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Moments of Excess; Movements, Protest and Everyday Life

Review

Paul Bowman

23 May 2011

In November 1999 a new cycle of struggles burst into the media consciousness of the world with the spectacle of anti-WTO protesters confronting police in the streets of Seattle. In fact this was a cycle that had first raised its head in England earlier that year when astonished TV viewers turned on the news on June 18th to discover that the City of London was under siege by ‘anti-capitalist’ protestors, the first time that term had ever been heard in media reporting. ‘Moments of Excess’ is a collection of texts by the Free Association written from 2001 to 2011 paralleling this cycle of struggles, of the so-called anti-globalisation or counter-globalisation movement with its succession of counter-summit mobilisations from Seattle, Prague, Genoa, Evian, Gleneagles and Heiligendamm amongst others.

The Free Association were participants as well as commentators in these events and many of these texts were originally published to be distributed freely to the participants in the

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mobilisations, either individually or as part of the Turbulence Project. The texts chosen for this collection show the progressive development of a unique political viewpoint through the learning experience of these protests and encounters.

The Free Association, originally the 'Leeds Mayday Group', came out of the group within the Class War Federation that pushed for the latter's self-dissolution in the late 90s and organised the Bradford Mayday Conference of 1998. Coming out of the autonomist Marxist current within Class War, the first text in this collection 'Anti-Capitalist Movements', a commission from a publisher looking for a book on 'anti-capitalism', reads somewhat as a confession of 'orthodox' autonomist Marxist faith (if such a thing can even be said to exist) with its obligatory hat-tips to Tronti and Negri. Nonetheless, the Free Association's practice of writing collectively guards them from the lapses into impenetrable 'intellectualese' all too often associated with older individual writers from this current, who have nowadays swapped prison cells for lecture tours. Rejected by the publisher as being 'too militant, not academic enough', the FA have thankfully continued in this vein ever since.

It is really with the later texts addressed to the participants of the counter-summit mobilisations that the FA's writings really begin to develop into a unique perspective squarely aimed at an audience of the movement itself. Indeed the question of what exactly 'the movement' is, is a continual theme throughout these texts along with a continual return to the maxim "again and again, the most productive place to start is with the question of what we want, not what we're against".

Although the theoretical background to these texts, whether the autonomist tradition of Tronti or Negri, or the progressively growing influence of Deleuze and Guattari, is not only rich but also dense to the point of being resistant to many readers, the Free Association's choice of audience and their intent to produce an effect in 'real-time' tactical situations transforms this density into lucid, affective prose. 'Event Horizon' for ex-

ample, begins with a description of the subjective experience of being in a real time 'moment of excess' situation in language that speaks directly to emotion and affect far more powerfully than the jaded art-school dropout poetics of any insurrectionist text. Although never explicitly stated, the feminist maxim that 'the personal is the political' and its converse that the political is either about personal and collective liberation or it is just another alienation, runs through all of these texts.

In reaction to the recent uprising against Mubarak in Egypt, just before the dictator's downfall, an Egyptian commentator wrote of the schizoid experience of reality in Cairo as a city split between two different timezones simultaneously. In one timezone, Tahrir square and other neighbourhoods, the dictator had already fallen, the broadcasts of state TV from the other timezone where he was still in power appeared like a bad joke, as if from another era, another reality. It was a powerful piece and yet, to this reviewer, strangely familiar. Since receiving my review copy of 'Moments of Excess' I placed that familiarity. In many of the texts, for example 'Worlds in Motion' or 'Event Horizon', the FA address the question of 'worlding', that is how to rip up the script and create new possibilities in the here and now, as opposed to the millenarian promises of some far off day 'after the revolution'. In writing of what the 'composition' of such situations is they write, "Maybe its as simple as acting though we already exist in a different reality" and "Take the example of Rosa Parks, who simply refused to move to the back of the bus. She wasn't making a demand, she wasn't even in opposition, she was simply acting in a different world".

'Moments of Excess' is a collection of political texts coming out of a cycle of struggles that is now closed, as the authors accept in their final text. This text, 'Re:generation', new to this edition, looks towards the emerging new cycle that has shown its face in the anti-austerity protests and the recent student clashes in Britain and Ireland. This book is a record of lessons learned in that previous cycle, written in language that partic-

ipants in the coming wave can access so as to be broken into parts for appropriation to their/our own needs. Above all, it speaks to the most basic questions of radical or revolutionary politics – the need to break through the alienation of the everyday under capitalism and to combat the reappearance of those same alienations in our oppositional organising or activity, and to renew the vision “that we can develop new tactics, new technologies and new ways of living that will cause a cascade of events to sweep through society”.

Today, in the wake of the financial implosion of neoliberalism, we are told ‘There Is No Alternative’ to a decade of savage cuts, dismantling social provision, lowering wages, an age of austerity. This, we are told, is the way the world is. Well then it’s time for us to make a new world, not in some far-off future, but right here, right now. This book is a contribution to the debate of how to make new worlds that respond to our needs instead of those of capital. If that sounds like something you’re up for, then beg, borrow or steal this book!