A Natural History Of 'Food Riots'

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> All men are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals
>
> Antonio Gramsci

In the first half of 2008, 'food riots' were much in the news. The streets of the global South and the television screens of the North were filled with angry protesters as the price of grains on world markets doubled or even tripled, pushing staples out of the reach of vast swathes of populations already struggling to get by. Nearly all commentators agree that the price rises that led to these disturbances were an effect of *global* forces, not merely local ones, such as drought or corruption, on which such unrest is typically blamed. Competition for oil, the cost of commercial seed, fertiliser and pesticide, speculation in commodities markets, shifting of grains to use for fuel rather than food, or for livestock rather than people, all have been identified as culprits. Thus, food riots raise anew - and emphatically at a global level - the question of the limits of the market in mediating the distribution of the most basic resources. At the same time, they remind us that *food* is still - despite the shift to 'immaterial labour' in many sectors of the post-Fordist economy and the continuing decrease in the percentage of the human population engaged in agricultural labour - a particularly volatile site of social struggle over *concrete* planetary resources. Not only does the concept of sugar not taste sweet, as Althusser was fond of saying, but you can't put an advertisement for it in your coffee.[1] Even as virtualisation technologies become ever more sophisticated, the World Food Program reminds us that 25,000 people still die in the physical world *every day* from hunger.[2] In this context, food riots can be seen as a critique of the current determination of global priorities for the dissemination of resources, the development of technologies and the deployment of labour, as well as the failures of the market in establishing them justly. As such, they are a praxis whose theoretical implications - in addition to their practical ones-- must be recognised.

This is particularly the case because Neoliberals emphatically claim that the poor *want* what they have to offer, and that human - and even planetary - welfare is vastly improved when regulated by markets. Starving people would be starving in any case, they shrug - or never would have been born - and the poor who are herded into sweatshops, or converted to 'modern' agricultural practices, are 'better off' to have made it onto the lowest rung of the 'value added' ladder as they start the path toward ostensible economic Nirvana. 'The problem of the poorest,' they insist, 'is not that they are exploited, but that they are almost entirely unexploited'.[3] Since they assume that there are

1. Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, Ben Brewster (trans), London, NLB, 1975, p106.

2. See: http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats

3. Martin Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, New Haven, Yale UP, p172.

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evolutionary stages from low to high 'value added' production that every people must pass through on the road to prosperity, they argue that concern with the lot of the poor as they make this ascent is misguided. Global trade, if but allowed to function fully everywhere, in contexts of good governance, will eventually effect a general - though not, of course, equal - prosperity. It will also stave off ecological disaster as GDP rises -and the (putative luxury) of environmental concern increases - because 'negative externalities' such as pollution will be, progressively, 'internalised.' In sum, the neoliberal market is not only the best that we can hope for, but, in the influential assessment of Jagdish Bhagwati, it *already* has a 'human face'.[4]

4. Jagdish Bhagwati, *In Defense of Globalization*, Oxford UP, p30.

While readers of *new formations* probably do not need much encouragement to see these claims as doubtful, my purpose in drawing attention to 'food riots' as *themselves* a refutation of capitalism's 'human face' are two-fold: first, to recognise such resistance from below as an important mode of critique in its own right rather than merely a spontaneous expression of rage requiring post-hoc theorisation by recognised intellectuals, and, more specifically, to return to an appreciation of the importance of globally coordinated *collective conscious struggle* at a time in which even the left in the metropole has been floating models of political praxis that might be seen, in effect, as variants on isolationism: take, for example, the emphasis on the 'weapons of the weak' as diffuse, the fragmentation of subjectivity that (supposedly) undermines the potential for conscious alliances, and, especially, an uncritical affirmation of 'decentered' politics. Food riots, conversely, have long been defended by left historians as sites of conscious collective social intervention, despite claims to the contrary among their colleagues. Indeed, E.P. Thompson emphasised that depicting food riots as mere 'spasmodic' eruptions of the poor, acting without thought or agenda, has allowed conservative historians to evade the far more threatening possibility that the poor might not only have legitimate grievances but also be capable of articulating them in 'direct, popular action ... with clear objectives,' that must be taken seriously.[5] What sets the current uprisings apart, and requires a coda to the story Thompson and his followers have already told, however, is the peculiar conditions of globality in which they unfold, including their theoretical conditions. In other words, the particular way that food riots refuse global market imperatives today has something to teach first world intellectuals about not just practice, but theory.

5. E.P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,' in *Customs in Common*, New York, New Press, 1991, pp185-258.

I begin with obvious, but irreducible facts: not only are food riots self-consciously collective, but they draw attention to the globally-shared concrete world on which we all rely, however 'immaterial' capitalist production may become in its 'tendency'. As one protesting Haitian small farmer put it, simply: 'Our children are hungry and we can't feed them. We know we have a president in this country. So we're forced to get out on the street and cry for help to the people who have the capacity to do something for us'.[6] Instead of shaking our heads in dismay at the apparently passive, dependent and subordinating idiom of the 'cry for help,' which appears merely to call on established authority to effect an adjustment of the status quo, rather than a

6. Vilner Chery, quoted in Mark Schuller, 'Haitian Food Riots Unnerving but Not Surprising,' http://www.worldpress.org/Americas/3131.cfm.

transformation of it, we should pay attention instead to the power of asserting a 'we' and demanding visibility and redress from governments - and the globally-privileged more generally - by groups who are otherwise invisible. If we take seriously Jacques Ranciere's assertion that 'politics exists whenever the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part', then the *political* power of 'food riots' emerges starkly.[7] Unlike quiet acquiescence, or the myriad individual resistances of theft, slacking, grumbling, and so on, or the suicide of indebted farmers, or even the milking of the system in the variety of ways that the 'Invisible Committee' would have us do, food riots are a moment in which atomised suffering is not only *refused* but finds its *collective conscious* expression, and in this, it is a crucial praxis against what I will be calling here, the 'Tragedy of the Private', and, thus, against the core of neoliberal global structural imperatives - as well as many first world theoretical critiques of them. Far from being mindless local expressions of the stomach, food rebellions are instead a profound - global - politics, not least because, as we shall see, if the demands of food rioters were met in any meaningful sense, the whole world would have to be changed.

7. *Disagreement*, Julie Rose (trans), Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, p123.

