

SOVEREIGN CHAOS AND RIOTOUS AFFECTS, OR, HOW TO FIND JOY BEHIND THE BARRICADES



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ABSTRACT

A commonly deployed signifier to render the political event of a riot intelligible, ‘chaos’ describes an affective condition of disorder and disarray. For some theorists of affect, such a condition of chaotic unpredictability suggests emancipatory potential. Recounting the 2018 May Day/May 1st protests in Paris, that both politicians and media declared to be a riot, this paper argues that to consider the riot as chaotic is to think and feel like a state. Critically interrogating the analytical purchase of ‘chaos’ to describe a riotous assembly of bodies, this paper contends that ‘chaos’ is not only a theoretically impoverished concept to understand such political events, but also that sovereignty mobilizes ‘chaos’ as an affective infrastructure of governance to shore up attachment to the security state. Repudiating the sovereign logic of chaos, this paper presents a first-person encounter with a protest-declared-riot in order to explore the various affects that materialize around such events. Through ethnographic reflection, this paper outlines a series of affects that accompanied the day’s events, such as speculative optimism, fragility, suspicion, fear, boldness, and joy. In so doing, the paper develops an affective approach to theorize relations of political antagonism in the street, arguing that whereas the state weaponizes terror as a form of governance, the rioters weaponize joy as an affective means of resistance.

KEYWORDS

chaos, riot, joy, political affects, sovereignty

Marching through the streets, banners held high, feeling the thunderous voice of the crowd explain what democracy looks like. Political protest is a loud and often civil affair, and frequently an enjoyable way to spend an afternoon. Other times, however, things get broken: skin, windows, promises, clean records. To make sense of the violence of broken things, the media commonly employs the word ‘chaos’. A *Los Angeles Times* (1968) headline about the May ’68 uprising in France reads: “De Gaulle Returns to France and Worst Chaos in 10 Years.” Fifty years later, whether in ‘respectable’ news outlets or tabloid journals, the narrative stays the same: “The annual May Day rally held by labor unions for better workers’ rights,” *Al Jazeera* (2018) reports, “led to chaos in the streets of Paris.” Similarly, *The Sun* headline reads: “Paris May Day riots see far-left anarchists . . . bring chaos to the French capital” (Christodoulou 2018). Like a loyal but rabid dog, the riot never arrives without chaos as its companion.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2018) provides one meaning of chaos as, “the formless void believed to have existed before the creation of the universe; primordial matter.” In its theological signification, chaos describes a confused, formless, order-less, state prior to the emergence of God. Given the historical imbrication of religion with politics in the medieval world, Carl Schmitt (2005) suggests that in modernity all (western) political concepts are secularized theological concepts. As such, it should not surprise us to see chaos mobilized as a trope to describe what life would look like without the state, or as Thomas Hobbes calls it—the mortal God. Take away law, Hobbes writes, and you “reduce all Order, Government, and Society, to the first Chaos of violence, and Civill warre” (1996, 469). Yet, the protest does not remove the law. Rather, it serves as a political warning or perhaps even a promise: from protest to riot on the path to revolution. The protest’s possibility to become a riot poses a threat of upending the state, of returning civil society to a prior space of chaos—undone, unformed, and ungoverned.

To see the event of the riot accordingly is to see like a state. Or rather, it is to feel like a state. Chaos is not simply an ideational position but also an affective condition—a social sensation where life feels out of place, displaced. Given the celebration of Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers’s work on chaos theory and its influence—via Brian Massumi—on ideas of chaos as a condition of potentiality (Clough 2007), one could describe chaos as an affective condition *par excellence*. “Affect or intensity,” Massumi writes, “is akin to what is called a critical point . . . in chaos theory and the theory of dissipative structures. This is the turning point

at which a physical system paradoxically embodies multiple and normally mutually exclusive potentials” (2002, 32). A “state of transformability” and thus of “unpredictable futurity” (Massumi 2002, 100), chaos suggests a condition of emancipatory potential and so often carries positive resonance in the work of affect theorists.

Yet, in mobilizing this signifier, I suggest that we remain caught within sovereignty’s symbolic order. From the sovereign’s perspective, chaos signifies the opposite of Law and Order. Law is Order, and so to exit the law is to exit order. Left in the dizzying terror of chaos, the state hurries to mobilize the police apparatus to recreate a sense of the ordinary that has been thrown out of joint. The ‘rioters,’ then, aren’t simply breaking the law by breaking property. They are breaking the technologies of the state that order our sensations of time and space. If chaos, terror, and fear are the feelings the state projects in order to make the riot intelligible and govern its effects, then we can ask, what is the emotional texture of the riot from the position of those momentarily ungoverned and how does this affective condition challenge the state’s description of the riot as chaotic?

