1 From Watts to Wall Street

A Situationist analysis of political violence

Martin Lang

Introduction

This chapter approaches the theme of political violence through a Situationist lens. The Situationist International (SI) were highly political artists that could be considered proto art activists, if not art activists proper. The focus of the first part of the chapter will be their essay 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle Commodity Economy' – first published in the tenth issue of the Situationists' eponymous journal *Internationale Situationiste* on 10 March 1966,[1] seven months after the Watts Rebellion (Los Angeles, 1965) that it analyses.[2] The chapter is, then, from the outset concerned with artists' interpretations of, as well as opinions and influences on, political violence.

'The Decline and Fall . . .' has received little critical attention. Only Heath Schultz's recent article addresses the SI text in depth (Schultz, 2018). Schultz contrasts Debord's 'Marxism' with Afropessimism, ultimately to show that the two positions are not as unreconcilable as they first appear. He does this, largely, through an analysis of imagery of the Watts Rebellion in Debord's film version of *Society of the Spectacle* (1973).

Gavin Grindon dedicates a section of his 2015 essay on what he calls the Situationists' 'fantasy of brainwashed political violence' to their assessment of Watts. Like Shultz, he focuses on their use of imagery (from Watts) and accuses them of not engaging with Watts directly but through 'the spectacle of Watts projected across the media' (Grindon, 2015b: 79). While Grindon recognises 'riot' as 'an open legal category blanketing a variety of particular forms of mass-cultural public assembly as "disorder"', he nonetheless describes Watts as 'a black working class riot' (Grindon, 2015b: 79). Grindon's verdict is that the SI's assessment of Watts is to fetishise its political violence, rather than recognise the potential of the riot-as-festival. Although Grindon is critical, 'The Decline and Fall . . .' is not the main focus of his essay: it is not mentioned until after seventeen pages.

The first major study on the SI – Sadie Plant's *The Most Radical Gesture* (first published in 1992) – only mentions 'The Decline and Fall . . .' once. Plant claims that it deals with a situation that has 'since reasserted itself in countless instances from Handsworth to Brixton' (2002: 30). Plant likens the SI assessment that Watts was a commodity 'riot' to the Poll Tax riots (UK, 1990), in which she claims emblems of consumption were attacked – 'the most expensive shops, the brightest neon signs, and the most prestigious cars' (2002: 31). The Situationist claim – that the unrest of 1965 was a rebellion against the commodity economy, not a 'race riot' – will be the central contention of this chapter.[3]

Other books on the SI similarly pay short shrift to their assessment of the Watts Rebellion. McKenzie Wark does not mention the essay in *The Spectacle of Disintegration* (2013), although she does mention Watts in passing. Simon Sadler's *The Situationist City* (1998) does not mention it either, although he includes an illustration on page 162.

In *Beneath the Beach the Street* (first published 2011), Wark dedicates nearly a couple of pages to 'The Decline and Fall . . .'. She partly agrees with the SI assessment that the Watts Rebellion was a revolt against the commodity – concurring that Black Americans were able to see through the spectacle. She also considers Watts as a 'cruel reminder of inequity to Black America' (Wark, 2015: 148). Wark notes that the SI account omitted many details: 'the thirty dead, the thousands injured, the four thousand arrests' (2015: 148). However, it is uncertain how much attention she really gives the matter, since she incorrectly claims, 'Before Watts, there was Newark, July that same year' (2015: 147) – in fact the riots in Newark took place two years later in July 1967.

Building on these accounts, this chapter will include a substantial analysis of Situationists' account of Watts, subjecting their claims to scrutiny by comparing them to other historical sources, such as government inquiries and newspaper reports – both contemporary to the events and looking back on various anniversaries and milestones.

The second text that I refer to in the first part of this chapter is Black Mask's account of the Newark 'riots', published in the seventh issue of their eponymous newspaper (1967). Black Mask were certainly art activists and might also be considered the SI's New York wing. Gavin Grindon writes that they were 'excluded from the Situationist International without having ever agreed to join' (2015a: 186). According to Grindon, Black Mask were in contact with the 'English Situationists' (T.J. Clark, Donald Nicholson Smith, Charles Radcliffe, Dave and Stuart Wise), and leading Belgian Situationist Raoul Vaneigem 'travelled to New York to visit potential situationists there, but refused to meet Morea' (2015a: 185–6).[4] When the English Situationists protested Black Mask's exclusion, they too were

expelled (Grindon, 2015: 186). Grindon draws parallels between the expulsion of Surrealists and Black Mask's situation – terming them 'dissident Situationists' (2015a: 187).

The originality of the second part of the chapter will lie in its application of the Situationist analyses of political violence in the 1960s to more contemporary iterations. It will highlight similarities between the Situationists' assessment of the Watts Rebellion, Black Mask's account of the Newark riots and the 'August riots' of 2011.[5] The aim, as will become clear, is to question whether the 'long, hot summer of 1967'[6] and the 'European Summer' of 2011 played comparable roles as precursors to the occupations that came shortly after (May '68/Occupy).[7] The second part also applies the Situationist analysis of Watts to Occupy, highlighting its moralistic and individualistic ethos to make surprising links with earlier claims about race and class. Then, investigation into recent scholarship on race and class will inform my final assessment of the Situationist claims made in 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy' and whether they remain relevant today.