'FAMINE' AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE PRIVATE

To fully appreciate the political dimension of 'food riots,' we first need to understand why hunger persists. It is not because there are 'too many people,' as is often argued by Malthusian commentators, nor is it because of insuperable impediments in terms of production. To the contrary, from the colonial period on, 'famine' and grain surpluses have often coincided, as the devastating analysis of Mike Davis and others has shown.[8] Davis concludes that the many so-called 'famines' that followed the introduction of market-based agriculture in the colonies during the nineteenth century resulted neither immediately from drought, nor from an absolute lack of food, but from colonial-capitalist policies that made food too expensive for marginalised populations to afford, and encouraged its movement to urban areas from the countryside, or even Europe from the colonies, rather than to locations where starvation was most acute. Similarly - Eric Holt-Gimenez and Raj Patel show - in the postcolonial world, the persistence of hunger has been an effect of specific policies of the World Bank and other international institutions working in the interests of Agri-business, as well as decisions by governments eager to encourage 'development'.[9] That is to say, hunger is often the effect not only of the market, but of the global market. Pervasive metropolitan elite attitudes toward 'development' put an emphasis on cash crops, commercial seed and fertiliser, 'efficiency' and privileging debt repayment in the South. This system benefits farmers who can operate at scale, driving many others to work for larger landowners, or into the slums of the rapidly growing cities, where, the assumption (though often not the reality) is, that they will be employed for wages. Furthermore, so that 'developing' world farmers would

8. *Late Victorian Holocausts*, London, Verso, 2001.

9. *Food Rebellions! Crisis and the Hunger for Justice, Cape Town, Dakar, Nairobi and Oxford*, Pambazuka Press, 2009.

concentrate on cash crops, the World Bank and other powerful institutions urged the global South to import 'cheap' food, especially grain from the US and other major producers, with whom small indigenous farmers cannot compete, which further skewed local production away from staple foods. When the skyrocketing price of oil made both imported grain and commercial agricultural inputs, such as fertiliser, much more expensive, however, this system could not provide even the illusion of working. In addition, highly-intensive commercialised agriculture has produced widespread environmental distress and degradation, which had not been anticipated. We might call these market-induced cumulative costs - such as water poisoning and shortage, extreme vulnerability to food and global commodity prices, soil depletion, and increased under- or un-employment - the 'Tragedy of the Private'.

The 'Tragedy of the Private' is my polemical inversion of the familiar mainstream formulation, 'the Tragedy of the Commons,' which undergirds so much current economic and political policy, the recent celebration of Elinor Ostrom by the Nobel Committee notwithstanding.[10] Indeed, variations on the 'Tragedy of the Commons' - that is, the widespread conviction that individual short-sightedness, greed and self-interest render unprivatised resources doomed to depletion - remains to a large extent the idiom in which rationalisation of private property and the free market takes place. When Garrett Hardin deployed the phrase in 1968, he used it to crystallise his argument that only private property or government regulation could effectively compensate for the perversely self-destructive tendencies of groups of individual actors when confronted with a limited resource.[11] Malthusian and eugenicist in his views, Hardin freely admits that capitalism has its problems; he expresses disappointment, for example, with inheritance law that makes it possible for the genetically inferior to 'inherit millions', but claimed that we are 'willing to put up with it' because alternatives would be worse, and such cases are relatively rare; what he claimed we should not 'put up with', however, were the liberal freedoms of a welfare state, because they corrupted the gene pool on a far more massive scale: 'in a welfare state', he fumes, 'how shall we deal with the family, the religion, the race, or the class ... that adopts overbreeding as a policy to secure its own aggrandizement?' (1246). Education can't work to ameliorate a population crisis, he insists, because appeals to 'conscience' will inevitably fail with some people and they will, necessarily, be the ones who have the most children, and these children (he further assumes) will be equally inclined to 'overbreed' with the ultimate effect of - he seriously proposes this - 'the elimination of conscience from the [human] race' (1246). If this pronouncement were extracted from a Gestapo propaganda manual, virtually every reader would be recoiling with horror; the 'Tragedy of the Commons' nevertheless finds its way into countless social science anthologies, textbooks, classrooms - and policy debates.

It must be underscored as well that these dubious population views are inextricable from Hardin's famous description of a 'commons' and its discontents. In a much-cited passage, he instructs the reader to 'picture a

10. Ostrom was awarded the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economics. In books such as *Governing the Commons*, Cambridge UP, 1990, she suggested that there have been (and are) collectivist as well as state and private solutions to 'commons' dilemmas. See also, 'Revisiting the Commons: Local Lessons, Global Challenges,' *Science*, 9, 1999: 278.

11. 'The Tragedy of the Commons' *Science*, n.s. v. 162, #3859, December 13, 1968: 1243-1248. Page citations for quotations from this essay will appear in the body of the essay.

pasture open to all' (1244). As many critics have pointed out, this 'picture' does not conform to historically-existing 'commons,' which were not 'open to all,' unmanaged and unorganised, but for now I want to focus on Hardin's assumptions about human nature which allow him to propose that each 'herdsman' - without any attempt to consult others, or in any way consider the future - 'as a rational being ... seeks to maximize his gain' by introducing ever more cattle onto a 'commons', with the - inevitable, in his scenario - end result that 'freedom in a commons brings ruin to all' as the land is overgrazed to the point of exhaustion (1244). In other words, the individually 'rational' is the collectively 'irrational'; this contradiction inhabits the core of mainstream economic theory (which assumes that it is an effect of human nature, not historical economic structure). Common resources cannot be shared 'rationally' because individuals are atomised, short-sighted, selfish competitors to the core.

The market antidote to these infelicitous attributes of human nature, which influential strands of classical political and economic theory (for instance Hobbes, Smith) take as given, is to allow individuals to enclose (privatise) resources for their exclusive use, or for exchange on the 'free' market. Market theories assume that a stunning transformation occurs in the 'herdsman' when he owns a pasture: he suddenly becomes not only provident but more industrious as he strives to ensure that 'his' pasture will thrive over the long term - accomplishments of which he is apparently otherwise incapable. As Marx once evocatively put it, indicating a vastly different way of thinking about enclosure: 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it'.[12] If we move from this observation back to Hardin, we can explore a critical question: what if private property produces what it proposes to cure? Above all, this question is raised by the curious return of resource crises at ever expanding scales following the enclosure that is supposed to prevent it: companies that own mines foul the rivers and streams with tailings; factory owners poison the air with chemical by-products; Agri-business saturates the food supply with pesticides that find their way into humans. Mainstream economic theory in the Hardin vein assumes that these problems derive not from the privateness of property, but from residual 'commons' (such as air and water being incompletely privatised). What if we pursue the alternative possibility, however, and consider if it is the habit of exclusion on which enclosure is predicated - an exclusion that encourages 'sanctioned ignorance' concerning anything that does not produce immediate gain, or a promise of ongoing profit, for the owner of a resource? At this level, the problem is not with unclear possession, but instead with where and how capitalism encourages decisions to be made.

Along these lines, it is particularly intriguing to discover that even within economics, the view of homo economicus assumed to be 'natural' by classical economic theory is by no means universal.[13] Some researchers even contend that disciplinary economics itself gives rise to the myth, which becomes self-perpetuating within the field because its own intellectuals are so thoroughly

12. 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,' in *Early Writings*, Rodney Livingstone (trans), New York, Vintage, 1975, p351.