The following account attempts to analytically distinguish between affective states that in practice both defy any simple parsing and refuse any stable proportional relations. Despite the murkiness of this affective situation, I argue that we can distinguish between those feelings tactically provoked by the state as a part of its strategies of riot control and those forces of feeling engendered by the riot’s successive unfolding. I begin with the affective sensibilities that accompany the riot even before the riot, narrowly understood, begins. The sensations of speculative optimism and comradely care engendered by the expectation of coming events shape the protestors’ entry onto the streets just as the feelings of fear and suspicion may linger long after they exit from the scene. As such, the event’s affective horizons stretch the riot beyond the delimited period of broken things.

Turning then to the riot proper, I argue that in contrast to the statist discourse of chaos, the political sensibility of the riot is better understood through the positive affects of public happiness and collective joy that circulate around the bold actions of the rioters. The igniting of happiness, joy, and boldness, however, do not exhaust the other affects at play, even if they are, as I argue, the riot’s primary sensations. In other words, even if such positive affects are not always experientially predominant, I suggest that the riot’s political trajectory tends toward their prominence, thus calling for a greater attunement to the riotous conditions that spark joy.¹ Insofar as chaos and its associated negative affects appear, they emerge not as organic to the riot’s form but rather as an effect of the state weaponizing

fear to disorganize riotous bodies. Herein, the state precipitates the very chaos believed to be constitutive of the riot in order to justify the riot's management and suppression. Ultimately, then, optimism, care, suspicion, paranoia, fear, boldness, happiness, and joy mingle and vibrate together throughout the riotous assembly, becoming louder or softer as the conflict between the state's fearsome governance and the riot's joyful resistance unfolds.

Speculative Optimism; Comradely Care

April 30, 2018—the evening before the annual celebration of labor struggle known as May Day. We sit around a map of Paris drinking wine and strategizing at the house of a couple I do not know, but who refer to us as friends, part of an international struggle. Though we are strangers, there is an impersonal intimacy to our conversation. Paris has been a fertile site of conflict in the months leading up to May: from student occupations to the attempted eviction of the autonomous territory known as La ZAD.² I hear from contacts dotted around Europe that others are planning to travel to Paris. The mythology of May '68, and its 50-year anniversary, is too alluring not to note. There is a warm atmosphere of optimism, as our Parisian hosts tell us that they feel certain that we will be many. And in that force, they say, we're going to be all right.

Our hosts conjure up our imagined future as a risky albeit hopeful endeavor. Their speculative optimism draws on conspiratorial circuits that span continents. An anonymous network of political radicals can make otherwise dangerous actions feel safe. They cannot know for certain, but international rumors have a way of electrifying the skin. It is unclear what it means to win. None of the activists want to get arrested, but that's a low bar for victory. Inarticulable, the event's promise is nonetheless palpable.

Reviewing police strategies of containment, surveying the city map for possible chokepoints and emergency exits, and concocting solutions of Maalox and water to counter the effects of teargas, these preparations are at odds with the image of the riot as a spontaneous event that catches all by surprise. Unforeseen and unorganized, the riot's supposed spontaneity finds affinity with its assumed chaotic form. As Joshua Clover observes, the Russian word *stikhiinost*, which Lenin famously used to condemn mass revolt, “signifies both spontaneity and the chaos of nature: that which has the least degree of organization” (2016, 92). As

an expected event for which such a high level of organization is undertaken, the 2018 May Day riot does not harmoniously fit within Clover's proposed scheme of contemporary riots, increasingly "incited by the police murder of a young person with dark skin, or following on the failure of the legal apparatus to hold the police adequately responsible for their violence" (2016, 10).³

This is not to suggest that the riot that "transpires within a logic of racialization" is the site of genuine spontaneity (Clover 2016, 11, 100). Like its twin 'chaos,' the trope of spontaneity rests within a sovereign framework that fails to make sense of the riot's internal workings. Neither chaotic nor spontaneous, the riots Clover analyses are nonetheless responses to particular episodes of *unpredictable*, even if unsurprising, police violence. In contrast, the 2018 May Day riot aligns with an alternate lineage of rioting, spanning other Labor Days, summits and conferences (1999 WTO in Seattle; 2017 G20 in Hamburg), Olympic games (Vancouver 2010), and presidential inaugurations (#DisruptJ20). What unites these events is the foreseeable specificity of their time and place. Indeed, they are so predictable that individuals can schedule time off work for travel in anticipation of the events they hope to precipitate and in which they expect to participate. In this regard, these assemblies are similar to the riots of European football fans in their preparation and expectation. Echoing Bill Buford in his study of English hooligans, we too can suggest that May Day 2018, like many before it, was "a riot by appointment" (1993, 201). Yet, given the risks, what insights can centering affect provide us in explaining why so many keep their appointments? How does thinking with and through affect illuminate the attraction of the event's anticipatory promise?

