

“Fuck Normalization”

Young urban ‘troublemakers’ as meaningful political actors

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Before I entered the academic world I was working as a policy advisor for the Dutch national union of high school pupils: an extraordinary position because in most countries high school pupils do not have a union, let alone policy advisors working for them. My job became even more remarkable in December 2007 when widespread rioting broke out in several Dutch cities. Teenagers went out in the streets to demand fewer useless classroom hours and a higher quality of education in general. Such large scale youth uprisings had not been seen in Holland for years. The topic dominated the public debate for days.

A while ago I was reminded of this period after reading an interview with the chair man of the high school union in the newspaper³. According to the

³ See Dagblad de Pers, May 18th, 2008: “Tussen klaslokaal en boardroom.” source: <http://www.depers.nl/binnenland/203020/Tussen-klaslokaal-en-Boardroom.html>

article this precocious seventeen-year-old was ‘the new hope’ of Dutch politics because of his tactical talents. He was depicted as the architect of the uprisings last December and, also, the catalyst of the return to normality because he closed a deal with the ministry of education. I was rather surprised by the article because I remembered the events quite differently. The union of high school pupils was expected to be in control of the protests. However, we had no idea why the pupils had gone out on the streets so suddenly, let alone where the masses of high school pupils would strike again. We had to watch the news like everyone else to keep ourselves updated. I remember our chair man who sat at a desk with his hands in his hair, not knowing how to handle the wild crowds that he was supposed to be representing.

Seeing things in the middle

While comparing my own memories with the interview I was reading I could not help but think of cows, grass and clouds. This seems strange in relation to a serious topic like derailed teenagers, but this quote of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explains my rather odd association:

It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes. It's not easy to see the grass in things and in words ([.....]); never is a plateau separable from the cows that populate it, which are also the clouds in the sky) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25)

Deleuze and Guattari explain how words can change the course of events drastically. The words we choose to describe a sudden event necessarily make us look back at it from some distance in time. Looking over our shoulder we lose the capability to be still in the middle of the event, we step outside of it and analyse it from afar. Our structured thinking makes us dissect the event in bite size pieces; we separate the cows from the clouds and the grass.

From our outside position we see a clear hierarchy in the event: we cannot lose ourselves in the meshed grid that carried the event in unexpected

directions. We tend to separate the actors involved in the event from the situation surrounding them, understanding their role as a thing in itself, apart from the total experience that the event provoked when we were still in the middle of it.

This need to subsequently structure events from the outside, applies to my example of the high school riots. When looking back at the riots through the words that were written in the interview, it seems that a different interpretation was created to mask the uncertainty triggered by events. The spontaneous chaos that the pupils created in many cities devoid of an articulated and reasonable political message or demand, was incomprehensible and frightening to many. The subsequent confusion was abated by appointing the chair man of the high school union as the architect of the protests. The idea that there was an initial actor deliberately setting the events in motion, an authority with a clear vision who lead the ignorant masses, was much more comforting than adolescent pandemonium.

It seems that the collective Dutch memory wishes to remember the high school riots of last December according to a hierarchical structure. The idea of a rhizomatic⁴, horizontal movement, a spontaneous network of actions inspired by instant excitement, without rationally formulated demands or motives does not fit into our familiar thought system. We cannot think of such a movement as productive or valuable. Such a movement would lead to mayhem devoid of political meaning and incapable of making political claims.

The incapability to view events 'from the middle' is a recurring error in accounts of urban youth riots in Europe. In this article I will explain why this is problematic to understandings of such events by looking at two recent cases of riots that both took place in Copenhagen. Copenhagen was recently the stage of two fierce clashes between angry young people and the police. In March 2007 thousands of alternative left-wing activists protested the loss

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the concept of the rhizome to be able to describe a network shape of organisation. Grass has a rhizomatic growing-structure; it grows randomly in all directions, connecting different points in an unpredictable and untraceable way. This is the opposite of the growing-structure of trees, which grow in a linear direction that can be clearly and rationally understood, traced and reproduced.

of an old squatted youth-house that functioned as their hang out⁵. In February 2008 hundreds of youngsters from immigrant backgrounds went out in the streets after an older man was harassed by the police in their neighbourhood⁶. In the cases of the Copenhagen riots it was difficult to understand afterwards what drove these youths to reek havoc on the city. However, it is exactly this disturbing and deregulating effect that gives the Copenhagen riots political value. Attempts to give posterior order to the riots serve to distort the political meaning of these events.

