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Images of the Rabble

The notion of “rabble” is a marginal but recurring theme of political thought in the West. In its many variations (like “mob”, “mass”, “multitude” or “crowd”) it has denominated the lowest social stratum since antiquity, and has been characterized as corrupted, unstable, passionate, spiteful, fickle, etc. In the classic representation of Polybius, the rule of the mob is compared to an unruly ship, on which some of the shipmates “want to continue the voyage, while others urge the helmsman to drop anchor; some of them let out the sheets, while others interfere and order the sails furled” (Polybius 2010, 403). Mob rule is a degenerate form of democracy, into which, according to the theory of the cyclical succession of regimes, the latter inevitably degenerates, being unable to tame the crowd. Similar metaphors had already been formulated by Plato, who also compared politics to the art of managing a ship. Here, again, the rowdy crew tries to dupe the captain so they can freely wine, dine and sail with the tide (incidentally, it is an odd picture of a ship that Plato paints, where the captain is clumsy and practically blind, and the sailors know nothing about the naval art). Plato’s comparison of the rule of the people to a big and dangerous animal is equally familiar. Aristotle, Cicero and many others will come to depict it in similar ways. Modern political philosophy largely maintains this imaging. For Hobbes, the existence of the state depends on taming the multiplicity, which he compares to a sea monster. Francis Bacon likens the human masses to swarms, herds and packs. They remained outside of the distribution of

colonial profits, often outside any political visibility at all, but at the same time, as slaves, sailors, “hewers of wood and drawers of water” they enabled the functioning of the colonial world. Bacon – as Linebaugh and Rediker show in their “history of the revolutionary Atlantic” – christened this multitude a “many-headed hydra”, and the myth of its monstrosity enabled him to legitimize terror and genocide. This zoological, often beastly imagery is a constant theme of both conservative and liberal portrayals of the poor. Burke called the French revolutionaries “swinish multitude”, de Tocqueville – proponent of the extermination of Algeria – described the Arabs as “sinister beasts”, Nietzsche used every occasion to emphasize his contempt for “asses”, “blind moles”, “herd morality”, etc. – many similar examples could be enumerated.

Like animals, people of the mob are unpredictable, violent and dangerous, have to be tamed or caged. Rabbles, swarms, packs – they remain in motion and so do their definitions. Barbara Brzezicka, in her essay presented here, develops a broad analysis of the semantics of these terms. She is at the same time aware that this task cannot be completed. She rightly observes a certain “untranslatable rest” which resists all the attempts to neatly discern or identify “mobs” and “rabblés”. This difficulty is twofold, at the very least. Firstly, in different languages the notions in question display different “family resemblances” – the English “mob”, from *mobile vulgus*, will connote movement, the French *foule*, close to *folly (folie)*, will suggest lack of reason, the Polish “*motłoch*” from “*mietlica*” – weed or wild grain; and the German *Pöbel* originating from the Latin *populus*, in Middle High German will become pejorative and begin to designate the non-civilized and unorganized part of the population. Secondly, “rabblés” will convey different meanings depending on their theorists’ political interests, always implying a certain normativity, a tactical, moral or aesthetic prompting. We’ve proposed a cursory delineation of three possible reactions to historical mobs: conservative – prone to suppress if not exterminate them; liberal – aiming at educating and civilizing; and leftist – identifying rabblés as legitimate political subjects.

These three perspectives become particularly pronounced in the seventeenth century, when colonial capital flourishes and the canon of modern political philosophy is formed. It is also the period of the “great confinement” described by Michel Foucault. The advent of the classical age orchestrates the “enforced fraternisation between the poor, the unemployed, the criminal and the insane” (Foucault 2006, 47), leading to more and more systematic solutions, aimed at their incarceration in various forms of prison. What connects these seemingly unrelated