Speculation: "the conjectural anticipation of something"; "a conclusion . . . reached by abstract or hypothetical reasoning" (OED 2019). The activists collect the evidentiary materials of their optimism—discussion of strategy, assessment of equipment, analysis of terrain—but, directed towards an open future, their feelings lack assurance. As such, despite the optimism of their preparations and plans, not everyone is confident. The meeting and the night close as the activists go around the table with their final thoughts and feelings: excitement and hesitation. Some aren't sure they want to participate in the *cortège de tête*—the head of the demonstration where the most intense conflict usually unfolds.⁴ The event's promise a bit too speculative to keep the nagging fears at bay.

Speculation: engagement in any "enterprise or transaction of a venturesome or risky nature, but offering the chance of great or unusual gain" (OED 2019). Militant politics requires a certain kind of political faith—in oneself, in one's comrades,

in a future where, though stacked up against you, the odds turn out to be in your favor. The risks run large, but so too do the promised gains—but what *exactly* do they hope to gain? After the go-around, the uncertainty of some envelops us all. The group affirms the vulnerability it takes to speak of one's own vulnerability and after a few shared cigarettes, they decide to reassess in the morning.

The Suspense of Suspicion

Urban inhabitants usually greet the faces of strangers in public with indifference, but on May Day, careful glances and double-takes fill the street. In Hannah Arendt's reflections on violence and power, she remarks that, "power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group that remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (1970, 44). The problem of surveillance in the city, however, troubles the possibility of collective power: to be *identified* as being together puts a stop to coming together. From the perspective of state security, any person roaming the announced starting point poses a threat in need for searching—and if you are caught with gas masks, that signals intent to protect oneself in a situation of conflict, an arrestable offence. As such, in the time before *it* begins, the protestor must navigate the streets suspended in suspicion: is that person an undercover agent, a potential accomplice, a tourist, or simply an unaffiliated citizen?

Despite intentions to glide smoothly through the city streets, the group's hurried walks, darting looks, and jittery conversations nonetheless draw attention. Militancy is its own political theater, and 'playing it cool' is a difficult art to master. Sitting at a café, chatting about nothing in particular, the activists pass time. The impasse drags on until the crowd before them begins to swell. Impatience overwhelms a few as potential rioters start crouching between friends and under banners, hiding from the surveillance gaze and preparing: black bandanas, sunglasses, gas masks, and leather gloves. It's time to begin.

But when does the riot begin? In France, the Penal Code (article 433–6) speaks of rebellion—"violent resistance" to any person of "public authority" attempting to carry out the "mandates of justice." United States federal law (18 U.S.C. § 2102) defines a riot as a "public disturbance" that "constitute[s] a clear and present danger" to property or person by someone in a group of three or more people.

Similarly, in the UK, the Public Order Act 1986 (c. 64) defines violent disorder as “3 or more persons who . . . threaten unlawful violence,” causing someone to “fear for their personal safety.” Despite their differences, the UK Public Order Act, US Federal Law, and also the French Penal Code figure rioting not simply as a manifestation of violence, but its *threat*.

Yet, the political impact of any protest depends on its ability to threaten. Hundreds of thousands spill out onto the street to voice their demands. Their presence in public is a sign of dissatisfaction, anger, and desire for a different order of things. If you do not listen, you will have to reckon with all of us who have come today with our bodies to show you who you are up against. Is the riot not simply the manifestation of this threat, the expression of those who speak but, as Martin Luther King (1968) said, whose language is unheard? Every protestor is a potential rioter, as every rioter a protestor.

Performatively speaking, then, the riot is a declared event. In 1714, the British parliament passed the Riot Act, one of the first juridical configurations of the riot in the West. Aimed to prevent “tumults and riotous assemblies,” the Riot Act mandated an officer publicly name the gathering a riot by reading the Riot Act aloud to the crowd, exclaiming that: “Our Sovereign Lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons, being assembled, immediately to disperse” (Stevenson 2013, 27-9). Sovereign declarations therefore performatively reconstitute the assembly into a riot. However, not every protest becomes a riot. In other words, not every protest sufficiently threatens sovereign power. As the police are fond of saying on the reality TV show *COPS*, “the situation is under control.” But if the situation is not under control, where is it?

The Joy of Possibility

“Siamo tutti antifascisti!” The sound of hands clapping in unison reverberates throughout the crowd. Over 1,200 people dressed in black forming a bloc at the head of the march are a collective force. It’s unclear what will happen shortly, but the feeling of joy in the shared power of an anonymous many increases as one’s line of sight beyond the black mass recedes.

Of course, we are not all anonymous. There is a special art of reading the bridge of a comrade’s nose, learning the particular eye structure and wrinkle formation of a friend’s face. Small clusters of affinity groups pervade the bloc. These bundles of friends and comrades draw themselves together via shared hand signals,

calls, and signs. I laugh as I hear a deep voice next to me baaing like a lost sheep only to be greeted somewhere farther down the crowd by a larger herd of sheep. That's a good joke, I think.