I will begin by briefly explaining the general motivation for both Copenhagen riots and by commenting on the differences between the two. Hereafter, I will analyse both cases from a perspective that will reveal some important similarities in the way the rioting youngsters are criticising the rest of society. Although I was not personally present during the riots, I visited the neighbourhood where both events started in May 2008 and interviewed some people involved in the events. I will use material from some of these interviews combined with reflections on the theoretical work of several philosophers to portray the young rioters as meaningful political actors. This analysis will contribute to an understanding of how seemingly senseless violent outbursts become valuable signs of a political struggle, exactly by viewing them as they are: spontaneous disorder generated by an instant excitement, without rationally formulated demands but still with a strong political claim.

After explaining how the violent deregulation of existing structures can be seen as a genuine political act, I will elaborate on the claim of equality, as a universal necessity, emerging in such a political act. In both cases of the Copenhagen riots the youngsters involved opposed mechanisms of normalisation. By doing so they make us aware that true equality lies in the fact that we are all in the same world despite differences of beliefs, identity and behaviour. This claim for true equality is not only a criticism of existing political structures, but also the starting point for a democratic political

5 English information on the events can be found on the website of the youthhouse, www.ungeren.dk. On the eviction: <http://www.ungeren.dk/spip.php?article130>

6 See this article in The Copenhagen Post, published Februari 12th 2008: <http://www.cphpost.dk/get/105589.html>

agency that can lead to the emancipation and empowerment of those unrepresented within existing political structures.

The rioting youngsters were not just uncivilised outcasts, the victims of their poor socio-economic life-circumstances. They are political actors demonstrating the necessity to reinvent politics in an urgently active way, in a way that breaks through the structures of well organised and clearly arranged political institutions and makes clear to us that the battle for genuine justice and equality has still to be fought out on the streets.

These young Danes are just an example of how we could see other rioting European youngsters as meaningful political agents instead of members of a lost generation surrendering themselves to nihilistic violence.

A hot year in Copenhagen

The Copenhagen riots are particularly interesting because two at first sight completely different groups of youngsters set the same neighbourhood on fire in a relative short period of time. Norrebro, the site where both of the Copenhagen-riots took place is a lively popular neighbourhood. There are no superficial indications that this area has been the stage of various violent uprisings throughout Danish history⁷.

The squatted youth-house Ungdomshuset, located in this area, was the centre of alternative youth culture in Copenhagen until March 2007. The eviction of the youth-house set a series of violent riots in motion that lasted for weeks. During my stay in Norrebro I visited one of the weekly solidarity demonstrations against the eviction and interviewed Else, one of the participants. She told me that the movement grew over time to present a much broader cause than the support for the youth-house alone. People felt affiliation with a general struggle for free space in the city and the right to dissent from the common behavioural norms. The youth-house movement had become the symbol of a struggle for the right to question authority, to question a political system that is increasingly perceived to be the

⁷ Traditionally a strong working class area, Norrebro is known for its politicized inhabitants. The squatting movement BZ had several violent clashes with the authorities in this neighbourhood in the '80. The squatters were fighting for better social housing in the then very run down area. A tragedy took place in Norrebro in 1993 when eleven anti-EU demonstrators were shot by the police. In the late '90 some big riots between young immigrants and the police also took place in the area.

performance of control-politics. Gavin, a 26 year old medical student and the flag-bearer of the solidarity demonstration I attended, gave me a similar account of the attraction of the movement in an interview that I had with him later.

