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**THE HUMAN NETWORK REVISITED: RESPONSES TO BRYNNAR  
SWENSON'S "THE HUMAN NETWORK: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE  
LIMIT OF POLITICS"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article combines contributions from three authors, each of whom writes in scholarly response to Brynnar Swenson's "The Human Network: Social Media and the Limit of Politics," originally published in the *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 4:2 (2011): 102-124. Ignas Kalpokas reads Swenson's theories of revolt and social change alongside a robust theory of sovereignty drawn from Carl Schmitt, while also expanding Swenson's interpretations of the media representations of the Egyptian revolution and the 2011 riots in England by an appeal to theories drawn from Lacanian psychoanalysis. J.D. Mininger also draws from psychoanalytic discourse as he revisits a key interview given in Swenson's account of the media interpretations of the London riots of 2011. Viktorija Rusinaitė addresses Swenson's provocation about the limits and status of politics, turning to media theory and the concept of politics found in the work of Jacques Rancière.

### **KEYWORDS**

The political, police, media, riots, violence, democracy, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Carl Schmitt, Jacques Rancière, Brynnar Swenson

## 1. RESPONSE I (BY IGNAS KALPOKAS)

Although Brynnar Swenson captures some important tendencies in the representation of the Egyptian revolution and the 2011 riots in England in his "The Human Network: Social Media and the Limits of Politics," his argument will be taken further by arguing that this representation was an attempt of the Western media and politicians to cope with the emergence of what is known in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the Real, i.e. the primordial pre-representational, pre-symbolic domain where no order and law applies, and to include it into the common order of representation and cognition. In essence the distinction between net activists as democracy fighters on the one hand, and internet chatters as law-breakers, rioters, and thugs on the other, usually found in the media and in political discourse, will be crucial. However, it will be argued that, especially in the case of the UK riots, Swenson's explanation is only partial, because it overestimates the (self-)consciousness of the rioters. Instead, drawing upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, Walter Benjamin's theorisation of violence, and Carl Schmitt's notion of the state of exception, an inquiry will be made into the concept of sovereignty and its relation to representation. Therefore, in contrast to Swenson's emphasis on the *limit* of politics, here the *extension* of politics will be stressed.

The 'Arab Spring,' and the revolution in Egypt in particular, profoundly shook the Western worldview and its strategic interests. The Arab world was primarily seen as a region of autocrats, who were brutal to a greater or a lesser extent but nevertheless guaranteed stability in these predominantly Muslim countries and restrained the possible coming to power of Islamist movements. Egypt especially was a key Western ally in the region, and the Mubarak regime enjoyed significant support, especially from the US.<sup>1</sup> Concurrently, the societies of the Arab states were seen as weak, fragmented and prone to manipulation, thus both posing no serious danger to the established regimes and not worthy to be trusted. Therefore, when the 'Arab Spring' broke out, the West struggled to normalise and order the Real, which had once again served reminder of itself. Therefore, comparisons with such established examples as the European revolutions of 1989 (a march towards democracy)<sup>2</sup> or 1848 (revolutions stolen by reactionaries)<sup>3</sup> are symptomatic of making the 'Arab Spring' recognisable. As correctly noted by Swenson, this was done by emphasising the Egyptians' desire to become 'like us': both in their desire for democracy and in their usage of 'our' means, i.e. the much-hyped social media.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Springborg, "Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?," *The International Spectator* 46(3) 2011: 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> Lucan Way, "Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Lessons of 1989," *Journal of Democracy* 22(4) (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Springborg, *supra* note 1.

As a result, the exceptionality of Egypt was included into the normality of world order by portraying it as a new, 'post-modern', revolution.

The story was absolutely different with the UK riots. Here also a basic scheme of events soon emerged: young hooded teenagers and men (although not always necessarily men) carrying bats and/or Molotov cocktails convened seemingly instantly, thrashed and looted a neighbourhood, and dispersed as quickly as they had gathered.<sup>4</sup>

Needless to say, social media undoubtedly facilitates communication, and this is a significant development in authoritarian regimes that attempt to limit the public space and often use it for manipulation, thus creating distrust in any information provided. Social media, however, provides user-generated content and allows it to be disseminated in a manner that avoids any official networks,<sup>5</sup> connects people with similar grievances and facilitates the creation of communal feeling.<sup>6</sup> And yet, what is usually forgotten is that even in this case two elements are needed: first, a core of hard-line devotees who prepare the information and carry out the initial dissemination to accumulate a critical mass of followers and make it viral; second, a set of grievances and other motivations that would turn the general public into users (and possibly disseminators) of such information (and even more serious grievances to cause action 'on the ground', which requires more effort and possibly sacrifice) – in other words, potentiality has to turn into actuality. Social media has not changed either of these. What is even more, the challenge to turn online activism and engagement into activities 'offline' is even more difficult because the internet tends to create weak ties of users rather than of members.<sup>7</sup> Finally, despite the fact that internet users participating in the revolution were more informed and more active than non-users,<sup>8</sup> the causal link is still unclear: it is highly possible that these people were *already* active before embracing the internet and the choice of means was merely incidental or a strategic addition to an already pre-existing arsenal.

The representation of social media in the case of the UK riots was once again very different. Here it was not a space of liberation (or, if it was, then of very specific liberation indeed). This media, and especially the Blackberry Messenger (BBM), was indeed widely used by the youths to organise themselves and transmit

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Kellner, "The Dark Side of the Spectacle: Terror in Norway and the UK Riots," *Cultural Politics* 8(1) (2012): 10.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Etling, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, "Political Change in the Digital Age: The Fragility and Promise of Online Organizing," *SAIS Review* 30(2) (2010): 39.

