

*The Free Association*

## Let England Shake

“Fantasy wears boots, desire is violent, invention is organised.”

– Antonio Negri

“Hundreds of protesters stormed the building after smashing through the windows chanting ‘die Tory scum.’ Rocks, wooden banners, eggs, rotten fruit and shards of glass were thrown at police officers trying to beat back the crowd with metal batons and riot shields. Inside the building, windows were kicked in, desks and chairs were overturned and the walls were daubed with anarchist graffiti. Protesters set off fire extinguishers, overturned filing cabinets and threw office paperwork and business cards from the smashed windows. Dozens swarmed onto the roof where they hurled fire extinguishers, burning banners, bottles and cans into the crowd. [...] Placards and banners were being burnt, to cheers from the crowd, while protesters inside the building used chairs as they smashed and kicked their way through more of the glass frontage, effectively opening up the whole atrium to the crowd.”

– *The Telegraph*, 10 November 2010

### 1. The End of the Affair

In 2007/08, the cycle of struggles associated with the counter-globalisation movement seemed to be coming to a close. The movements that delegitimised and sometimes shut down world leaders’ summits from Seattle onwards seemed more predictable, less interesting. These movements seemed to have stopped moving. Even when the ‘Doha round’ of trade talks faltered and stalled in 2006 – signalling the crisis of the WTO itself – there was no general affect or sense of victory. The movement had certainly moved on since

1999 and its anti-WTO protests in Seattle, but it appeared to have reached an impasse.<sup>1</sup>

And then something happened, something that made us certain the counter-globalisation movement was over. The world shifted in 2007/08. The counter-globalisation movement already seemed to have reached its limits; with the financial and subsequent economic crisis it stopped making ‘sense’ completely – despite the ‘correctness’ of its politics.

The global financial meltdown also saw the collapse of the neo-liberal deal. ‘Deal’ is perhaps an unfamiliar term to associate with neoliberalism. We’re more accustomed to the notion of a Keynesian deal: ‘full employment’; rising real wages linked to rising productivity (via the trade-union brokered ‘productivity deal’); the welfare state. Of course, this deal applied more to workers in the First World than the Third, more to men than to women, more to white workers than to black. We could in fact think of three deals – an A-deal, a B-deal and a C-deal, depending on the section of the global proletariat.<sup>2</sup> But all Keynesian deals were annulled by the epochal crises of the 1970s, which ended with the triumphant emergence of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism also involves a deal between capital and the proletariat.<sup>3</sup> Unlike in the Keynesian era, this deal is not explicit: it is not hammered out by trade union leaders in late-night meetings with bosses and politicians. The neoliberal deal is more tacit, an implicit deal. It has three main elements: first, aspiration or hope;

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<sup>1</sup> The impasse was challenged for a time by initiatives around climate change but these were themselves swept aside by the economic crisis.

<sup>2</sup> See P. M., Bolo ‘Bolo, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this piece we use the terms ‘proletariat’ and ‘working class’ synonymously. More importantly, our understanding of the proletariat is expansive. We include not only waged workers, but ‘housewives,’ students, the unemployed and others who perform unwaged labour of one form or another. We also include ‘peasants,’ whom classical Marxists might insist are outside of the capital relation. So we could also substitute ‘the 99 per cent’ for ‘working class’ without much difficulty. What’s interesting, of course, is the composition, both ‘technical’ and ‘political,’ of this class, this ‘99 per cent,’ a question we’ll return to later.

second, plentiful cheap credit; and third, access to cheap commodities.

The archetypal Keynesian worker of course hoped his (or her) life would get better. He no doubt expected it to: a modestly rising income, negotiated by his trade union, over the course of a working life of four decades, followed by secure retirement – a ‘safe’ pension and state-provided health care. But aspiration is different. It’s hard to *aspire* to modest, incremental advances. You aspire to be different, to stand out, to be somebody. The Keynesian economic policies adopted by social democratic governments across the global north stifled aspiration – and the desire to be different –, which is one reason why ‘cultural’ and ‘social’ movements, from gay rights to punk, were so powerful.