This wish to create space for alternatives to the establishment is best expressed by the plan the youth-house sympathisers had to blockade City Hall; symbolically locking-up the politicians in their own institutional domain while, they, the young activists, would have the whole city to move around in freely⁸. The movement is still going strong today. Weekly solidarity demonstrations attended by hundreds of people continued until the youngsters recently received the key to a new youth-house. Plans are currently made to involve the sympathisers in the activities of the new house.

It seems the youth that went out on the streets of Norrebro in February 2008 was representing a whole different struggle. A couple of hundred youngsters from immigrant backgrounds left a trace of destruction in the same neighbourhood during one turbulent week. The events were initiated by inhabitants of Norrebro but soon they were joined by other youngsters from different areas of Copenhagen. The Danish media were speculating about the reprinting of the offensive cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in *Jyllandsposten* as a motive for the youngsters to start off the riots, but both the youngsters themselves as well as different police advocates stated that the cartoons did not play an important role in the violent outburst⁹. The police suspected the rioting youngsters to be bored because of the lack of activities in their neighbourhood. Anoir, a Moroccan Danish social worker that works with the youngsters from Norrebro who were involved in the riots, told me in an interview that the youth's frustrations were first of all inspired by the injustice they felt at the hands of the police. The youngsters had told Anoir that the new 'visitation-zones' in their neighbourhood had led to constant 'preventive' searches that went hand in hand with insults by police officers. Perceptions of constantly discriminated and suspected of criminal behaviour put them on edge. When they saw the police were not only insulting them but also a respected older man from the neighbourhood, they flew into rage,

⁸ See: <http://www.ungeren.dk/spip.php?article567>

⁹ See: <http://www.cphpost.dk/get/105730.html>

sparkling of riots. Unlike the youth-house sympathisers, these youngsters were not deliberately trying to stand out from their environment, instead their wish was to blend in. Their goal was not to dissent from the common norms of behaviour, but rather to show that these common behavioural norms of behaviour are stigmatising them against their will.

When analysing my interviews and observations differences between the two cases of rioting first caught attention. The youth-house movement seems to have a lot of elements of a traditional political protest movement: The youngsters involved made comprehensible political statements. From the beginning there was a clear demand¹⁰ and they were capable to communicate their message in a co-ordinate way to the outside world¹¹. The youngsters from immigrant backgrounds seemed to display a more emotionally inspired protest without conscious-political claims. Only with help of a local social worker they were able to communicate their motives in a letter sent to the press¹².

This lack of political focus also became clear in the targets they chose to attack. Where the activists of the youth-house destroyed banks and establishments of multinationals like McDonalds, which they saw as representatives of an oppressive capitalist economy, the youngsters from immigrant backgrounds also attacked the library, schools, local shops and even the office of the social workers that support them. The youth-house activist chose deliberately to destroy symbols of the mainstream culture they detest, while the youngsters from immigrant backgrounds seemed to have worked off their anger more randomly. This difference might lead back to the different values and the different view on social participation of both groups. The youth-house activists are struggling for an alternative for the established society they do not wish to be part of because of their divergent behaviour and convictions, whereas the youngsters from immigrant backgrounds are struggling to be accepted as a full part of the same established society that they would very much like to be invited to. The youth-house activists wish to be seen and respected as different, whereas the youngsters from immigrant backgrounds are seen as different, but wish to be

¹⁰ a new youth-house.

¹¹ See their website <http://www.ungdomshuset.dk/spip.php?page=english>

¹² An article on the letter in The Copenhagen Post: <http://www.cphpost.dk/get/105741.html>

respected as equal. In what follows I will argue that this focus on the differences between the two Copenhagen riots is but a preliminary interpretation of the events.

