

# **Moments of Excess\***

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## *Abstract*

We propose the concept *moments of excess* as a way of exploring and understanding various, heterogeneous “political”, “social” and “cultural” events. Importantly we suggest that this concept allows us to recognise the resonances between heterogeneous events within apparently separate spheres of social life and, indeed, between “events” and “everyday life”. We suggest that the difference between moments of excess and everyday life is one of intensity not one of kind. We show first of all how capital’s valorisation is predicated upon creative excess. We then discuss moments of excess proper, illustrating our arguments with the principal examples of punk and counter-summit mobilisations. Finally we relate moments of excess to other concepts of political theory and draw out some of its political consequences.

*Keywords:* excess, counter-globalisation movement, punk.

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## **Moments of Excess**

The first impression was of a gigantic lid suddenly lifted, of pent-up thoughts and aspirations suddenly exploding, on being released from the realm of dreams into the realm of the real and the possible. In changing their environment people themselves were changed. Those who had never dared say anything suddenly felt their thoughts the most important thing in the world - and said so. The shy became communicative. The helpless and isolated suddenly discovered that collective power lay in their hands. The traditionally apathetic suddenly realised the intensity of their involvement. A tremendous surge of community and cohesion gripped those who had previously seen themselves as isolated and impotent puppets dominated by institutions that they could neither control nor understand. People went up and talked to one another without a trace of self-consciousness. This state of euphoria lasted throughout the whole fortnight I was there. An inscription scrawled on the wall sums it up perfectly: “Deja dix jours de bonheur” [ten days of happiness already]. (Dark Star Collective 2001: 76)

I was expecting another grubby Marquee gig on a Thursday night; a couple of hopeful young bands, a few beers. What I got was a Year Zero moment, one of those cusps between before and after; in this case before the [Sex] Pistols and after the Pistols. (Spencer 2006: 36)

It's a physical thing. The hairs on the back on your arms stand up. You get goosebumps. There's a tingling in your spine. Your heart is racing. Your eyes shine and all your senses are heightened: sights, sounds, smells are all more intense. Somebody brushes past you, skin on skin, and you feel sparks. Even the acrid rasp of tear gas at the back of your throat becomes addictive, whilst a sip of water has come from the purest mountain spring. You have an earnest conversation with the total stranger standing next to you and it feels completely normal. (Not something that happens too often in the checkout queue at the supermarket.) Everybody is more attractive. You can't stop grinning. Fuck knows what endorphins your brain's producing, but it feels great. Collectivity is visceral! (Free Association 2005a: 569)

I was drawn out by the sound, a feeling of happiness with the noise, a realisation that there was a massive sound – I was walking on the street and I thought “this is history”. A collective feeling of happiness, surprise, amazing noise. One wanted to be on the streets and to confront power in all forms. (Cited by Dinerstein 2004)

### **1. Introduction.**

In 1994 a new anti-capitalist, or counter-globalisation, movement emerged. As the clock chimed midnight on January 1 of that year, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

came into force, a rag-tag army of Mexican indigenous marched into San Cristóbal de las Casas and took control of the city. The same night the EZLN took over another six cities in Chiapas, releasing prisoners, occupying City Halls, setting fire to police stations, securing major highways and declaring war both on the Mexican government and the policies of neoliberalism. The Zapatista rebellion resonated around the globe and 1994 saw a dramatic increase in resistance to IMF policies throughout the global South.

In the North this movement exploded into public consciousness with the blockades against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in November 1999. Summit protests were nothing new: more than a decade earlier, in 1988, 75,000 had protested against IMF and World Bank meetings in Berlin; in 1996, 10,000 demonstrated against the Asia Pacific Economic Community meeting in the Philippines. But Seattle launched a whole cycle of counter-summit mobilisations. To name but a few: anti-IMF and World Bank in Prague in 2000; EU heads of state summit, Gothenburg, June 2001; G8, Genoa, July 2001; G8, Evian, June 2003; WTO, Cancun, September 2003; G8, Gleneagles, July 2005; WTO, Hong Kong, December 2005; G8, St. Petersburg, July 2006. Already activists are organising against 2007's G8 summit in Heiligendamm, Germany.