This is where neoliberalism delivered, or at least credibly promised to do so. In the UK and across the planet, for three decades struggling workers aspired to become something or someone else. And this is the form their struggle took. Perhaps unlike the old model and the old deals – the A-deal, the B-deal and the C-deal, loosely corresponding to, respectively, the First World, the Second World and the Third – neoliberalism had a one-size-fits-all approach.<sup>4</sup> And across the planet, and particularly in Asia, economic growth rates seemed impressive (a ‘miracle,’ according to capital’s proponents), and millions were ‘lifted out of poverty.’<sup>5</sup> For several billion people, neoliberalism offered this hope, it allowed people to aspire: things might be bad at the moment, I might be working a shitty job, living in shitty accommodation, maybe even a slum, but ... if I work hard, if I go to school, if I go to university, if I study hard, if I can send my children or one of them to university ... with a little

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<sup>4</sup> This is why Hardt and Negri are able to write: “The spatial divisions of the three Worlds (First, Second and Third) have been scrambled so that we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all.” Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, we’re leaving aside the expropriation and primitive accumulation so much of this growth – read: capitalist development – depended on.

luck, things will be better in the future, if not for me, then for my children. In other words, a sizeable proportion of the global working class had faith in the capitalist system; the system was credible.

The second main element of the neoliberal deal was credit. Since the late 1970s, real wages across many of the ‘advanced capitalist economies,’ especially the UK and the USA, have been stagnant. But workers have been able to maintain their access to social wealth (which has risen) by drawing on credit – by becoming more and more indebted. Who knows what social struggles might have erupted if our ability to enjoy the fruits of our (collective) labour had been as constrained as our pay packets over the past three decades? But by granting us cheap and plentiful credit, capital was able to avoid taking that gamble. Capital, in effect, displaced antagonism into the future.

As well as this temporal displacement of antagonism through the mechanism of credit, capital used globalisation to displace antagonism spatially or geographically. On the one hand, globalisation intensifies competition, forcing workers in Britain, say, to compete with those in Bangladesh, Korea and/or China. At the same time, British workers are more likely to blame Bangladeshi or Korean or Chinese workers for their situation, rather than their boss or capital. But on the other hand – and this is the third element of the neoliberal deal – the cheap ‘Made in Korea/Bangladesh/China’ commodities that fill our shops also mitigate the effects of our collective inability to struggle successfully for higher wages.<sup>6</sup>

With the financial meltdown of 2007/08, both ‘sides’ lost faith. The ‘credit crunch’ meant exactly that: the end of cheap credit. Quite simply, creditors lost faith in debtors’ ability to repay (probably with good reason) – and called in the debts. Capital’s temporal displacement of antagonism disappears. The future collapses into

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<sup>6</sup> Capital’s attempt to displace antagonism is not unique to neoliberalism. Capital *always* seeks to displace antagonism and, if possible, to harness it. This is one reason for its resilience. What distinguishes neoliberalism is the particular way in which antagonism is displaced.

the present, with an almighty crash. At the same time – or possibly because of the general economic crisis that followed the financial crisis – the working class began to lose faith in capitalism’s ability to guarantee their social reproduction. In country after country, polls are showing plummeting public support for capitalism and free markets. The aspirational element has certainly disappeared. The education route to class mobility is blocked; the only thing a degree guarantees is a mountain of debt. We no longer expect the future to be better than the present.

With the crash, the crisis, the future then has collapsed into the present – and at the same time, the ‘other’ has collapsed into ourselves, as we in the First World now face the ‘structural adjustment’ meted out to Third World proletarians and commoners over much of the past few decades, ‘adjustments’ that resulted in the global market and, at the end of the supply chain, cheap stuff on the supermarket shelves and the clothes rails.