The Watts Rebellion and the long, hot summer of 1967

In the aftermath of the protests, occupations and riots of May '68, Situationist René Viénet claimed that 'the commodity system was undoubtedly the target of the aggressiveness shown by the masses' (2014: §6). He quotes de Gaulle's televised speech of 7 June 1968, in which the French president also acknowledged that 'this explosion was provoked by groups in revolt against modern consumer and technical society' (Viénet, 2014: §8). Viénet notes that: AuQ14

> The situationists had foreseen for years that the permanent incitement to accumulate the most diverse objects, in exchange for the insidious counterpart of money, would one day provoke the anger of masses abused and treated as consumption machines.
>
> (2014: §6)

Indeed, the SI did foresee a build-up of mass dissatisfaction with consumer capitalism: not in France but in the United States. They took a keen interest in US race relations and civil unrest, imagining the Watts Rebellion as the first stage in a broader struggle, signs of which they saw in the 1964 student strike at University of Berkeley that was linked to both civil rights and the Vietnam War. They predicted that African Americans had the potential to 'unmask the contradictions of the most advanced capitalist system' (Situationist International, 2006: 195). In the obituary of 'the man who started

the [Watts] riot', the *New York Times* described the Watts Rebellion as the biggest insurrection by African Americans in the United States since the slave revolts (25 December 1986). The uprising in Watts was the catalyst for a series of riots across America (1965–67) that I refer to as the 'long, hot summers'.[8]

At first, it seemed obvious that the Watts 'riots' were 'race riots', as they were described as such in the *Los Angeles Times*. For example, on 13 August they reported that an eighteen-year-old girl admitted to throwing bricks and rocks at 'anything white' (Hillinger and Jones, 1965). The *LA Times* also reported on how the riots were perceived abroad. It was front-page news in several countries, including the UK and South Africa. On 15 August, under the headline 'Reds Call L.A. Rioting Evidence of Race Bias', they reported that the foreign communist press was taking the opportunity to highlight US discontent (Associated Press, 1965). The New China News Agency is reported to have said that the riot was evidence of 'a general outburst of their (negroes) pent-up dissatisfaction' – the brackets, we assume, were inserted by the *LA Times*.

Contemporary reports from the *LA Times* did refer to racial tensions, but headlines also referred to 'negro heroism' saving whites (13 August 1965). Referring to sociologists' and other expert opinions, mixed reasons were reported for the rioting (on 14 and 17 August) and even doubts that 'racial hostility' was the cause of the riots at all (14 August). The SI went further, declaring that 'The Watts riot was not a *racial* conflict' (Situationist International, 2006: 196). Instead, they claimed that what they were witnessing was a 'rebellion against the commodity . . . in which worker-consumers are hierarchically subordinated to commodity standards' (2006: 197).

The SI proclaimed that looters targeted 'black shops' and left 'whites' alone, only targeting white police officers. Similarly, their analysis of 'black-on-black' crimes is used as evidence that Watts was not a race riot: 'black solidarity did not extend to black store-owners or even to black car-drivers' (Situationist International, 2006: 196). Their estimation of events is contradicted by some news reports. For example, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* (the principal paper serving the black community at the time) reported that 'the problem, as far as the residents were concerned, is that they were white-owned stores, selling substandard stuff for high prices' (Landsberg and Reitman, 2005). The *Sentinel* also reported how a large supermarket, notorious for bad quality food, was burned to the ground, without even being looted, while a tiny grocery store was left untouched because it was black-owned.

The *Sentinel* and some of the reports in the *LA Times* seem to cast doubt on the SI account. Were the SI unfairly attributing a revolt against consumer capitalism to a series of incidents on the other side of the world that they

could not comprehend? Or, could it be that they were right? Might we consider that the supermarket owners happened to be white but also represented a ruling elite that owned property in a working-class neighbourhood?

The SI were not alone in their assessment. We have already seen that popular accounts were conflicted regarding the cause of the 'riots', but there is also testimony from more authoritative sources. Two days after the unrest ended, Martin Luther King visited Watts and subsequently declared that the causes were

> environmental and not racial. The economic deprivation, social isolation, inadequate housing, and general despair of thousands of Negroes teeming in Northern and Western ghettos are the ready seeds which give birth to tragic expressions of violence.
>
> (https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu)

As is customary following riots, an inquiry was set up to establish the cause. The McCone Commission's report recommended, among other things: '"emergency" literacy and preschool programs, improved police-community ties, increased low-income housing, more job-training projects, upgraded health-care services, more efficient public transportation' – although on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the riots the *LA Times* reported that most of these measures were never implemented (Dawsey, 1990).

The SI declared that one reason the unrest was more likely in LA than other US cities was relative poverty. African Americans in LA, they tell us, were wealthier than the average African American, but they were also surrounded by the 'superopulence' of Hollywood 'that is flaunted all around them' (Situationist International, 2006: 198). Previous revolutions have encountered the problem of scarcity; the Watts Rebellion highlighted the problem of abundance. The SI recognised this when they noted that:

> Unable to believe in any significant chance of integration or promotion, the Los Angeles blacks take modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, literally. They want to possess now all the objects shown and abstractly accessible, because they want to use them.
>
> (2006: 197)

One of the SI's examples of how the LA black community took the 'capitalist propaganda' literally is how they stole fridges. They were apparently seduced by their exchange value, even though they had no use value given that many of the looters either did not have electricity, or if they did, they could not afford to pay the bill (Situationist International, 2006: 197). This highlighted the myth of abundance for all. We are told that if we all work hard, we will all become rich, but this is impossible.