An undercurrent of suspicion still lingers. Undercover agents could be lurking anywhere throughout the crowd. Yet, once a certain threshold is passed and a collective force has unfurled, this suspicion will loosen, and the militants will move more freely. The crowd begins marching and soon thereafter the sound of hammers clanging cobblestones pierces the air. Without any division of command or dictated instructions, those few with hammers get to work for all. Shrouded bodies move in and out of the scene with their pockets heavier. Against the tear gas, riot shields, concussion grenades, and the power of state violence, the protesters turn to the city. Opening up the city beyond market exchange, the potential rioters make use of the city in new ways: the road's uniformity broken as paving stones become projectiles, chairs and fences rearranged as they lose their commercial use to become barricades in conflict. The militants feel the city with a different touch, disrupting the flows of market exchange and transforming urban space: *sous les pavés, la plage*; beneath the cobblestones, the beach.

The sound of glass shattering rings out and is followed by cheering. This appears to energize the crowd as the pace accelerates and we move closer. Ahead, a McDonalds stands crumbled over, but not impressively destroyed. Like a playground bully with a black eye, this McDonalds will be collecting lunch money again in a day or two. Farther down the road, a subject of tension: a burning Renault dealership. The cars in flames still sit parked inside the dealership, which is on the bottom level of an apartment building. The danger is obvious. The fire could spread, and people could get hurt. Yet, fingers are not pointed and speeches are not made, but quick decision follows: two people extinguish the flames; others then move the singed cars out and onto the pavement. Again, the fire is set and again the crowd pushes on down the Boulevard de l'Hôpital.

A seemingly non-deliberative assembly, it would be a mistake to think that the crowd did not speak at all. Littered on the ground to explain the foreseeable property destruction was a prepared communiqué entitled: "To Those Who Would Side with Windows" (Anonymous 2018). It reads the broken windows and charred cars as a strike against capital: "we attack symbols, physical manifestations of capitalism, and not individuals, the furniture is not human, it is only money."

For the authors of this communiqué, the broken things of the riot signal an attack against “industrial domestication, conformism and,” for some unexplained reason, “fashion.”⁵

While the riot makes the city newly possible, the riot is not inherently subversive. All riots, even if not all rioters, fight the police, whatever the political position of the participants. Formally speaking, the riot is like a game and to win means gaining control of the streets. “The revolutionaries”, Arendt argues, “are those who know when power is lying in the street and when they can pick it up” (1972, 206). Of course, the police always win; otherwise, there is no longer a riot but the beginnings of a revolution. But the riot can be the winning side for a short while. To push back the police or have the police tactically disengage creates the conditions for momentary autonomy. Political differences enter when the rioters decide what to do with their newly found freedom.

From the perspective of state sovereignty, this situation is terrifying: ‘if those people would commit such violence to that window, that car, that bank, then why not also *you*?’ The space of the law ceases to operate, and the ordinary functioning of monopolized violence—the police, the prison system, capital—is up for debate. While sovereign logic would suggest politics itself is no longer possible in the absence of the law, the opening up for debate of who exercises violence and for what purposes is the very stuff of politics. As Jacques Rancière puts it, political events engender a “dispute over the object of dispute, the dispute over the existence of the dispute and the parties confronting each other in it” (1999, 55). The political difference of the riot depends on how the rioters, having opened up the question of violence, use their freedom to redraw its lines. For white supremacists, the boundary is visibly at race, and so, whether in Charlottesville, USA or Chemnitz, Germany, when neo-nazis gain autonomy they attack non-white people. In both 1968 and 2018, the anti-capitalist riots set the limit at capital: banks, boutiques, luxury car dealerships.

The most alluring spectacle therefore is not the smashed windows or the burning cars but the crowd itself. Sovereignty’s scariest event is not the presence of the rioters but the absence of the police. The state has lost the monopoly on violence. In defining riots, social scientists propose a necessary characteristic to be an event in which “authorities have lost control” (Halle and Rafter 2003, 347). Following Max Weber’s classic definition of the state as a “community that *successfully* claims the *monopoly* of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,” we could say that in the riot, the state momentarily disappears (1948, 78, emphasis

added). These scenes therefore terrify; this is the nightmare of the state of nature, a world the state imagines would exist in its absence. Behind the militarized police, the prison walls, the tough on crime sloganeering trembles a frightened ruling class. As Chicago rapper Vic Mensa (2017) explains, “If the National Guard was actually hard they wouldn’t be scared.” Like the swagger of insecure men, the state’s thorny exterior compensates for a fragile governmental regime—always in crisis, always on the verge of falling apart.

