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CROWD POLITICS

Or, 'Here Comes Everybuddy'

IN JAMES JOYCE'S dazzlingly inventive *Finnegans Wake*, the hero is a certain Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, HCE for short, whose dreaming mind becomes the psychological space of the *Wake's* drama. If *Ulysses's* Leopold Bloom is everyday man, then Earwicker, or HCE, is *everynight* man. Thus the epithet Joyce gives him in Chapter 2: 'Here Comes Everybody'. The initials HCE were the 'normative letters', Joyce said, of a universal dreaming figure; a sort of Jungian archetypal image of our collective, desiring unconscious, reliving in a single night's sleep the whole of human history. 'An imposing everybody he always indeed looked,' Joyce joked of Earwicker, 'constantly the same as and equal to himself and magnificently well worthy of any and all such universalization.'¹

For a while I dreamed of writing a book with the title, *Here Comes Everybody*. An urban book, because today urban life is, famously, the social environment to which everybody is coming. Only a few decades ago, a majority of the world's population lived in the countryside; today, most people live in cities, and soon that majority is set to become almost everybody; billions of people, inhabiting a vast global *banlieue*. In 2008 Clay Shirky, a communications professor at New York University, beat me to it, publishing a book called *Here Comes Everybody* with the intriguing subtitle: 'The Power of Organizing without Organizations'. I gravitated toward it, in expectation of high-spirited Joycean puns and artistry; but there were none to be had. *Here Comes Everybody* is an artless book, un-Joycean in its lack of existential depth. Yet perhaps lack of content is the point, in Shirky's account of the new forms of sociability

engendered by a digital age; a world where everybody is getting together on Facebook and Twitter.

Here Comes Everybody quickly became a best-selling bible for the new social media movement, with a thesis that could apply as much to the corporate sector as to grassroots activism. In this latter respect, it was not far removed from John Holloway's 'change the world without taking power'—organize without organizations. Shirky's appeal was his inclusive 'everybody': social media had the power to de-professionalize select sectors, like journalism, and create collaborative work for 'ordinary' non-specialist people. Groups could now operate 'with a birthday party's informality and a multi-national's scope'.² This line came under attack from Malcolm Gladwell in the *New Yorker*, who argued that online activism inspired only 'weak-tie' radicalism. It could not provide what social change really needs: people risking life and limb, as in the 1960s sit-ins that kick-started the black civil-rights movement. What mattered was the physicality of bodies being present in space; the 'strong-tie' connections that bonded people to a cause and to each other: 'The kind of activism associated with social media isn't like this at all. Twitter is a way of following people you may have never met. Facebook is a tool for efficiently managing your acquaintances.' They had their advantages, but 'weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism'—'we're a long way from the lunch counters of Greensboro.'³

Lost cities

Arguably Shirky and Gladwell are both right and both wrong; each thesis is insufficient in itself. Is it not possible to conceive of activism today as at once weak-tie and high-risk, both online and offline at the same time? And if so, would the 'strong-tie' space in which an offline 'Here Comes

¹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, New York 1976, p. 32. When Joyce lived in Zurich, he and Jung got together a few times; Jung was convinced that Joyce was schizophrenic. Always a sceptic of psychoanalysis, Joyce himself refused to let the Swiss psychologist psychoanalyse him. Later on, desperate about his daughter Lucia's mental condition, he relented and agreed to allow Jung to analyse her. The sessions, however, proved disastrous and Joyce soon broke off contact with Jung. In several sections of *Finnegans Wake*, the psychologist is satirized: '*Jungfraud*'; instead of *jungfrau* (the German for young woman), Joyce puns both Jung and Freud: he saw them equally as 'frauds'.

² Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, New York 2008, p. 48.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, 'Small Change', *New Yorker*, 4 October 2010.