One of the points of commonality for this movement has been the perception of a 'democratic deficit', that nation states have become increasingly powerless in the face of a globalised economy. People from many different countries have experienced this through the imposition of a common array of neo-liberal policies in which politics has been removed from large areas of life by being subsumed under the market (Tormey 2004). We are drawn to the concept of *moments of excess* as a result of our own experiences within this counter-globalisation movement. In particular, we are interested in the constitutive role that events such as summit counter-mobilisations and, to a lesser extent, world and regional social forums, have played in forming this movement. Such events have triggered in us feelings, or affects, that we've experienced before, and we wanted a conceptualisation that accounted for this. But we are unhappy with accounts of summit protests

which dismiss them as somehow exceptional, and therefore opposed to struggles in “real life”, and possibly even a luxurious waste of time for those who engage in the practice of “summit-hopping”. We are also unhappy with those analyzes which suggest that summit protests are all very well as a first spark of revolt, but that their energy must be harnessed by a “serious” political programme. This schema implies that politics is made of a different substance and occurs in a different sphere to events such as summit protests. In fact we would argue that it is precisely through such events that politics has been reintroduced into life.

In this article we propose moments of excess as a more productive concept with which we can conceive not only “political” events such as summit counter-mobilisations and other manifestations of struggle, but also “social” and “cultural” events and movements, such as punk and the free software movement. In fact, we suggest that the concept allows us to recognise the resonances between heterogeneous events within apparently separate spheres of social life and, indeed, between “events” and “everyday life”: the difference between moments of excess and everyday life is one of intensity not one of kind.

The article is structured as follows. We first point out (in section 2) how daily existence is predicated on the productivity of life exceeding capital, but how, nevertheless, capital is dependent upon this excess for *its* continued existence and valorisation. In section 3, we consider moments of excess proper: moments of intense human creativity which exceed any limits posed by capital and which evade capture by capital or state apparatuses. We discuss the characteristics of such moments and illustrate our points with examples drawn from punk (in section 4) and the current counter-globalisation movement, in particular the cycle of summit counter-mobilisations (in section 5). In section 6, we explore the resonances and dissonances of moments of excess with other concepts of the political, including Agamben’s analysis that sovereignty is founded on the state of exception and Negri’s ontological distinction between constituent and constituted power. In section 7 we explore some of the political consequences of our conceptualisation. We are trying to maintain

moments of excess as an *open* concept and we are thus reluctant to draw too many conclusions, but we offer some concluding remarks in section 8.

## **2. Excess and capital**

Capital is predicated upon excess. Most obviously, and like all class societies, the capitalist mode of production depends upon excess labour. For capital to be valorised, workers must perform labour in excess of that necessary to produce the means for their own reproduction. That is, workers must perform what Marx called surplus labour, which produces surplus value.

But capital also depends upon excess in a second, less obvious sense. Work in a capitalist society automatically carries an element of excess because it is ultimately based on creativity and cooperation that can never be reducible to capital. This creativity and cooperation – this humanity! – is essential to capital, it provides its lifeblood. In short capital is dependent upon life *outside* of capitalism both for the corporeal bodies which labour in its factories and, increasingly, for the ideas which drive its development. In eighteenth and nineteenth century England, capital tended not to concern itself with the reproduction of labour-power, yet labour-power nevertheless managed to reproduce itself, moreover doing so on wages which frequently fell below labour-power's value (Marx 1976). Thus, the English working class was forced to rely upon its own ingenuity, its own relationships outside capital in order to survive. Yet, in turn, capital relied upon this working class, as labour-power, for its own valorisation. This situation is today repeated throughout much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, where one in five people live in “extreme poverty”, defined as an “income of \$1 per day per person, measured at purchasing power parity”. But, the point is, such people *live*: it is clear that, within the capitalist mode of production, living in a country such as the US, say, one cannot satisfy one's basic needs on \$1 per day. By this definition of “extreme poverty”, the 1.1 billion people who fall under it “ought all to be dead. But they are not.” (Caffentzis 2005: 55; see also Sachs 2005)