<sup>6</sup> Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, "The Role of Digital Media," *Journal of Democracy* 22(3) (2011): 40-41.

<sup>7</sup> Jeroen Van Laer and Peter Van Aelst, "Internet and Social Movement Action Repertoires: Opportunities and Limitations," *Information, Communication & Society* 13(8) (2010): 1163.

<sup>8</sup> Zeynep Tufekci and Christopher Wilson, "Social Media and the Decision to Participate in Political Protest: Observations from Tahrir Square," *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012): 375.

information.<sup>9</sup> But here it also achieved a certain quasi-mystical quality of an impenetrable place where vice and anarchy persevere – once again, especially concerning the BBM due to the impossibility to retrieve and decipher its messages, in contrast to the more open and conventional spaces of Facebook and Twitter. In either case, the ideas to switch off not necessarily the entire internet but at least some of its services sounded eerily similar to those voiced earlier in Egypt. And, once again, the question remains as to why one should follow the threads in social media and act accordingly, i.e. less of than from other motivation(s). What is more, participation in rioting and looting appeared to be based more on individual decision than on significant social interaction.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Egypt (but also the Middle East in general), chronic corruption, often directly related with foreign aid, multiple failures of important social and infrastructure projects, and socioeconomic disparities were key factors in causing massive discontent.<sup>11</sup> Although there is a tendency to see the revolution as a generational conflict between the young, dynamic, internet-literate, and pro-democratic generation and the aging autocratic one,<sup>12</sup> as correctly noted by Swenson, this was not entirely the case as many of the grievances were shared across the society and generations. As a result, it was a response to the deficiencies of the system as such and not some primordial striving for democracy and larger freedom that united the protesters, as illustrated by subsequent developments. And then it must be stressed that, contrary to widespread representations, liberal democracy is only one of the options put forward by a segment of society – one end of a spectrum where the other extreme is Islamic theocracy, and a plethora of other forms lie in-between them.<sup>13</sup> What is even more, the image we have of the revolution was formed by the internet users themselves in a way that most reflects their attitudes and experiences but a significant portion of the protesters remained unrepresented because it had no means to make its voice heard.<sup>14</sup>

Notably, demonstrations should not be seen as an exceptional event in Egyptian politics. Minor outbreaks were common and therefore the revolution should be seen as having been in the making for years.<sup>15</sup> Thus one could speak about the importance of a vision or a mental model that had developed over time<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra* note 4: 10.

<sup>10</sup> Bill Durodié, "The Changing Nature of Riots in the Contemporary Metropolis from Ideology to Identity: Lessons from the Recent UK Riots," *Journal of Risk Research* 15(4) (2012): 349.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn M. Youssef, "Recent Events in Egypt and the Middle East: Background, Direct Observations and a Positive Analysis," *Organizational Dynamics* 40 (2011): 223-224

<sup>12</sup> Ashraf M. Attia, et al., "Commentary: The impact of social networking tools on political change in Egypt's 'Revolution 2.0'," *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 10 (2011): 370.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Springborg, *supra* note 1: 6.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Christensen, "Discourses of Technology and Liberation: State Aid to Net Activists in an Era of 'Twitter Revolutions'," *The Communication Review* 14 (2011): 248.

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn M. Youssef, *supra* note 11: 225.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

but not necessarily about spontaneous online organisation. No less important was the maintenance of the protests 'on the ground', especially in the case of the camp on Tahrir Square, where a high amount of cooperation and 'real' action was required.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the protests, once small-scale and more or less *ad hoc*, continued and grew despite occasional threats and even sporadic violence. What is important here is the initial precedent of success and a symbolic centre (again an 'offline' one) around which further action could develop. When a 'real' material centre begins to develop, favourable conditions develop for real interpersonal relations that stipulate commitment even if danger is present. Furthermore, the regime's response was important. Indeed, the Arab autocrats appeared to be vulnerable during the so-called 'spring', except where strong military response was either imminent or actual.<sup>18</sup> This, however, is determined not only by the autocrat's *willingness* but also by his *ability* to retain support of crucial forces within his regime.<sup>19</sup> For example, the major breakthrough of the Egyptian revolution was not the accumulation of large crowds in Tahrir Square but the decision of the military to force the resignation of Mubarak who was strongly clinging on power only a day earlier,<sup>20</sup> making it more a military coup than a revolution. The dominance of the military (and many Mubarak-era officials) in post-revolutionary Egypt only confirms this.

The attempts to explain the UK riots are much more diverse as they tend to be motivated first and foremost by the ideological orientation and political aims of the commentators, but most of them are still entirely speculative.<sup>21</sup> The only thing everyone seems to agree on is that there are serious social and economic problems underlying British society, but the interpretations of causes and presentations of possible cures vary significantly. Those on the left of the political spectrum usually tend either to equate the riots with the crisis of global capitalism (and see them as "an explosion of rage and market-driven greed"<sup>22</sup> rather than motivated by political goals) or to emphasise rising deprivation, inequality, and spending cuts by the Conservative-led coalition government,<sup>23</sup> thus returning to the domain of politics. Meanwhile, those on the right prefer to stress 'sick communities', 'moral decay', 'poor parenting', and, in the words of David Cameron, a 'broken society'.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, a third possible perspective is to concentrate on the general moral

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*: 227-228.

<sup>18</sup> Vincent Cannistraro, "Arab Spring: A Partial Awakening," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 22(4) (2011): 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 15.