Dutch artist Renzo Martens' artwork *Institute for Human Activity* (2012–present) illustrates this predicament. He mocks such assumptions by setting up a cultural centre in a remote location in the Congolese jungle, on the site of a former Unilever palm oil plantation. When the palm oil extraction was exhausted, Unilever pulled out leaving mass unemployment. Martens invited Richard Florida, author of the influential book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), to deliver a keynote speech via satellite phone at the centre's opening conference. He asked Florida if the lack of roads and infrastructure would impede the development of his art institute. Florida, oblivious to the irony, said that this would not be a problem: once the demand was created, supply would come. Speaking at a conference at Tate Modern,[9] Martens quipped that he was now waiting for the hipster cappuccino bars to spring up. Of course, this is impossible. Consumers can only afford hipster coffee because of economic inequality. By taking this logic of abundance literally, Martens exposes its impossibility. Likewise, the African American looters in Watts pointed to the fact that consumerism necessitates economic exploitation: mainly black Americans in America 1965, the Congolese and the Global South more generally in the globalised economies of 2018.

The Los Angeles black community was demanding unfettered access to the spectacle-commodity economy on equal terms to the white community. However, the SI claim it is 'the nature of the spectacle that it cannot be actualized either immediately or equally, *not even for the whites*' (2006: 200). Inequality, in their view, is a necessary condition of the spectacle-commodity economy, and adherence to its logic was encouraged through the symbol of the African American, who illustrated 'the threat of falling into such wretchedness' to spur 'others on in the rat-race' (Situationist International, 2006: 200). AuQ15

'The Decline and Fall . . .' is a conflicted article. Although the SI clearly assert that the Watts Rebellion was not a racial conflict and although their analysis of the causes points to social and economic reasons, they do acknowledge the racial divide:

> Just as the human riches of the American blacks are despised and treated as criminal, monetary riches will never make them completely acceptable in America's alienated society: individual wealth will only make a rich nigger because blacks as a whole must represent poverty in a society of hierarchized wealth.
>
> (Situationist International, 2006: 198)

They also recognised that until 1959 many Los Angeles unions refused to accept African Americans as members. However, it is here that they make an interesting, if controversial, observation. The SI argued that the black community represented a radical potential for negating the commodity

system, *precisely because* they had not yet been integrated into it and that racial equality would only mean integration into the spectacle-commodity economy – 'the blacks are the rallying point for all those who refuse the logic of this integration into capitalism, which is all that the promise of racial integration amounts to' (Situationist International, 2006: 200).

The SI supported and defended the Watt rebels; indeed, it has been said that the Situationists were the only 'whites' at the time to defend the rioting black community and to fully grasp the revolutionary feeling coming to the boil (Gray, 2001: 3). They declared that, because of their lack of integration, African Americans could 'see more quickly through the falsehood of the whole economic-cultural spectacle' (2006: 200). At the same time, they delivered a warning about ignoring the broader systemic conditions of oppression – 'the spectacle-commodity economy'.

This is perhaps one reason for the wave of African American uprisings that spread across America in the wake of the Watts Rebellion that became known as the 'long, hot summer of 1967'.[10] In total, there were 159 riots in several major US cities. The most serious occurred in Newark and Detroit.[11] Following the Detroit riots, President Johnson established an inquiry, headed by the Kerner Commission. The report (1968) noted that:

> What the rioters appeared to be seeking was fuller participation in the social order and the material benefits enjoyed by the majority of American citizens. Rather than rejecting the American system, they were anxious to obtain a place for themselves in it.
>
> (The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 2016: 7)

Both the Kerner report and the SI account highlight the role that economic, material conditions played in the festering sense of dissatisfaction in the US black communities. Both accounts emphasise that the American black communities aspired to have the commodities that they were unable to own. Rather than seeing this as an endorsement of the commodity economy (as the Kerner report does), the SI saw a radical potential to undermine it. As we have already seen, the black community revealed the impossibility of abundance for all by demanding their equal share. The SI expand that:

> In taking the capitalist spectacle at its face value, the blacks are already rejecting the spectacle itself. The spectacle is a drug for slaves. It is designed not to be taken literally, but to be followed from just out of reach; when this separation is eliminated, the hoax is revealed.
>
> (Situationist International, 2006: 200)

In August 1967, the anarchist art collective Black Mask published the seventh edition of their eponymous newspaper.[12] In this issue they quoted two accounts of the 1967 Newark riots. The first is taken from the *New York Times* (16 July 1967): 'At times, amidst the scenes of riot and destruction that made parts of the city look like a battlefield, there was an almost carnival atmosphere' (Hahne and Morea, 2011: 46). The second is from *Time* magazine (21 July 1967): 'Said [New Jersey] Governor Hughes after a tour of the riot-blighted streets. . . . "The thing that repelled me most was the holiday atmosphere. . . . It's like laughing at a funeral"' (Hahne and Morea, 2011: 47). AuQ16

'Yes!' Black Mask agree:

> We laugh at this funeral. . . . [Governor Hughes] belongs to an obsolete generation, the last of a system at whose burial we cannot but burst in joy . . . he is only repelled by their enjoyment, their holiday atmosphere, as soon as they transcend the commodity enslavement and so do [sic] transcend him.
>
> (Hahne and Morea, 2011: 47)

Then, Black Mask makes a claim that also points to systemic causes rather than racially aggravated ones:

> Sure 'they don't hate so much the white man as they do hate America,' America as it is abused and dominated by a handful of white, clean washed, cool blooded gangsters. In their disgust of this America the Black Man does not stay alone!
>
> (Hahne and Morea, 2011: 47)

The two media reports of the Newark riots that describe a carnival or holiday atmosphere could easily be recounting the 2011 August riots. There are other similarities between the 'long, hot summer' and the 'European Summer' of 2011 that I will explore through a Situationist-style analysis of the August riots in the second part of this chapter.