With the crash, militants expected the antagonism of capital (of the capital relationship) to be laid bare. We expected the new landscape to be an obvious battlefield. We expected a return of all those (previously displaced) antagonisms. Instead there was a curious calm. And also shock, on which more later. It felt like war had been declared but nobody was shooting; we were caught in a phoney war.

In the face of the meltdown, it was obvious that ‘traditional’ social-democratic politics were completely impotent. (Again, more on this later.) But no new composition was able to take shape and create its own forms. And, in the absence of any coherent, or cohering, alternative, neoliberalism was able to stagger on, zombie-like. The old ‘new’ Labour government continued its programme of marketisation and privatisation of public services – as though markets hadn’t just failed spectacularly. They were replaced, in 2010, by a Conservative-Liberal-Democrat coalition government (the ‘Con-Dems’) which continued with more of the same – only attempting to accelerate it. Massive public spending cuts (£ 130 billion – € 155 billion – over five years), job cuts for public-sector workers, further

marketisation of higher education, more competition in schools, cuts to all manner of social benefits.

And we were waiting, waiting, waiting ... waiting for a response, waiting for something to happen.

## 2. Breaking Glass

For two decades student marches have been predictable, staid affairs. Students, in the main, have been more concerned with maximising the return from their university education (with the multiple objectives of consuming alcohol and other drugs, attending parties and gaining a degree) for a given investment (money borrowed, time spent in the library, time spent doing waged work), than getting involved in politics. That is, they have behaved like well-trained, aspirational neoliberal subjects. Student leaders (the presidents and other officers of student unions up and down the country), for their part, have seen their tenure as simply a stepping stone on their way to some form of political career, as MP or advisor, most often for the Labour party. That is, they too have behaved like neoliberal subjects. So we did not expect much when, on 10 November 2010, the National Union of Students (NUS), along with the university lecturers' union (the UCU), organised a demonstration to protest the government's plan to slash state funding for universities and, at the same time, to triple the maximum tuition fees universities can charge – from £ 3,375 (about € 4,000) to £ 9,000 (almost € 11,000) per year.

On 10 November 2010, our expectations were defied. The demonstration took the 'traditional' form of an A-to-B march, with marchers moving from Whitehall in central London, past Downing Street, past the Houses of Parliament to finish with a rally and speeches by the NUS president, UCU president and various other trade unionists. With 50,000 protestors on the streets, the march was double the expected size. Much more interestingly, at a certain point, a group broke off from the agreed route and

headed off to Conservative party headquarters, at 30 Millbank. Once there, these student militants occupied the building, unfurling banners from the roof and repelling police attempts to evict them. The day's lasting image was that of a masked demonstrator kicking in the building's plate-glass windows. That boot through the window signalled the return of class antagonism. It was what we'd all been waiting for.

With the 'Millbank riot' (of course, it wasn't really a riot), suddenly everything seemed to be happening. There was a second demonstration in London a fortnight later, with more clashes with police, who deployed five times as many officers as they had at the earlier march and used the controversial tactic of 'kettling' demonstrators. Six days after that people demonstrated again. This time protestors – having learned their kettling lesson – kept on the move. Then, on 9 December, the day MPs were scheduled to vote on the fees increase, there was another set of demonstrations in central London, with yet more clashes with police, more kettling by police and more destruction of property, including the offices of the Treasury. Meanwhile protestors who'd roamed into London's West End came across a car carrying Prince Charles and his wife, the Duchess of Cornwall, which they surrounded and splattered with paint. That event provided another iconic image of class antagonism: the heir to Britain's throne and his future queen visibly fearful of an angry mob.

Two points are worth emphasising. First, these London demonstrations were in fact just one series of moments in a much broader student movement. There were demonstrations in many other towns and cities, and occupations of universities up and down the country. And the occupations and street protests were organically connected. Militant students used their occupied spaces as places to theorise, analyse and ... plan demonstrations, and also as safe spaces to retreat to following demonstrations in order to reflect and prepare their next moves. And sometimes demonstrations ended up in apparently impromptu new occupations.