Everybody' expresses itself necessarily be urban? In the 1960s, when the majority of people on Earth were still rural dwellers, the 'right to the city' was theorized as a radical 'cry and demand' by the French urbanist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre. Fifty years on, now that Lefebvre's urban revolution has largely consummated itself, how does the 'right to the city' fare? For Lefebvre, the political utility of a concept did not lie in its tallying with reality, but in enabling us to glimpse a 'virtual reality', as he often called it; one that is waiting to be born. In one of his final texts, he lamented the end of the traditional city: nobody today could write as gaily and lyrically about city life as Apollinaire had once written about Paris. The more the city had grown and spread its tentacles, the more degraded had social relations become. For Lefebvre, the 'menace' was that this amorphous monster would become a planetary metamorphosis, totally out of control.⁴

As hitherto rural worlds had been urbanized, traditional forms of work—secure, decent-paying jobs—seemed to melt into air. Once, people had migrated to the city looking for steady factory jobs; but those industries had gone belly-up or cleared out to somewhere cheaper; cities had lost their manufacturing bases, their 'popular' productive centres. Millions of peasants and smallholders, thrown off their land by agribusiness or the dynamics of the world market, came to an alien habitat that was now neither meaningfully urban nor rural; the result of a vicious process of dispossession, sucking people into the city while spitting others out of the gentrifying centre, forcing poor urban old-timers and vulnerable newcomers onto an expanding periphery. The outcome as Lefebvre described it was a paradoxical dialectic, in which 'centres and peripheries oppose one another'. But the demarcation between these two worlds was not defined by any simple urban-rural or North-South divide. Centres and peripheries were immanent within the 'secondary circuits' of capital itself. If ground rents and property prices offered better rates of return than other industrial sectors, capital—spearheaded by banks, financial institutions, big property companies and realtors—would slosh into portfolios of property speculation. Profitable locations would be deluged, as secondary-circuit flows became torrential, while other zones would be desiccated through disinvestment. The centre thus created its own periphery, the two existing side-by-side, cordoned off from one other, everywhere.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, 'Quand la ville se perd dans une métamorphose planétaire', *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 1989.

The giant industrial city that Friedrich Engels had documented was being destroyed by its own progeny. Industrialization had bequeathed something new: planetary urbanization. Rural regions had become absorbed into post-industrial production and financial speculation, swallowed up by an 'urban fabric', ceaselessly corroding the residue of agrarian life. At the same time, the notion of citizen and that of city-dweller had been wrenched apart. Cities' inhabitants now experienced a tragic form of proximity without sociability. Lefebvre's tonality throughout the essay is Céline-like in its journey to the end of the night; yet he could not resist a few Whitmanesque flourishes, throwing out one final thought about what a new democratic vista might look like. The 'right to the city', he concluded, now implied 'nothing less than a new revolutionary conception of citizenship', in which city-dweller and citizen would somehow embrace one another again.

But, as ever with Lefebvre, the proposition raised as many questions as it answered. Right to *what* city? If urbanization is planetary, if the urban—or urban society—is everywhere, does this mean the right to the metropolitan region, the whole urban agglomeration, or just the right to the city's downtown? And if power is now global, does that not render Lefebvre's singular demand hopelessly archaic? Does it still make sense to talk about right to *the* city, as if this was something mono-centric and clear-cut? Moreover, is there any political purchase in defining citizenship through something 'urban', when urban territoriality itself has become so formless, so global in its reach? At the same time, never before has the urban process been so bound up with finance capital and with the caprices of the world's financial markets. The crucial term here is David Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession', mobilizing Marx's theory of 'primitive accumulation' in a 21st-century neoliberal context. In *Capital*, Marx described primitive accumulation as the process of 'divorcing the producer from the means of production'—'when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis of the whole process.'⁵

In advanced capitalism, Harvey argues, accumulation by dispossession marks out other terrain for speculation and market expansion:

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, London 1976, pp. 874–6.

asset-stripping through mergers and acquisitions, raiding of pension funds, biopiracy, privatization of hitherto common assets and the general pillaging of hitherto publicly-owned property. Under Haussmann's direction, the built urban form of 19th-century Paris became, simultaneously, a property machine and a means to divide and rule; today, neo-Haussmannization, integrating financial, corporate and state interests, sequesters land through forcible slum clearance and eminent domain, valorizing it while banishing former residents to the post-industrial hinterlands. In Harvey's formulation, the 'right to the city' has to be reconceived as global, because urbanization is now masterminded by transnational finance capital; on the other hand, the city itself still holds the key: the revolution 'has to be urban or nothing at all'.⁶

