

# **Riots and Remembrance on the Streets of Barcelona**

**the collective learning of subversive techniques**

Peter Gelderloos

September 2018

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Barcelona is a city whose name, more than that of many other cities, is tied to countless histories of riot, revolt, and revolution.

Local identity itself is in part defined by this history of revolt. The official national anthem of Catalunya, “Els Segadors,” (“The Reapers”), recounts the story of *el Corpus de Sang*, a major peasant uprising of 1640 that saw armed commoners storm Barcelona, killing priests, judges, soldiers, and representatives of the King.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Barcelona was the world capital of anarchist “propaganda by the deed”, while popular insurrections against the Church, the State, and the capitalist class earned the city the nickname, “the rose of fire” (Rivas, 2009). The revolution of July 1936 saw armed workers defeat the military in the streets, handing the growing tide of fascism its first setback.

Through the middle of the century, the Franco regime was constantly beleaguered by anarchist guerrillas who went on to influence armed anti-capitalist groups around the world. At the end of the ‘60s, autonomous workers’ struggles led to the outbreak of one of the largest wildcat strike movements in world history, forcing a transition to democracy.

By the ‘00s, democratization seemed to be leading inexorably to social peace, but in the last decade, Barcelona became one of the foremost cities in the wave of uprisings and occupations rocking the globe.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role that historical continuity, collective memory, and apprenticeship—and therefore intergenerationality—have in the transmission of knowledge and the learning of technique that are an integral part of revolt.

My motivation for carrying out this exploration is to help other people who, like me, may find their desires for dignity, well-being, freedom, self-actualization, health, or even survival pit them in direct conflict with that complex of powerful institutions we can refer to as the State.

## **Assumptions**

Every text rests upon a framework of prior research, truths held to be self-evident, culturally encoded points of departure, social limitations, and corollary arguments too lengthy to be reiterated. I would like to make a few of those pertaining to the present text explicit, especially since they may clash with what is often expected from an article of this format.

First and foremost is a rejection of the ostensible objectivity and neutrality that allow the historian or sociologist to present a politically engaged narrative that favors elite perspectives and values while erasing even the possibility of other valid experiences or criteria by which to judge them.

I prefer, openly and from the start, to profess my total sympathy with those who take to the streets, occupy buildings, burn symbols of government and private property, and fight with the forces of law and order. This sympathy is backed by the conclusion, founded in hard-won collective experience and well documented research, that current forms of social organization and the dominant institutions are antithetical to our freedom and well-being.

## **On Legality and Punishment**

Another foundation of the present text is the rejection of academic modes of scholarship and the ostensibly privileged vantage of the researcher. Contrary to liberal mythology, there is no free

exchange of ideas. The present debate unfolds in the shadow of a vast and powerful system of reward and punishment. We are “free” to debate rioting, yet if our research is useful to the police and social workers who quell rioting, we significantly improve our economic security and access to institutional power. If we celebrate the humanity of those who riot, especially if we recognize our place amongst them, and if we deny the legitimacy of the institutions and paradigms of power, we lose access to most structures of social communication that amplify ideas and allow subjects to be constructed in the eyes of their peers, we suffer the emotional and economic consequences of being identified as public enemies, and we expose ourselves to possible surveillance, black-listing, or prison time.<sup>1</sup> It is truly a free choice, in that only those who choose to brave the stick and reject the carrot can be considered free. This paper is written exclusively for them.

A moment may come in a person’s life when they realize that the only way they can effectively defend their dignity or well-being is by constructing a molotov cocktail or taking up arms. In most countries it is illegal to spread technical instructions teaching people how to do such things. At the same time, it is perfectly legal, in fact well paid, to publish technical instructions teaching police how to beat down and disperse crowds. Even the authors of government torture manuals go unpunished. This is the world we live in.

Though I wish to speak about the passing on of technique, I cannot mention a great many technical questions without exposing myself or the editors of this book to revenge by those institutions that criminalize self-defense. Fortunately, this is not a major setback. The techniques a community needs for defending itself against police or liberating public space are not to be learned in manuals but must above all be learned *in situ* and hands-on. Oral and manual knowledge has always been more important for the exploited and dispossessed, whereas book-learning has more often been a tool of the exploiters and colonizers to achieve state-building, genocide, and pacification.

## **Barcelona: the Rose of Fire in Historical Review**

This article focuses on a time frame that corresponds to the living memory of people of my generation, people who started paying more attention to the struggles in the world around them in the ‘90s, and who became old enough to participate directly at the end of that decade and the beginning of the next. Nonetheless, our sense of history, or lack thereof, is one of the most important factors influencing our participation in social struggles. It therefore becomes worthwhile to trace a farther-reaching retrospective. Such a history exceeds the space we have for the present chapter. What is most important is the dual presence of a historical continuity of struggle and a historical rupture.

There exists in the consciousness of this generation an inspiring, revolutionary past, present as an encouragement and even as a corpus of historical examples, but for the most part absent as experience, as inheritance, as a direct hand-me-down. To simplify, a revolutionary horizon

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<sup>1</sup> In Italy, Alfredo Bonanno, and in the US, Sherman Austin, each went to prison for engaging in free debate around questions of revolution and struggle against state authority. In Bonanno’s case, authoring the essay *Armed Joy* cost him one and a half years in prison, and in Austin’s case, maintaining a website cost him one year in prison. Not even academics are safe from the threat: Ward Churchill was subjected to an extensive campaign of harassment and slander in the media, and in the end he lost his tenure position at the University of Colorado Boulder for authoring *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens*.

exists, people are broadly familiar with the “what” of social antagonism, but as far as the “how” is concerned, they have to start from scratch.

With their war, their extermination camps, and their prisons, the fascists broke the revolutionary organizations and structures of the lower classes, but even after forty years of dictatorship they could not put an end to popular antagonism. It was the democratization of government in the ‘70s, the institutionalization of workers’ and neighborhood struggles immediately thereafter, some time later the democratization of policing techniques, and the creation of a middle class through university education and home mortgages that accomplished the social pacification that became undeniable in the ‘90s and ‘00s.