13. A frequently cited essay is one by Robert Frank, Thomas Gilovich and Dennis Regan, 'Does Studying Economics Inhibit Cooperation,' *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7.2, 1993: 159-171.

saturated by it. Students in economics classes tested at the beginning and the end of the term for tendency toward 'cooperative' behaviour manifest a decline in such tendencies, not just in relation to students enrolled in other classes, but with respect to their earlier selves. It has also long been recognised that the 'homo' part of homo economicus was properly a vir economicus because women, differently socialised, were less likely than men to manifest such behaviour. In addition, historically, certain traits desirable to consumerist capitalism - particularly throwaway culture - are by no means 'natural' nor were they easy to instill.[14] Despite all these counter-indications, the notion has persisted among the privileged that utterly localised, thoughtless, wasteful individualist selfishness is irreducibly natural, not ideological.

14. Evan Watkins, *Throwaways: Work Culture and Consumer Education*, Stanford University Press, 1993.

Hardin certainly assumes this to be the case, and yet, at the same time, manages to reveal the ideological conditions - specific historical interests - that give rise to this particular prop of neoliberal theory when he observes that 'most people who anguish over the population problem are trying to avoid the evils of overpopulation without relinquishing any of the privileges they now enjoy' (1243, emphasis added). In other words - though this is not Hardin's emphasis - the disproportionate use of resources (that is 'privileges') by some groups would be another way of framing the 'population' problem. Some years back the UN Human Development Report organised an issue on the topic of global 'consumption'. To raise questions about current 'global priorities', it produced comparative statistics, contrasting annual expenditures in wealthy countries on line items such as cosmetics (8 billion in the US), ice cream (11 billion in Europe), perfume (12 billion in Europe and the US), pet food (17 billion in Europe and the US), cigarettes (50 billion in Europe), alcohol (105 billion in Europe), with the additional costs annually that would be required to provide basic education, clean water, or health and nutrition universally - 6 billion, 9 billion and 13 billion respectively.[15] Mainstream economists could perhaps come up with objections to these numbers, but they would be missing the point, which is that the market does not make ethical choices at this aggregate level possible, and this is, in global (and local) terms, one of its great defects. Privatisation and the market are a means of making resource distributions seem 'rational'. They are, however, instead, a means to sidestep the question of 'justice' in the distribution of resources. Why should the ability to pay alone determine whether one eats or starves, or has access to generally-valued resources?

15. *Human Development Report*, Oxford, 1998, p37.

This is worth asking because even economists have noticed, to their astonishment, that because, apparently, 'people care about fairness', they do not always make 'rational' decisions as 'individuals' (that is, they use criteria other than 'self-interest' in the crudest sense).[16] A much-cited example is of a game in which players are asked to distribute cash resources. One player is given $100 and instructed to divide it between himself and another player any way he wishes, but if the other player refuses the division, than both players will lose the money. Mainstream economics suggests that 'rational' players should accept a $1, or even a penny, but in practice they do not,

16. Gregory Mankiw, *Principles of Microeconomics*, 4th ed., Thomson, 2007, p497-8.

frequently choosing instead to punish the greedy player if he tries to keep most of the money. The crucial lesson of this game is not that individuals can be 'irrational,' which is what mainstream economists take from it, but, rather, it is a reminder of how rarely we are given the opportunity to participate in decisions about the fairness of resource distribution in this way, and that, indeed, if we had a genuine chance to choose, 'fairness' would be one of our major criteria - potentially producing quite different outcomes than 'efficiency' in the market sense, which does not permit such choices.

For example, Ms Consumer is in a US grocery store contemplating the myriad breakfast cereals on offer. From the front of the cart, her three year old is whining for a high-sugar, low-nutrition option she has seen advertised on tv while on a play-date at a friend's house. The mother knows that corporations spend billions on advertising, and employ child psychologists to pitch effectively to them. She also knows that millions of children are starving. She contemplates the potential adverse effects on her child of eating junky food, versus her relief if the child stops crying. She considers, too, the cost to countless other children of the diversion of collective resources to empty calories, as well as to the cajoling of people to buy them. It dawns on her, as she stands there before the vast slough of cereals, that many of the so-called 'choices' she has are rigged and, especially in planetary terms, patently unfair. She knows that she can choose oatmeal over coco-fluffs, and that if most people did so, coco-fluffs would disappear from the market, but she also knows that she has no forum through which to argue that the choices we make about food have palpable effects not only on our own families, but on myriad others, near and far, equivalent to the advertising venues and armies of lobbyists that major corporations have. There is also no site in which people can meet collectively to decide, for example, that the money used to advertise coco-fluffs should be diverted instead to making sure that everyone on the planet has access to clean water.

'Choice', as understood by capitalism, is merely individual, and restricted to what is offered in the marketplace, and therefore is highly limited. Alternatively, treating resources as a 'commons' that we collectively manage - which is not at all the same as assuming that they should be controlled by government bureaucracy - would be a way to promote such a 'social' perspective in place of the atomised 'individualist' one of the capitalist market, in which thinking about the effect of one's choices on others never need be part of the conscious equation, because market choices are, by definition, indifferent, except insofar as they (putatively) satisfy individuals. This is where the current politics of the 'commons' emerges most palpably: it requires us to focus on the justice of aggregate global distributions of resources, not merely the 'choices' that isolated individual 'consumers' make.[17] For this reason, mechanisms of global aggregate choice must be developed to inflect choices consciously at all levels. In other words, a global 'resource distribution' forum alone is unlikely to solve our current crises; rather, the global must be inserted consciously as a moment of more 'local' choices, in direct confrontation with

17. Thus, as compelling as it is in its potential for immediate re-distribution of wealth, Peter Singer's model of increased voluntary individual charity on the part of citizens in the global North – within the context of private property and the market as we know it – is ultimately problematic because its focus on individual 'charity' does not address the problem of the injustice of distribution in the first place. *The Life You Can Save*, New York, Random House, 2009.

the sanctioned ignorance that capitalism encourages. At the same time, the conditions in which choices are made must be equalised more fully so that 'choice' is a more fair and meaningful indicator of actual desire.

Jagdish Bhagwati, after all, claims that globalisation has a 'human face' not only because he assumes that the path toward a developed market delivers incremental improvement to both societies and the environment, but because he perceives the poor to be exercising 'choice' in opting for migration, or in accepting the very working conditions and wages that Northern protesters find so shockingly oppressive. He explains that the global market in affective labour, for example, is desirable, whatever costs it may incidentally exact:

> The migrant female worker is better off in the new world of attachments and autonomy; the migrants' children are happy being looked after by their grandmothers, who are also happy to be looking after the children; and the employer mothers, when they find good nannies, are also happy that they can work without the emotionally wrenching sense that they are neglecting their children. In short the idea of the global care chain as a chain that binds rather than liberates is almost certainly a wrongheaded one.[18]

18. Ibid., p77-8.

In support of these assertions he offers the case of 'our own maid of many years from Haiti, who escaped from an abusive husband'.[19] This is his *sole* evidence that such women are 'better off' and that they have 'choice' in a meaningful sense, though we never hear any independent confirmation of the story from her directly *and* he complains about the incomplete sample offered by scholars who argue the opposite case!