<sup>20</sup> Mohamed El-Khawas, "Egypt's Unfinished Revolution," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23(1) (2012): 57-58.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Phillips, Diane Frost, and Alex Singleton, "Researching the Riots," *The Geographical Journal* (2012): 2.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra* note 4: 19.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Birch and Nicholas Allen, "'There will be Burning and a-Looting Tonight': The Social and Political Correlates of Law-Breaking," *The Political Quarterly* 83(1) (2012): 33.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

failures within a society, not only among the rioters. This includes the perception of corporate and banker greed as the causes of the financial crisis as well as a recent parliamentary expenses scandal making it more socially acceptable to simply take what you want and stipulating distrust in state institutions.<sup>25</sup> Both long-term research and surveys conducted immediately in the aftermath of the riots appear to support the latter hypothesis.<sup>26</sup> Alienation, lack of real prospects, and crisis of legitimization were indeed important issues that led to the riots.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, economic reasons do not offer a full explanation since rioting was not confined to the poor and unprivileged and clearly food stores were not prime targets of looters as they opted for less basic but more expensive goods.<sup>28</sup> Also, response was important, similarly as in the Egyptian case: it was the slow, ineffective, and often impotent police response as well as a lack of attempt to impose any authority by the government itself that contributed to the "casual pursuit of looting in an almost relaxed atmosphere"<sup>29</sup> and further encouraged the youths.

Once again, developments offline are crucial not only for the revolution itself but also for the post-revolutionary period. One of them is the international context: whereas the European revolutions of 1989 were facilitated by the global shift of power, an absence of such shift might hamper the consolidation of the 'Arab Spring'.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, internally, the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organisations after the revolution illustrates that the existence of 'real' offline ties and networks is crucial in the long run. As was perfectly summarised by Cannistraro, "The young people who filled Cairo's Tahrir Square may know how to use Facebook, but the Brotherhood has a branch in every neighborhood and town".<sup>31</sup> Keeping this in mind, the recent electoral success of Islamist parties seems absolutely logical. As far as the UK rioters are concerned, it is precisely the non-existence of any bonds whatsoever that was crucial to not only the sporadic and dispersed nature of the events but also to their sudden and unexpected beginning and end. Indeed, if earlier riots (e.g. in the early 1980s) were characterised by collective aims and collective action which was undoubtedly political in character, "what united the youths involved in 2011 was not a shared ideology, but rather their taste in footwear (Nike trainers) and electrical goods (plasma TV screens)".<sup>32</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that after the riots calmed down, everything came back to 'normal' and no new reality was created.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 36.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas Kellner, *supra* note 4: 22.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Birch and Nicholas Allen, *supra* note 23: 34.

<sup>29</sup> Bill Durodié, *supra* note 10: 351.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Cannistraro, *supra* note 18: 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*: 21.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Durodié, *supra* note 10: 350.

It is worth noting that, for Lacan, in an object of desire “there is from the beginning something other than use value. There is its *jouissance* use,”<sup>33</sup> i.e. the satisfaction that a person attributes to the object. Needless to say, the actual satisfaction is always less than expected, leaving the subject to constantly transfer his/her desire to yet another thing.<sup>34</sup> Political reality (as any other reality), on its own part, is a phantasmatic coherence produced through a specific ordering of meaning and value attached to objects and phenomena – the symbolic structure of ideas that governs desire and facilitates its transference when needed.<sup>35</sup> As stressed by Lacan, ‘I see *outside*’,<sup>36</sup> namely, perception lies in the order external to the subject that nevertheless is the essence of the subject’s constitution. Consequently, law and power are not only external – they are also internal, deeply rooted in a subject’s desire.<sup>37</sup> As a result, politics is about providing enjoyment for the people and satisfying their desire. However, since no satisfaction is enough, it is also about creating new promises of enjoyment (as well as actual satisfaction) in order to channel desire. When, due to some reason, the chain of satisfaction gets stuck, discontent arises.

The riots in the UK and the revolution in Egypt could indeed be seen as the Lacanian Real perforating the symbolic ordering of the world that we live in – as the ‘heart of darkness’ in which horror persists. In both cases discussed, it was the lack of enjoyment that broke through the law, although the issues at stake were undoubtedly very different: from basic economic, social and political deprivation of protesters to the narcissism of boasting looters. Accordingly, the presence (in Egypt) or absence (in UK) of notable organisation and attempt to bring about change was visible. One more possible way would be to see the events through the lens of Benjamin’s conceptualisation of violence. Indeed, as seen in Egypt, “all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counterviolence”<sup>38</sup> until there is a new power strong enough to triumph. Meanwhile, the UK events could be seen as ‘divine violence’ which neither makes nor preserves law, accepting sacrifice not for some complete emancipation but only in the name of abstract justice as such (in Benjamin’s own words, “the sign and seal but never the means of sacred execution”<sup>39</sup>) – that is, an expiating one.<sup>40</sup> But at the same time this is also the

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 229.

<sup>34</sup> Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 87-88.

<sup>35</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 75-76.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> A. Kiarina Kordela, *Surplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence”: 300; in: Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Schmittian exception, where reality breaks through the crust of repetition.<sup>41</sup> It is well known that for Schmitt the sovereign decides on the exception, and it is the exception that constitutes the very relevance of sovereignty.<sup>42</sup> The crucial question is, then, who had decided on the exception in a particular case: the protesters, any other societal group, or the state apparatus. On the one hand, when illegality becomes extreme, it can convert itself into a new standard of legality<sup>43</sup> (as seen in Egypt), while on the other, failing to establish itself, it may only remain as the outside (as in the UK).