De-regulating existing structures

In an analysis of the riots that took place in the banlieues of Paris in November 2005, Slavoj Žižek interprets these events as a direct effort to gain visibility in a society in which the rioting youngsters experience themselves to be excluded from the political and social space (2007, p.14). The riots in Paris caused general consternation because the youngsters involved did not refer to any political demands or statements and therefore seemed to perform a senseless outburst of violence. Their political claims were misunderstood because their actions did not seem to imply any rational demands. This misunderstanding shows exactly the lack of visibility of these youngsters. According to Žižek's interpretation, the Parisian rioters did not wish to make any other demand than to be taken serious as citizens of the society that seemed unwilling to accept them. Their struggle for visibility had to be performed in a violent way because the closed rational structure of present-day political order did not leave the youngsters any other option. The sense of their actions therefore lay in its disturbing effect in itself. They pushed their way into public awareness in a rather compelling way. This effort to become visible actors in political and social space can also be seen in both cases of the Copenhagen riots.

Despite the fact that the youth-house activists wish to be respected as different and the youngsters with an immigrant background wish to be respected as equal, one could argue that both groups are not taken serious as political actors and wish to gain access to the public domain. The ways in which both groups of young rioters in Copenhagen expressed their political awareness opposes the discourse of established and traditional democratic political institutions. This discourse is reflected in the organisational structure of several European cities like Paris, Amsterdam and Copenhagen where a consensual hegemony of collaborating technocrats from different institutions like political parties, commercial companies and non-governmental well-fare organizations are ruling public life (Swyngedouw (2007), p. 64). This consensual hegemony seems to account for the demands of every social group in civil society because of its horizontal structure that leaves space for diversity. However, one can only participate within civil

society when expressing oneself in the appropriate ‘civilized’ manner or language, when coming up to so called ‘procedural discursive expectations’ . If one does not speak the appropriate language, one is not taken serious. Outsiders that are not recognised as adjusted citizens are only noticed inside of civil society if they perform some kind of ‘uncivilised’ intervention. From the institutionalised point of view such an ‘uncivilised’ intervention is perceived as a destructive disturbance of the order and controls that is necessary to keep society safe. From the point of view of the rioters, it is the only way to break free of the control mechanisms that keep them off side.

By directly addressing the emotions and fears of others the rioters claim space to influence the political system, pushing for the realisation that the democratic consensus is leaving them out as active participants. This standpoint is best reflected in the interview I had with Gavin about the youth-house riots. Gavin explained to me that the violent riots were not the exciting choice of adventure seeking youngsters, but a last act of despair, because they realised it was the only means they had to break the power monopoly of the institutions that would not allow them their own space. During the days of the riots people were put in detention just for walking in areas where earlier actions had taken place, or just for wearing black clothes. Gavin told me:

“No one felt safe and everyone felt judged, so then you might as well do something [use violence, FK]. More and more people saw it as the only way to confront the strict measures of the police. The riots turned into an all or nothing situation in which people felt like they were defending the last free space in the city. If we would let go, it would be over.”

Where Zizek accepts violence as a necessary means for non-accepted youngsters to gain influence within social and political space, Alain Badiou takes this one step further. It is, according to him, exactly the violently deregulating impact riots have on their environment that make them a genuine political act. For Badiou politics necessarily finds itself outside of institutional areas, because politics is about prescribing new possibilities that are overlooked in existing structures. Politics is not about affirming a status quo, but about localising the undefined spaces that are not covered under the presentation of a current situation. When the flaw in the system is

uncovered in an event, a whole new perspective unfolds before us and new possibilities emerge to rearrange the situation (Badiou, (2005), p. 72). Those revealing these possibilities can transform from meaningless figures on the sideline into subjects whose actions can influence the world.

The deregulating of a current situation and the appointing of the flaws in the existing system is never a comfortable event, it causes turmoil and disorder¹³ (Badiou (2005), p. 100/101). It means rupture and confusion, it turns our world upside down, sometimes in a rather violent way. Youngsters that resist a system that they perceive to be false or unjust are performing a political act, exactly because they deconstruct the existing order. They bring into practice the necessary ‘unbinding’ effect of a political act. Their actions are political because they manage to step outside of the blind spot of the political-institutional structure in which they were non-existent as actors so that they too may influence society. By disrupting this structure they affirm their own power to act.