19. Ibid., p77.

It is hardly an argument in capitalist globalisation's favour, however, that women are now offered 'choices' on a planetary scale that were already unjust when demanded locally in, for example, the Jim Crow Southern United States. 'Mammys,' after all, continued to care for the children of white families, even after the abolition of slavery, in order to feed their own. This arrangement can be recognised as an improvement on chattel slavery without conceding that it is either fair or 'voluntary', since the 'choice' can be seen as falsely and unfairly restricted to negatives. Similarly, the global market in affective labour often places women in a double bind. A thought experiment can focus us on the problem here: what if Northern (hemisphere) children had to be shipped today to their Southern (hemisphere) nannies, and thus the first world parents deprived of contact with their children rather than the other way around; would the arrangement seem so felicitous then? How might the globe look different, one might well wonder, if every decision-maker, local and global, had to answer to the imperative: 'would you be willing to decide thus even if you personally, or your family, had to bear this decision's most oppressive cost?' One would not have to be a 'saint' to think differently about the planet than 'the market' does if *these* were the terms.[20] Forcing every decision to be based on an accounting of the distribution of *total* costs, with a careful eye to

20. 'Those who condemn the immorality of liberal capitalism do so in comparison with a society of saints that never existed – and never will', Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, op. cit, p57.

the context in which they are made - a more refined version of 'internalising externalities' - would move these decisions consciously and *ethically*, rather than merely accidentally (when at all), toward justice.

The market's own primary mechanism for 'internalising externalities' - raising prices - fails in at least two senses. First, as food riots indicate, price rises in basic commodities disproportionately affect the poor. Choosing between eating and clean water or school fees is not at all the same as choosing between a Porsche and a Ferrari (or even a Toyota and a Honda). Second, 'market' mechanisms not only reinforce the global and local inequality necessary to capitalism, but they tend to promote making the smallest possible adjustments to the status quo in order to remedy environmental damage and other problems, always in ways consistent with corporate profits and the continued privilege of the few. Bhagwati cites, approvingly, the following description of the desirable trajectory out of poverty for factory workers in the global South: 'when they started, the workers came on foot. Then they got motorbikes. Now they drive cars … Everyone wants to work here, but it is hard to get in'.[21] For Bhagwati and other free market advocates, this ostensibly happy scenario is evidence of the need for *more* 'globalisation' so that it would not be so hard for the workers to 'get in'. But as even some right wing observers have come to realise, there is a severe limit to this fantasy, which raises the problem of 'too many Toyotas' - the dilemma, that is, of '3 billion people … with … the American dream, a house, a car, a toaster and a microwave', as Thomas Friedman, of all people, has recently worried.[22] Where will the concrete *resources* for the generalisation of such high-consumption, planet-ravaging, dreams come from? Interviewed by the *International Herald Tribune* in the Spring of 2008, Bhagawati himself observed that the current food crisis, unlike previous ones, such as the period of 'tight supply' in the early 1970s, could not be attributed to natural causes (such as drought), but was instead clearly due to *increased consumption* (biofuels and higher demand in India and China are his two main examples).[23] However, this does not lead him (or Jeffrey Sachs, also consulted in the interview) to consider grossly disproportionate global consumption of the global North to be a problem; instead they call for technological fixes such as agricultural research and more nuclear energy. It is not surprising that the privileged would prefer such fantastical assessments of the situation, assessments which are refuted, I have been suggesting, by food riots, which make visible the costs of the world according to Neoliberals by drawing attention to the groups who disproportionately bear those costs.

At the same time, however, it makes visible a blind spot in many recent theories and movements in the global North that urge a 'decentred' politics. For example, *L'insurrection qui vient (The Coming Insurrection)*, a pamphlet issued in France in the wake of the banlieue uprisings by an avowedly radical anonymous group calling itself the 'Invisible Committee' has achieved prominence among Northern activists after being declared terroristic by the Sarkozy government.[24] In a language familiar from many such recent Euro-

21. Ibid., p53.

22. 'Transcript of an IMF Book Forum—The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century,' http://www.imf.org/external/np/tr/2005/tr050408bf.htm

23. 'Bhagwati and Sachs on the food crisis,' May 7, 2008, http://blogs.iht.com/tribtalk/business/globalization/?cat=11

24. Semiotexte has issued a print edition of an English translation, but the book is also available for free (in English and French) at: http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/texts/the-coming-insurrection/ Page numbers in the text are to the 'booklet' format of the English translation that can be downloaded from this site, which also includes press materials concerning the controversy the pamphlet has given rise to in France.

US theoretical interventions, it proposes succession from the 'Empire' of capitalism, by urging the reader to refuse participation in the formal economy, and, instead, to shoplift, squat and so on. At the same time it proposes the forming of 'communes' with two immediate functions: bringing the norms of everyday neoliberal existence into crisis by 'sabotaging the social machine' - impeding flows of traffic, information, commodities and so on - as well as learning the skills necessary to survive the collapse of the current order that the authors propose will eventually result from the escalation of such incursions from numerous independently-acting small groups, each taking encouragement from the example of the other, without needing to coordinate their efforts formally.

There are many problems with this proposal in my view, but what I want to focus on here is its Eurocentrism - not the explicit Eurocentrism of its address to the 'children of the metropolis', but the implicit Eurocentrism of the 'decentred' politics it promulgates to them. What the 'Invisible Committee' calls the necessary 'self sufficiency' of communes rejects 'organisation' and conscious decision-making, privileging instead face to face community and the supposed absolute freedom of each member of each commune: 'each person should do their own reconnaissance, the information would then be put together, and the decision will occur to us rather than being made by us. The circulation of knowledge cancels hierarchy; it equalises by raising up. Proliferating horizontal communication is also the best form of coordination among different communes, the best way to put an end to hegemony' (82). According to the committee, diffusion of 'power' also means that insurrection in any location will have globally liberatory effects: 'power is no longer concentrated in one point in the world ... Anyone who defeats it locally sends a planetary shock wave through its networks.' But can this 'shock wave' really be counted on to be liberatory in its effects in all locations? After all, its emphasis on 'self-sufficiency' and 'self organisation' in purely local terms, manifestly privileges those 'communes' who already inhabit sites where infrastructure is highly developed, and where resources are ample, and sanctions a problematical ignorance about the global effects of its actions. The advice to milk the 'welfare state,' for example, is obviously of no use to the majority of the planet's inhabitants who have no such infrastructure to exploit - people, who, to the contrary, are already deprived of their share of global resources so that the North can maintain such an infrastructure. In this sense, the 'invisible' communes might be instead seen as blind.