Between 2001 and 2003, there were major protests organized variously by the anti-globalization, anti-militarist, and anti-war movements. Each of these occasions included clashes with state forces, but despite the huge crowds, the stone-throwing, molotov cocktails, and dumpster fires represented more of an anecdotal phenomenon, rather than the strategic, offensive rage of the neighborhood riots of Sant Adrià del Besòs in 1990 or the Cine Princesa squatter riots of 1996. And in 2005, there were small riots associated with the Queeruption gathering, outside the context of any mass mobilization and at a time when radical queer politics were marginalized even within feminist and anti-capitalist movements. Examples of society fighting back, as well as the practitioners of combative tactics, were becoming more isolated.

The State tried to give the *coup de grâce* with a series of focused campaigns of repression. In 2003, there began a series of arrests targeting anarchists, and in 2006 a major frame-up targeting the squatters’ movement, the famous 4F case. It should be made clear that when we speak of arrests and repression, we are talking about consequences that include torture, imprisonment, solitary confinement, harassment, and other dirty tactics. The anarchists arrested in 2003 as well as the principle three 4F detainees were tortured by police, and another person from the latter case committed suicide as a direct result of her imprisonment. All of this occurred with the full complicity of the politicians and journalists, using their superior resources to justify the repression to the rest of society, to blame the victims of that repression, and to pass off police lies that were demonstrably false. In other words, none of these repressive cases were merely judicial affairs initiated as a response to concrete crimes; rather they were intentional campaigns using legal and paralegal means designed to weaken social movements, concerted across institutions, including supposedly non-State actors like the press.

The repression sowed paralysis and fear, but it also gave people a chance to make themselves stronger through solidarity, experiencing state violence as a collective rather than as an assortment of individuals. It also taught those directly affected, their families and social circles, and many bystanders the true nature of the State: an institutional complex of professional torturers, murderers, and liars from which people legitimately need to defend themselves.

The fact that these lessons needed to be learned implies that they had been forgotten, a consequence of the loss of historical memory among large sectors of the population.

This was the situation people faced: an ascendant State with rapidly improving techniques; a society that no longer understood the antagonistic relationship between itself and its rulers and bosses, that, on the contrary, believed in the middle class promise of integration, even as the clock ticked down to the financial crisis and the millions of mortgage defaults that would lay waste to their material aspirations; and diminishing numbers of rebels, demarcated as separate from the rest of society, contained within increasingly isolated subcultures, and increasingly unable

to resist repression, maintain the continuity of their struggles, or pass on historical lessons and subversive techniques.

A more complete chronology of the last decade can be found in the CrimethInc. articles “The Rose of Fire Has Returned” and “After the Crest, Part III: Barcelona Anarchists at Low Tide”.

## Understanding Oneself in Revolt

Why do people revolt? For their own reasons. At first glance, this may seem like a tautological or uselessly broad answer, but I think it is a useful starting point. Every time a population subject to the authority of a modern state rebels, that state dispatches an army of sociologists, journalists, advisers, and politicians to discover the causes of the disorder, but this exercise is doomed from the start because the free will of the rioters, the open-ended legitimacy of their desires, is negated by the very fact of their being governed. Governments systematically seek the input of their subjects as to *how* they are governed, but *whether* they are governed is never subject to inquiry nor open to debate. Therefore, institutional inquiries into revolt must produce explanations designed to facilitate *social peace*, which in insurrectionary theory is a concept that refers to the submission of a governed population, predicated on the illusion of a community of interests, of non-antagonism, between governed and governors, between people and institutions. To elaborate further, social peace is the discursive and psychological complement to *social war*, the institutional and structural reality that explains why states are constantly engineering the pacification of their subject populations through the optic of counterinsurgency. One of the first uses of the term was by the French anti-authoritarian feminist André Léo, a participant in the Paris Commune, who wanted to designate not a war between states but the constant war states wage against their own populations (Léo 1871).

Riots and revolts are significant in large part because they are the moments that represent the seamless continuity between social peace and social war. The same institutions play seemingly opposite roles, and the one common factor explaining their disparate behavior is the imperative of maintaining state authority. In Barcelona over the last decade, or in the Ferguson uprising in 2014, the police attempt to foster values of cooperation and civic duty that unite them with the citizenry. Institutional discourses present the police as the defenders of the common people, and these discourses manifest as significant changes in the actual practice of policing, with community police (or “proximity police,” as they are referred to in Catalan) playing the role of friends and neighbors. These same police don riot gear or arm themselves with automatic rifles and tanks to attack those common people in the space of the riot (Williams 2004).

People revolt for their own reasons. The tumultuous years that became apparent with the 2005 banlieue uprisings in France, and that became undeniable after the insurrection in Greece in December 2008 and the Arab Spring in 2010, transcend any narrow sociological explanations. They have visited countries in severe economic crisis, such as Tunisia, Guadeloupe, Greece, and Spain, and countries in full economic growth, such as China, Turkey, and Brazil. They have crossed racial, economic, and ethnic divides, as in Greece, the United States, and Kurdistan, or quickly degenerated into nationalist or religious conflicts, as in Ukraine and Hungary. They have evoked cross-racial solidarity, in the US, or not, as in the UK. The protagonists have been industrial workers, as in Bangladesh, peasants resisting modernization, as in China, students, as in Chile, the unemployed, as in Guadeloupe, or a total economic mix, as in Egypt, Greece, and Oakland.

Something as vague and quasi-mystical as Katsiaficas' "eros effect" explains the spread of revolt better than any materialist or sociological theory of causation (Katsiaficas 1989).

Those who participate directly in revolt will often notice that the media and the experts are willfully ignorant as to our motivations. They ascribe aspirations, complaints, and demands that strike us as bizarre, outlandish, nonsensical, and ridiculous. When we win the space for reflection amidst the relentless pace of turbulent events, we often come to the conclusion that they are systematically performing a very concrete role: to divide that which has melded in the space of the revolt.