The European Summer and Occupy

Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine-year-old British man of mixed race, was shot dead by the Metropolitan Police in North London on 4 August 2011. Two days after Duggan's death, his family – many of whom are West Indian – along with residents from the Broadwater Farm estate, marched on Tottenham Police Station demanding answers.[13] Initially the protests were peaceful. Accounts of what happened next vary, but some claim a teenage

girl threw something and was promptly set upon by police with batons and shields (Beckford and Gardham, 2011; Lewis, 2011). The crowd responded by burning police cars. The protests spread across Tottenham, one of the capital's most ethnically diverse areas. It is easy to see how this looked like a racially aggravated protest about police brutality against Mark Duggan and, by proxy, the black community. I am not arguing that it was not, but the looting that followed across the city, then across England,[14] had little to do with race and, as in LA 1965, everything to do with commodities.

Writing while the riots were still underway, Alain Badiou noted how David Cameron categorised the looters as mere hoodlums, contrasting them with the 'good citizens' whose property needs defending (2012: 16). Cameron simultaneously announced new tough measures to deal with the 'hooligans', using laws established under the Blair government with the result that the UK 'has many more prisoners as a percentage of its population than France, which does not pull any punches when it comes to locking up youth' (Badiou, 2012: 16). Badiou notes how the full force of the law was televised. Images of riot police smashing through the front doors of suspects denounced by 'good citizens', he claims, shows that the state does not give a damn about the property of the poor (2012: 17). At the same time, Badiou notes the 'infinite tolerance for the crimes of bankers and government embezzlers which affect the lives of millions' (2012: 19).

Comparing the situation in London to the unrest in France (2005), Badiou notes that the 'spark that "lights a prairie fire" is always a state murder', usually of a 'Black hooligan' or Arab 'known to the police' (2012: 18). Apparently, 'the destruction or theft of a few goods in the frenzy of a riot is infinitely more culpable than the police assassination of a young man' (Badiou, 2012: 19). While Badiou recognises the racial element or spark, he is clear to couch the overall riot in terms of Marx's theory of alienation, noting 'the primacy of things over existence, of commodities over life and machines over workers' (2012: 20).

The UK government commissioned an independent Riots, Communities and Victims Panel to investigate the causes behind the rioting. The report showed that local communities and victims shared 'concerns about brands and materialism'. One of the six 'key areas' set out in the report is entitled 'riots and the brands' (Marcus et al., 2012: 6) – this section features seven separate recommendations. The panel found that 85 per cent of people feel advertising puts pressure on young people to own the latest products and nearly 70 per cent felt that materialism was a problem and that measures were needed to decrease the amount of advertising directed at young people (Marcus et al., 2012: 10).

The fact that looters targeted brands (rather than non-branded commodities) also suggests that advertising played a role in their motivation. Just as

the Situationists and the McCone Commission concluded about the Watts Rebellion, the UK government-appointed independent panel reasoned that it was consumer culture (not race relations) that underlay the riots. This deduction seems plausible: anybody who watched the news footage will have noticed that there were at least as many white people involved in the rioting and looting. People from varied backgrounds and of varied ages, incidentally, took trainers and sweets with the same zeal as when they took plasma screen televisions. Like the Los Angeles black community, British youths had been told they needed to have certain commodities, so when the opportunity arose . . . they took them.

Both government reports describe an underlying spirit fraught with consumerist issues, but could it be coincidental that commodity riots, with a carnival or holiday atmosphere, preceded both May '68 and Occupy in 2011? First, I will argue that the SI attempted to harness the tensions they perceived in Watts and release them in the events of May '68. Then I will argue that there is a similar link between the August riots and Occupy.

The SI were well-known to have influenced, maybe even instigated, the events of May '68 (Wollen, 1989: 67, 71; Lasn, 2000: xvi, 213; Gallix, 2009; Kurczynski, 2010; Knabb, 2011; McKee, 2016). They were involved in the occupations from the beginning, and it was they who made two key demands: to maintain direct democracy in the assembly and that workers across the whole country occupy their factories and form workers' councils (Knabb, 2011). Furthermore, the assembly could be understood in terms of Raoul Vaneigem's call for open dialogue and the distribution and simplification of information, published just the year before (Vaneigem, 2001: 103). The SI were also involved with the Atelier Populaire, established in the occupied lithography studios of the Paris École des Beaux-Arts, where they produced political posters and enigmatic slogans – the sheer amount produced suggests that many people were involved (Considine, 2015). In 1966, 'On the Poverty of Student Life' was written and circulated by the SI and students of the University of Strasbourg. The pamphlet was re-issued and widely distributed at the Nanterre campus in May 1967 (Dark Star, 2001: 6). The two seminal Situationist texts, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord) and *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (Vaneigem), were both published later that year. So, without becoming embroiled in a debate about who contributed more to the build-up to the occupations and riots of May 1968, we can at least assert that the SI played an influential role.

In the same year they were co-authoring political pamphlets with students in France, the SI also published 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy', which also mentions the Algerian Revolution and appears in issue ten of *Situationiste Internationale* alongside three articles on the unrest in Algeria.[15] This suggests they were thinking globally. I have

already established that they considered African American revolt as a kind of precursor of something to come. According to Viénet, they had already identified, before May '68, that incitement to accumulate 'would one day provoke the anger of masses abused and treated as consumption machines' (2014: §6). The evidence suggests that the SI were thinking about these things together. It is therefore fair to speculate that they recognised the global potential of anti-commodity sentiment in Watts and later attempted to release it in France.

We have seen that the Watts Rebellion and the unrest of the 'long, hot summer of 1967' received significant press coverage abroad, even making the international front pages. Furthermore, the SI account of Watts was one of their most 'readily available in the late sixties' (Dark Star, 2001: 6). It is therefore fair to assume that the occupiers in Paris were aware of these 'riots'. Even if only on a subconscious level, they would have been able to tap into a growing sense of dissatisfaction, rage even, against consumer capitalism.