Second, the social mix of this movement was far broader than mere university students – it’s perhaps more appropriate to talk of ‘young workers’ rather than students. The many street protests included thousands of school children, many of whom demonstrated in school uniform, along with college-age youth (16–18 year olds). Thus on these demonstrations, people started talking about the ‘EMA kids,’ that is, youths who benefit from a small (£ 30 / € 36 per week) Educational Maintenance Allowance, payable to 16–18 year olds from poor families who remain in full-time education – its abolition was announced at the same time as the fee increase. From this came a third iconic moment which definitively signalled the re-emergence of antagonistic class actors: a group of young black men, mostly masked up, are filmed by a news journalist, and one of them exclaims: “We’re from the slums of London, yeah. How do they expect us to pay £ 9,000 for uni fees? And EMA the only thing keeping us in college.”

Within weeks, the Arab Spring had erupted, heralding a tumultuous 2011 right around the globe. In Spain one in six people are reckoned to have participated in the movement of the *indignados*, which began on 15 May 2011 in 58 cities across the country. In the same month, Greece saw square occupations and daily demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of people, with the focal point being the people’s assembly in Athens’ Syntagma square (the Parliament square). Hacktivism reached new levels with co-ordinated attacks on north African governments during the Arab Spring, while Operation AntiSec, jointly launched by LulzSec and the group Anonymous, targeted major corporations and financial institutions. The Occupy movement emerged from apparently nowhere to become a major presence in cities right across the world. And finally the UK was rocked by major urban riots in August 2011, with widespread looting, arson and attacks on the police. By coincidence, the riots erupted just one day after another financial meltdown, with massive stock market falls in Europe and the US, of a kind not seen since the depths of 2007/08. This was an even clearer

message from the slums of London ... and Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Bristol, Leeds, etc. As one young female looter put it, "We're getting our taxes back!"

Across the globe, protest came to be the defining form of politics. And for a time it seemed that power once again lay in the streets.

### 3. Bodies

As we write this, in the spring of 2012, those waves of popular resistance to capitalism seem to have abated. Neoliberalism staggers on. This is no surprise to the left theorists who criticised that resistance for its reformism, for its lack of strategic direction, for its populism and so on. However correct these criticisms, they remind us of the old joke about a city-dweller who is lost in the countryside. Panicked, she asks a local farmer for directions home. The farmer scratches his head and says, "Now then, if I was wanting to be going to the city, I wouldn't start from here." The point, of course, is that we can only ever start from where we are. But more than this, we can reverse the structure of the joke and use the limitations of current struggles to establish where exactly 'here' is. In other words, rather than criticising these social movements for their failure to fulfil our pre-established ideals, we should be asking what they can tell us about the new social composition.

At a superficial level, the return of street politics is perhaps not so exceptional. It can be seen as part of the 'natural' ebb and flow of political generations, which has been given new impetus by the financial meltdown of 2007/08. Both in the UK and globally, that crash highlighted the increasingly circumscribed role of national governments. Any illusion of sovereignty, or of the possibility of forging some independent path towards a more equitable society, was shattered when it became clear that government policies are ultimately dictated by the money markets. The massive bank bailouts further exposed the democratic deficit at the heart of advanced capitalist economies and provoked severe legitimisation crises. When

the real decisions are taken elsewhere, when money markets can depose and appoint leaders in an instant, traditional politics of appeal, representation and negotiation don't make sense. In the UK, this extra-parliamentary logic was reinforced when the Con-Dem coalition took charge: Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, had signed a pre-election pledge to oppose any rise in tuition fees for university students but performed a spectacular U-turn in return for the post of deputy prime minister in the new government. In the face of all this, by 2010 it was clearer than ever that if you want change, taking to the streets is the only option.

But there is also a deeper level to these developments. 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 current upsurge of militancy: organised labour, 'the graduate with no future' and the urban poor.<sup>7</sup> 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?" Perhaps we can re-frame that question in terms of class composition and ask whether we are witnessing the birth-pains of a new radical subjectivity.