In the insurrection in Greece in December 2008, the media systematically tried to break the crowds in revolt into three distinct sectors—students, anarchists, and immigrants—each with their own modes and motivations, which coincidentally corresponded perfectly with the stereotypes they had already mass-produced around these identities in the prior years. On the contrary, participants in the insurrection spoke about how all previous demographic categories broke down, how people who had previously been separated by the structural segregation of democratic society and consumer capitalism came into contact, created lively communities, shared intimate experiences, and completely reformulated their desires, their interests, and their modes of behavior (Schwarz and Sagris 2010, 120, 296).

In May 2014 in Barcelona, the city government sparked a week-long riot by evicting and partially demolishing the squatted social center Can Vies. The media and the politicians were unanimous in ascribing a singular, reformist motivation: to save the one social center. To an outsider, the explanation seems unquestionably obvious, yet nothing could be further from the truth. In all probability, the solid majority of the tens of thousands of people who took to the streets had never set foot in Can Vies. Some did not even know it existed, and others may have supported the idea of autonomous social centers yet harbored a grudge against Can Vies in particular, either due to political differences or because they were neighbors annoyed by the loud concerts sometimes held there.

No one explanation could be satisfying for everyone. Some opposed the policies of the political party in power at the moment, and others were simply drawn by the joyful experience of the riot. Yet I feel confident in asserting that two ideas were generalized among those who took to the streets, creating the possibility of a community in revolt speaking a common idiom.

One was extreme anger at our powerlessness to stop the forces that are violently changing our city, robbing us of what makes a residence or a neighborhood feel like home, and here one could point to tourism, gentrification, and urban planning, all of which were issues that led to an extreme change in the Barcelona government after elections just one year later. (And one could also underscore that *home* is not a concept recognized by capitalism nor a right conceded by democracy, suggesting why similar riots broke out again just one year into the progressive administration of the new mayor).

The second was hatred of the police, whether that hatred was born of individual experiences; the mistreatment, abuse, surveillance, and torture the police systematically dole out to people who participate in social movements, to poor people, to immigrants and people of color; or a more holistic rejection of state authority.

Significantly, each of these two motivations take on revolutionary implications if left unbridled, and they each suggest institutional reforms that may serve as a pressure valve, bringing popular anger back down below the boiling point, without ever resolving the underlying issues, which I would summarize as whether or not people have power over their own lives.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the riot is that people violently and illegally recover their own bodily powers, beginning with their power to negate, to make any decision they want regardless of social conventions and restrictions, and to destroy that which they consider an affront to their dignity or well-being (all of which explains why the destruction and law-breaking that occur in a riot are by no means indiscriminate, but rather very accurately reflect people's political ideas, or a possible horizon of those ideas, when liberated from dominant morality). \*Frantz Fanon discussed this as a response to neurosis, the cleansing of muscular anxieties by fighting back against that which has systematically dehumanized and constrained the subject.

Another fundamental characteristic is that people recover these powers together.

Riots and revolts are a communal space. This characteristic has ramifications that will emerge and reemerge throughout the course of this chapter. Those who sit on the fence, those who play the underappreciated role of crowding about the margins, and those who participate directly but then distance themselves in the throes of the post-partum depression that frequently follows uprisings, will often make the perfectly understandable critique that riots are fetishized. As far as we anarchists are concerned, there is a not entirely unfair caricature that anarchist imaginaries are single-mindedly obsessed with street fighting, and that anarchist media are saturated with "riot porn".

In recent decades, the State has achieved a near perfect monopoly on the total organization of social life. We are now closer to living in a totalitarian society, with no deep influence over our surroundings (meaning, nothing more than consumer options to color the façade but not change the architecture) than at any point in the past. Given our powerlessness, it actually makes perfect sense that we adopt a nihilist focus on the destructive aspects of revolutionary activity rather than delving into the nauseatingly daunting task of imagining and creating something different. In this light, riot fetishism is an understandable weakness.

Notwithstanding, riots are the last truly communal space that many of us have access to, and the only experience of freedom we readily remember in our adult lives. The attention they elicit goes well beyond an adrenaline fix. Some have theorized the riot as the dense, inchoate precursor of a free, healthy society, the moment in which the constraints—both the architecture and the relations of power—are broken so that society can expand into an ecosystem of self-guided relationships and intercommunal freedom (Zlodey and Radegas 2014).

Because they are communal, riots encourage people to remember, to reconnect with a subversive history that contradicts the official history of the citizen, and to see themselves in others, across multiple lines of identity. This is why revolts occurring in dictatorial countries in Northern Africa directly influenced subsequent revolts in democratic countries on the other side of the Mediterranean. Despite supposedly opposite political contexts, different ethnicities, and incongruent cultures, people saw themselves in their brothers and sisters in revolt, and they identified the oppression they fought against as fundamentally the same oppression. (This identification is by no means permanent, and as revolt ebbs, so too does solidarity, as seen in the absence of trans-Mediterranean identification during the civil wars in Syria and Lybia and the repression in Egypt. A few decades under democracy and a racist media train us to believe that our governments would never send tanks against us, even if they have in the not so distant past, and that such is a normal and acceptable occurrence in the Global South.)



## **The Exhaustion of Revolt**

Riots question not only the specifics of a social order, but the legitimacy of the dominant institutions to order society. As we have seen in the case of the Can Vies riots, they generally surpass the motivations ascribed to them by professional commentators, and the objections they adopt in a limited form, when taken to their conclusions, lead to a revolutionary questioning or negation of the entire social order.

Riots, therefore, must either be eliminated by brute force by the military and police, at great cost to a government's legitimacy and narrative of social peace, or they must be compartmentalized, particularized, atomized, and shunted into reformist demands by the whole complex of social institutions and with the collaboration of at least some of the participants. Otherwise, they become revolts.