Equally, capital has always been dependent upon creative excess *within* the workplace. For instance, in *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith notes that “a great part of the machines made use of in those manufactures in which labour is most subdivided, were originally the inventions of common workmen, who, being each of them employed in some very simple operation, naturally turned their thoughts towards finding out easier and readier methods of performing it” (Smith 1970: 114). In other words, Smith recognises that the growth in the “productive powers of labour” – one of the principal effects of the division of labour – is to a large part dependent upon the creativity beyond capital of ordinary workers. Frederick Taylor also recognised the extent to which production depended upon the craft knowledge of workers and his project was to appropriate to managers this knowledge. Yet even with the advent of Taylorism and Fordism – and the associated shift from “craft” to “mass worker” – capital was not able to escape its reliance upon human creativity in excess of its own rigid demarcation of tasks and duties: how else can we explain the potency of the “work-to-rule” as a tactic of working-class struggle within the factory?

That capital is entirely dependant upon human cooperation, communication and creativity – excess life – has only become more obvious over the past half-century, with the passage of production from Fordism to post-Fordism, and as capital – capitalist social relations – seems to have leaked into every aspect of our lives. At the same time, and of course related to capital’s colonisation, work – our daily activities – has become ever-more socialised. It is no longer just a matter of the extraction of surplus value in the workplace: capitalist production is now inserting itself deep into the texture of our day-to-day social existence, in such a way that it now makes sense to think that society itself functions as a “social factory” (see, e.g., Modern Times 1974; Tronti 1973). With “immaterial labour” (see, e.g., Lazzarato 1996) becoming hegemonic larger sectors of work “no longer involve the completion of a single particular assignment, but the changing and intensifying of social cooperation” (Virno 2004: 62). This increasing socialisation of labour has opened up new possibilities for cooperative and creative collectivities within capitalism that seem to lead beyond it.

As work spreads throughout life so does the cooperation it relies on and it is this excess of cooperation that makes transformation possible.

But capital's problematic is that it needs to make profit: it must be able to appropriate and realise the value that is produced throughout the social sphere. In order to do this, it must impose measure upon our activities, thus cramping our creativity and limiting human excess. It is in this sense that capital has become "corruptive": "Empire recognises and profits from the fact that in cooperation bodies produce more and in community bodies enjoy more, but it has to obstruct and control this cooperative autonomy so as not to be destroyed by it" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 392). Similarly, capital needs to codify everyday practice into laws which relate to sovereign, rights-bearing individuals, even though this contradicts the way that innovation actually occurs. In fact capitalist culture tends to reduce all collective products of creativity to the sole property of individuals – "Brunel built this...", "Farraday discovered that..." – or corporations (which have a similar legal status to individuals) – "GlaxoSmithKline invented such and such a drug..."

But human beings' abstract potential always exceeds and tries to escape the conditions of its production, that is, the capital relation. As a living, breathing mass, human needs, human desires, human lives constantly transcend the limits of capital. To put this another way, "capital cannot be society". This fact means that the possibility of fundamental social change remains open even if in habitual life such excess usually remains, no matter how imperfectly, contained and isolated.

### **3. Moments of Excess**

This leads us to the second, more profound type of excess. Every now and then, or perhaps frequently, in all sorts of different social arenas, we can see moments of obvious collective creation, where our "excess of life" explodes. This is excess which capital cannot siphon off or capture. In

these “moments of excess”, time accelerates, creativity is amplified and the space of what is possible expands: everything appears to be up for grabs.

From our own lives and experiences, examples of moments of excess are punk in the mid to late 1970s, the miners’ strike of 1984–1985, the anti-poll tax struggle in the late 1980s/early 1990s, and the recent moments within the anti-globalisation movement. At these times, which may have spanned several years or literally a few moments, we have glimpsed whole new worlds. (And we have also enjoyed numerous, “micro” moments of excess, more personal, though none-the-less collective, experiences, which will never be recorded in any history book.)<sup>i</sup> These examples are all specific to a certain time (obviously, since they are from our own experiences), if not place, the UK. But other examples of moments of excess abound. We could mention upsurge of revolt in Bolivia in June 2005; the *argentino* uprising of December 2001 in Argentina; the Zapatista rebellion, which we mentioned at the beginning of this piece; the free software community; the 1960s underground and counter-cultural movement. And it is important to note that moments of excess are not purely modern phenomena. We can trace them back further in history: to the Russian Revolution of 1917; the Paris Commune of 1871; the Haitian revolution of 1794–1804; the Digger commune and the Putney debates of the English revolution of the mid-seventeenth century...