Yet even if we accept the 'urban' as a specific terrain for political struggle, what would the 'right to the city' actually look like? Would it resemble the Paris Commune, a great festival of merriment, people storming into the centre of town (when there was still a centre), occupying it, tearing down statues, abolishing rents for a while? If so, how would this deal with the problem Marx identified—those flows of capital and commodities? Even if people re-appropriated the downtown HQs of the big corporate and financial institutions, would this really destabilize 'the system'? In 20th-century revolutionary traditions, wresting control over urban areas has often been the final icing on the cake: by then, the social movement had already been built, the bonds already forged; taking control of the city announced the culmination of victory, the storming of the Winter Palace, the social movement's final, joyous fling. Often, revolutionary currents have flowed from the countryside onto the urban streets. In *Revolution in the Revolution*, Régis Debray described the city as the 'empty head', deaf to the plight of those who feel accumulation by dispossession the most; the rural hinterlands, mountain jungles, and abandoned *banlieues* provide the 'armed fist' of rebellion: 'The city, for the guerrilla movement, was a symbol, *the purpose of which was to create the conditions for a coup d'état in the capital.*'⁷ Mao, Che, Castro, Ortega and Subcomandante Marcos would doubtless concur: the city does not so much radicalize as neutralize popular elements.

The city, from this standpoint, is not so much a Lefebvrian dialectical *oeuvre* as a Sartrean practico-inert, the prison-house of past actions that

⁶ David Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *NLR* 53, Sept–Oct 2008.

⁷ Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution*, New York 1967, pp.76–7.

inhibit active praxis. The practico-inert announces that dead labour dominates over living labour, that praxis has been absorbed into the form of the city itself. It would explain the relative conformity of the world's urban populations today: unemployed, sub-employed and multi-employed attendants, cut off from the past yet somehow excluded from the future; deadened by the daily grind of hustling a living. This is a generation of urban dwellers for whom 'the right to the city' serves no purpose—either as a working concept or as a political programme. It remains at too high a level of abstraction to be existentially meaningful in everyday life. Put a little differently: the right to the city politicizes something that is too vast and at the same time too narrow to mobilize contemporary city-dwellers to act as a collectivity, a fused group. None of this is to deny the role of people fighting to maintain affordable rents or to ensure public spaces stay open. But to bundle these multiple struggles together under the loose rubric 'right to the city' is to render what is tellingly concrete somehow vacuously abstract. It is too vast, because the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level; yet it is too narrow as well, because when people do protest and take to the streets *en masse*, they frequently reach out beyond the scale of the city. What is required is something closer to home—something one can touch and smell and feel—and something larger than life, something world-historical: a praxis that can somehow conjoin both realms at once.

Politics of the encounter

If the 'right to the city' is not working, perhaps the notion of the 'encounter' may be more useful in a political landscape in which new social media can become subversive weaponry. In a normative sense, the politics of the encounter can mediate between the lived and the historical; it can overcome the inertia of apparent mass and individual powerlessness. *Active* affects somehow replace *passive* affects; people start to recognize a 'singular essence', especially humiliated and exploited people, who encounter one another not always directly, but through a mode of relating to the world, through unstated forms of solidarity. As people find one another, they start to piece together common notions: they universalize, make more coherent what seems, on the face of it, only specific, lived experience. What appears particular is in fact general; our plight is that of many people. A politics of the encounter utters no rights, voices no claims. It just acts, affirms, takes back. An example of this in the United States would be Take Back the Land. Beginning in Miami in 2006, Take

Back the Land has borrowed its organizing and mobilizing techniques from Latin American social movements, particularly Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST), with direct-action occupations of land and vacant lots, claiming and reclaiming abandoned and foreclosed properties for ordinary people, with the slogan 'Occupy, Resist, Produce'.