Revolts, or insurrections, make crises of legitimacy undeniable, showing that discontent is generalized and therefore the problem is systemic. Institutional solutions, whether reform or repression, must be equally broad. Yet revolts do not spontaneously grow into disturbances of the next order of magnitude, revolutions.

Revolution requires the conscious self-constitution of the community that was born in the revolt. And while the dynamics inherent in the riot are intrinsically subversive and consciousness-expanding, albeit in a frequently inarticulate way, the conscious act that gives birth to a revolution is subject to all the ideological and cultural conditioning of those who carry it out. It is for this reason that revolutions have more often than not served to restore state power within the free community of the revolt rather than to encourage the proliferation of horizontal relations that made the revolt possible. Thus, the American, the French, the Russian, the Algerian, and so many other Revolutions have in the final analysis been counter-revolutions that resulted primarily in a change to the strategies of governance or to the pecking order of elite actors.

As there is nothing inevitable about revolution, revolts can exhaust themselves without realizing the social proposals they bring into being through their negation of the existing order. In Greece, they can set fire to nearly every police station and bank in the country, without taking the conscious step of building a world without cops and without money. In Barcelona, people can defeat the police in the streets and set fire to the bulldozers, leaving the city government powerless to implement its will, without deciding to create a city fully belonging to its inhabitants.

## **Imaginaries and Histories**

A week, or a month, of rioting is exhausting, and dreams cannot live on fire alone. Radical imaginaries are vital for suggesting organizational possibilities and strategic directions that people can take in a moment of rupture, when the State suddenly loses its architectural control over the social fabric. Just as a great deal of technological advancement is prefigured by science fiction, revolutionary advances are made possible by utopian creativity in the time before the rupture. What people cannot imagine, they cannot create, and multiple insurrections have been suffocated by their own lack of creativity, the absence of a radical horizon towards which people could move, rather than just destroying the more obvious symbols of their oppression.

The feature of utopia that has been most disparaged, its nowhere-ness, is in fact its greatest strength: by locating our desired social relations and models for self-organization in a non-

physical plane, we protect them from the majority (but not all) of the State's arsenal. While they can certainly be corrupted, they cannot, at least, be evicted, imprisoned, or sent to the firing squad.

I would argue that utopias are at their worst when they are perfect, because perfection represents distance or alienation from the present. At a time when the culture industry is increasingly involved in the production of imaginaries, what is most important from a revolutionary standpoint is not having the right imaginary but having an active, fertile imagination (echoing the longstanding anarchist assertion that the vital component for attaining freedom is not fabricating the proper model of organization but reviving society's capacity for self-organization). A perfect utopia betrays us because we will never be capable of imagining how to arrive there. A healthy imagination, on the contrary, permits us to constantly create and adapt imaginaries that flow from our present conditions. Such imaginaries open revolutionary paths during moments of rupture, and it is these paths we must walk if our revolts are to grow rather than stagnate and expire.

And though imagination also allows us to create wholly new possibilities, it is always informed and cultured by our history. In one of the famous lines from *1984*, George Orwell hit the nail on the head, though I would invert his order: he who controls the present controls the past; he who controls the past controls the future. When an authoritarian institutional complex attempts to project its power in the present indefinitely into the future, it provokes ever more resistance. But if it instead acts upon the future by controlling our memory and thus our imaginaries, it successfully imposes effective limitations on the future that generally survive this or that ruler, this or that specific constellation of elite interests.

It has been pointed out that history and memory are always reconstruction, and that dreams are often the ordering of—at their most mundane—and play with—at their best—memories. The interrelation, therefore, between history, memory, dreams, and imagination is unavoidable, as much as mythical ideas of objectivity have erected a hierarchy with history at the unassailable summit, memory as an imperfect path upwards, dreams an irrelevant swampland beneath the foothills, and imagination a childish game completely irrelevant to serious mountain climbers.

## Recovering History

Participating in a struggle often reconnects people to a history that surpasses their individual lives or the national histories that official education still permits people. After direct experience in a revolt, people often find it easier to identify with the romanticized or nearly forgotten revolts of the past, as the new subversive space-time afforded by the emotional intensity of the event interrupts the capitalist space-time, in which events are continuously wiped off the map and history immediately consigned to an inaccessible distance. What's more, by fighting, by risking themselves, people begin to lose their attachment to their prior passive identities of consumer citizens and to feel like they might be worthy recipients to carry on the experiences of radicals from earlier generations.

Nor is rioting, by any means, the only or the principal activity in a social struggle. As anarchist historian Dolores Marin expresses clearly in her prologue to the Spanish translation of Louise Michel's book on the Paris Commune, the recovery of historical memory is one of the most important tasks for social rebels, to regain experiences suppressed by dictatorship or exile, or to

understand our place in the world we inhabit (Marín 2014, 7–8). And many anarchists who in their youth fought in the streets of Barcelona, people like Abel Paz or Ricard de Vargas, did as Louise Michel did and in their older age took to recording and celebrating the histories of their struggles. Nor do such historiographies follow the standard models for documenting official memory as a professional act of intellectual property, as illustrated by the many anonymous accounts, for example the recently published interviews with women who fought in *els Grups Autònoms* in Catalunya in the '70s and '80s (Cardona 2015).

In fact, referring back to a much earlier repression, Silvia Federici suggests that many of the women judged and executed in the European witch trials may have been the survivors, and thus the memory-bearers, the story-tellers, of earlier peasant rebellions (Federici 2004, 174).

Here, we find some early indications of the relation between revolt and the preservation of subversive memory, between the latter and the intergenerationality of a struggle, as well as the role that gendered tasks potentially play in all of the foregoing.