Likewise, the Invisible Committee's image of communists who 'circulate freely from one end of the continent to the other, or even across the world without too much trouble' is obviously not describing choices easily available to most people in the world, or even the choices of people worried about their carbon footprint, much less disproportionate use of global resources. In short, the Invisible Committee, in evading the question of how to deal with planetary limits, and, especially, the uneven distribution of resources, such as water, whose availability in many parts of the globe has reached crisis, crisis

that cannot be solved in merely 'local' ways, encourages the perpetuation of inequalities on a global level, however successful individual European communes might be in establishing their autonomy. A truly liberatory commune, alternatively, must - consciously, painstakingly and, above all, collectively, in global terms - take into account the planetary consequences of all 'local' choices, or there is no guarantee its choices will be any more just than market ones would be. We need, thus, I suggest, to be particularly attentive to the quite different mode of critique that 'food riots' enact: Global Natural History.

NATURAL HISTORY

In its modern form, Natural History emerged as part of the Enlightenment attempt to free mankind from myth as a largely descriptive project, a putatively neutral collecting and classifying of a vaguely defined, presumably unchanging, 'nature,' in order to know and control it. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer proposed that poverty persisted after the triumph of Enlightenment not because the market or technology were under-developed, but because capitalism forces humanity to develop one-sidedly, privileging 'reason' in individual thought rather than in social relations, and encouraging antagonism with 'nature' as a direct effect of this preoccupation with control.[25] Furthermore, ostensibly 'rational' Enlightenment man is, ironically, saturated with his own 'mythical' thinking, such as the ideology of *homo economicus*, which justifies not only the violent domination of nature by men, but also the subordination of the majority of men to a minority, undermining the possibility of human mutuality and imperilling the long-term survival of the planet. Defenders of the market have responded with repeated claims that alternatives are either undesirable, impossible, or both, no matter what the cost of reproduction of the capitalist system may be. In this way, history - conditions constructed by people - are relentlessly transformed into 'second nature' - a set of circumstances from which there is, seemingly, no working exit. Against this normalisation of capitalism, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that, while class structure remains intact, domination and human misery must also. At the same time, they transform 'Natural History' from a descriptive and 'neutral' project into a consciously philosophical and critical one, a deploying of the concepts of 'nature' and 'history' in ways that unsettle reified thought.

25. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Edmund Jephcott (trans), Stanford, Stanford UP, 2002.

Dialectic of Enlightenment does not, then, provide a recipe for critique, but assumes that historical conditions and the specificity of the situation faced by the critic will prompt the necessary corrective practice. To think through the 'food riots' of 2008, we might then ask, how do 'history' and 'nature' confront each other as mutually corrective concepts in this case? And what can we learn from this confrontation? First we need to keep in mind that food riots contest the Neoliberal evolutionary model of 'emerging' economies and faith in salvation by technology, exposing them to be an effect of 'second nature',

a recognition which underscores that there is *nothing natural* about starvation today. It results from definite *historical* choices. At the same time, the food riots' calling attention to history in this way by no means implies that 'nature' is no longer relevant - to the contrary, 'first nature' cries out in both hunger and in the degradation of planetary resources. As an antidote, they insist on the importance of treating the concrete world in its specificity as a *moment* - albeit not an exclusive one - of any materialist analysis.[26] Finally, food riots indicate that there is an extra-academic dimension to the conceptual analysis urged by Adorno, which furthermore provokes recognition of the global situation of any current confrontations of 'nature' and 'history.'

The so-called 'Green Revolution,' as well as supposed 'food aid' from the US, are two telling examples of the current limits imposed by the market in the quest to end hunger sustainably. They demonstrate the need for a long historical view, as well as a careful assessment of the distribution of planetary resources, in any analysis of 'food riots'. Not only has US food aid, despite common misperception among its citizens, always been pitifully small in relation to GDP, but it has typically been linked to purchases from powerful agribusiness and shipping companies, such that instead of supporting agriculture in the global South, US food surplus is transported to the target destination, a benefit for US corporations more than the supposed beneficiaries.[27] Meanwhile, the 'Green Revolution,' an agribusiness plan to convert Southern agriculture to commercial seed, fertiliser and pesticide, with promise of 'high yield', has actually, in the long run, produced crippling debt, ravaged soil and serious water shortages, since the new methods have proved far more resource intensive than traditional ones. These ecological costs are joined by human ones: a rash of suicides has followed in the wake of failed farms, drinking water poisoned, and soils rendered inhospitable to *any* agriculture. To call these deaths and planetary denigrations the cost of progress is dubious, since the so-called 'progress' has itself proved equivocal.[28] This is by no means to say that the world should return to universally pre-technologised agriculture, but rather to suggest that technological priorities, when they are managed by the likes of Monsanto, do not lead inevitably to the collective global benefits Bhagwati, Wolf, *et al* prognosticate.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's terms, the assumption that, *eventually*, the 'market will provide' is not only a fantastical *deus ex machina*, brought in to save the plot of capital when it come up against constraints or contradictions, but, more specifically, 'technology', even when it does appear, often proves a false god because of the limits and unintended consequences of the market-determined use of it. Food riots, in response, can be seen as a refusal to worship at this shrine - a mode of resistance through which the most oppressed have raised critical questions about the ethics of resource distribution, bringing received understandings of both nature and history into crisis. As such, their return today enacts an intervention, however unrecognised, in current mainstream debates about the merits of neoliberal globalisation, as well as attempts to imagine alternatives to it that emerge from radical theory, where

26. The work of 'materialism', as any other concept, must be flexible enough to remain critical as situations change. In other circumstances, it might be necessary to deploy the concept with more attention to its 'social relations' aspect. See, for example, my 'Oh, Dear, What Can the Matter Be?', *Early Modern Culture*, 1, http://emc.eserver.org/1-1/bartolovich.html.

27. Sophia Murphy and Kathy McAfee, *U.S. Food Aid, Time to Get it Right*, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, 2005.

28. These issues have made their way into the mainstream news, such as Mark Doyle's 'The Limits of a Green Revolution?,' http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/6496585.stm; For more extensive discussions, see Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: The Hidden Battle for the World Food System*, Melville House, 2008; Jack Kloppenberg, *First the Seed: the Political Economy of Plant Biotechnology*, 2nd edition, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

global inequality is frequently viewed as an effect of the 'enclosure' of resources that are properly common. This trope is explicit and widespread in the work of activist-intellectuals, such as Vandana Shiva or Antonio Negri or Naomi Klein, and implicit, I would suggest in food riots.

What I am proposing here, however, is much more than that an echo from the street finds its way into theoretical interventions on the pages of books and journals - or vice versa. To the contrary, what is remarkable about food riots is that they emphasise the body in a different way than as the language and affect producers that get the most emphasis in theoretical accounts such as Hardt and Negri's, which focuses on the immaterial:

> in the paradigm of immaterial production ... labor tends to produce the means of interaction, communication, and cooperation for production directly. Affective labor always constructs a relationship. The production of ideas, images, and knowledges is not only conducted in common ... but also each new idea and image invites and opens new collaborations. The production of languages, finally, of the natural languages and artificial languages, such as computer languages and various kinds of code, is always collaborative and always creates new means of collaboration.[29]

29. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, New York, Penguin, 2004, p147.