It is worth noting that if for Schmitt the taking of land (*Landesnahme*) is the spatial precondition of order, then the taking of the outside (*Ausnahme* – his term for the exception) is a juridical precondition.<sup>44</sup> Unavoidably, at the end there is a decision that ‘normalises’ the situation, once again subsuming it under the (extended) symbolic. Violence thus becomes law-making in either case: either positively, by being able to decide and shape the new symbolic (as it was in Egypt, at least to a certain extent), or negatively, by being included as a new negation, decided upon outlawing provisions of the extended symbolic. As a result, there is hardly such thing as a purely anomic ‘divine’ violence. This also explains the different representations of Egypt and UK as different ways of inclusion, stemming from the different results of the explosion of the Real: the success of the former meant its normalisation and re-inclusion in the Western symbolic as a postmodern democratic revolution while the scarcity of any efficacy of the latter meant its inclusion only by exclusion. Partly *contra* Swenson, one should talk less about a ‘limit of politics’ than about the (old-fashioned) sovereign decision. Finally, the examples of Egypt and the UK show that the social media is still a *terra incognita* in the field of political signification: a space of whatever, to which the most varied qualities could be ascribed depending upon convenience, from the utopia of a free society to the dystopia of a channel for darkest desires.

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<sup>40</sup> Marc de Wilde, “Violence in the State of Exception Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt”: 198; in: Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (Cambridge (MA) and London: The MIT Press, 1985), p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> Hent Kalmo, “A Matter of Fact? The Many Faces of Sovereignty”: 114; in: Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner, *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 19.

## 2. RESPONSE II (BY J.D. MININGER)

Of the many merits of Brynnar Swenson's "The Human Network: Social Media and the Limit of Politics," one of the greatest is surely that the article is at once specific enough in its research and detail to intervene in arcane scholarly fields (such as new media studies and the history of social movements and change, not to mention discourse analysis, which is one of his tacit methodologies throughout) and yet broad enough in its framing questions and categories (e.g. what amounts to 'politics'; who decides on this category; etc.) to be teacherly. By this latter designation I understand a text that teaches in the best Socratic sense: it asks difficult, engaging questions that demand and inspire readers to seek answers for themselves in the wake of the questions. I proceed in my contribution to this response article embracing the teacherly spirit of Swenson's work. On the matter of designating politics, its enunciations, and the source and nature of political agents' social media tools, I leave the commentary to my co-contributors. In this brief addition to the conversation I concentrate on Swenson's insights regarding the Subject(s) of the political actions and enunciations in the London riots, and I expand on them by appealing to the discourse of psychoanalysis in order to further consider these subjects' mutually determining Others.

Swenson introduces the topic of the London riots of summer 2011 with reference to the use of Blackberry technology; but by the end of his analysis, it is not the technology but the class-based motivations of the riot participants that buoy the continuing importance of the topic. He argues that "the political subjectivity which emerged on the streets of Tottenham cannot be assimilated by the media and transformed into a palatable version of liberal democracy, and, therefore, confronts the limit of what can be defined as politics today. In England the poor did have a voice but, in the end, it seems that most people did not like what they had to say."<sup>45</sup> Leaving aside the basic (Schmittian) point that the political is perhaps most poignantly embodied in the moment of deciding especially what does not count as politics (and therefore including non-politics in the very act and purview of the frame of the political as such), what is most notable in Swenson's admirable final thesis is the lesson that the riots did indeed signify meaningfully, despite the frequent attempt on the part of the government, the police, and the media to paint the events as rudderless, senseless, barbaric, and, thus, supposedly lacking in political credibility or value.

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<sup>45</sup> Brynnar Swenson, "The Human Network: Social Media and the Limit of Politics," *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics* 4:2 (2011): 122.

Despite the *Guardian* series' unintentionally ironic title "Reading the Riots," it seems that most responses to the riots lacked precisely the strong act of *reading*—i.e. not merely assigning static meaning to the riotous actions (in this case, often simply calling the acts 'meaningless'), but reflecting (on) meaning as a dynamic relationship created 'as we go along' between signs, their interpreter-readers, and the interpretive context. Swenson's insistence upon the signifying consistency of the London riots demonstrates just such a strong, reflexive practice of reading. Nowhere in his analysis is this reading so well executed as in his analysis of an informal and spontaneous early-morning post-riot interview with two young females. The exchange warrants quoting in its entirety:

--Everyone was just going to riot, just going mad. Like chucking things, chucking bottles. Breaking stuff.

--It was good, though. It was madness. Good fun.

-- Yea, good fun.

[Interviewer]: So you're drinking a bottle of rose wine at half-nine in the morning?

--Yea, free alcohol.

[Interviewer]: Have you been drinking all night?

--Yea, yea. It was the government's fault. Conservatives.

--It's not even a riot, we're just showing the police we do what we want.

--Yea, and now we have.

[Interviewer]: Do you think it will go on tonight?

--Hopefully!

[Interviewer]: But these are local people, why is it targeting local people?

--It's the rich people, the people that got businesses, and that's why all of this happened. Because of the rich people.

--So we're just showing the rich people we do what we want.<sup>46</sup>

These two young, exuberant, drunken women are emblematic of both the London rioters and the interpretation of their acts of disorder, crime, and violence. What makes the interview so compelling and insightful is what Swenson correctly describes as a scandal: "what was scandalous about this short interview is not that they were young women, or that they had been stealing stuff and 'drinking all night,' or even how they justified their actions ('just showing the police/rich we do what we want'), but that the rioting was a source of pleasure. These girls were not angry, inhuman, or violent—they were having the time of their lives."<sup>47</sup> In the end, many were unwilling or unable to accept the rioters' subjectivities and acts as

<sup>46</sup> "London rioters 'showing the rich we do what we want'," *BBC.co.uk* (August 9, 2011) // <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14458424> (accessed August 9, 2011) [quoted in Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 120-1].