As part of the rollback of Keynesianism in the UK, neoliberal policies were implemented to effect a thoroughgoing decomposition of the working class. These were spearheaded by an assault on the labour movement, a massive increase in financialisation, and the reorganisation of the housing market via the 'right to buy' scheme (which gave council tenants the right to buy the home they rented). These were the classic hallmarks of Thatcherism, but the political thrust of this strategy was continued by successive Labour governments in the late 1990s and the 2000s. Most of what remained of

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Mason, Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere, [[http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty\\_reasons\\_why\\_its\\_kicking\\_off\\_everywhere](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kicking_off_everywhere)]; Paul Mason, *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*, London: Verso, 2012.

the state-owned sector was further de-regulated – either privatised outright or re-born as corporate entities which have to operate according to commercial criteria. Market forces were encouraged to rip through public and social services at all levels, further weakening the power of organised labour.

With a boom in the number of 18–30 year olds, at the end of the 1990s the Blair government pledged that by the end of the next decade, i.e. by 2010, half or more of young people would be entering higher education. This target was never met, but the numbers did remain at around 40 per cent (compared to just 3 per cent in 1950). This policy pledge, along with Blair's now famous emphasis on 'education, education, education,' clearly helped feed the neoliberal narrative of aspiration and social mobility – aided by the widespread perception in Britain that having a university degree makes you middle class. These policies also guaranteed the creation of a new strata of the indebted, for at the same time, student maintenance grants were abolished and tuition fees were introduced (initially £ 1,000 or € 1,200 per year), along with a new student loan system to allow individuals without wealthy parents to finance their university education.

Also at this time successive governments attempted to head off the growing threat of social exclusion and a poverty trap by a combination of tax credits and welfare-to-work initiatives.<sup>8</sup> We can understand this governmental concern with 'social exclusion' as an attempt to strictly limit the number of 'poor [who] will always be with us.' Now, since the onset of the crisis, youth unemployment is rocketing, while there is 'scandal' as companies are increasingly extracting completely free labour from young people under the guise of unpaid internships.

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in 1997 Blair's government created a Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). This invented or at least popularised the term NEET – not in education, employment or training – which effectively meant those having 'no status.' (In fact, in policy circles, 'status zero' was the phrase previously used to categorise such individuals.) The SEU's successor, the Social Exclusion Task Force, was abolished by the new Con-Dem government in 2010.

Although government policies maintained downward pressure on the social wage, this was masked by an increase in the availability of cheap credit and a property boom. Mortgage mobility went hand in hand with (perceived) social mobility. While rising aspirations also had the flipside of destabilising communities, in boom times this didn't seem to matter. Most social antagonism was displaced into the future (in the form of a debt we thought we'd never have to repay) or across the globe (as our pension funds sought to extract maximum value from workers in the global south). Despite the best efforts of the anti-globalisation movement, anti-capitalist politics failed to resonate widely across the UK. Oppositional politics seemed a thing of the past and trade unions were at best a vehicle for delivery of cheap car insurance.

In order to understand how this world came to 'make sense,' we need to think a little more about the neoliberal subjectivities that those economic and social developments helped to create. In this sense, neoliberalism should also be seen as a process of deterritorialisation, ripping humans apart from all social grounding in order to unleash (or rather impose) the 'invisible hand' of the market. Under Fordism, the landscape was fairly well defined: mass production supported mass consumption and both were flanked by a range of institutions and policies aimed at producing controlled demand and social stability. Everyone, and everything, had a territory. Neoliberalism flattened that terrain. This was the essence of Thatcher's famous dictum that "there is no such thing as society": instead the social body is *homo economicus* writ large, a mass of competing individuals seeking to minimise costs and maximise gains for themselves, held together by no social ties other than the market.