I do not dispute Hardt and Negri's assertion that the 'tendency' of advanced capitalism is to increase its reliance on 'service' and 'affective' labour as machines replace immediate human inputs in industrial production, or factories migrate to regions unsaturated by capital in search of 'cheap' labour. What I do find strange or misleading in many descriptions of 'biopolitical' production, however, is that its computer languages often seem to circulate without computers, its 'services' seem to transcend offices, telephones, or transport systems, and its 'communication' seems to emanate from people who do not eat, live in houses, wear clothes, or drive cars. Conversely and emphatically, the theoretical and practical intervention that food riots make is an insistence on the concrete object-world of 'first' nature - food, water, body, earth, air and other resources - without which there is no language, no affect, no theory, no dreaming. Hence, a moment of 'crude materialism' is called for because it is so often utterly ignored by 'cutting edge' theory. Man may not live on bread alone, but he doesn't live on 'symbolic analysis' alone either, and without constant attention to the dialectic with/of concrete nature, our long-term existence on this planet is surely imperilled.

30. Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, op. cit., p320.

Above all, however, calling attention in this way to the physical demands of the global marketplace indicates a lacuna in defences of the market, which hold out the carrot of Western consumption to those excluded from it despite the manifest impossibility of its generalisation. Indeed, when we consider the long-term implications of disproportionate global use of resources 'rationally,' it becomes stunningly evident that it's capitalism that is 'utopian'- in the derogatory sense of being unrealisable - for implying that the phantasmagoria of consumer capitalism as we know it can, eventually,

31. Hardt captures this questionable 'Autonomist' (others might say questionably Autonomist) view of consumption

be available to all. Market apologists frequently lament that 'the sight of the affluent young of the west wishing to protect the poor of the world from the processes that delivered their own remarkable prosperity is depressing' - and suggest that, were it not for these misguided youth, and the incomplete project of capitalist globalisation, western prosperity already would saturate the globe.[30] I am constantly left wondering, however, how such market-utopians imagine that the nearly 25 per cent of the global oil input consumed every day by the US alone - less than 5 per cent of the global population - is to be generalised. Presumably, they can sweep such questions under the rug, because they imagine that the day of reckoning, when the splendid market saturation would occur, ostensibly putting a car in every driveway, would be far, far in the future - too far for them to be held accountable by the billions promised this vision, and never delivered it. The real crime of this impossible promise, however, is that it obviates the possible: everyone's more basic needs might be met - sustainably - right now, if global resources were treated as common instead of the rightful possession of the highest bidder.

From this perspective, the entire way of life in the North is necessarily, in global terms, unjust. Furthermore, to the extent that even activists in the metropole nurture an (un)conscious wish that global change will cost them nothing, or very little, or that they can change their own local conditions for the better without considering - explicitly and consciously - possible negative effects on others across the globe, radical theory, too, can participate in an unconscionable blindness - a blindness that theories such as Hardt and Negri's and The Coming Insurrection unfortunately - in different ways - encourage.[31] Food riots, in this context, offer a crucial grounding corrective to both right and left utopianism by refusing to defer a more equitable global distribution of resources to some ever-distant future, and by insisting on the irreducible concreteness of the world - including human bodies and our collective dialectic with 'nature'. To suggest this is by no means to say that food riots are the spontaneous, unthinking outburst of biological 'nature' in the rioters, as historians have often suggested was the case with their early modern European counterparts.[32] To the contrary, food rioters past and present inevitably, and often pointedly, protest the inequality of resource distribution and the conditions that maintain it, at the same time as they express the effects of immediate physical hunger.

Recognised intellectuals need to learn to listen to this eloquent refusal of patient suffering because neoliberal deferring of social justice to the (ever receding) future is, like the old priests' promise of heaven, a particularly insidious ruse of modernity. Adorno and Horkhiemer reminded us already in the 1940s that 'the idea of "exploiting" the given technical possibilities, of fully utilising the capacities for aesthetic mass consumption, is part of an economic system which refuses to utilise capacities when it is a question of abolishing hunger'.[33] Because as a dialectician, he refused to view technologies - or any other aspect of the world - in isolation, Adorno returned again and again to an insistence that the development of certain technologies and not

succinctly in his 'Introduction,' with Paolo Virno, to *Radical Thought in Italy*, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, where he objects to those who would 'predicate revolutionary struggle on a denial of the pleasures offered by capitalist society' and proposes that 'the path we find here [in Autonomia], by contrast, involves no such denial, but rather the adoption and appropriation of the pleasures of capitalist society as our own, intensifying them as a shared and collective wealth', p7. Such a view problematically presumes that the 'pleasures' of 'capitalist society' are not ideological, and that they are, indeed, generalisable, both of which are highly unlikely propositions, especially in global terms, which, here, as is often the case in Euro-directed arguments, is not even taken into account.

32. E.P. Thompson influentially showed this view to be unfounded. For an important attempt to understand modern food riots in relation to these earlier struggles, see John Walton and David Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots: the Politics of Global Adjustment*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1994.

33. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* , op. cit, p111.

others is neither innocent nor natural, even when their histories appear to be an effect of chance, or to offer a collective benefit. Indeed, the relative balance in today's technological advancements make it far easier for images of hunger to be displayed on television (and, now, computer and cell phone screens) in the North than for starvation in the global South to be obliterated, while the increasing commodification of agricultural resources (land, knowledge, seed, labor, etc.), regularly disrupts research that might address production and distribution in more just and equitable ways. Prioritisation via the market does not ask any questions beyond the ability to pay, giving disproportionate power to money as a 'vote' for a particular resource use, and to 'creating jobs' as a justification for a whole host of attendant inequalities and disproportionate power, without asking if the 'jobs' are worth the doing in the first place, if they use resources sustainably, or if there might be a way to organise labour without exploiting it. To leave such 'decisions' to the market, then, is inevitably to support privilege in the guise of neutrality, 'choice' and equal 'opportunity' that the market supposedly offers. Recognising food riots as a protest against current common mainstream neoliberal assumptions - especially that the oppressed should wait for justice - foregrounds their power as 'Natural History' in an - expanded - Frankfurt School sense. To underscore this, a historical excursus would be helpful.

EMERGENCE OF FOOD RIOT AS CRITIQUE

In early modern England, when capitalism - and liberalism - were emergent, the social loss entailed in the shift to the now-triumphant individualist perspective was still manifest. Food and enclosure riots were frequent and, in the eyes of later historians, to be expected in local situations when suspect price rises or other challenges to traditional rights of ordinary people were undermining what E.P. Thompson influentially has called the 'moral economy' - 'a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices ... grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations'.[34] Prior to the middle eighteenth century, 'the commons' were not only still widespread, concrete working agrarian spaces in England, but also symbolic ones: sites in which resource distribution, and how it should be determined, were a matter of concern to the widest swathe of the rural population, who asserted under this sign - and in practice - the limits beyond which they would not accept their own exclusion from control over access to food, fuel and other means of subsistence. This is by no means to suggest that the actually-existing traditional commons were either equitable or democratic - they were not - but they were frequently a flashpoint of popular claims on vital resources. Thus, food and enclosure riots can be seen not only as objects of interpretation by scholars, but, as agents of exposure in their own right - a making manifest of the conditions and relations in which its participants are inserted: 'claims' in the argument sense, rather than the 'rights' sense alone.