<sup>47</sup> Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 121.

politically credible, and their response was to deny meaning and/or effectively misread the riots, which Swenson points out when he sums up: "In England the poor did have a voice but, in the end, it seems that most people did not like what they had to say."<sup>48</sup> However, following Swenson's reading of the events and their perception by the media, government, and police, the key point in understanding the misreading lies in the scandal: namely, the participants' pleasure. What is and whence the nature of this pleasure? These are the questions generated by Swenson's teacherly text, and they are the questions animating the remainder of this brief analysis.

Why is the young women's pleasure so scandalous? Perhaps, as Swenson in part suggests, it is a predictable pleasure taken in transgressive activities, such as breaking the law. Or further, perhaps it is simply spiteful glee in a perceived loss (of property, safety, etc.) located in the Other (the "conservatives"; the "police"; the "rich"). But *schadenfreude*, even politically motivated because class-based, is hardly worthy of the description of "scandalous." Perhaps, also as Swenson notes, it is their cavalier spirit ("it's not even a riot"). But this is potentially easily dismissed as the ignorant hubris of youth. A hint of misogyny seems to haunt all of this as well, at least with respect to these two young women who have been up all night spontaneously celebrating. Still further, there is something in the scene of the interview reminiscent of Sir Toby and Sir Andrew's scandalous, drunken frivolity in Act II of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*—especially with Malvolio's haughty scolding included. But as the partial answers proliferate, we must ask again—what was so extraordinarily unsettling about the young women's pleasure that the riots should be understood as politically unworthy of respect (or even validity)?

The importance of this interview as a statement representative of the London riots is underscored by the eventual answer provided by Swenson: the actions taken were "a collective expression of agency on the part ("we") of the young and dispossessed against those with property."<sup>49</sup> The young women portray the situation with an "us versus them" logic, in which the role of the enemy is played by the conservatives, the police, and the rich. As Swenson notes, "far from feeling any obligation to or association with those in their own neighborhood, these girls clearly express a theory of class that is not about work, region, or identity, but simply the distinction between those who have something and those who have nothing."<sup>50</sup> At bottom, it points to an extreme, and extremely simplistic, but still valid socio-economic concern. So perhaps it is anxiety as a kind of danger signal that led many to dismiss the riots as nothing more than senseless violence and the

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

rioters as, in Swenson's words, "lazy, undisciplined youth, whose pleasure in destruction and violence is only surpassed by their desire to obtain expensive clothes and new electronics."<sup>51</sup>

Beyond the answers just mentioned, which Swenson suggests in one way or another, there is yet another important interpretation—one borrowed from the discourse of psychoanalysis, and which draws a helpful connection between the question of why so many refuse to ascribe legible, logical political signification to the London riots and why the young women's pleasure was so scandalous. What created anxiety and outrage for those who did not like what the poor had to say was the fact of hearing and seeing their own message being returned to them—both literally and allegorically—in the form of these two drunken revelers and their selfish pleasure.

One important reason the pleasure produces anxiety and indignation is that it is contradictory from a certain perspective. The rioters are looting and burning their own neighborhoods—which the interviewer is quick to ask about—and clearly enjoying themselves in the process! This "self-destruction" clearly indicates the presence of socio-economic systemic violence.<sup>52</sup> This kind of violence, exemplified in poverty and its systemic disenfranchisements, is less visible than the physical violence of the riots. Thus, in comparison, the looting and rioting appears 'out of nowhere' because most interpreters hold it against a level-zero state of affairs that defines 'normal' as without subjective, physical, agent-based violence. But the systemic violence inherent to the lives of impoverished Londoners is precisely 'normal.' The message of pleasure and the temporary freedom to enjoy aspects of commodity culture from which they are otherwise excluded, relayed by the two riot interviewees as representatives of the "have-not's," is in fact the "have's" own (unconscious) message, but delivered to them in its inverted, true form. The pleasure accessed through capitalistic success via various forms of objective, systemic violence returns now from the ether of the Real as that self-same pleasure, only inverted into subjective and immediate violence. The pleasure of the Wall Street broker and the rose wine swilling teenage London riot girl is the same enjoyment of violence that acts upon desire's fundament of envy: showing the Other you (apparently) do what you want. This is the primary fantasy organizing the ego, and equally the primary fantasy organizing free market capitalism as summed up in Adam Smith's famous Invisible Hand metaphor. Tellingly, unlike the broker, the riot interviewees are aware that the riot's violence is equally directed inwardly at themselves. When the interviewer asks why the riots are targeting local

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*: 120.

<sup>52</sup> For more on this concept, cf. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), pp. 9-14.

people, the answer ("It's the rich people, the people that got businesses, and that's why all of this happened.") is effectively *extimate*: an 'outside' that 'inside', a 'them' very much in the midst of and even constitutive of 'us'; it is the Other in them, as them. Owning the freedom to impose one's own enjoyment on others—this is the basic message of the have's, buried mostly in structures of objective, systemic violence. The riots—and in particular the pleasure of the drunken, triumphant young riot interviewees—sends this same message back to its originators in its true and now more disclosed form, made more conscious and obvious in its form as subjective, physical violence. Hence the anxiety; hence the denial of political validity; and hence the scandal of pleasure.