One of the consequences of this, evident even before the crisis in 2008, has been steadily rising precarity. By this we don't simply mean the transformation of previously guaranteed permanent employment conditions into contract-based, short-term or temporary posts. Precarity also involves the shrinking of the social wage and a consequent rise in insecurity about meeting our basic needs, whether

in terms of housing, travel, health or affective relations. Our lives and our time become increasingly contingent on the shifting demands of capital. This is the case for freelancers and casual workers (constantly available and infinitely flexible), but it's also true for most of the working class, juggling demands and desire against the imperatives of capitalist time. And here we should also note that, "if the clock, not the steam engine, [was] the key-machine of the modern industrial age",<sup>9</sup> then network technologies have been equally central to this post-industrial landscape – and instrumental in the creation of a new precariat.

In this neoliberal landscape, when the global financial crisis exploded, antagonism found it hard to create a collective protagonist. Under Fordism, the subject was clear: in mass workplaces employing hundreds, if not thousands, of workers you could literally see collectivity. With a precarious, fragmented and mobile workforce, things are very different. As Franco 'Bifo' Berardi explains, "the social body is pulverised and is deprived of the very bodily existence of the body itself; a disembodied body in a sense, dissolved in the process of work".<sup>10</sup> In the aftermath of 2008, and in the absence of a social body strong enough to resist it, capital embarked on a rapid process of proletarianisation. Huge numbers of skilled workers are being driven into unemployment or pushed into precarious, temporary and unskilled work. At the same time, with the rise in tuition fees, the next generation of workers has been saddled with rising bills for a college education that had been seen as a guaranteed route to self-improvement and social mobility. And a full-scale slash-and-burn policy is being deployed against pensions, healthcare, education, libraries, publicly provided sports and leisure facilities and almost all other areas of public spending. This attack on the social wage has inevitably sparked a crisis in social reproduc-

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1934, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> Franco Berardi (Bifo), *Semio-capital & the problem of solidarity*, [<http://shiftmag.co.uk/?p=593>].

tion. Perhaps more importantly, it has impoverished the political imaginary – people’s perception of the sort of life they should expect, for themselves and for their children.

From this perspective, then, we can ascribe greater significance to Millbank, or rather, to those weeks of spiralling protest and occupation at the end of 2010. As one reviewer summarised in a review of Mason’s book, “Is it kicking off because we are, in fact, seeing the growing pains and anxious howl of a working-class for the new century, and a whole new family and industry of technologies?”<sup>11</sup> If we see Millbank as an attempt to call into being a new social body, then Mason’s three tribes – organised labour, the graduate with no future and the urban poor – are a useful way of thinking about a possible shape for the class. Of course, we need to be clear that these categories are a tool, not an empirical reality: they overlap, they don’t describe the whole of the UK working class (they say nothing about the ‘squeezed middle’ for instance), and they are not nuanced enough to deal with the complexities of race and gender. But they can help reveal some important points about those social forces which are on the move.

We can loosely tie each tribe to a field of action. Organised labour, for instance, has primarily revealed itself through a series of one-day public sector strikes, accompanied by large but passive marches, while the more amorphous category of the ‘graduates with no future’ has tended towards decentralised, networked forms of action, carrying the inheritance of the anti-globalisation movement. The National Union of Students, for instance, lost all influence over the post-Millbank student movement, and while formal campaigns such as the ‘National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts’ (NCAFC) had some role in organising subsequent demonstrations, it wasn’t the primary form of organisation within the movement. Actions, tactics and theoretical reflections mainly circulated by viral adoption and adaptation, taking advantage of the breadth

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<sup>11</sup> Tom Fox, review of Mason, *Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere*, [<http://shiftmag.co.uk/?p=523>].

of weak ties found in social media. A good example of this method can be seen in the rise and spread of UK Uncut. A small group of veterans of the Camp for Climate Action<sup>12</sup> imported the direct action techniques developed there into an anti-austerity movement by blockading and occupying shops and businesses that had been left off 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. In contrast the final tribe, the young urban poor, has tended to adopt more directly confrontational tactics, driven partly by routinely conflictual interaction with the police and partly by the feeling of having little to lose.