Yet, the rioters do not feel like a state. This is not to say that they do not feel fear, they do, but terror fails to capture their imagination. The affect of the riot is a shared social force, a potent energy that resonates throughout the mobile bloc. So much that had been forbidden by the law suddenly becomes possible. The riot makes politics newly possible. This possibility may only remain a potentiality, but its promise sticks as a question: What if next time? As a piece of graffiti during the May 68’ riots in Paris reads: “*La barricade ferme la rue mais ouvre la voie*”—barricades close the street, but open the way. If the riot is a political force of natality, then joy is its sensation, regardless of the political position of its participants. “There was an intense energy about it; it was impossible not to feel some of the thrill,” remarks Buford on his experience in ultra-nationalist English hooligan riots; “Somebody near me said that he was happy. He said that he was very, very happy, that he could not remember ever being so happy” (1993, 87–88). “Join the battle of Joy,” writes an activist reflecting on the battles at the blockades of Heiligendamm, where the G-8 summit was held in 2007. “Under every mask was a smile, in every stone thrown against the common enemy there was joy, in every body revolting against oppression there was desire” (Dupuis-Déri 2014, 83).

The joy of the riot, however, is qualitatively different from the pleasures of private life. Acting as a collective force, the protestors experience a form of joy more akin to public happiness. In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that “public happiness . . . consisted in the citizen’s right of access to the public realm, in his share in public power” (1977, 118). Unlike “the pursuit of private happiness” (1977, 118), public happiness emerges from the experience of collective power, that is, participating in public with others in such a way as to organize the affairs of our common lives. As Arendt puts it, “public freedom consisted in having a share in public business,” and “the activities connected with this business . . . gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else” (1977, 110). Yet, in contrast to Arendt’s revolutionaries in their deliberative assemblies,

when “public business” has become the public *of* business, the rioters turn not to the townhall but to the city street as the site of their collective assembly and source of public happiness.

Public and collective, the riot’s joy nonetheless emerges from an altogether different type of political power than Arendt had in mind. Public happiness for Arendt appears intimately linked to the pleasures of constituent power: the “joys of discourse, of legislation, of transcending business, or persuading and being persuaded” (2018, 206). In contrast to the pleasurable action that comes from constituting a new juridical order, the riot is a force that momentarily deactivates the governmental apparatus. In other words, the joys of the riot are the pleasures of destituent power (cf. Aarons 2019). No less collective and no less public than constituent power, the riot’s pleasures emerge from action-in-concert that simultaneously renders the law inoperative as it opens up a public space of autonomy.

There “exists such intense happiness in acting that the actor, like the gambler, will accept that all the odds are stacked against him” (Arendt 2018, 206). Indeed, this experience of public happiness, argues Arendt, “had been sufficiently profound for them to prefer under almost any circumstances . . . public happiness to private welfare” (2018, 125). So too for the rioters, who risk the private pains of injured bodies, lengthy trials, and lost work for the taste of public joy. So striking is this joy, that sometimes you catch yourself thinking: this is not a riot, so much as a political carnival. The riot is serious play—a game where freedom’s vitality is at stake. Writing in Italy 1977, during the years of lead and against the ascetic militancy of the Red Brigades, Alfredo Bonanno argues that insurrectional “play is characterised by a vital impulse that is always new, always in movement. By acting as though we are playing, we charge our action with this impulse. We free ourselves from death. Play makes us feel alive” (1977, 17). Considered as a strategy in revolutionary struggle, maintaining the affective life of the riot as a joyous event is one of the militant’s weightiest responsibilities. The “pursuit of joy, dreams, utopia in its declared ‘lack of seriousness,’” Bonanno writes, “hides the most serious thing in life: the refusal of death” (1977, 17).

But is the joy of the riot qualitatively different from the joy of the protest? Media tropes commonly depict political events ‘turning,’ like the flicking of a light switch: the protest turned into a riot; the event turned chaotic. If, however, we turn away from declarative utterances and their performative effects, away from words and towards the sensations of the body, then we need a new way of making sense of the protest’s escalation into that collective force we call a riot. Feelings do

not switch, but flow like waves. Sometimes they drift slowly and at other times rush wildly, but it is always a changing of intensity. As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write, “affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body” (2010, 1). The riot can be understood through its qualitative shifts of intensity, not of chaos, but of autonomy and its sensations. In militant struggle, joy qualitatively increases as the space of autonomy enlarges. Yet, the question remains: when does one pass the threshold from protest to riot? One feels joy, but one does not feel a riot. And hours later one may even feel bewildered: ‘Was *that* a riot?’

The Paralysis of Fear

Canisters fly above the crowd, separating mid-air and then fall to the ground. A few militants move to pick up the burning black disks, but these gestures prove futile. The atmosphere quickly becomes suffused with a thick white smoke. The sounds of dry heaving soon follow. Even though I am equipped with goggles and a mask, the gas tugs at my eyes and forms a burning goatee around my mouth. Unable to see five steps into the corrosive fog, we move in blind retreat. We are packed together tight—too tight. One feels to be on the precipice of panic. Someone might fall, someone might get trampled. I need air. I want out.