To declare that the August riots influenced Occupy in a comparable fashion is less straightforward. There is no equivalent analysis by artists (such as the SI) of the August riots, but the earlier accounts by Badiou and the UK government panel, when seen in terms of the Situationist analysis of Watts, reveal similarities. Occupy has been considered as building on the Arab Spring (2010–12) and a 'European Summer' of riots and occupations.[16] Others have also linked the political violence in North Africa to the unrest that followed in Europe (see, for example, Badiou, 2012; Eggert, 2013). AuQ17 This reminds us that both the occupations of May '68 and Occupy were preceded by riots but also by unrest in North Africa. The Arab Spring, first in Tunisia, then Egypt and Libya, recalls the Algerian Revolution (1954–62) that so fascinated the SI. These historical similarities and Thompson's chronology suggest that the 'European Summer' affected or maybe helped to form the Occupy movement.

To declare that the SI influenced Occupy is not clear-cut, since they disbanded in 1972. However, there is evidence to support the claim that their ideas influenced its formation. The July 2011 issue of *Adbusters* magazine featured an advertisement that was the original call for people to 'Occupy Wall Street': it read: '#OCCUPYWALLSTREET. September 17th. Bring tent. www.occupywallst.org' (Elliott, 2011).

Adbusters describe themselves as an 'international collective of artists, designers, poets, punks, writers, directors, musicians, philosophers, drop outs, and wild hearts' (www.adbusters.org/). They were not only key to the foundation of Occupy; they are also overtly and heavily linked to Situationist theory and tactics. For example, their blend of modern advertising techniques with irony, collage and pastiche echoes the Situationists' subversive

elements and tactics. Adbusters' editor and co-founder Kalle Lasn draws parallels between Situationist détournement and its contemporary variants in his books *Culture Jam* (2000), *Design Anarchy* (2006) and *Meme Wars* (2012). While not proof that Situationist theory influenced the Occupy movement, it does show us that a key organiser was familiar with and influenced by the Situationists.

David Graeber was another early, key figure in the Occupy movement. In 2011, *Rolling Stone* magazine credited Graeber with giving the Occupy movement its slogan 'we are the 99%' (Sharlet, 2011), although others claim it appeared on an anonymous blog first. Graeber is similarly familiar with Situationism. He wrote about the SI's role in the build-up to May '68 in his book *Direct Action* (2009), asserting that their thought was influential on the Global Justice Movement. Graeber notes that, while academics have focussed on the writers that emerged after 1968, such as 'Deleuze, Foucault or Baudrillard', who reflected on what went wrong and concluded that revolutionary dreams are impossible, punks and revolutionaries are still reading 'theory from immediately before '68' (2009: 259). Graeber asserts that two strains of French thought emerged from 1968: the pre-'68 strain 'kept alive in zines, anarchist infoshops, and the Internet' (the SI falls into this category) and the post-'68 strain that exists in academia (Graeber, 2009: 259–60). He notes:

> The Situationists argued that the system renders us passive consumers, but issued a call to actively resist. The current radical academic orthodoxy seems to reject either the first part or the second: that is, either it argues that there is no system imposed on consumers, or that resistance is impossible.
>
> (Graeber, 2009: 260)

Graeber mentions the SI on fourteen pages in this book alone. Therefore, there is evidence that more than one of the key Occupy organisers was at least aware of and probably influenced by the SI.

The effect that artists had on Occupy was not limited to Adbusters' and Graeber's mediation of Situationist thought. Yates McKee has argued that Occupy was a movement with artists at its core from the very beginning: not as illustrators of the movement but as fundamental components to its planning and organisation (McKee, 2017). McKee describes how curator Nato Thompson ended his closing remarks at the Creative Time Summit by urging the attendees to 'visit a little-known plaza in the financial district called Zuccotti Park', which had, for the past week, been 'the staging ground for something hazily known as "Occupy Wall Street"' (McKee, 2016).

The general assembly that prefigured the Occupy Wall Street camp, McKee explains, was:

> launched from a para-artistic space (16 Beaver) and held at an aesthetically charged site (Charging Bull, reframed by the Adbusters poster) . . . it was inaugurated with a call from an artist [Georgia Sagri] to desert the representational space of the stage, with its special hierarchy of speaker and audience, its dependence on official state permission.
>
> (2016)

For McKee, the artists involved in Occupy embodied the indebted, precarious workers on zero hours contracts that emerged in such large numbers after the banking crisis of 2008. They differ from the artists involved in May '68 in this regard and because many of them came from a generation raised to believe that being an artist was akin to being an entrepreneur: that if they just worked harder they could grasp the American dream. Occupy was the moment when this illusion was rejected. At least some of these artists were familiar with Situationist thought. For example, Ayreen Anastas and Rene Gabri had previously undertaken a summer-long psychogeographical détournement of the road trip to 'test out Agamben's thesis that "the camp is the nomos of the modern" considering their own question, "How can a camp like Guantanamo exist in our own time?"' (McKee, 2016).

Having established similarities between the 'long, hot summer of 1967' and the August 2011 riots and links between Situationism and Occupy, let us return to my claim that Occupy was – to some degree – formed by the political violence of the 'European Summer'. Returning to Badiou's theory of the riot gives us another means to claim a connection. For Badiou, the August riots are an example of an 'immediate riot'. Immediate riots start at the location of the 'spark', usually following state violence or provocation. These riots may spread by imitation, but they will still be 'immediate': they will continue to stagnate in their own social spaces as they rage upon themselves, attack symbols of wealth, 'particularly cars, shops and banks', and 'symbols of the state' (Badiou, 2012: 23). Often accused of destroying what little they have, immediate rioters demonstrate that 'when something is one of the few "benefits" granted you, it becomes the symbol not of its particular function, but of the general scarcity' (Badiou, 2012: 24).

