arab Spring', for example, what was decisive in the end was massive numbers of physical bodies in physical spaces. So we can think of consistency as a way of bridging that gap between huge numbers of people and small groups moving fast.

This brings us on to the second reason why finding consistency is crucial. As austerity begins to bite, social conflict will intensify. Without developing some sort of coherence, our social movements will remain

fragile, tentative and prone to collapse. We do not wish to lose the flexibility, speed and responsiveness offered by the network form. But, if we are to avoid the creation of dissonance, we must move beyond these and learn how to handle shock.

Notes

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- 1 We're using the term 'affect' here in an attempt to move beyond the binary thinking that underpins much political theory, separating 'consciousness' from 'action' in much the same way that 'the mind' is often split from 'the body'. Affect here signifies something more than an emotional, psychological or sensory state. Indeed it would be a mistake to see it as a personal feeling at all. Instead, it might be more accurate to think of affect as *potential*, as an increase (or decrease) in a body's capacity to act. This seems a more productive way of dealing with the problems of agency and change than a traditional 'class consciousness' approach which often assumes that awareness of class exploitation plus the 'correct' class analysis adds up to a revolutionary subject.
 - 2 Caroline Davies, 'Boris Johnson heckled in Clapham Junction over London riots', *The Guardian*, 9 August, 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/aug/09/boris-johnson-clapham-junction-london-riots>>
 - 3 Seumas Milne, 'These riots reflect a society run on greed and looting', *The Guardian*, 10 August, 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/riots-reflect-society-run-greed-looting>>
 - 4 The post-riots hysteria has persisted, however, in the incredibly draconian sentencing for those passing through the courts in relation to the events. One 21-year-old was infamously jailed for 39 months simply for sending a BBM from his BlackBerry telling his friends to "kick off" during disorder in Nottingham. (See also Anderson, Chapter 16.)
 - 5 Indeed *Reading the Riots: Investigating England's Summer of Disorder*, a joint study by the LSE and the *Guardian* newspaper drawing on interviews with 270 participants in the riots, showed that austerity provided more than just a general context. Alongside other issues such as hostility to the police, it formed a central part of the self-understanding of the riots by participants. As the report summarised: "Rioters identified a range of political grievances, but at the heart of their complaints was a pervasive sense of injustice. For some this was economic: the lack of money, jobs or opportunity. For others it was more broadly social: how they felt they were treated compared with others. Many mentioned the increase in student tuition fees and the scrapping of the education maintenance allowance."

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- <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/series/reading-the-riots>>
- 6 Paul Mason, 'Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere', 5 February, 2011.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kicking.html>; Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, (London: Verso, 2012).
 - 7 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 6.
 - 8 Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. xiv, cited in Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 6.
 - 9 Austerity is always a political choice, not a neutral fix, and the form it takes will depend on the strength of those attempting to impose it and those able to resist it. The most well-known period of austerity in the UK, at the end of World War II, had a very different flavour. Then, the UK's public debt was more than double the size of GDP, and sovereign debt three times what it is today (relative to output). But this was the era of the welfare state, with the creation of a national health service, free education, social security and huge state investment.
 - 10 Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 16.
 - 11 *Ibid.* p. 453.
 - 12 Franco Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011), p.94.
 - 13 George Caffentzis, 'In the desert of cities: notes on the Occupy movement in the US', 27 January 2012. <<http://www.reclamationsjournal.org/blog/?p=505>>