## **Social Amnesia and Pacifism**

Whereas the autonomous, multifaceted, and self-guided recovery of history is an integral activity of revolt, the flattening of history becomes a central plank of institutional democracy. The former is practically unlimited in the range and register of historical voices it can preserve, encouraging as it does the subjective process of self-actualization through (in part) a strengthening of historical memory. In fact, the term historical memory only makes sense to refer to a subjective process. The latter—institutional democracy—on the other hand, requires the creation of an objective and highly normative history told to reflect the perspective and interests of an artificial historical subject, one that never existed as such, but that reflects the nation, the citizen, and the elite, all rolled together. This operation means, above all, suppressing, silencing, or at least marginalizing narratives that are subversive to whatever the writers of history determine to be the national interests.

The institutionalization and flattening of historical memory was one of the primary mechanisms by which the new democratic government of Spain, which only entered into existence through a consummate act of complicity with the fascists and mass-murderers of yesteryear, cemented its power. In the new official history, the fascists were recognized as bad, the dictatorship a stain on national honor, but the class conflicts that made fascism a necessary measure to rescue the bourgeoisie, as well as the most ardent enemies of the fascists, those who lost the most, were given a superficial treatment, not consigned to the waste bin of history, but relegated to a mere footnote. The fascists-turned-democrats, of course, were conceded full legitimacy, whereas the most principled anti-fascists were recast as terrorists.

Social amnesia is a functional part of capitalist democracy, the continuous alienation of the past, the daily erasure of yesterday's experiences, the vigilant extirpation of any roots we may lay down. This amnesia is directly connected to pacifism. Pacifism, in practice, has never succeeded in accomplishing revolutionary goals, and experience with pacifism collectively leads people to adopt more combative tactics, requiring the State to produce a historical rupture, enabling people to lose their historical memory, to forget their collective lessons, and to start all over again from zero (Gelderloos 2013, 12).

It is no accident that the 15M movement, which temporarily allowed pacifism to become the dominant method across the Spanish state, made no references to the distant or recent history of revolt, and this in a country in which historical memory tends to be very important to social movements. The conclusions of such memory reveal pacifism to be irrelevant and ineffective. In Barcelona, it took people just ten months of experience to return to the same conclusion and once again support rioting and other combative tactics. In tandem the police, more than anyone else, taught the younger generation that “All Cops Are Bastards,” that if police are truly human, they have been distanced from their humanity by a very thorough institutional process.

## **From Pacification to Riot**

Even though most riots do not result in revolts nor lead to the creation of new social relations that survive the moment of the rupture, they are useful in helping us learn collectively how to liberate space, and also to punish the State for its excesses, creating a permanent threat that frequently limits the more heavyhanded deployment of state power in the future.

In 2005, the *Mossos d'Esquadra* assumed full duties in Barcelona, completing their substitution of Spanish police forces begun in 1994. The *mossos* are a more disciplined, democratic police force that model their methodology on that of social democracies like the UK and Germany, marking a break with the macho, imprecise tactics used by the solidly post-fascist police forces of the rest of the Spanish state. This democratization of social control techniques enabled the triumph of social peace, a reduction of street disturbances, and a greater ability for the State to control and isolate subversive popular forces in the streets. In other words, we lost the streets. This loss of power went hand in hand with a loss of memory and a loss of technique, and occurred in the space of a few years. A prominent feature of successful pacification was that people forgot that it was possible to win the streets. The organic relation between history and memory was severed. Past street battles, whether in 1936 or 1996, became mere history. Memory, which brings history to the present, was lost.

This did not begin to change until the insurrection in Greece in 2008 influenced anarchists and other radicals in Barcelona; however, the chain of influence was preceded by intentional strategic changes that could already be identified at least a year earlier, which made radicals in Barcelona capable of receiving the 2008 insurrection as a source of inspiration, an awakening, rather than merely a spectacular foreign event. For example, the major rioting in France, much closer at hand, in 2005 and 2006, did not succeed in inspiring people in Barcelona to take to the streets to the same extent. Nor was there anything inevitable at work in 2008. Anarchists were roughly divided, upon receiving the news of the insurrection that broke out in Athens and extended even beyond the borders of Greece, into two camps: those who invented sociological and cultural explanations for why such an uprising was easy in Greece and impossible in Spain; and those who remembered what they were capable of, and began looking for ways to implant their imaginaries and their memories in the soil of their present world.

Until the general strike of 29 March 2012, preceded perhaps by a moment or two in the riots of the general strike on 29 September 2010, people did not realize their ability to win the streets. Previously, a riot or a disturbance in Barcelona could be faithfully characterized as the frenetic process of smashing all that could be smashed before the police charged, and then running like

hell. In fact there are hardly any exceptions to this characterization going all the way back to the Cine Princesa riots of 1996.

Once people saw that they could send the police running, generating new memories to inspire new generations and replenish combative imaginaries, the question of technique won a central importance, sometimes eclipsing longer term and parallel considerations (e.g. revolutionary imaginaries, the self-organization of vital needs, subversive communication with the rest of society), but nonetheless representing a major shortcoming that had to be surpassed.

The learning of combative techniques advanced at an impressive pace. Contrary to the liberal idea of intellectual property (whose merit lies more in its function as an enclosure mechanism than as a faithful rendition of how the human intellect works), learning and intelligence are never fully individual, and they thrive in a communal atmosphere. The riot, a communal space *par excellence* (at least in our impoverished world, stripped of references to functioning communities), acts as a grand laboratory in which techniques can be elaborated, adapted, practiced, and imparted.

The riot police require months of hierarchical drilling and training to be disciplined like the automatons they eventually become, according to methodologies and armed with technological implements that are developed by teams of experts working full-time to constantly bring up to date the institutional knowledge based on decades and decades of such processes. This institutional knowledge, representing many years and hundreds of millions of euros in elite resources, can be left flat-footed by a mere hour of collective learning by angry crowds.