These scenes do not evade the grip of fear, but this feeling is a qualitatively different experience than that projected by the state. Terrified by the possibility of the state’s absence, the state weaponizes terror. Fear strangles the body and renders it chaotic in the sense of placing the body in a state of confusion, disorder, and formlessness. In other words, disorganization is not so much the condition in and of the riot so much as a governmental strategy of its management. Consider tear gas as a crowd control tactic. The police seemed to have wizened up to the rock throwing and keep their distance, but close enough to fire tear gas and concussion grenades. In sufficient quantities, tear gas makes the body impotent and docile by overwhelming it, rendering it temporarily paralyzed. From the Greek, παράλυσις (*parálusis*: “palsy”), meaning to loosen or untie, it’s as if tear gas unwinds the nervous system and the body’s membranes come undone: tears, mucus, vomit all spill out.

From the position of the militants, the organizational form of the riot is not inherently chaos. State interventions, however, can render the body of the protest-protestor chaotic. That is, in weaponizing fear, the state disorganizes the

body on both an individual and collective level. Indeed, students of the riot have often remarked on the ways in which the state produces the very chaos it then tasks itself with quelling, as police projections of protesters as always-already potentially violent mobs tend to produce repressive actions that provoke the expected violence that then justifies police strategies of escalated force (Schweingruber 2000; Perez, Berg, & Myers 2003). In centering the question of affect, however, we become attuned to the imbrication of the singular organic body of the protestor with the public political body of the riot. In tear gassing the crowd, for instance, the state attempts to unwind the political relations that hold the collective body together by unwinding the sensuous relations that hold the organic body together. In disorganizing the riot's communal corps by attacking the rioter's singular body, the state strategically constitutes an affective condition of chaos that it then seeks to re-order.

If affect describes the capacity of the body to affect or be affected, then the affects of fear are weapons of state control—these felt sensations the tactile effects of police technologies that attack the body. Tear gas, sound cannons, rubber bullets, and stun grenades make bodies lose control. As such, these are the weapons of crowd control as sense control. We should consider these administrations of bodily sensations to be a central strategy of state governance. In the prison system, for instance, solitary confinement, a favored method of punishment in the US, deprives the prisoner of human and environmental contact; it isolates the body and strikes at its senses in order to make the prisoner docile. If chaos enters the scene, then, it is not due to the state's absence but rather the very presence of its affective apparatus of violence. Far from being a secondary or poetic perspective on the state, the government of our affective life is central to both the techniques of sovereignty and its resistance.

The Boldness of Initiative

Pushed back into a clearing, the crowd readjusts. The police no longer launch tear gas canisters into the air but directly at the protestors. As the militants compete for the chance to volley the black fuming disks back into the direction of the police, a rhythm emerges. Protestors move forward into the plumes and exit to catch their breath and let the burning subside. Occasionally someone is struck and their body collapses. Shouts of 'Medic!' move through the crowd as strangers drag the injured comrade away. Somewhere down the street, barricades are built, and confrontations seem to be happening at various fronts.

With enough rounds of tear gas and stun grenades, the police break through the barricades and shift into an offensive. The slow movement of the militants becomes a steady run. Turning their backs to the police, the rioters commit to retreat. Yet, even in the flight of exit, boutiques continue to lose their glass coverings. Black clad protesters leave the collective safety of the crowd, isolating themselves in an out-stretched vulnerability, to continue their attacks inside the shop. The boldness of these gestures in the face of such risk is dangerously seductive, as several other protesters stop in their tracks to watch the attacks. Temporarily suspended, these gawking protestors demonstrate that the attack on the commodity spectacle can itself become a spectacle, sweeping others up into the unfolding initiative. Stay too long with gaze affixed, and the spectator-protestor risks capture by police. Yet, their momentary immobility also demonstrates the power that such risky actions evoke. Don't stay at all, and the protestors-in-flight may miss the boldness of others even in retreat.

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Once in flight, the riot is soon dissected, choked, and exhausted. The space of possibility has diminished to a zero point, and one no longer feels joy but seeks the relief of exit and the calm of safety. Small clusters of people split from the running crowd into the arteries of the city's side streets. Those who are unable to escape are arrested. The police seem to have re-established an old ordinary, even though bystanders remain bearing witness, as if waiting for something unexpected to occur. Walking away, the adrenaline begins to subside, and I become tired and cold, as the hard concrete returns like a forgotten memory to my feet.