However, the scandalous pleasure submits to still further productive analysis. Though the young interviewees' pleasure is certainly also an immediate form of simple delight, we should not miss the equally paradoxical constitution of their pleasure as what Jacques Lacan calls *jouissance*. Related in part to Freud's theory of the death drive, it refers to *Lust im Unlust*, pleasure in displeasure. In this case, it is the rioters' pleasure gained through a certain mode of self-destruction (i.e. at the very least, targeting their own neighborhoods with violence). *Jouissance* is a mode of enjoying your own symptom(s). Lorenzo Chiesa reminds us that Spinoza theorizes a similar brand of pleasure as *titillatio*—the pleasure, pain, and panic of being tickled, and "who does not like being tickled?"<sup>53</sup> We tend to understand *jouissance* as an impossible form of wholeness and a consistency of enjoyment that we attribute to the Other as something denied to us. We sustain our belief in this excessive *jouissance* via fantasy, and, as Slavoj Žižek contends, one of the key socio-politically related fantasies is that the Other has stolen our *jouissance*.<sup>54</sup> The London interview scene with the young women allegorically stages the fantasy of the theft of *jouissance*. As if to further drive home their point, the girls are laughing and enjoying themselves, having 'lifted' numerous items in the looting, including the rosé wine they have apparently been imbibing throughout the night and into the early morning. This interview becomes a convenient image for attributing excessive enjoyment to the hordes of otherwise seemingly faceless rioters.<sup>55</sup> In terms of perception, the political stakes revolve around whether the rioters are understood as 'merely' enjoying the transgression, or whether that pleasure is equally a *jouissance* that they enjoy precisely because they are depriving the rich, or the police, or any (perceived or otherwise) preserver of the status quo, of an

<sup>53</sup> Lorenzo Chiesa, "Lacan with Artaud: j'ouïs-sens, jouis-sens, jouis-sans": 351; in: Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>54</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Enjoy your Nation as Yourself!": 201-205; in: *idem.*, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>55</sup> Recall the image/branding mark used by the *Guardian* to mark its coverage of the riots; cf. Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 118.

enjoyment supposedly originally constituting that status quo. Borrowing from the syntactically clever title of a Blumfeld song, the political stakes of the situation seem to ask: *status quo vadis?*

The benefit of drawing from psychoanalysis to expand on insights from Swenson's "The Human Network" should now be clear. In situations of xenophobia, psychoanalysis provides a frame for understanding how and why blatant contradictions are ignored, such as when national or racial characteristics are "conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by him."<sup>56</sup> In a similar but interestingly inverted way, the discourse of psychoanalysis illuminates the London riots by making sense of why perfectly understandable, even logical behavior on the part of the interviewed girls and the rioters more generally is perceived and maintained as contradictory, senseless, and thus perplexing. But whether simple delight or more unsettling *jouissance*, rudderless or coherently strategic violence, the London riots, as with any return of the repressed, constituted a *real* and valid threat—especially in a society where the socio-economic reality has led its members to nihilistic violence-as-celebration.

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<sup>56</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *supra* note 54: 203.

### 3. RESPONSE III (BY VIKTORIJA RUSINAITĖ)

In his recent article in the *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, "The Human Network: Social Media and the Limit of Politics," Brynnar Swenson discusses the difference between representations of the Egypt revolution and the then recent riots in England. At the conclusion he poses a question: "What if the riots in England were political actions?" This question concerns chaotic events in London and other parts of England in 2011, which were often later dubbed the "UK riots", "England riots" or "London riots." Here I will call these events "the events in London". The question posed by Swenson invites reflection on matters such as which actions can be regarded as political, what constitutes the political and how and why can something come to be read as political? However, if the events in London were not political actions, how can we define and understand them?

In lexical discourse we are often faced with *the political* as instrumentally defined in close connection to institutions and their functions. For example, in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought* politics is defined as the process within which a group of people, though having different beliefs and approaches, are able to perform collective decisions, which are necessary for this group to sustain itself and which are implemented by common effort. (1) Politics is not needed in situations where a group of people have to come to a decision, but all of them carry a common set of beliefs and can come to a decision through discussion. (2) Politics also anticipates approaches used to implement collective decisions. Usually these approaches are as follows: persuasion, negotiation, and the mechanism of final settlement of the problem. (3) Politics requires that the decision made is authoritative and mandatory. (4) Politics also includes the notion of power, which is used to impose a decision on the members of the group who do not comply with the decision made.<sup>57</sup>

According to this instrumental logic, political action should be defined in these terms: to act politically is to act in the name of the common good, even if holding different opinions and beliefs; political action is constructive and instrumental, going through phases of persuasion, negotiation and settlement of the problem; the decisions collectively made are mandatory to all and politics are enacted in the context of political power—i.e. the state—and within its instrumentation through formal ways of voting, participation in parties, police, jails, courts and so on. However, what are we left with when particular real life events do not correspond to the instrumental logic? What if following this logic fails not only to resolve, but even

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<sup>57</sup> David Miller, ed., *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), s. v. "Politics."

identify the problem? Is it possible to avoid ruling out events in London in 2011 as not “obviously criminal” acts, and not reducing the political nature of the acts to a “source of pleasure” gained from “partaking in a commodity culture which they [the rioters] are excluded from?”<sup>58</sup>