By 2007, it was generally accepted that the State had effectively pacified what had been combative social movements, leading in most sectors to apathy (perhaps seen in an increased drug-use and party culture in the squatting movement), pacifism (of a pragmatic, non-ideological form, in the student movement, or dogmatic, among the techno-progressives who would eventually launch the 15M movement), or reformism (in the part of the squatting movement that broke off to become a lower-middle-class housing rights movement, eventually taking the mayorship in the form of Ada Colau). However, small sectors, primarily in the anarchist movement and secondarily among the radical youth wing of the socialist Catalan independence movement—the *indepes*—recognized this pacification for the defeat that it was and engaged in a drawn-out process of reflection, strategic critique, and tactical experimentation.

The attempts to identify and contain or reverse new repressive techniques adopted by the police resulted in crucial successes during the years of pacification, with the anti-authoritarian wing of the squatters' movement being most effective in this regard. In perhaps its last conscious acts before dissolving into reformism on one side and subculture on the other, the squatters' movement succeeded in severely limiting the police use of the kettling tactic, and banning their use of the *kubotan* crowd control weapon.

Meanwhile, the attempts of both anarchists and *indepes* (or sometimes both together) to convene combative crowds in the form of public protests that could wrest control of the streets away from police (typically taking advantage of important dates of historical memory and conflict, such as May Day and the 12<sup>th</sup> of October) all failed to achieve their main objectives, though of course much was learned in the process.

On the contrary, clandestine attempts by anarchists to organize small crowds, at first exclusively at night and as of 2008 increasingly during the day, to carry out sabotage attacks, though they did not directly confront the police, demonstrated that social control was not perfect and that the streets were still a space where free subversive action was possible. Judging from the

internet communiqués and the broken windows, political graffiti, or signs of arson one could come across in their neighborhood, such attacks flourished between 2003 and 2011.

During those years one's choice really was to act in a clandestine setting or to carry out no combative actions at all. The actions carried out by the anarchist movement kept combative practices alive and preserved techniques of self-defense, sabotage, and security that could later be transmitted directly to the angry crowds that were born starting in September 2010.

Anarchist propaganda also played an important role in keeping a combative imaginary alive during the years of pacification, as no other movement continued to produce posters, stickers, graffiti, theater pieces, songs, and videos that depicted riots, sabotage, and street fighting. Starting in 2012, a large proportion of the street combat spread spontaneously, carried out by youth with no prior experience in subversive social movements. Some were immigrant youth who had learned combative techniques and self-defense thanks to institutional racism and police profiling, but others were white and middle-class youth without such informal experience. All of them had access to a combative imaginary thanks in part to videos of riots in other countries, and thanks in part to the widely published anarchist imaginary, pasted up on the wall of every neighborhood in the city. The delayed effectiveness of such propaganda contradicted the hypotheses of the *indepes* and the populists who thought that propaganda should pamper to public sensibilities rather than challenging and provoking people.

In conclusion, strategic, intentional action that directly confronted the seemingly insurmountable limitations during the years of pacification generated new possibilities and preserved useful techniques that greatly expanded the power of the crowd, when this latter was reborn between 2010–2012; and it may even be that the subversive crowd would not have reappeared at all, or would not have been able to expand as forcefully, if not for the aforementioned strategy and intentionality.

## The Techniques of Winning the Streets

A powerful illustration of the speed with which combative techniques can be developed and transmitted can be found in the arc of events between the general strike of 29 March 2012 and the Can Vies riots of May 2014.

Since the launching of the 15M movement in May 2011, an aggressive, hyper-legalistic pacifism that suppressed debate and that defended property, banks, and police, had taken control of the streets in Barcelona. The general strike of March 2012 was declared in this context, but it was organized by the unions—including anarcho-syndicalist unions—and by the neighborhood assemblies, spaces in which the *indignados*, the reformist current that tried to control the 15M movement, had little influence. What's more, the strike occurred after ten months of pacifism and the attendant defenselessness, ineffectiveness, humiliations, and absurdities.

Among the couple hundred thousand people who took to the streets on March 29 independently of the mainstream labor unions, the memory of combative methods was still alive, but only a small minority had ever participated in such acts, and over the prior decade rioting in Barcelona had nearly always meant smashing a few things and running away from the police. At the anti-capitalist protest on the morning of the strike, this is exactly what happened. After a modest amount of property destruction, the *mossos* charged and people ran like hell. They ran into the Gràcia neighborhood, a terrain of narrow streets in which rioters might produce advan-

tages, but they kept running. Immediately, regret coursed through the more veteran segments of the crowd. An important opportunity had been lost, and who knew how long people would have to wait to get another chance.

As it turned out, people seized another opportunity that very afternoon. Tens of thousands milled around Plaça Catalunya, refusing to join the official protests of the major unions. An anarchist march several thousand strong had just torched dozens of banks and luxury shops on a central street, taking advantage of the fact that the police were busy elsewhere, and now a mix of anarchists, *indepes*, immigrants, and other youths spontaneously attacked the police and forced a retreat. Fed by this unexpected success, the riot was suddenly reborn with a vengeance. Nearly the entire crowd adopted techniques of self-defense, functioning as a single organism. Numerous roles fit together in an ecosystem of revolt. Some people broke up pavement. Others carried rocks to the frontlines, others kept up a steady barrage to keep the police at bay. Others carried away the wounded, struck by the projectiles the police were firing by the hundreds. Others smashed and burned the banks, the Starbucks, and the fascist-connected shopping mall the police had been protecting. Others looted and scavenged, rustling up useful materials from the urban landscape – gasoline from a media van, manhole covers or other chunks of heavy metal that could break the pavement or smash open windows.

It became apparent that of the three things a crowd needs in order to riot, to defend themselves against police and to negate the parts of their landscape they find hateful—experience, tools, and willpower—willpower is the most important. That crowd had little experience, even less flammable liquid in portable containers, and hardly a single hammer or crowbar, yet they were able to quickly accumulate experiences and develop new techniques (for example, how two people, kicking in the right way, could knock off a metal trash bin that could subsequently be used to open plate glass windows; or how to pry up a manhole cover with a pen and then use that as a hammer), and in the process summon up improvised tools from the urban landscape itself, even though the city has been designed and redesigned over the last one hundred fifty years with the very specific intention of disarming, isolating, and surveilling us.