Chaos—that dominant and clichéd signifier to render the riot intelligible attempts to capture the citizen's affective reaction to the event of broken things. The discourse of chaos poses a threat: a world without the state, a world devoid of order, and thus a world of unceasing violence. As Massumi writes, this threat “has the capacity to fill the present without presenting itself. Its future looming casts a present shadow, and that shadow is *fear*” (2005, 35). Figuring chaos as its outside, the state stimulates the very chaos it retroactively invokes as the reason for public management. The mobilization of ‘chaos’ as a way to render the protest-riot affectively meaningful therefore illustrates one of the many ongoing mechanisms in which the state uses technologies of affect “to manage and contain cultural anxiety and dissent” (Staiger, Cvetkovich, and Reynold 2011, 7). In this way, both state and media narratives of chaos attempt to shore up attachment to the state

security apparatus. Fear is the form of governed life in modernity and ‘chaos’ is one kind of affective infrastructure of governance.

Is ‘chaos’ then a compromised analytic? Caught within the symbolic register of these statist deployments, are affect theorists who normatively equate ‘chaos’ with potentiality destined to think and feel like a state? Or rather, can we not affirm that as a force of “destratification,” the riot will, in Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “*sometimes end in chaos, the void and destruction*” and other times gesture towards a more emancipatory order (1987, 53, emphasis added). Indeed, according to Massumi’s humanistic appropriations of the science of chaos theory, this “order-out-of-chaos effect” poses salutary possibilities for theorizing politics (2002, 224). A Massumian style of analysis of the riot, for instance, may resemble the following:

Like the application of increasing heat to a tranquil liquid, initially causing chaotic perturbations but suddenly and unexpectedly producing a Bénard stability, the riot’s destabilizing force may increase in intensity until “a threshold is reached at which order spontaneously arises out of chaos” (1992, 59). In upending state stratification, the riot throws the governed social world into a “peculiar state of indecision, where what its next state will be turns entirely unpredictable” (2002, 109). Unstable and unpredictable, “this ‘chaotic’ interlude is not the simple absence of order. It is in fact a superordered state: it is conceived as the literal co-presence of all of the possible paths the system may take” (2002, 109). A political appropriation of the science of chaos theory thus reveals that the chaotic force of the riot can break the stranglehold of the governed present, hold it in suspense, and present “an unpredictable futurity” (2002, 110). This new future may be devastating but it also may be beautiful—we cannot know before the riot begins and such are the stakes of political action. Rather than lament riotous chaos, therefore, thinking the political with and through scientific phenomenon such as the Bénard stability provides hope that a new political configuration of “structural stability [can be] achieved under conditions of extreme instability” (1992, 59). In other words, a new and brighter “order from disorder” may emerge (2002, 111).

I do not dispute the allure of such a politico-scientific analysis, nor do I contest Massumi’s laudable attempts to “poach a scientific concept” and see how humanistic thinking “will be changed by the encounter” (2002, 20). However, as Massumi readily admits, such scientific poaching “carries with it scientific affects” (2002, 20), and I worry that such affects may cast a shadow over and thus obfuscate the political affects at play. A *scientific* analysis of chaos risks short-circuiting its *political* analysis as an affectively loaded concept historically mobilized to suppress just the sort of transformative potential that this politico-scientific analysis glorifies. Any productive recovery of ‘chaos’ thus requires reckoning with this political history. Until then, the *political* affects of chaos demand a political and not scientific mode of thinking.

Consequently, it is not the riotous assembly but the police apparatus that engenders a (political) condition of chaos—the disorganization not only of the human body as a biological organism but also the political body as a collective assembling in public. These events indicate not only the analytical poverty of ‘chaos’ for understanding the multiple affects at play in a riot, but also the political poverty of ‘chaos’ as a shared affective condition bubbling with emancipatory potential. Indeed, the affective promise of the riot as a joyful event depends on the degree to which the human and political body is not rendered chaotic. The usage of ‘chaos’ as a positive (scientific) analytic normatively inverts but does not escape the symbolic logic of sovereignty.

Where the proliferation of ‘chaos’ as an affective infrastructure of governance demonstrates an understanding of “affect as capturable life potential” (Massumi 2002, 41), capture is by no means guaranteed. Affect, Sara Ahmed reminds us, “is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects,” without making these connections permanently stuck (2010, 29). The riot is one manner of unsticking affective connection by violently intervening into political assemblages. In so doing, the riot gestures at a different form of life. As political theorist Taiaiake Alfred argues, “how you fight determines who you will become when the battle is over” (2005, 23). To focus on the affective life of struggle is to take seriously the pre-figurative politics of feeling. Though fear is present, it need not dominate the riot’s emotional texture. The joy of possibility, and that possibility taken with bold initiative, is the primary political sensation that the riot promises its militant participants. And so, if fear is weaponized by the state, then joy is weaponized by the riot.