For Badiou, when an immediate riot constructs a new site (usually in the city centre – Tahrir Square is his main example) 'where it endures and is extended, [then] it changes into an historical riot' (2012: 23). If we think globally, this transition could be mapped onto the August riots and Occupy. It is not clear that Badiou considers Occupy a 'historical riot' since it apparently lacks an 'Idea' (Badiou, 2012: 21). What is clear is that, for Badiou,

immediate riots are often precursors to their historical variants (Badiou, 2012: 22).[17]

Graeber was aware of the August riots, as he was living in London at the time. His knowledge of Situationism allows us to speculate that he might have seen in the 'European Summer' a similar revolutionary anti-commodity potential that the SI saw in Watts. The SI urged us to see the structural conditions responsible for civil unrest. The accounts of the August riots by Badiou and the Riots, Communities and Victims Panel are commensurate with a Situationist analysis. Could such an analysis work with Occupy?

Wark's assessment of the 'The Decline and Fall . . .' that I mentioned in the introduction links Watts to Wall Street. Wark claims that although the Watts political unrest was leaderless, it was not without organisation – referring to the impromptu nightly meetings that took place in the park to coordinate events. She describes how gangs organised 'safe-conduct hand signals' that allowed members to stray outside their own patches (Wark, 2015: 148). This recalls the organisation of the Occupy movement, with their leaderless structure, hand signals, human microphones and so on. Occupy's focus on structure and organisation at the expense of an 'Idea', for Badiou, would undermine its potential development into a truly political 'historical riot'.

Writing in *FIELD: A Journal for Socially Engaged Art Criticism*, Sebastian Loewe identifies a moralistic element in Occupy's central claim that 'we are the 99%'. For Loewe, this is a fundamental flaw to its logic (2015: 187). By attributing the banking crisis to immoral behaviour, 'the 1%' are conceptualised as other – greedy bankers, for example. Such behaviour might be immoral, but, in most cases, they did nothing illegal. In fact, the system encouraged and rewarded risky investments with large bonuses. 'Stringing up' the bankers, like achieving racial equality, will not strike at the spectacle-commodity economy. Herein lies the similarity between the SI account of Watts and Loewe's assessment of Occupy.

More people joining the Occupy movement was considered evidence that the movement truly represented the 99% and that all grievances must be attributable to the 1%. As McKee notes:

> The ongoing ramifications of Occupy are evident across the spectrum of the Left, ranging from the invocation of the '1 percent' as a general class enemy in the self-described democratic socialist campaign of Bernie Sanders, to the rich debates concerning questions such as the party-form, communization, and platform cooperativism in contemporary theory – all of which have been recoded and radicalized by the emergence of Black Lives Matter. AuQ18
>
> (McKee, 2016: Footnote 1)

This polyvocal 'movement' had to represent multiple grievances directed at various individuals who were all guilty of different moral crimes depending on each accuser's viewpoint. The ethos of Occupy was such that every voice must be given equal respect, while at the same time discouraging conflict. Loewe's analysis reminds us that such an inclusive polyvocal makeup renders each voice equally lost in a cacophony. Individuals might feel they are heard, but their opinion is also diluted. However, the polyvocal concerns manifested in Occupy should not simply be swept under the carpet. Let us focus on recent scholarship about race and class, since this is the issue that the SI tackled, and address arguments about their place in the assessment of recent civil unrest.

In *Class, Race and Marxism* (2017), David Roediger calls for thinking the politics of race and class together and bemoans that colour-blind politics has shifted to the Left. I will posit two examples that apply Roediger's refusal to side-line 'the consideration of race or, as in the case of liberal multiculturalism . . . questions of class' (Roediger, 2017: 6) to two related contemporary issues.

First, an example of how race has been side-lined in favour of class: Bernie Sanders has repeatedly claimed that class is more important than race and called for us to move beyond identity politics – one factor that has been attributed to his failed presidential campaign (Arceneaux, 2016). Sanders' position is compatible with the SI's account of Watts, but in an age of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, is such a stance tenable?

A recent example of how identity politics ('liberal multiculturalism' in Roediger's terms) can side-line class unity can be found in the debates about whether Turner Prize nominee Luke Willis Thompson, a New Zealander of white and Fijian ancestry, has the right to make portraits about black people who have lost relatives to police brutality (Cascone, 2018; Cumming, 2018; Khong, 2018; Searle, 2018). This is the latest in a long list of controversies about cultural appropriation in art (see Malik, 2017). Recall, for example, Hannah Black's petition to have Dana Schutz's portrait of lynched black teenager Emmett Till (*Open Casket*, 2016) removed from the Whitney Biennial and destroyed (Charlesworth, 2017). The debate is whether white artists are profiting from making work about black suffering or, as others have argued, whether artists should be allowed to make work about whatever they like (Shaw, 2018).

Those outraged by apparent white appropriation of black suffering rarely pause to think that white artists can make work *in solidarity* with people of colour or that there are other factors that allow us to empathise with people of a different race. As Schutz argued: 'I don't know what it is like to be black in America but I do know what it is like to be a mother. . . . Their pain is your pain. My engagement with this image was through empathy with his mother' (Schutz in Charlesworth, 2017).