However, the lack of experience was felt. The police finally cleared Plaça Catalunya by firing teargas, the first time the *mossos d'escuadra* had ever taken recourse to such an imprecise measure. The teargas was not tactically effective at such a low quantity in such a large area, but hardly anyone present had ever breathed in teargas before, and the psychological effect was more devastating than the hour-long barrage of eyeball-busting, rib-cracking, spleen-rupturing hard rubber bullets the police had been firing. They ran. Nonetheless, the rioting continued in one form or another all night long. People had learned how to defend themselves from the police.

But the State also learned. Threatening fines and other forms of repression against the public organizations involved in strike-preparation, they managed to get not only the UGT and CCOO, the two major unions, on the side of public order, but also the CGT, COS, and other nominally anti-capitalist unions. In the following general strike on 14 November 2012, with the crowd policed from within and therefore divided, radical and enthusiastic minorities could make specific attacks, but they could not take over the streets nor defend themselves from police. And the pacifist discourses that had been built up over the prior years by the media, the police, the politicians, and progressive currents within the social movements, all provided effective tools for disciplining the crowd and portraying would-be rioters as provocateurs.

The subversive crowd would have to wait for a day of its own creation, rather than piggybacking on the labor unions, which had long since become the undisputed gatekeepers and managers

of the movement of workers and unemployed. May Day 2013 was an attempt to create something interesting, something with the possibility of growing in unpredictable directions, but it fell short of its goals. By the end of 2013, many people were ready for any chance to fight back, and there was a monthly occurrence of mini-riots blossoming out of crowds as small as two or three thousand people. The occasions ranged from a student strike to a solidarity protest with the rioting neighborhood of Gamonal, Burgos. On one occasion, after the protest had apparently been dispersed by police, a large crowd made a lightning attack—using the chairs and tables of gentrifying streetside bars—on the police commissary on Las Ramblas, forcing police to hide inside their building and call for reinforcements to rescue them. At the solidarity protest held after the arrest of two anarchists on anti-terrorism charges, molotov cocktails made a brief reappearance in the rioters' toolkit.

Finally, on May Day 2014, the crowd was large, and it had the *voluntat*, the will, to take over the streets. But sometimes, a great deal of enthusiasm can have a negative impact on lucidity and even bravery, insofar as the latter is in part a function of calm nerves. Despite the illegality of the crowd, the day was widely viewed as an embarrassing failure. Bystanders were hit with rocks or bottles intended for the cops, a burning barricade was set up in the middle of the march, dividing it in two, and masked protestors fled the police charge without resistance, despite being in a neighborhood with small, defensible streets and many vulnerable tourist shops and restaurants. Criticisms were widely debated and even published.

Just three weeks later, these same criticisms were shared in the streets and put into practice when a thousand people responded to the city's eviction of the Can Vies social center. The night of the eviction, the riot was started by a breakaway group of merely one to two hundred who began setting up barricades and smashing banks on a major street. When police made a van charge, a typical *mossos* tactic effective at breaking barricades before they can be firmly constructed, the small crowd made tactical retreats to small streets on both sides of the avenue, forcing police on an hour-long goose chase through unfavorable terrain, and continuing the riot. In the course of fighting back, people actively discussed when and where were the best times to light fires and set up barricades, they made sure to only throw stones and bottles when the police and no one else would be hit, and they took care of one another, like a functioning collective. They also demonstrated that small groups of people, and not just crowds of tens of thousands, could stand up to the police if they made wise tactical decisions.

The next morning, people returned to the streets, going up against police again and again until they recovered the Can Vies site and set fire to the backhoe that was in the process of demolishing the social center. Their resistance ensured that the uprising would continue night after night for the rest of the week. The crowd grew daily, and by the third night there were some ten thousand people participating in the rioting. Molotov cocktails also came back into use, as did powerful fireworks. And though the police were forced to retreat a couple times, and were in general completely stymied (simply sweeping rioting crowds from one street to the next without being able to make targeted arrests), these more powerful tools were never generalized.

The tactical expertise of the people advanced at lightning speed, and the police were unable to win back the streets. The city government, led by a conservative party loath to compromise with radicals, canceled the eviction, making their defeat official. However, the rioters lost on a strategic level. They never broke the symbolic importance of the Sants neighborhood where most of the fighting occurred. On the second night, as the backhoe still burned, spontaneous attacks were carried out all over the city, and the entire citizenry could hear the helicopters going back



and forth all night long hunting, unsuccessfully, the saboteurs. Finally, the entire population was placed in a common antagonistic mentality: they were living in a warzone. On the third day came the crucial chance to extend the uprising to the entire city, sparking an insurrection that would deal not with a single social center but with all the oppressions of urban planning, housing prices, and exploitation that people were subject to. And though protests began in multiple points, they all returned to the symbolic site of importance in Sants rather than taking over their own neighborhoods. After that, the media were able to contain the meaning of the uprising, and the government was able to offer a concession capable of buying back the social peace.

For two years, people in Barcelona enjoyed considerable power: their government was afraid of them. Social centers that could mobilize support were left alone, unevicted. Finally, on 23 May 2016, the city carried out the long overdue eviction of el Banc Expropiat, a squatted bank in the Gràcia neighborhood. People fought back, and there were multiple days of rioting, but preference was given to more “artistic” or media-driven tactics, such as symbolic re-occupations that looked good on Twitter and could be carried out with smaller, more specialized crowds. Though Gràcia was an even more favorable terrain for street-fighting than Sants, people did not take the intentional step that would have been necessary to win the streets. They did not claim and generalize the more difficult, more dangerous techniques they had experimented with two years earlier. By limiting their weapons to stones and bottles, they were essentially choosing to be incapable of defending themselves from armored riot police. And in effect they lost their new experiences. The techniques capable of overcoming state expertise in crowd control sank back into the mists of history.