34. Thompson, *Customs in Common*, op. cit., p188.

These claims achieved perhaps their most highly developed early modern form in the seventeenth century English Digger 'riots,' as they were called by troubled authorities. Unlike 'rioters' as they are now typically understood, the Diggers produced a sustained, self-conscious and emphatic critique of unequal distribution of resources.[35] Taking the most radical claims of the reformers of church and state in the 1640s at their word, the Diggers insisted that their 'freedom,' too, should have been secured by the execution of Charles I, an event that, they pointed out, should have broken the 'Norman Yoke' and its insidious legacy of private property that gave some men unequal control of resources and made all the rest their 'slaves' (370). In 1649, when it became evident that political, economic and even religious and social reforms of the civil wars were going to be very limited, despite the beheading of the King, the Diggers occupied 'waste' [unused] land, building their houses there, settling their families and animals on it, and planting crops. To justify these activities, they produced a systematic and wide-ranging critique - from below - of the institutional structures of private property, law, the church, 'correcting houses' and so on - through which inequality, even to the point of starvation, was maintained in the world that they inhabited. More important, they acted on this critique, thereby capturing the attention of authorities, who were quick to suppress them violently, burning their houses and crops, beating them and their animals, prosecuting and persecuting them relentlessly, indicating the seriousness of the threat that their example offered, entirely disproportionate to the size of the communes themselves.

The authorities responded so brutally because Digger encampments were at root - as food riots, I want to suggest, always are - protests against 'privilege' understood as the inequitable distribution of resources. Diggers were not seeking access alone to grain, but to the means of producing it, so that they would be relieved not only of hunger but of economic and social subordination. Above all, they refused waiting for a heavenly reward for their suffering, thereby leaving earthly happiness to the rich and powerful, who maintained their position by keeping resources from them, and exploiting their labour. Diggers, thus, even go so far as to assert - in support of their refusal to live in misery, patiently waiting for God's reward in the afterlife - that it is their responsibility to reverse the Fall in the here and now by living according to the commonality and mutual love to which man had been intended by God in the 'Creation'. Tyranny and inequality in their view are the Fall, such that man perpetuates Fallen conditions by living according to the norms of private property rather than redeemed principles, to the disgust of the Creator:

> For truly the common-people by their labours, from the first rise of Adam, this particular interest upheld by the fleshes law to this day, they have lifted up their Landlords and others to rule in tyranny and oppression over them. And let all men say what they will, so long as such are Rulers as cals the Land theirs, upholding this particular propriety of Mine and

35. Gerrard Winstanley complains that 'digging upon the Commons for a livelihood, is no Riot, though some Justices would make it; for they [Diggers] do not fight against any. And their meeting together, is no unlawfull or riotous meeting, unlesse the gathering together of many people in one field, to dig, plow or reap be a Riot, or an unlawfull meeting' (432, emphasis added). All quotations from the Digger Pamphlets are from *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, George H. Sabine (ed), Ithaca, Cornell UP, 1941, and will be given parenthetically in the body of the text.

> Thine; the common-people shall never have their liberty, nor the Land ever freed from troubles, oppressions and complainings; by reason whereof the Creator of all things is continually provoked (159).

From first to last, then, Digger writings are infused in these terms with the urgency of changing the world, not just interpreting it. Furthermore, Digger pamphlets recognise that the struggle in which they are engaged is by no means a merely local one, nor even national, but properly one of the 'whole world', as numerous of their pamphlets claimed.[36]

36. *A Declaration from the Poor Oppressed People of England*, for example, is signed by a group of Diggers 'for and in behalf of all the poor oppressed people of England, and the whole world', p277.

The Diggers' early resistance to inequality and incipient market rationality lays out an alternative view of the commons to Hardin's now far more familiar one. It is also important to recognise, given the widespread dismissal of socialism on the grounds that it has had a chance and has not worked, that the Diggers did not fail, but were suppressed to make way for the generalisation of private property and the world of unequal access to resources we still inhabit now. The developed capitalist market enacts this suppression in more subtle ways, but it continues to enact it, as its models of development counsel the patient waiting of the poor and exploited for distant rewards which, for the majority, cannot ever come given not only the limits of the planet, but of capitalism, which requires inequality to function. 'Technological' solutions, as even Hardin recognised, cannot be presumed to magically appear when needed, and, more important, as Adorno pointed out, the technologies that do appear answer to the imperatives of profit, not justice. Meanwhile, generalised sanctioned ignorance concerning the deleterious effects of capitalism, and a naturalisation of its functioning, has underwritten the rationalisation of the misuse and overuse of resources by global elites. Movements from below, on the other hand, whether the 'Diggers' of seventeenth century England, or the struggles of food rioters, peasant insurgents and urban squatters today, groups in whom the Diggers' long disappointed hopes now cry out, challenge such privileged blindness, and thus keep alive the dream - and demand - for a radical commons.

I underscore 'radical' commons because I am not proposing regression - a going back to the 'traditional' commons, which were not sites of equality, though they did, as the agrarian historian Joan Thirsk has observed, keep 'alive a vigorous co-operative spirit in the community' which inculcated 'the discipline of sharing things fairly with one's neighbors,' producing yet another example of the ways in which, when we take the long historical view, it is evident that homo economicus is not 'natural'.[37] Currently planetary requirements, if not ethics, demands we re-cultivate this spirit of 'sharing fairly'. Neoliberals propose that any such attempt can only result in generalised misery, or at least asceticism: 'an extreme egalitarian might take the view that a world in which everybody was an impoverished subsistence farmer would be better than the world we now have, because it would be less unequal'.[38] But this characterization of our choice, like that of the 'voluntary' choice of the poor to their lot in EPZs, is a false one. Combating privatisation will not require a

37. 'Enclosing and Engrossing', in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. IV, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1967.

38. Wolf, *Why Globalization Works*, op. cit., p140.

return to 'subsistence farming', but it will require rethinking the distribution of resources in a world in which the majority are obliged to live below subsistence, while the minority indulge in wasteful consumption. One need not agree with every tenet of Raj Patel's 'food sovereignty' platform, then, to realize that the current food system must be transformed in ways that will entail 'reclaiming ourselves from choices made for us' by agribusiness. The market that supposedly gives us 'free' choices, has, in other words, been depriving us of the most important ones all along: choices about aggregate distribution of vital resources, of sustainability, of health and taste, of, in Thirsk's words, 'sharing things fairly with one's neighbors', which she identifies as the great loss we entailed with enclosure, the process that I have been calling 'the Tragedy of Privatisation'.