But what are moments of excess actually like? First, as the epigraphs at the beginning of this piece suggest, they are characterised by a great intensity, a strong sense of collectivity, a feeling that anything and everything is possible, a feeling that it’s possible to remake the world – to “make history”: there exists an “abyss of possibility” (Bonefeld and Holloway 1995: 6). In these moments, existing methods of mediating people’s desires and demands fail. People don’t stop to think what’s possible, what’s realistic – and no “expert” is there to help them keep their feet on the ground. Hence the Paris 1968 slogan “Be Realistic, Demand The Impossible”. During such times the only question worth asking seems to be: “what sort of life do we want to lead?” Or even, in Cyril



Smith's (1996) formulation: "what does it mean to be human?" Elsewhere we have suggested that these moments, or events, are "a little like when you fall in love with someone":

There's a surplus of love that gets transferred to the whole world. Simultaneously you fall in love with the individual and the whole world. ... The sense of connection you feel with the people around you becomes a connection with the whole of nature, including other humans. And we're not using metaphors here. Love is not just love for an individual – romantic love. This sense of connectedness is, in itself, love, an immanent love for the whole world. And just as with romantic love, we not only connect with everything outside, but with everything within ourselves too. Doors open, barriers dissolve – love isn't just a feeling, it's a force. We fall in love and anything becomes possible. (Free Association 2005a: 569--570)

Such moments tend to be *physical, corporeal*. Our whole bodies might vibrate with the intensity of the situation. Clearly this might be the case in the midst of a riot, but it may also occur when we are engaged in some peer-to-peer ("p2p") software project. Moreover, a moment of excess frequently produces an affect or affects, which contribute to the moment remaining with us forever. These can be as simple as a song, an odour, an image. A few bars, a whiff, a fleeting glimpse and we are transported back to the moment.

We have suggested that moments of excess are moments of intense creativity, a collective, liberating creativity that delights in mixing things up and smashing through all barriers. In fact, we can simultaneously characterise them as moments of emergence: of new technology, new tactics, new modes of expression, and, always, of new subjectivity. In this sense, then, moments of excess are perhaps similar to what Ana Dinerstein would call "moments of subjectivity" or E.P. Thompson "moments of becoming" (Dinerstein 2004; Thompson 1978: 103).

Finally, we should emphasise the importance of temporality. The immense space of possibilities that opens up during a moment of excess, the intense creativity, the sense that "anything can happen", gives such moments a "year-zero" quality. They correspond to a "degree zero of politics" (Terranova 2002). And as time accelerates, our habitual conceptions of the orderly progression of

time are undermined: moments of excess are dominated by a praxis of “phase time” (as opposed to “linear time” or “circular time” – see De Angelis and Diesner 2005). Moments of excess are “cracks in the time of capitalist domination. ... [They] open a perspective in which communism (or whatever we want to call that other world that we say is possible) emerges as a world in which the axis is not duration, but intensity” (Holloway 2005: 41). In fact we can understand moments of excess as singular moments, or rather as singularities in social space-time. Just as the normal laws of physics breakdown in a singularity in physical space-time, so a moment of excess is characterised by a breakdown in social “norms” and the usual “laws” of capital or political economy. And like singularities in physical space-time, which may be connected by a “worm-hole”, moments of excess seem to prise open similar wormholes in social space-time. We have mentioned already the affects created by such moments which have the power to transport us back to them. It is also the case that during moments of excess (“revolutionary” moments) we feel more connected to past experiments in new-world construction – to the Italian autonomists, the Naxalite rebels, the Paris Communards, the English Diggers – as well as to contemporary experiments, such as the Zapatistas. During bursts of revolutionary creativity we feel “really” connected to our antecedents, not just warming ourselves with their memory. This is because the fundamental foundational problematics with which they grappled are suddenly the ones with which we are faced. This is part of the effect of the “rent in the texture of domination” (Holloway 2005: 39) that each rebellion creates running across oceans and across millennia.