To stand up against humiliation is to strive for equality

Following Badiou’s theory we can understand how an ‘unbinding’ and disrupting political event that is shared by singular people in a singular moment can make us paradoxically aware of issues with a universal impact concerning all of us. Badiou states that a just political event should be prescribing a genuine equality which is not founded in mechanisms of normalisation. (Badiou (2008))

In both cases of the Copenhagen riots the youngsters involved challenged the perception of ‘normal’ citizens that make a contribution to society. Their violent intervention in the peaceful course of events in the city contests general ideas about what is normal behaviour for a respected citizen. However, the direct and confrontational character of their uprising makes it difficult to ignore their presence. The provocative disruption of the rioting youngsters could make us aware that we are still sharing the same public domain, whether we accept their behaviour or not. In the terms of Badiou we could come to realize that we are in the same world, whether we accept

¹³ The events that take place in such a deregulating situation can’t be predicted nor defined. We can never talk of the politics, but only of diverse singular moments of politics that are each based in a different event and experienced by a different subject. Political truths derived from such events can therefore never become a doctrine, although they do require a full conviction.

it or not (Badiou, 2008). This awareness leads to an understanding of the broader significance of the Copenhagen riots as events prescribing a claim for equality, based on a shared presence in the same world, not on similarity in character, behaviour or belief system.

Fundamental equality does not lie in a shared identity, in who we are, but in the fact that, despite differences of conviction, identity or behaviour, we are in the same world:

...the African worker I see in the restaurant kitchen, the Moroccan I see digging a hole in the road, the veiled woman looking after children in a park. That is where we reverse the dominant idea of the world united by objects and signs, to make a unity in terms of living, acting beings, here and now. These people, different from me in terms of language, clothes, religion, food, education, exist exactly as I do myself; since they exist like me, I can discuss with them-and, as with anyone else, we can agree and disagree about things. But on the precondition that they and I exist in the same world. (Badiou (2008))

An unlimited set of differences is the first and most important thing that characterises the single world we find ourselves in. Exactly because people are always different this is the only just thing we can say of them without being tempted to categorise them. Their equality is therefore not an objective given, but something we decide upon, it is a prescription or a conviction that we decide to follow in every singular political event that we experience again and again.

Political equality is not what we desire or plan; it is that which we declare to be, here and now, in the heat of the moment, and not something that should be. [...] 'Justice' is the qualification of an egalitarian moment of politics in actu. (Badiou (2005), p. 98/99)

Therefore the equality between people is the truth that is produced in an axiomatic way¹⁴ in any event that is aimed at breaking mechanisms of normalisation.

Maybe this truth is best expressed in the jacket that the girl wore who was walking in front of me in the solidarity demonstration for the youth-house that I attended. It had the quote “Un-normal and proud: Fuck Normalization” sprayed on the back of it.

The youth-house sympathisers clearly stood up against mechanisms of normalisation that they perceived to be unjust and that would leave them to be seen as divergent or even unwanted outcasts.

Also in the riots in February 2008 the youngsters who went out on the streets were suffering under mechanisms of normalisation that they perceived as unjust. They felt stigmatised because their identity as young men from an immigrant background is mistrusted and deprives them from the possibility to be respected as normal citizens. The story of one of the boys who explained the motives of the February 2008 riots to the press from his personal perspective makes this confrontation with normalisation mechanisms clear¹⁵. The boy was once stopped by two police officers for a search when he was walking around in his neighbourhood. He did not display any suspicious behaviour but the officers still wanted to strip search him and made him take off his pants on the street. The boy did not dare to protest because he feared the things the police officers were capable to do to him if they took him to the station, considering what they were already doing to him out in the open. According to Anoir, the humiliations the boy

¹⁴ The political truth, like all truths, has an axiomatic character. The axiom prescribes the consistency of our actions without defining what this consistency should look like with help of something outside of the axiom itself. Because the axiom can only point back at itself to explain its validity it can never be generalized or reproduced. For any generalization or reproduction we would have to be able to extract certain elements from the axiom that we could apply in an other setting or context. Since this is an impossibility, the axiom is always singular. We have to declare it to be the truth according to which we are willing to surrender completely with all our thoughts and actions. The axiom prescribes our actions not because we can prove that it is true according to an objective standard, but because we are convinced that it's true.