The recent upheavals in Tunisia, Egypt, Greece and Spain could be read as a dramatic politics of the encounter. In each case, whether in Tunis, Cairo, Athens, Madrid—or Manhattan, with the latest Occupy Wall Street protests—encounters unfolded in the heart of the city, yet the stake was not about the city *per se*; rather, it was about democracy, in conditions of capitalist crisis. A lot of the activism and organizing was done de-territorially—post-urban, if you will—through Facebook and Twitter; people experienced the encounter in terms of an affinity. One of the slogans raised by young Spaniards mobilizing across their recession-ravaged land was: 'no jobs, no houses, no pension, no fear.' Many in Spain were new protesters, with little to lose and everything to gain; disgusted with unions, who do nothing to represent their interests, and disillusioned with both PSOE and the PP. Protests bloomed over Twitter and Facebook, triggered by WikiLeaks documents exposing government officials' behaviour; the government's attempt to shut down previously legal websites through antipiracy laws riled this new social media generation. 'They were the spark,' one young protester claimed, like Mohamed Bouazizi's setting himself ablaze in Tunisia.⁸

In such encounters, it is the Joycean 'here comes everybody', rather than the 'right to the city', that is at stake. Affinity becomes the cement that bonds, perhaps only for a moment, but a moment that lingers, a lasting encounter, of people across frontiers and barriers. In the 1970s Murray Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* argued that the 'affinity group' could be regarded as 'a new type of extended family, in which kinship ties are replaced by deeply empathetic human relationships—relationships nourished by common revolutionary ideas and practice.'⁹ In the context of an affinity-group encounter, 'class' perhaps evokes something meaningful principally in terms of a class-conscious ruling elite. The rest of us, those who do not rule, are an assorted and fragmented layering of

⁸ *New York Times*, 7 June 2011.

⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, London 1974, p. 221.

disparate people who are neither conscious of class nor motivated to act in its name. Still, these people, which is to say ‘us’, are often motivated by a desire to act against a ruling class, and against an undemocratic system that this class so evidently maintains. We who encounter one another, who find affinity with one another, are not so much class-conscious as collectively-conscious of an enemy; conscious of a desire to do something about that enemy, of wanting no truck with that enemy’s game.

This takes a somewhat different tack to Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, which spoke of the ‘modern working class’. As Marshall Berman points out in a new preface to that famous tract, this layer has always been ‘afflicted with a case of mistaken identity’.

Many of Marx’s readers have always thought that ‘working class’ meant only men in boots—in factories, in industry, with blue collars, with calloused hands, lean and hungry. These readers then note the changing nature of the workforce: increasingly white-collar, working in human services . . . and they infer the Death of the Subject, and conclude that the working class is disappearing and all hopes for it are doomed. Marx did not think the working class was shrinking: in all industrial countries it was already, or in the process of becoming, ‘the immense majority’.

The basis for Marx’s political arithmetic was rather simple. The modern working class is ‘a class of labourers who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These workers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are commodities, like every other article of commerce, and are constantly exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition and the fluctuations of the market.’ The crucial factor is not working in a factory, or with your hands; nor is it necessarily anything to do with being poor. Rather, as Berman writes it is the need ‘to sell your labour in order to live’—‘to look at yourself in the mirror and think, “Now what have I got that I can sell?”’¹⁰

One virtue of this definition of the working class is its inclusiveness, its flexibility. By this reckoning, it would seem that the working class is practically ‘here comes everybody’. It is a definition that hinges on a relationship to the means of production and to the global system of capital accumulation. But what seems a great conceptual virtue is also its major drawback, its potential failing. If the working class is now pretty much everywhere and everybody, then, like the city itself, it is at the same time

¹⁰ Marshall Berman, ‘Tearing Away Veils: *The Communist Manifesto*’, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, New York 2011.

pretty much nowhere, too; its definition serves no analytical or political function anymore. It no longer has any identifiable specificity as an object yearning to be a subject. In other words, the concept serves no strategic purpose, has no organizing pull. We may just as well label the working class ‘the multitude’, ‘the general intellect’, ‘the people’, or even ‘Here Comes Everybody’. Maybe the working class is now a kind of *lumpen-concept*, setting itself free from its object like Marx’s industrial reserve army: it is too flabby a notion to reveal anything meaningful to us, other than that we all need to find work to live. This is hardly news.