### **3. On Punk**

Punk is an excellent example of a moment of excess, for many who experienced it, a “year zero” moment of immense intensity. Punk wasn’t simply a musical or fashion subculture, although it certainly included these elements. One of the most exciting elements of punk, for example, was the way it broke down boundaries and identities. (An important part of this was the way punk

challenged traditional gender roles and notions of sexuality.) It was an excuse to reinvent yourself, with a new look and a new way of viewing things; this play with identity was often topped off with a new name. Other boundaries were broken by bands having shifting and multiple line-ups, or by gigs where the split between band and audience became blurred. In that moment, anything really was possible: people who had had no musical training (and even no musical ability!), got up on stage and performed, people created or customised their own clothes, other individuals discovered that it was possible to write, produce and publish their own fanzines... or to pick up a cine camera and make a movie... or go into a studio and produce and release their own record... all outside of the control of publishers and record companies. In this sense, punk opened up new spaces for struggle and for self-valorisation, that is, for experiments in new ways of living.<sup>ii</sup> It is hard to overestimate the creative intensity and impact of punk. Its immense burst of energy launched multiple new trajectories, numerous new genres, sub-genres and sub-cultures: anarcho-punk, goth, hardcore, indie-pop, industrial, Oi!, “noise”, post-punk, psycho-billy, synth-pop, two-tone... and numerous others which defy all classification.<sup>iii</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) concepts of territorialisation and deterritorialisation and their three-way distinction between majority, minority and minoritarian are useful in making sense of the various trajectories of punk and its aftermath, and the importance of temporality. In 1976 punk was minoritarian: it was undefined and open, it revealed a huge range of possibilities. But that initial urge to change, which was a process, got solidified into a never-changing state of being. Running alongside punk’s drive towards openness and experimentation was a counter-tendency, towards identification and demarcation. All of a sudden you had to wear the right “punk” clothes, you had to know who was in the band, and the stars were always on stage. Now, three decades on, punk is an established minority identity. It has become fine to be “a punk”, posing no threat: you wear the right clothes, you mess up your hair a certain way, you listen to certain records. Capital can incorporate any identity because you aren’t actually required to believe in anything for capitalism to function. In fact, this process of ossification, of territorialisation, began almost immediately: it was their

awareness and dissatisfaction with this tendency that caused some of punk's original movers and shakers to move beyond punk as early as 1977.<sup>iv</sup> But the shockwaves of punk continued to impact elsewhere and on other people. And, although some "punks" slavishly copied the media's flattened representation of punk, others were able to open out this stylized representation and, in the process, create something new. Throughout the late seventies and early eighties, the echoes and shockwaves of punk's "first wave" of 1976 continued to interact with the various trajectories of "post-punk".

Thus, with punk, following the initial moment of excess, we can trace simultaneous movements of deterritorialisation, on the one hand, and (re)territorialisation, on the other. But it is too simple to say that the first is good and the second bad. A certain amount of stratification is necessary to focus co-operation and energy; without it the result would be entropy – the dispersal of energy.

Stratification can have productive and restrictive moments. Having a stable line-up in a band, for instance, and a degree of musical ability is actually helpful if one wants to produce any sort of music other than a cacophony of noise!<sup>v</sup> The way people look, talk, and hold their bodies can reflect a certain commonality and can help spread recognition of a shared antagonism and shared desires (Hardt and Negri 2004). Moments of excess often produce their own common styles and common conducts. Our struggles aren't just struggles for bread and potatoes, but for new ways of being and the political and cultural movements with the most resonance (the Black Panthers, Zapatistas and so on, but also punk) have understood this. Over time such styles and the attitudes they reflect can become rigid and begin to act as a conservative force. But just as you can still see the original lava flows in rock formations, traces of the moment of excess are always present and can always be "re-activated". That's why many of the people who threw themselves headfirst into the early days of punk were people who'd lived through those moments of excess in the 1960s "counter-culture". And why so many who became involved in rave were old punks.