¹⁵ Anoir told me this story in the interview I had with him, but the story is also present in the letter that the youngster have send to the press. (see footnote 9)

had to undergo symbolised the way many others from the neighbourhood felt at the hands of the police.

This kind of humiliation is being described by Hardt and Negri as a modern torture technique that springs from the overall present control-system that should keep our society safe from the harms that could be inflicted to us by ‘unnormalised’ outsiders or strangers. These outsiders or strangers are not literally outside society, they are amongst us but can be indicated as outsiders because of their behaviour that does not fit the general norm of what is accepted. (Hardt & Negri (2005) p. 19) By making people look ridiculously different from the well-behaved, their inferior position is defined.

The general consensus of what is normal or accepted has become a coercive doctrine within the political order, a doctrine one cannot escape from. Badiou states that a genuine political event should be aimed at breaking this doctrine of a general, normalising consensus. It is only possible to perceive people as equal once there are no categories to divide them into accepted and non-accepted groups. These kinds of categories are always propagated by certain privileged groups that are performing a false politics out of self interest or feelings of resentment. (Badiou, 2005, p.97)

Democracy as a way of direct emancipatory action

For Badiou, the prescription of equality based on a shared presence in the same world can lead to an understanding of democracy as a liberating process. This is an interesting thought because it indicates how youngsters involved in the Copenhagen riots are not only criticising existing political structures but also how their actions can lead to a positive, alternative interpretation of political agency within these existing structures.

Badiou makes clear that granting certain political privileges to people based on categories of nationality or juridical status can never be a completely democratic act, because it necessarily brings other people, who do not belong to the preferred categories, in an a priori unequal or even prejudiced position. A direct political protest against humiliation, normalisation and exclusion on street-level is therefore more democratic than the dividing structure of democracy in institutional context. In Badiou's view democracy as a form of government always runs the risk that it is not properly

representing everybody, because it is inclined to sustain the categorisation of citizens that will benefit privileged groups.

'Democracy' means that 'immigrant', 'French', 'Arab' and 'Jew' cannot be political words lest there be disastrous consequences. For these words, and many others, necessarily relate politics to the State, and the State itself to its lowest and most essential of functions: the non-egalitarian inventory of human beings. (Badiou (2005) p. 94)

Jean Luc Nancy shares this point of view. In his essay "Vérité de la démocratie" (2008) on the heritage of the events of '68, Nancy pleads for a reinvention of democracy as an attitude reflecting the fact that we are always-already-together in the world. Being-in-common with others is a given that does not have to be established by some kind of institutionalised system, it is the way we always-already are. Our most original state of being is always in relation to others; therefor being-together does not have to be realised afterwards. For Nancy democracy is in the first place a state of mind that reflects the awareness of this already being-in-common, even before this state of mind is expressed in a certain organisational form like a state-apparatus or electoral system.

For both Badiou and Nancy democracy is also the state of mind that refuses to bring the common being in a single world under the rule of a consensual, sovereign power-structure. The hegemony of a consensual identity of society or the good citizen should be traversed by democracy as a way of direct emancipatory action that gives freedom to the multiple singularities that make up the world. This kind of democracy is emancipatory because it is aimed at the liberation of those who are not represented in the consensual power structure of governmental democracy.

For Badiou politics can never be seen as means to an end. Politics is not aimed at the implementation of a structure outside of it is own event that will guarantee the control of just and equal relations between people. Politics is always an end in itself, in the sense that only within the political event itself the truth of being on an equal basis can be prescribed, and never outside of it. Consequently, democracy should be seen as the political prescription of equality brought into practice in a singular event.