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subjectivities is, first and foremost, their refusal (or inability) to work. In the eyes of the moderns, this mortal sin deserved the most severe of punishments. Nina Assorodobraj describes a similar process of transformation of this dispersed and undisciplined multitude into a modern working class. Written in 1935 as doctoral thesis, this compelling work traces the venturesome trajectories of vagabonds (*ludzie luźni*) in eighteenth-century Poland. The Polish historian gathers their traces from archives to depict a broad panorama of inventive ways of vagrant living. Sadly, it is also the story of their systematic eradication by subsequent legal dispositifs (passports, certificates, banishments, coercive labor), administered by the authorities in agreement with the lobby of nascent industry and public intellectuals across the board. Vagabonds, derided as useless idlers and the products of various processes of social degeneration, yet who at the same time are urgently needed as a workforce for the growing industry, exemplify perfectly the previously mentioned tension between the positive and negative images of the rabble. The progressivist myth – that it was a chance for a better life that brought people to the factories – is repudiated by the testimonies of these people themselves, as they wandered and took up odd jobs, but nevertheless enjoyed a life better than the one of toil, constraint and exploitation in the factories. Claudia Snochowska-Gonzales tells another story of the pauperized Polish masses. She describes a “Brazilian fever”, which began in the 1890s, i.e. the mass emigration of peasants encouraged to settle and work in Brazil, which suffered labour shortages after slavery had been abolished in 1888. Fleeing hunger and the risk of freezing to death – constant threats in the underdeveloped region of Galicia, Polish peasants took off to cross the Atlantic, because they saw the work on plantations as a chance worth taking. At the same time, in the eyes of the nationalist ideology, these desperate, half-starved people were seen as the pioneers of Polish colonialism, providing yet another ambiguous, two-faced image of the pauper.

Still, assigning a place to the poor proves a difficult topic also on the left side of the spectrum, as can be seen from their ambivalent status in the social philosophy of Karl Marx. The mob, often referred to as the *Lumpenproletariat*, does not fit inside his theory, which is based on the neat division of classes, as the mob does not really constitute a class, being rather similar to a social sediment; resistant towards employment and proletarianization, but susceptible to politically suspicious alliances. Marx invokes the derogatory image when looking at the French *Lumpenproletariat*, this jumble of “vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley-slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, *lazzaroni*,

pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, *maquereaus*, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars-in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term *la bohème*" (Marx 1963, 75). Lacking the discipline that workers learn in factories, *Lumpen* are never ready for revolution. But this is not the only fragment where author of the *Communist Manifesto* talks about rabble-like communities. When considering the Paris Commune, the processes of wood gleaners, the horrors of primitive accumulation, or non-European, pre-state societies based on shared ownership, Marx adopts a more favourable attitude towards mobs.

Łukasz Moll, in his essay *Gleaning on the shores of politics. Commoning as the new philosophy of praxis*, refers to this ambiguity in Marx's thought, spanning between negative (*Lumpen*) and positive theories of the rabble. Both in his earliest and late writings, Marx reevaluates different forms of the praxis of the poor – gleaners of dead wood or members of stateless societies appear not so much as remnants of the bygone social life-worlds, but rather as active forces of resistance against regimes of closures, private property and capital accumulation. Bringing together the *glaneuses* from Agnes Varda's movies, urban *cartoneros*, Walter Benjamin's *chiffonniers*, clandestine diggers and recyclers of leftovers from industrial plants, Moll presents gleaning as a powerful set of practices based on commoning, reproductive labor and resistance.

This kind of "weak resistance" of the subordinated classes (to use the formulation of James C. Scott) is at the center of the text by Łukasz Zaremba, which is devoted to the anti-slavery revolts that flared up on the ships and plantations throughout the eighteenth century. Zaremba, after Vincent Brown and his *Tacky's Revolt*, comprehensively deconstructs that vision of the history which focuses on the spectacular revolutions, like the one in Haiti. The goal is not just to critique the dominant historiography but also to try to reclaim the history of thousands of smaller rebellions, which raged in a permanent battle of black slaves against violence and exploitation. The theme of black slavery returns in the text of Agnieszka Więckiewicz, which compares the imagery of colonized Africans with that of European workers at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Germany. Analyzing the works of Hannah Höch and illustrations from the satirical magazine *Simplicissimus*, the author employs the category of "counter-imagination", aimed at a reversal of ideological similes. She reminds us that social change is possible only when we start to see things differently. This simple observation keeps on resonating. Images of police brutality and the mutilated bodies of its black victims which spread across the world after the

killing of George Floyd have sparked massive protest movements and reopened the much needed debate about today's more or less hidden forms of racism. Race based exclusions differ in their meaning and history from those based on class inequality. Still, they often prove to share mechanisms and coordinates.

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