What is equally evident for millions of the world’s population, is that they will never find work—and they know it. Instead they must find the means to bend the rules, to work the system for themselves. Others actively disaffiliate themselves from any labouring public, creating another life-form for themselves and their families and entering the ever-swelling ranks of a constituency that André Gorz provocatively termed a ‘non-class’. The latent political muscle Marx accorded to the working class has not disappeared:

Instead, it has been displaced and has acquired a more radical form in a new social area . . . It has the added advantage over Marx’s working class of being immediately conscious of itself; its existence is at once indissolubly subjective and objective, collective and individual. This non-class encompasses all those who have been expelled from production by the abolition of work, or whose capacities are under-employed as a result of the industrialization (in this case, the automation and computerization) of intellectual work. It includes all the supernumeraries of present-day social production, who are potentially or actually unemployed, whether permanently or temporarily, partially or completely. It results from the decomposition of the old society based upon the dignity, value, social utility and desirability of work.¹¹

Berman countered this, claiming, ‘Marx understands that many people in this working class don’t know their address’:

They may not discover who they are, and where they belong, until they are laid-off or fired—or outsourced, or deskilled, or downsized. And other workers, lacking credentials, not dressed so nicely, may not get the fact that many who push them around are really in their class, despite their pretensions, share their vulnerability. How can this reality be put across to people who don’t get it, or can’t bear it? The complexity of these ideas helped create a new vocation, central to modern society: the *organizer*.

¹¹ André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, London 1982, p. 68.

But again, this seems a concept from the past, a golden age when labour organizing was a professional occupation—like a photojournalist or a literary critic. But is this still the case today? Doesn't organization somehow organize itself, especially when it really matters? A strength of Shirky's *Here Comes Everybody* is precisely this 'do-it-yourself-with-others' spirit: the idea that grassroots organizing no longer needs a mediator, a Leninist intellectual to reveal 'with sober senses, one's real conditions of life', one's true class status. A lot of people already know this, and even if they do not, they can still manage to organize themselves—or, to some extent, to get organized without consciously knowing it. People create group commonality through face-to-face, 'strong-tie' offline activism, but also through online 'weak-tie' association. The two flanks strengthen one another; the notion of affinity helps the idea of a group to take hold, adding a new dimension: speed—the speed at which crowds assemble and demonstrations take place; the speed at which people of different occupational groups and ages encounter and organize one another.

The spark that triggers any explosive encounter is like that first Jackson Pollock drip: suddenly the paint falls onto the giant canvas; things explode at ground level, on the floor, in the street; dense skeins of black and white swirls disrupt the field of vision; brown and silver nebulae dazzle; paint is layered on swiftly, like meteorites flashing across a white void. There is neither beginning nor end here; entering is via some middle door; there is no meaning other than a pure intensity, a flow of pure becoming. Standing in front of a huge Pollock masterpiece like *One: Number 31* (1950), or *Autumn Rhythm* (1950), shares something of the same dramatic (and unnerving) intensity of standing amid a huge crowd at a demonstration. The same spontaneous energies both incite and terrify; the splattering of colours and entangled lines are there before you. But now they are direct extensions of your own body. Now you are in the canvas. Those swift dripped lines somehow flow through you, become frenzied gestures of your own self in the crowd, the crowd in you. You are simply present here and now; passions are expressed rather than illustrated.