For Nancy democracy is not a prescription that we have to believe in, it is an infinite regime of meaning that we find again and again in the common being in a single world and that precedes any valorisation of this common being. Before we decide whether the being-in-common is beneficial to us or not, or whether we should support or enhance it, we realise that this initial state of being is the only state of being in which we are together on a completely equal basis. Therefore democracy is not an end, but just the beginning of an infinite search for a means to create space for just politics. For every emancipatory political act we first need democracy as an attitude based in the realisation of the being-in-common. However, democracy as an initial attitude will never guarantee us that the outcome of our political actions will truly be a just situation.

Keeping Nancy in mind, I do not wish to claim that the rioting youngsters of Copenhagen are bringing a new organisation of democracy into practice that should be adopted by others. I simply wish to suggest that we could see their uprising as a search for means to open space for a just politics. One can see democracy as their initial attitude and motivation to strive for genuine equality, but it can be debated whether the actions of the rioters are an appropriate way of searching for equality.

In any case, whether we approve of them or not, both Copenhagen riots can be seen as singular events of genuine politics because of the desire of its actors to strive for equality by breaking an existing and paralysing institutional structure. Experiences of injustice have led the young urban 'troublemakers' to fight exclusion caused by mechanisms of normalisation in a confronting, disturbing and sometimes emotional way. Their 'abnormal' and 'uncivilised' uprising brings the injustice that is produced by the framework of accepted social and political participation to light. By confronting us actively with this injustice, the rioters are showing that they are meaningful political actors in society instead of bored teenagers or passive victims of their deprived life-circumstances. Seeing their actions in this light will also make us aware that our misunderstanding of their behavior is not a sign of their incapacity to make a meaningful contribution to society, but of our incapacity to understand equality as the shared presence in the same world despite any differences.

The spontaneous, rhizomatic and irrational character of riots like the ones in Copenhagen and the Netherlands leads many to think that they just imply

antisocial behaviour, because we tend to recognise relevant political and social behaviour only as such if it has a hierarchical structure and a clear, premeditated political program. I believe that this is rather owing to our incapacity to understand the political value of rhizomatic, irrational direct outbursts like named riots, than it is to the incapacity of the rioters to make a significant contribution to society. I hope to have made that clear by explaining that it is exactly the disrupting impact of such riots that make them a genuine political act. Furthermore it is precisely this disrupting impact that can force us to think about equality, democracy and emancipation in a fruitful and renewing way.

The Copenhagen riots show us that youngsters from different backgrounds and with different ideals can still point at the necessity for a common struggle for equality and emancipation, in actions on street-level, but not necessarily performed in a co-ordinate way. I do not see the events in Copenhagen as an argument to strive at one new, generally organised, movement of resistance. The difference that Hardt and Negri make between the masses that let itself be ruled and the multitude that rules itself comes to mind here. (Hardt & Negri (2005)). For Hardt and Negri the multitude is radically democratic, because it does not accept any central sovereignty that is placed above the rhizomatic network of a multitude of singular and autonomous acting and thinking people. The multitude therefore is a movement of movements, in which groups with at first sight contradictory interests can work together because they struggle against a commonly perceived subordination and for a transformation of existing unjust structures (Hardt & Negri (2005), p. 86/87).

The two Copenhagen riots represented two different struggles, but still some basic similarities can be analysed from both cases. Maybe the rioting Danish youngsters show that a shared struggle for equality could exist once the various urban 'troublemakers' become aware of their common goals. They don't have to be brought together in a single protest-movement, since the singular events of local politics are the battlegrounds where present day emancipatory struggles should be fought out. A mutual recognition of one another as political actors will be enough for the various young rebellious people to support each other in the moments it is needed. In Copenhagen this awareness is already slowly raising. Gavin told me that a lot of youngsters from immigrant backgrounds had helped the youth-house activists to hide in their houses when they were being chased by the police.

Anoir asked me grinning where I thought his rioting clients had gotten the Molotov cocktail from that had destroyed the front door of his office in Februari 2008.

Who knows what this kind of practical and beneficial recognition will lead to in the future?

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