But what of fear’s closely related negative affects—rage, anger, and other ‘ugly feelings’? Indeed, discussions of anger and “black rage” have been pivotal for theorizing racialized experiences of domination, resistance, and black power militancy (Grier & Cobbs 1992; hooks 1995; McCann, 2013). It may be the case that unlike the planned riots under discussion, those that emerge from police killings of black men predominantly express rage—not simply as an immediate response to an event of state murder, but also as a re-activation and upswelling of past traces of punctual and structural events of state violence.⁶ Nonetheless, we should not discount the presence of joy even in these riotous assemblies. As some of the Baltimore teenagers who took to the internet to live-tweet the 2015 riots in response to the police murder of Freddie Gray put it: “They really beating 🇺🇸🇺🇸 police 🇺🇸 downtown, I love everything about 😂”; “Fucking shit up is one of the funnest things to do yall know that lol” (Research and Destroy 2015).⁷

Being an event of particular intensity and thus spotlighting the question of affect in politics, the riot is by no means a privileged site of political affect. Rather, as an exemplar of affective politics, the riot poses the question of how to orient political organizing around happiness, joy, and bodily sensations more generally. The political logic of sentiment and the transformative power of affect has, however, been overlooked by the Left's overemphasis on mental awareness, education, and consciousness-raising. Focusing on consciousness prior to action, on rationally re-thinking ourselves into new ways of being, misses the ways in which sensuous activity engenders new modes of thought. The riot and its accompanied affects suggest prioritizing the body and its sensations as an entry point for political organizing. To inverse the popular song from 1970s band Funkadelic (1970), we could say that emphasis on the politics of emotion teaches us a simple lesson: "Free Your Ass and Your Mind Will Follow." Thinking through the politics of affect and its aesthetic sensibilities promises to open up new possibilities for political intervention on the level of feeling, maybe helping to reconfigure forms of popular attachment away from capital and towards the commune, away from deadening party politics and towards joyful democratic life.⁸

Notes

1. For whom is the riot joyful? For all or even most of the rioters? For most of even some of the time? While I have been encouraged by the positive reception I have received from those who have previously participated in riots and read prior versions of this paper, the claim that riots tend toward joy and under what conditions they do so ultimately requires more ethnographic work to substantiate. My thanks to Chad Shomura for pushing me to clarify this point.

2. La ZAD, or Zone to Defend, describes an autonomous squatted area of wetlands, fields and forests in the French commune of Notre Dame de Landes. In 2008, the French state slated the area for the development of an airport, but in 2009 the land was occupied to oppose the project. After years of struggle, on January 17th 2018, the French prime minister cancelled the airport project, but nonetheless vowed to evict the numerous occupants of the ZAD. In April 2018, the state deployed 2,500 police backed by armoured personnel carriers and helicopters to carry out the eviction, which led to weeks of intense conflict. The eviction is said to be France's largest domestic police operation since May 1968.

3. Likewise, these 'types' of riots seem to confirm Alberto Toscano's caution, in his review of Clover's book, that: "at least in the overdeveloped and deindustrializing world that forms Clover's stage, many of the partisans of riots are not in any way fully excluded from reproduction, nor can they be properly or usefully defined as 'abject'" (Toscano 2016). In fairness to Clover, however, he does note that contemporary riots are not wholly made up of the excluded or 'abject,' but also of indebted students and other "youth discovering that the routes that once promised a minimally secure formal integration into the economy are now foreclosed" (2016, 180). Would the black bloc partisans fall into this latter category?

4. More than simply the head of the demonstration, the "cortège de tête" describes a phenomenon emerging in the 2016 "loi travail" protests, where the first line of the protest march is no longer made up of the traditional trade unions but of masked demonstrators willing to engage in militant confrontation with the police.

5. While targeting the fashion industry's store fronts may enact the more commonly voiced critique of capitalism and conformity, the singling out of "fashion" as a possible stand-in for vanity, superficiality, and aesthetics more generally appears misplaced, especially considering the seduction of the riot's own fashion aesthetics. Indeed, the preparation for these mass blocs is rarely absent the ogling and oo'ing at the military grade gas masks or the sleek leather gloves that one finds on the protest runway.

6. My thanks to Ben Anderson for this formulation.

7. Compiled by the New York city research collective Research and Destroy, *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary* is a collection of tweets from Baltimore teenagers who either participated in or spectated the riots that unfolded in their city. In addition to various statements of joy and copious use of the laughing-face emoji, one can also read descriptions of acts that are similarly expressive of public happiness, such as the person "dancing to Michael Jackson on top of a truck in the middle of the riot Imfao" (Research and Destroy 2015).

8. My thanks to Gregory Seigworth, Sophia Goodfriend, Vincent Millou, Chad Shomura, Ben Anderson, and the participants of the Double Binds of '68 conference held at the University of Kent, 29th -30th September 2018 for comments and criticisms on earlier drafts. My gratitude to the anonymous militants who enabled me to accompany them on their Parisian adventures.

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