### 3.1. WHAT IS THE *POLITICAL*?

In her *On the Political*, Chantal Mouffe draws an interdependent, but dividing line between *politics* and the *political*. For her politics is based on the ontic level; it is “a set of practices and institutions through which an order is created organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the *political*.”<sup>59</sup> The political, on the other hand, works on the ontological level and is a “dimension of antagonism that is constitutive for human societies.”<sup>60</sup> According to her, politics occurs and works at the level of the conflictuality of empirical things, and real life actions; however, the political occurs at the phenomenological level; it is an inherent, core and fundamental dimension of antagonism between two conflicting alternatives, which “is constitutive for human societies.”<sup>61</sup> For Mouffe, the political is that which is always present, however negated and undermined. The political forms a “dimension of antagonism” where a confrontation of the collective identity positions we/them arises. She states, however, that contemporary liberal democratic politics functions to defuse “antagonism,” turning it into “agonism”: to play down the confrontation to consensus. This situation constitutes poor political mobilization and poor political identification, she argues. If there are no conflicting collective identities, so the possibility of identification is reduced, because the situation of the conflict creates the source for the pleasure of identification between two conflicting sides. As she explains: “Political discourse has to offer not only policies but also identities which can help people make sense of what they are experiencing as well as giving them hope for the future.”<sup>62</sup>

Who should we speak about, and what identities should we mention when talking about the events in London? Who were “we” and who were “they”? The participants of the events were obviously not conventional political parties or groups, such as liberals or conservatives, nor is it ethnical, racial or endorsed by some idea of the common good. As Swenson himself states: “There was no central organization, no stated cause, no clear target, no clear oppositional standpoint that

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<sup>58</sup> Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 121.

<sup>59</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

directed their actions could be transformed into pre-existing political narrative.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the participants could be *everyone* and *no one* at the same time. The problem with the application of the framework of *the political* by Chantal Mouffe for this context is that the active participants themselves did not actively identify with any possible “we”, though “they” in the interviews and media articles were named as the police, the rich, etc. Therefore “we” could be regarded as those that are not police and not rich, but this political identity seems to be neither consistent, nor giving hope for a consistent future of otherwise inconsistent groups of people.

In a different theorization of politics, Jacques Rancière proposes that a line be drawn between *police* and *politics*. According to Rancière, *the police* is “first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.”<sup>64</sup> So *police* is not only an institutional order, but also a social order, or as he states, “an order of bodies” which determines what should be done, where it should be done, how things should be said and the spectrum of these practices indicate what will be seen, heard, perceived and understood and what will be ignored and evaded in the discourse. The Rancierian theory of *police* not only overlaps with the instrumental perception of *politics*, but broadens it by inviting it onto the societal level. By contrast, *politics* opposes the *police* as “whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part of those who have no part.”<sup>65</sup> For Rancière, tangible configuration is the configuration of the common, everyday persistent life—in other words, it is the *police* that defines and guards the tangible configuration of society.

But who are, according to Rancière, those who have no part? In his view, the sum of the parties and interest groups never equals the whole of the society, because what makes this arithmetic fallacious are “those who have no part”: “The mass of men without qualities identify with the community on the name of the wrong that is constantly being done to them by those whose position or qualities have the natural effect of propelling them into the nonexistence of those who have no part in anything.”<sup>66</sup> For Rancière, “those who have no part” are the presupposition for politics to happen. The constitutive conditions for politics are (1) the confrontation of the police with those who have no part, no equality, and no

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<sup>63</sup> Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 120.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 29.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

logos in order to redistribute assets and give a part to those who have no part. This shift is only possible when (2) egalitarian logic is overcome by the moment of equality which gives voice and logos for those who have no part.<sup>67</sup> Communication is important for Rancière in the sense that those who have no part are deprived of logos—they cannot speak; they have no account and cannot be heard; they can only express emotion, but not a stance, not their body position, and not status.

In the example of the London riots this can be understood quite literally as the situation in the media and in academic fields, where journalists and academics through their own interpretation try to make sense of what happened and why actual participants are silent (who not only cover their faces, but rarely speak in front of the cameras about rioting and looting). In this primitive one-dimensional example, the Rancierian math is quite simple. In this picture we have those who have no part, (whom the media called) the rioters, who are suffering from economic and social segregation. The rioters clash with the police (by breaking societal norms of behavior, attacking their own neighborhoods, acting antisocially, etc.). However, there never appears to be a moment of equality, when those who have no part can finally speak up for themselves, express their discontent and be heard. This moment of equality is crucial for Rancière; it is the entry point for those who have no part to finally have a part—to participate in the (political) conversation and therefore to have a share in society's construction and maintenance. Therefore, a political event would be an event related to any shift in societal values.

Both in the theoretical framework of Chantal Mouffe and in the framework of Jacques Rancière, the events in London were not a political event. Taking the framework of Chantal Mouffe, the events in London were not a political event, because the participants were unable to form antagonistic identities, and express them as conflicting and therefore to pose their question as political. This is the reason that, according to Mouffe's theory, the events in London and the actions of the people who were called rioters by the media were not political actions. Rancière's framework suggests a similar yet discrete direction. The people who were called rioters by the media could be regarded as those who have no part; therefore, the moment of equality can never arise, because by definition there is no part in society for those who have no part. According to this logic, the London riots were not a political event. However, the event very much happened within the dimension of the Rancierian police, which defines the ways of being, saying and assigning bodies by name to the ways of doing and certain tasks.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32-34.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

### 3.2. RANCERIAN MEDIA *POLICE*: WHAT IF IT IS NOT *POLITICAL*?

The position of the intransigent patricians is straightforward: there is no place for discussion with the plebs for the simple reason that plebs do not speak. They do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of *logos* – meaning, of symbolic enrollment in the city. <...> The order that structures patrician domination recognizes no *logos* capable of being articulated by beings deprived of *logos*, no speech capable of being proffered by nameless beings, beings of no *ac/count*.<sup>69</sup>