Like Schutz, Roediger points to the fact that we are more than our race. For example, he takes issue with David Harvey's claim that the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri (2014) had little to do with anti-capitalism (Roediger, 2017: 1).[18] Roediger takes issue with what he perceives as Harvey's 'either or' approach. Roediger feels that the Ferguson unrest was an example of 'pro-worker struggles' aimed at ending the practice of 'shaking down the [neighbourhood's] working the poor' rather than 'taxing the large Emerson Electric corporation headquartered there' (Roediger, 2017: 2). Referring to Orlando de Guzman's film *Ferguson: Report from Occupied Territory* (2015), Roediger highlights an array of social issues that underpinned the Ferguson unrest: the abandoned neighbourhoods, derelict factories and unfair rents – *as well as* the racial tensions, especially with the police. Like the Situationists, he reconfigures what appears to be a race riot by considering multiple factors that influence political violence.

Roediger's case that Ferguson – and by implication the other 'riots' I have mentioned in this chapter – are about *both* race and class seems logical and appealing. However, he is attacking a 'straw man' in Harvey, who leaves the door open to intersectionality. While the *causes* might be economic and social as well as racial, Harvey's claim that *struggles* in Ferguson had little to do with anti-capitalism could be true. Roediger criticises Harvey for claiming that Ferguson is part of a long history of preventing US racially aggravated unrest turning into wider social movements (Roediger, 2017: 1), but Harvey is not saying that Ferguson *should not* be anti-capitalist or part of broader social movements. On the contrary, he warns that no struggles (racism and sexism, homophobia and so on) 'should transcend or supersede that against capital and its contradictions. Alliances of interests are clearly needed' (Harvey, 2014: 281). Harvey creates a hierarchy, but he avoids the pitfall of ranking race and class that Sanders fell into, by referring to 'anti-capitalism'. The SI target the spectacle-commodity economy in much the same way.

While Harvey's claim that Ferguson was not an anti-capitalist struggle does not prevent it becoming one, the Situationists' claim that 'The Watts riot was not a *racial* conflict' (2006: 196) shuts down the inverse possibility. So too did Martin Luther King, when he said that the causes were 'environmental and not racial' (https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu). This is the kind of binary thinking that Roediger opposes, and it is hard to deny that there were also racial elements in the 'long, hot summers'. Roediger's intersectional approach potentially bridges fragmentary identity politics (as seen in the critique of Thompson and Schutz), while Harvey reminds us that it is still possible to lose site of the bigger picture – struggles that are only about race and little to do with anti-capitalism.

Conclusions

I draw two conclusions from this research. First, I conclude that both May '68 and Occupy were formed by the political violence that preceded them and that this relationship – between riot and occupation – illustrates Badiou's transition from 'immediate' to 'historical' riots.

Second, I conclude that, although the 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy' makes problematic and outmoded claims about race, the Situationist assessment of the spectacle-commodity economy provides a timely reminder to focus in solidarity on the bigger picture in the face of populism and nationalism. If combined with intersectional theory, it can also provide a counterbalance to identity politics, which can prevent the 'immediate' from becoming 'historical' by fragmenting mass social movements and undermining unity.

Notes

1 The essay is not signed, so I refer to it as being authored by the Situationist International throughout this chapter. However, the version on the Virginia Tech website states that it was written by their de facto leader Guy Debord, translated into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith and distributed in America in December 1965, just four months after the rebellion (see www.cddc.vt.edu). McKenzie Wark also attributes the article to Debord (2015: 148). All references and quotations in this chapter are taken from Ken Knabb's translation in the revised and expanded edition of his *Situationist International Anthology* (Knabb, 2006).

2 Also known as the 'Watts Riots', I refer to the political violence that erupted in Watts, Los Angeles (August 1965) as 'The Watts Rebellion'. This term has been used in encyclopaedic entries (https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu; www.blackpast.org), by universities (www.csudh.edu), political magazines such as the *Boston Review* (Franklin, 2015) and in academic journals (Murch, 2012). Donna Murch directly addresses the question of whether they were riots or a rebellion (2012: 37–9). She explains that 'the choice to use the term "riot" as opposed to "rebellion" reflected conflicting assumptions about the meaning not only of the popular street protests, but the larger significance of the historical period that immediately followed the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act' (2012: 37–8). For Murch, the term 'riot' embodies notions of spontaneity and destruction, while 'rebellions' are supposedly more planned and rational responses to legitimate grievances.

Recent scholarship on such violent civil unrest reclaims the term 'riot'. Joshua Clover's book *Riot. Strike. Riot* (2016) claims that 'riots' were the central form of protest until the nineteenth century when they were replaced by strikes, before the riot made a comeback in the 1970s. In *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* (2012), Alain Badiou discerns three types of 'riot': immediate, latent and historical. The first kind resembles Murch's 'riot': spontaneous, destructive, but failing to grow beyond its immediate location and time before petering out. The second kind resembles Clover's 'strike' but would also include other forms of mass actions such as demonstrations and blockades.

The 'historical riot' can be thought of as Murch's rebellion: it grows to include additional layers of people from various backgrounds, casting aside previously rigid social distinctions.

3 The fact the SI felt the need to deny that the Watts Rebellion was a race riot is noteworthy. Today, most encyclopaedic entries and popular accounts do not use the term 'race riot', although some do (www.npr.org; www.ranker.com). Nonetheless, despite not using the term 'race riot', most accounts imply that the Watts Rebellion was a series of racially motivated riots – even those sympathetic to the black cause. For example, on the fiftieth anniversary of the rebellion, Black Power in American Memory (a website maintained by the University of North Carolina) claimed that the spark for the unrest was 'racially charged abuse by the police' and refers to 'institutional racism' in the article title (http://blackpower.web.unc.edu). Luna Ray Films describes how in 1965 the Watts neighbourhood became the 'scene of the greatest example of racial tension America had seen' (www.pbs.org/). Blackpast.org claim that 'racial injustices' caused 'Watts' African American population to explode on August 11, 1965' (https://blackpast.org). The History Channel also refers to 'racial tension' as the cause of the riots (www.history.com). Whether or not the unrest in Watts 1965 were 'riots' and whether or not the unrest was 'racially motivated' will be critiqued throughout the first part of this chapter.