## **The Architecture of Ephemerality**

As we have seen, the collective, horizontal intelligence of the crowd is in many ways superior to the institutional intelligence of the police and the State. But the latter have two important advantages that revolutionaries need to understand and counteract. Institutional memory means that police methods and decades of street experience are preserved automatically, whereas the crowd frequently loses memory and therefore also loses important techniques. Secondly, the State controls the present. It controls the architecture of the world we inhabit, and therefore it also controls our access to the past.

We live in a society in which collective amnesia is a cultural value. All but the official history is continuously bulldozed and asphalted, old people are sent off to retirement homes, young people are kicked out of the nest into unforgiving job and real estate markets, the mortgages they pay vital to keeping the capitalist bubble from popping. New virtual architectures subject the entirety of our communications to surveillance, the demands of immediacy, and the lifeless filter of a two-dimensional screen, adorned with unlimited bytes yet straitjacketed by character limitations and a deeper incorporeality.

The means and effects of this architecture of control would require an entire other essay just to summarize. For our purposes, we need to underline that it makes it increasingly difficult for a crowd to form, it puts the crowd at a disadvantage in questions of self-defense, and it makes sure that the crowd is ephemeral, that it will not survive the day or the week of its birth so to pass on the lessons learned and the techniques developed.

Only through highly intentional, energetic, and strategic projections of our needs can we undermine this architecture. It will not happen spontaneously.

## **Intergenerationality and the Community of Rebellion**

Memory is a vital component of our uprisings. It gives us strategic perspective, an empowered imaginary, and the possibility of a revolutionary horizon. And because it preserves techniques and tactical experiences, when combined with the unmatched speed of horizontal, collective learning, it may be the only thing that might allow us to overcome the multifaceted power and the institutional expertise of the State.

What can we do to foment memory? The two major lines of action that come to mind are to develop safe and effective ways of sharing memory, and to foster intergenerationality, the sharing of spaces, experiences, and roles among members of various generations.

The methods of communication used by subversive groups tend to display a bipolarity not conducive to passing on memory. One pole is external communication: spreading subversive ideas to those “on the outside.” Such communication is predicated on the assumption that speaker and listener have very few shared experiences and do not form part of the same community. Complex ideas are simplified and abnormal life-experiences are omitted. The other pole is internal communications: either publishing complex ideas for people who already share an ethical or theoretical framework, or sharing sensitive information through clandestine means resistant to state surveillance.

Radicals need methods of communicating experiences and techniques that are both engaging to a diverse audience and resistant to repression. These two criteria practically demand the narrative form. By telling stories, we help people put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist, with her experiential and ethical framework intact, better than any work of theory. We also create an imaginary space where the events portrayed are supposedly unreal and where state repression is inhibited.

In other words, we need Robin Hood tales for our times, tales that describe both an economic and a moral relationship that many, many people might be able to recognize in their own surroundings, and that prescribe a fantastic and therefore bold way of responding to those relationships. In the case of Robin Hood: in the face of exploitation and misery, rob from the rich, and give to the poor, and to protect yourself from state repression, conceal your identity and take refuge in a wilderness area.

Where is the Pippi Longstockings of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, who not only beats up cops but also knows a thing or two about biometrics, so she can keep the police from tracking her down in the aftermath?

One of the closest examples I can find is the story that has sprung up around Loukanikos, one of the “riot dogs” of Athens. Loukanikos is invulnerable to repression, both because the police do not usually arrest dogs, and because anarchist affinity groups in the city were willing to carry out a firebombing campaign in solidarity with him, to break him free the one time animal control was foolish enough to round him up. Loukanikos, who swallowed up more teargas and bit more police motorcycles than should have been caninely possible during the long years of his life, showed that rioting was heroic and even natural, in the sense of healthy and wholesome. Given

his four-legged stature and non-human needs, he did not excel at demonstrating useful street techniques, though who could fault him for that?

The need for more and better storytelling recalls the image of the grandmother or grandfather telling stories around the fire, and this suggests the other line of action for rescuing memory from oblivion: the intergenerational community.

As much as some radicals speak about communities, hardly anyone in the West today forms part of a community. A community is, among other things, a structure by which people share their very survival. It is not, therefore, a subculture or a loose network of affinity. By the very definition of what it means, evolutionarily, to be human, a community must be multigenerational. And this coexistence and sharing among multiple generations, so rare in capitalist modernity, demands the creation of traditions for the direct transmission of experiences, knowledge, and techniques. Such traditions can be authoritarian or anti-authoritarian, our past is littered with examples of both. What is required of us, though, is to reconstruct a tradition that suits our needs. But in order to achieve an intergenerational coexistence and thus the possibility of living historical memory, a preservation of experiences that will overpower the archiving of information and methodology by the institutions that oppose us, we must recover survival as a community affair, which means a direct confrontation with the isolation, individualism, and dependency that capitalism has imposed on us through hundreds of years of violent dispossession.

It seems circular, such a strategic suggestion, tantamount to saying that in order to create the conditions for victory, we need to win. But perhaps through a circular logic, one suggesting simultaneity and mutuality, we begin to break through the rationalist straight lines and right angles that constitute the bars of our prison.

We cannot create communities of rebellion, in which old people pass on their experiences and young people fight for the future, until we develop collective means of survival by which young and old, farmers and healers, builders and printers, help one another survive. And we cannot create direct links of mutual aid until we break the capitalist monopoly on survival, or at least build the capacity to defend our autonomous projects. And we cannot build that capacity, we cannot get the strength to defeat the police in the streets, not just once but a second time and a third time, until we resuscitate the kind of powerful collective memory that a multigenerational community can provide.

This, therefore, is the relationship between riot and remembrance: they are two activities that must go hand-in-hand.

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the collective learning of subversive techniques  
September 2018

Retrieved on 21/04/2023 from <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786603708/Riots-and-Militant-Occupations-Smashing-a-System-Building-a-World-A-Critical-Introduction>  
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