Those who have no part, according to Rancierian logic, have no recognizable *logos* in the “structures of patrician domination.” In other words, in the working structures of society those who have no part cannot reason, argue, and speak, because their speech is misrecognized and misinterpreted. In the working structures of the society, not those who have no part, but others (patricians, governors, media makers, business people, etc.) hold the power to speak and therefore to dominate. For example, during the events in London, the participants of the events essentially never spoke for themselves. In Rancierian terminology, they were those who have no part and who have no *logos* to express their discontent or pain. The media, not the participants, gave account of what actually happened (e.g. the events in London were called ‘riots’) and the media, not the participants, named the people participating in the event. For example, in his article Swenson states how in their news coverage correspondents for the BBC were ordered by the management to change the term “protesters” to “rioters.” As Swenson explains, “protester” has a more positive connotation than “rioter,” since rioters are those people who are out to steal and loot.<sup>70</sup> One could argue that the people participating in the events used their own media to organize the events (e.g. it was well reported that participants used Blackberry messengers to organize the attacks on the shops), but the function of this media is precisely organizational, not informative and therefore not discursive.

As participants of the London events are, in Rancierian terms, beings of no “*ac/count*,” they cannot be held accountable for their words. Therefore, the representations of their actions are constructed over their actions and the voice-overs are recorded over their voices. For example, participants are deprived of mass media as speech (they have no direct entry into mass-media market – no media channels owned or influenced) and of speech in media. Participants of the events are left with the fact that their words and images will be read and translated, interpreted, and manipulated by the journalists. Meanings will be

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>70</sup> Brynnar Swenson, *supra* note 45: 119.

imposed on the words, and the images of the participants will be constructed in mass and social media channels by people other than them. Global mass media imposes meanings on large groups of people, such as participants of the events in London and mass media deprives the participants of the right to construct their own images, and give meaning to their own actions and words. The participants are those who have no part, because they do not have a say in the representational mechanism of what they do, say and mean. In the words of Rancière, the functioning of mass media in this case could be regarded as police—"an order of bodies" that defines how the events in London came to be, how they were put into practice, and what could be said about them. In other words, the mass media *polices*—in the strong Rancierian sense of that term—"ways of doing, ways of being, ways of saying."<sup>71</sup> By labeling the participants of the events in London "rioters," the mass media assigns them a name. As Rancière notes, "bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task," and therefore the people are given the name which belongs to the discourse of the riots.<sup>72</sup> The mass media defines an order of bodies and assigns those bodies to a particular discursive place—here, a riot—and a task—here, to riot. This does not mean that the mass media directly influences the scope of rioting, but more that the actions of the people are defined as rioting. This order of bodies designates "that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that speech is understood as discourse and another as noise."<sup>73</sup> In the mediated order of bodies media tells us that the fires in neighborhoods are visible as violent, destructive acts, but not as a cry for help, and that the noise of showcase window glass breaking is understood as vandalism, but not as a complaint. And in the context of destruction, looting, and rioting there is rarely a note about the reasons for conscious or unconscious motivation for such activities.

As Rancière notes, policing is not about the discipline imposed on the bodies, but the rules by which the distribution of the space occupied by certain people are organized: "Policing is not so much the 'disciplining' of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, it is a configuration of occupations and the properties of the spaces where those occupations are distributed."<sup>74</sup> In other words, policing is implemented not by forced rules and disciplines for bodies, but by distributing the spaces and their properties. Mass media can be understood as an example of a tool of the police. First of all, the police state the properties of the span taken by certain groups in mass media space: the entrance barrier to the mass media space (e.g.

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<sup>71</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *supra* note 64, p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

how can a new member enter?), the possibilities for mobility in the space (e.g. how can a member change its (dis)course?), and so on. Police as well states the quantity and quality of the space occupied by the parts of the society: quantity (e.g. how much mass media space do certain figures occupy?), and quality (e.g. what is the proportion of this occupation?). If we would take ruling political figures and psychologists as an example, we could ask: how much media space do the ruling political figures occupy in comparison with psychologists? If we take both (a. the speeches about the psychologists; b. the speeches about political figures), who is more likely to have their own say (i.e. an analysis of the situation, speech, debate, public letter, etc.) and who is more likely to be interpreted in third-person (i.e. a presenter, statistics, etc.) in the mass media?

Additionally, mass media discourse reflects the scale of what Rancière calls "symbolic enrollment in the city". He writes that, "they do not speak because they are beings without a name, deprived of logos – meaning, of symbolic enrollment in the city."<sup>75</sup> The participants of the events in London themselves do not speak in mass media because they are "beings without a name" – they do not have any channels representing them and therefore they are deprived of *logos*, of speech, opinion, account. As they cannot express their ac/count, they are deprived of enrollment in the city, i.e. they are not counted as citizens. The media (as) police defines the quantity and quality of the media space that the participants of the events occupy. Media defines the symbolic enrollment in the mediated city and assigns bodies to those particular places and tasks. The activities that are visible and the speech that is understood as discourse are the result of the media (as) police. Following Rancierian logic, 'media police' can be defined as one of the institutions through which an order is created in the context of the conflictuality provided by the political. Therefore, the events in London could be understood as the context of conflictuality in which the societal order is created through institutions, a critical one of which is mass media. "Political activity," according to Rancière, "is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise."<sup>76</sup> In this sense, the events in London were not political activities. However, the events in London were police activities, through which the media (as police) distributed, assigned, and displayed a configuration of speaking bodies: those who can speak and be heard and those who simply cannot.

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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