4 Ben Morea was the de facto leader of Black Mask.

5 Also referred to as the 'London riots' or the '2011 England riots', I use the UK government's preferred term (see Morrell et al., 2011; Marcus et al., 2012).

6 The 'long, hot summer of 1967' refers to 159 'riots' across the USA during the summer of 1967. It has been referred to by this name since the summer of 1967 in newspaper reports (see for example, *New York Times* 30 April 1967; 16 July 1967). It continues to be referred to by this name in the popular press (Gonsalves, 2017), in research contexts (Weldon, 2017) and in encyclopaedias (www.britannica.com).

It is also used as the title of a book by Malcolm McLaughlin – *The Long, Hot Summer of 1967: Urban Rebellion in America* (2014). McLaughlin tells us that newspapers referred to the 'long, hot summer' so often that it 'became almost a mantra in the press' (2014: 2). McLaughlin claims that the term dates to 1958, 'when it was chosen as the title of a film' (2014: 2). Although the film was not about the civil rights movement, McLaughlin feels it captured the tension in the South. It was in the 1960s, he tells us, that it became explicitly connected with civil rights. In 1964, Martin Luther King announced the start of a 'long, hot nonviolent summer' of protest (McLaughlin, 2014: 2).

7 The term 'European Summer' has been applied to the unrest preceding Occupy in a chronology referred to as the 'Arab Spring, European Summer and American Autumn' (Holloway, 2012: 199; Thompson, 2012: 32) or the 'Arab Spring, European Summer and American Fall' – this version being used on protest banners and as the title of a 2013 symposium whose papers were later re-printed in *Rethinking Marxism* (see The Editors, 2013: 146–51).

8 See endnote 6.

9 'The Politics of the Social in Contemporary Art', Friday 15 February 2013 (see www.tate.org.uk for more information).

10 See endnote 6.

11 The rioting in Detroit is the subject of Kathryn Bigelow's recent film *Detroit* (2017).

12 Black Mask went on to become the (even more) radical anarchist group Up Against the Wall Motherfucker! This name was allegedly taken from a poem titled 'Black People!' by the radical black poet Amiri Bakara, who participated in the Newark riots of 1967 (Grindon, 2014: 22). Bakara is referred to as a warrior poet. In issue six of *Black Mask,* Dan Georgakas likened him and the Watts rebels: 'Roi Jones [Amiri Bakara's birth name] and Watts guerrillas create kleftic cantos. As even in the poisonous cauldron of white America, the kleftic strain rises to war against Establishment and Spectacle. The warrior poet takes up his santouri and his weapons and the Junta understands full well' (Hahne and Morea, 2011: 43 [my brackets]). In 2014 Amiri's son Ras Bakara, was elected Mayor of Newark; he won re-election in 2018.

The Outlaw Page, a leaflet written by John Sundstrom (a member of Up Against the Wall Motherfucker!) was used by the band Jefferson Airplane (almost verbatim) in the lyrics for their 1969 song 'We Can Be Together'. On 19 August 1969, the song was performed live on *The Dick Cavett Show* in what became known as 'the Woodstock show'. The song features the line 'In order to survive we steal, cheat, lie, forge, fuck, hide and deal', another reference to the ruthless competition of consumer capitalism. Since the performance was uncensored, it was also the first time the word 'fuck' had been uttered on US television – quickly followed by the phrase 'Up against the wall motherfucker' (Dangerous Minds, 2017). This points to how integrated the counter culture movement was: the phrase 'Up against the wall motherfucker' made its way from the Black Panthers, to a black poet, to an anarchist-Situationist collective and then onto US television via Jefferson Airplane.

13 To give some context, Duggan grew up on the Broadwater Farm estate, notorious for the 1985 race riot in which police officers were attacked and seriously injured, culminating in the death of PC Keith Blakelock. The last time a police officer was killed in a riot was in 1833 (Newman, 1986: 1), and only three officers have been killed in riots since the formation of the Metropolitan Police Force (Moore, 2015: 19). Timothy Brain's account of the murder cites eye witness fire officer Trevor Stratford, who described how forty to fifty people set upon Blakelock (Brain, 2010: 113). Tony Moore collates several testimonies that describe a mob carrying machetes, baseball bats and petrol bombs (Moore, 2015: 150, 152, 196, 207, 221). By the time Blakelock's body was recovered, he had sustained forty stab and slash wounds, his jaw was probably fractured by a machete and he had a knife buried into his neck up to the hilt (Brain, 2010: 113; McKillop, 1987: 3). The wound to his jaw was interpreted by the coroner as being consistent with an attempted beheading: a view backed up by witness statements that describe the intention to place Blakelock's head on a spike (McKillop, 1987: 3). Blakelock lost several fingers trying to defend himself (Moore, 2015: 152). The riots resulted in 186 arrests and eighty-four charges (Brain, 2010: 114).

14 The August riots were confined to English cities (London, Birmingham, Bristol, Gloucester, Gillingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham). They did not occur in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

15 These articles are translated as 'Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries', 'The Class Struggles in Algeria', and 'The Algeria of Daniel Guérin, Libertarian' in Ken Knabb's anthology (2006: 189–93, 203–12, 235–6).

16 See endnote 7.

17 For brief definitions of 'immediate' and 'historical' riots, see endnote 2.

18 Harvey is referring to the unrest following the murder of eighteen-year-old Mike Brown on 9 August 2014 (Ferguson, Missouri) in which more than 300 people were arrested.

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