Revolutionary rehearsals

During such intense moments, when people encounter one another, 'the instant of greatest importance', according to Lefebvre, 'is the instant of failure. The drama is situated within that instant of failure: it is the

emergence from the everyday or collapse on failing to emerge, it is a caricature or a tragedy, a successful festival or a dubious ceremony.' Therein lies the problem: the encounter 'wants to endure. But it cannot endure (at least, not for very long). Yet this inner contradiction gives it its intensity, which reaches crisis point when the inevitability of its own demise becomes apparent.'¹² One moment leads to another, and a politics of encounter explodes when moments collide, when affinity takes hold. How, then, can the intensity of the encounter be sustained, how can it be harmonized with an authentic politics of transformation, one that endures over the long haul?

In his essay, 'The Nature of Mass Demonstrations', first published when crowds of young men and women piled onto Europe and America's streets in the spring of 1968, John Berger argued that the crowds in demonstrations should be distinguished from crowds in riots or even in revolutionary uprisings. The aim of a crowd in a demonstration was essentially *symbolic*; demonstrations were rehearsals for revolution, but not in a strategic or tactical sense, rather they were 'rehearsals of revolutionary awareness'. A mass demonstration is a spontaneous event; yet it is equally something created by individuals. People come together to create a function, to protest, to affirm; they are not responding to a function, like a crowd of shoppers. The crowd at a demonstration acts rather than reacts; or, if it reacts, it does so in reaction to its own previous actions and how these have been received by the powers that be. Crowds here dramatize the power they still lack: 'The historical role of demonstrations is to show the injustice, cruelty, irrationality of the existing state authority. Demonstrations are protests of innocence.'¹³ The crowd that encounters itself at a mass demonstration expresses political ambitions before the political means necessary to realize them are created. The revolutionary in the crowd has to learn how to rehearse symbolically, how to translate inner force into an external, common and transformative praxis; one has to test oneself out in the collective and strategic drama of the historical performance itself.

In his 1972 novel *G*, Berger evoked the experience of the 1898 uprising in Milan, when the cavalry charged the crowd and butchered a hundred workers, wounding many hundreds more:

¹² Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 2, London and New York 2002, pp. 351, 345.

¹³ John Berger, 'The Nature of Mass Demonstrations', *New Society*, 23 May 1968.

The crowd sees the city around them with different eyes. They have stopped the factories producing, forced the shops to shut, halted the traffic, occupied the streets. It is they who have built the city and they who maintain it. They are discovering their own creativity. In their regular lives they only modify presented circumstances; here, filling the streets and sweeping all before them they oppose their very existence to circumstances. They are rejecting all that they habitually, and despite themselves, accept. Once again they demand together what none can ask alone: Why should I be compelled to sell my life bit by bit so as not to die?¹⁴

Nobody can know in advance when an epic historical-geographical performance will be enacted, nor are there preconceived formulas for what makes a successful encounter. What is clear, however, is that any moment of encounter will likely be a kind of process without a subject, spreading like wildfire, a moment in which crowds become speedy ensembles of bodies, created via spontaneous online and offline ordering; participants will simultaneously act and react, in a human kaleidoscope in which joy and celebration, violence and wildness, tenderness and abandon somehow get defined. Participants will come together not only as a singularity sharing passions and affirming hopes, but also as a force that creates its own historical space. For the politics of the encounter will always be an encounter *somewhere*, a spatial meeting place. It will always be an illicit rendezvous of human bonding and solidarity, a virtual, emotional and material topography in which something disrupts and intervenes in the paralysis.

What takes hold is what Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* termed a ‘collideorscape’.¹⁵ The notion of the encounter is perhaps the central motif of *Finnegans Wake*, and the collideorscape marks for Joyce something of a ‘collide and escape’, a kaleidoscope of sorts, a coincidence taking hold, shaking things up to give form to another reality; a portmanteau word for a new portmanteau politics. The spatial question will not go away: it will always be the battleground for political struggle, the centre stage of any encounter or collideorscape. But what kind of human—rather than urban—space will this be, and what kind of new social networks hold the key for a 21st-century politics of militant democracy? In what forms will the Joycean *everybuddy*—as *Finnegans Wake* puns, seemingly giving the nod to Facebook addicts everywhere—begin to express itself, as it challenges the crisis-ridden neoliberal order?

¹⁴ Berger, G, London 1972, pp. 68–9.

¹⁵ Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 143.