Food riots indicate that this ethic has not lost its purchase in the popular imaginary. Holt-Gimenez and Patel thus insist on calling them 'food *rebellions*' - actions that contest an unjust global 'food system' which situates most people in a structurally unequal and highly vulnerable relation to the most basic planetary resources. 'We understand the game that the government is playing', challenged an aggrieved food rioter in Haiti, referring to its corruption and support of privileged interests, indicating a more sophisticated view of the situation than is usually allowed to 'rioters'.[39] Food rioters mistrust of the 'game of politics' as it is typically played resonates not only with a long history of insurgents from below, such as the Diggers, who, as we have seen, were also denounced for inciting 'riot,' but also indicates their continuity with a host of current resource struggles across the globe. Indeed, the 'Zapatistas' and other peasant militants have captured land, lived communally, and issued manifestos - providing an interesting and important example of Digging in the late twentieth century, using old techniques, and new, as they make a claim on resources from which they have been excluded, in an idiom familiar from earlier Diggers, though secularised and fully inserted into the digital technologies of a late capitalist globalising world. It is evident to them that their localities are bound up in a set of global relations that are an effect of history, and, thus, are irreducible. There is no 'autonomous' local. We are all at this point, willy-nilly, bound up in the effects of global warming, resource limits, and other 'common' conditions of global existence - albeit not currently equally, or justly - but we are not doomed to these conditions.

39. Anonymous Haitian interviewee, quoted in 'Deadly Food Riots in Haiti', April 7, 2008, http://www.reuters.com/article/americasCrisis/idUS12075580124.

Hence members of 'Via Campesina' - a transnational peasant's movement - creates global alliances and conducts its analysis at a planetary, as well as a local, level. In Brazil, for example, the 'Movimento dos Trabalhadores Ruais Sem Terra' (Movement of Landless Peasants), not only links up with peasants across the globe, but also workers in the cities. In a recent communiqué, it observes why global coordination is necessary, and why Northern communities cannot at this point simply promote 'autonomous' communes: no group can delink from a world in which we are all already implicated in concrete historically-produced *planetary* effects. They explain:

> The felling of forests by agribusiness and the large number of cars produced in the last period to save the crisis has further aggravated the environmental problems, forcing the world to discuss global warming and its consequences for humanity. In addition, intensive farming and the agribusiness production model - based on the misuse of agricultural machinery and poisons - increased the environmental imbalance in rural areas ... The governments of the countries most responsible for creating imbalances remain the same, increasingly unreasonable and irresponsible. Finally, in the end, they do not want to change their pattern of consumption, or their privileges, which are paid for by all mankind. The international Via Campesina (peasant movement) and the environmental movement have evaluated the situation well: only popular mobilisation can now save the life on the planet.[40]

40. http://www.mstbrazil.org/?q=node/635.

The key point for Northern theorists and activists in all this is that, in such a world, simply opting out of the formal economy in the North cannot by itself repair such damage or disproportion, nor can it ensure that destabilisation caused by Northern activists in pursuit of their own interests would not extract terrible costs in the global South. Even in the North, then, the needs of the South must be *prioritised* in any radical struggle - and this requires conscious, collective, global coordination.

Food riots and other resource rebellions in the South, then, insist that we remember that our reliance on common planetary resources is *global*. With its own food production infrastructure destabilised by transnational forces, its land and water poisoned, its knowledge stolen, its tiniest villages increasingly dependent on imports of staples and exports of cash crops, *any* decisions made in the North about fundamental resources will impact upon it. Northern radicals cannot simply ignore that this is so. And it is not only the countryside that is impacted by the volatile global food system. Now that as much of the Earth's population - for the first time in human history - inhabits the city as the countryside, urban variants to Digging - which is to say, claims on belonging and resources that slum dwellers make - are increasingly politically significant. Social justice movements such as Abahlali baseMjondolo in South Africa are fervent in their insistence that the revolutionary energy and promise of the anti-apartheid struggle cannot stop at the borders of the shanty-towns. In the seventeenth century the Diggers complained to Cromwell, 'is not this a slavery ... that though there be Land enough in England, to maintain ten times as many people as are in it, yet some must beg of their brethren, or work in hard drudgery for day wages for them, or starve, or steal, and so be hanged out of the way, as men not fit to live in the earth' (507). Today, participants in urban squatter resistance movements, such as Abahlali baseMjondolo, similarly ask why they must eat, wear, and build their shacks with the cast-offs and detritus of other, more privileged, people's lives, while they see luxury and abundance for a few, along with stadiums, airports, roads, waterfront developments,

rising up all around them? Resources are always plentiful, it seems, until *they* make a claim on them. So they assert:

> We are driven by the ... suffering of the poor ... The First Force was our struggle against apartheid ... [Now our struggle is for] land, housing, water, electricity, health care, education and work. We are only asking what is basic - not what is luxurious. This is the struggle of the poor. The time has come for the poor to show themselves that we can be poor in life but not in mind.[41]

41. S'bu Zikode, 'We are the Third Force,' http://www.abahlali.org/node/17

They also assert that they are determined to make these claims *themselves*, not to depend on the NGOs and other political leaders or intellectuals, who are ever eager to speak for them, but rarely to listen. One hears countless generations of Diggers, speaking through them, as they struggle for themselves *and* their oppressed ancestors all the world over. It is with such struggles that today's food riots are continuous as their acute form, just as in an earlier moment the Diggers embodied and refined a far longer and more widespread tradition of acute protest in terms of a 'moral economy'.

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Food Riots are one means by which the oppressed seek redress for global conditions in which the market makes production for *waste* by the few appear to be 'natural' on a planet where there is still so much deprivation of even the most basic resources for the majority, and the pressure on objectified nature is pushing the planet to the tipping point, where it will be unable to sustain anyone at all. In this way, they produce their own version of Althusser's assertion that the *concept* of sugar does not taste sweet, reminding us that, even in the digital age, we all must eat, and thus that concrete planetary resources and their distribution must be part of any theoretical analysis or social struggle directed toward global justice. They are not, then, anti-intellectual for insisting on this objective irreducibility. To the contrary, their emphasis demands we recode the so-called 'population problem' as one of resource *use*. Four centuries of capitalism, the 'Tragedy of Privatisation' - not the 'Tragedy of the Commons' - has brought us the unequal, exploited and depleted world we currently inhabit. A Global Commons, meanwhile, has yet to be developed and tried.

But how to move toward it? This is not for an individual to say. My task in this essay has been the humbler one of pointing out what will not lead us toward this goal - including aspects of currently fashionable theory (and praxis) in the North. Though Neoliberals attempt to suggest that global poverty, pollution and other 'negativities' are actually the effect of 'commons' rather than capital, and 'radical' theory in the North often acts as if 'communes' could be locally 'autonomous' as they quest for justice, food riots, alternatively, provoke us to think - and act - globally, otherwise.