Each of these ‘tribes’ is on the move, yet the forms they adopt are marked by the neoliberal world they are seeking to escape. The poverty of ambition that reigns in organised labour must partly be explained by its long experience of defeat over the last forty years. At its low points the default horizon of utopia is reduced to the re-election of the Labour Party, who would inevitably make the same spending cuts but not quite so quickly and not quite so deep. By contrast the emergence of the Occupy movement had a dramatic effect on the notion of what’s politically possible. Yet despite its impact the camps were often limited by the individualist politics of moral outrage and bearing witness. The riots, with their atomised, destructive fury, coupled with the looting of high-status goods, revealed another face of neoliberal subjectivity as it struggled to find a collective politics.

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<sup>12</sup> The Camp for Climate Action was part of the attempt to break out of the dead end in which the counter-globalisation movement found itself by 2006. After several more or less successful camps in the UK, the network has struggled to adapt to the post-crash landscape and is now in a stage of radical transition. For more information, see [<http://climatecamp.org.uk/2011-statement>].

The promise of moments like Millbank is that they generate enough consistency between different social actors that new forms of class power, collectivity and organisation can emerge. But this coalition of forces is intensely fragile and in the months following Millbank the three tribes moved apart. Their divergence was highlighted most dramatically on the ‘March for the Alternative’ anti-austerity demonstration on 26 March 2011. While thousands of public sector workers sat listening to speeches by trade union leaders, UK Uncut organised a mass occupation of Fortnum and Mason, a luxury food store in Piccadilly. Meanwhile a ‘black block,’ reckoned to be the UK’s largest ever, went on the rampage through the West End. The recriminations that followed hardened the separation between the three tribes, but this was nothing compared to the aftermath of the London riots.

The ferocity of the riots, the unpredictability of their spread and the apparent impotence of the police provoked a feeling of deep shock in large segments of the population. That feeling was reinforced by the endless looping footage of shops set alight with what seemed like little regard for those living above. This affective reaction was articulated by political and media elites into a right-wing backlash. A hysterical campaign was launched to prevent the riots being linked to the context of crisis and austerity that produced them. It resulted in a prohibition on thought that was ruthlessly policed. Indicatively, the Conservative Mayor of London Boris Johnson 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> See [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/aug/09/boris-johnson-clapham-junction-london-riots>].

#### 4. Don't mourn, organise

At the beginning of 2012, as the promise of the Occupy wave began to fade, some asked just what had been gained from the events of 2011. Weren't we back in the same state of impasse where we'd begun? The situation reminds us of a tale from the early 1990s of a football manager trying to introduce a more patient, continental style of football to players used to the directly attacking nature of the English leagues. During a training session the manager asks his attackers to pass and move in the final third of the pitch instead of launching the usual early cross into the box. After five minutes the centre forward pipes up: "What was the point of all that running, we're back in the same positions as we started?" "Yes," says the manager, "but the defenders aren't."

We suspect that the field of class struggle in the UK has been fundamentally altered by a year of dramatic events. Yet much of that impact has taken place in the opaque and unpredictable realm of desires, expectations and the sense of what's possible.<sup>14</sup> As the crisis turns into a battle over 'the new normal,' it's ever more vital that these changes in class composition are given a political expression. Of course we can't know for sure what form this will ultimately take but the events of 2011 point us to three distinct yet related problems that must be tackled along the way. The first is the difficult task of keeping very different forms of struggles articulated together. The second is the problem, created by the scale and length of the crisis, of sustaining political organisation across the ebb and flow of distinct protest waves. Thirdly we see the need to

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<sup>14</sup> Hints of this new composition, and perhaps even a loss of faith on the part of the government and business, have been visible in two recent, quite unexpected victories on the part of the movements. Firstly there has been the defeat of unwanted new contract conditions for electricians working for large contractors. This follows a militant grassroots campaign involving wildcat pickets, protests and other direct action. The second victory has seen the removal of an element of compulsion from one of the government's workfare schemes. The ease of the latter victory has surprised some as the campaign was conducted primarily through social media and the press.

face up to the crisis of political representation by moving struggles beyond simple protest, beyond the purely symbolic, to the direct satisfaction of material needs.

In relation to the first problem, there have been moments when the different tribes have moved in concert. Even union leaders, such as the head of the Trade Union Congress, Brendan Barber, have talked of supplementing strikes with civil disobedience, using UK Uncut as an example of the latter. However, rather than thinking purely in terms of formal alliances and agreements, it might be better to frame the problem as one of enhancing the resonance and avoiding the dissonance between different struggles. In this light, we might look to create some common spaces in which the different tribes could contaminate one another, while allowing for the possibility that quite new subjectivities will emerge. In addition, however, we need to tackle the problem thrown up by the experience of the riots. If we are to avoid the creation of dissonance, we must learn how to handle shocks. There will, after all, be many more shocks in the years to come.<sup>15</sup> It is not preordained 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. It can knock us out of habitual patterns and make us question the usually unthought assumptions and presuppositions of existing society. In this light, the problem

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<sup>15</sup> In fact the riots seem to have had less long-term effect on the prospects for protest than was at first feared. In some ways the riots have disappeared from public discourse, overshadowed by the enormity of the economic crisis. We also detect an elision similar to the excision from public memory of the hysteria that followed the death of Princess Diana in 1997. There are hints of a slight sense of embarrassment about the aftermath of the riots and the untenable positions that many people took. The post-riots hysteria has persisted, however, in the incredibly draconian sentencing for those passing through the courts in relation to the events. In one recent case, a 21-year-old was jailed for 39 months simply for sending a BBM from his BlackBerry telling his friends to “kick off” during disorder in Nottingham. Crucially, there was no evidence that his message had led to public disorder in the area. Like the ‘Facebook rioters,’ he was criminalised precisely for trying to flush out an emergent collectivity.

becomes how movements can learn to respond to shock with open rather than closed affects.

The answer becomes a little clearer if we define a shock as a sudden and unexpected burst of stimulation or information that exceeds a body's ability to process it. Habituating a body to shock or anticipating its arrival is one way to ameliorate its effects. But collectivising the reception and processing of the new stimulation or information is an even surer path. Organisation and collective analysis are the best shock absorbers. Yet we found the weak ties that had helped build the movement during its upsurge were ill-suited to the aftermath of the riots. Computerised social networks proved a poor medium for dealing with shocked metrosexuals who had suddenly discovered their inner fascist. 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.'

We can see the repeated theme of occupying physical space as a move to supplement weak ties with the stronger bonds of sustained engagement. Yet the intensity and commitment of 24-hour occupations seem less suited to addressing our second problem. Our forms of organisation and collective analysis must be able to sustain themselves across movement downturns and transformations in motivating issues. The solution to this lies, in part, in adjusting our political imaginaries to the longer timescale of struggle created by the size of the crisis. But we also think it can be addressed by our third task: shifting our focus from symbolic actions to ones which directly make actual improvements to people's lives.<sup>16</sup> Underneath movement slogans, such as the Spanish *indignados*' demand for "Real Democracy Now!" or Occupy Wall Street's "We are the 99 per cent", lies the crisis of political representation. The collapse of

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<sup>16</sup> Amongst the ideas being mooted in the UK are campaigns to auto-reduce the price of utilities or repudiate personal debt. Such a turn could also play a role in the articulation of different struggles. A historical example of this can be found in the 1990s anti-poll tax movement whose slogan was 'Can't pay, won't pay.' It expressed the articulation of a common strategy between those who couldn't afford to pay the new tax and those, outraged by the tax's unfairness, who simply refused to pay.

both the revolutionary and reformist projects has left political elites unable to either reform themselves or funnel movement demands into institutional change. Yet forms of action, from symbolic one-day strikes to the occupation of non-vital public squares, don't reflect this reality. To do so we will need forms of struggle that materially interrupt the rollout of austerity while directly enacting other values.