It is important to emphasise that moments of excess aren't necessarily and, in fact, are rarely spectacular moments. Nor are they generated by some external, transcendent force or power.

Moments of excess do not appear from *nowhere*. The Zapatistas' emergence from the Lacandona jungle to take San Cristóbal on New Year's Day 1994 was the culmination of years of patient work and an uncountable number of "micro" events or moments of excess. And although the Zapatistas' struggle has resonated with and provided an inspiration to the struggles of millions of activists and more "reluctant" warriors and strugglers<sup>vi</sup> elsewhere across the planet, the Zapatistas did not ignite these other struggles. Movements are frequently subterranean, consisting of numerous more localised moments of excess. At certain times and in certain places, these constituent parts suddenly find themselves consistent with one another: this aligned energy allows the emergence of the more discernable moment of excess on a higher level of scale. So, in the case of punk, the Sex Pistols simply happened to be a more spectacular manifestation of a panoply of dissatisfactions (with existing music, clubs, fashions, politics, etc.) and desires amongst young people in Britain and North America in the mid- to late 1970s.

## 5. "Summitry"

The current counter-globalisation movement is another example of a series of moments of excess, unleashing huge flows of energy, prompting new questions and generating new desires.<sup>vii</sup> We have already mentioned the Zapatista rebellion. Here we will discuss instead another of its manifestations, the cycle of counter-summit mobilisations, which we have more personal experience of.

Again, the concepts of territorialisation or stratification and deterritorialisation can help us trace the movement of this series of summit mobilisations. By looking at each in turn we can see that each is different, each with its specific context, presenting specific problems, which have prompted particular innovations. Seattle (World Trade Organization, 1999) was interesting for the strange new alliances which emerged and the startling mix of demonstrators (trade unions and

environmentalists, anarchists and communists, queer activists and church groups). The principle of “diversity of tactics”, employed a year later in Prague at anti-IMF and World Bank protests, developed out of this. This can be seen as a moment of productive stratification, as it allowed protestors to essentially choose their level of physical confrontation. However, this move was disrupted by an horrific escalation of violence on the part of the police, firstly when three people were shot in Gothenburg, in June 2001, and then with the indiscriminate violence in Genoa five weeks later, which saw beatings, torture and the murder of Carlo Giuliani. Another feature of the Gothenburg counter-mobilisation (protesting an EU summit) was the imprisonment of a number of activists on conspiracy charges for operating an information line. Two responses were possible to the state violence of Gothenburg and Genoa and the conspiracy charges. First, a response in kind: increasing militarisation of the movement and more clandestine organisation.<sup>viii</sup> This would have been an unproductive stratification since essentially the state cannot be beaten at its own game: movements will, ultimately, always be militarily defeated. The second possible response, and the one adopted, was greater horizontality and openness – a deterritorialisation – an even greater diversity of tactics and the creation of a peer-to-peer network sharing information. Thus, at Gleneagles, the info-line became a sounding-board: information was shared, but no one was directed where to go or what to do.

Another important innovation – and another example of productive stratification – in the movement of summit protests is the development of so-called “convergence centres”. Modelled on “no border camps”,<sup>ix</sup> these were first employed in the Evian anti-G8 summit of 2003. Essentially large rural camping spaces, by bringing together activists in a small number of places, they both created a “safe space” and facilitated concentration and focusing of energy. Similarly, the network of social centres, opened up by activists in the United Kingdom in the lead in to the Gleneagles summit, constituted safe spaces and facilitated a concentration of energy, which, in turn, allowed collective creativity to flourish. The very idea of protesting against a summit is another example of productive stratification. The argument against such mobilisations suggests that, since capital is a global social

relation, we should attack it everywhere and every day. But, capitalist summits can be moments of concentration for activists too, allowing us to feel our collective strength and create forms of new wealth – ideas, affects, tactics, skills, etc. – which would not otherwise be possible.

Stratification often occurs as a conscious attempt to establish the preconditions for new moments of excess, as in the above examples, or to defend moments of excess. But they can just as easily be unproductive. In political movements, stratification often appears as a turn to “ghetto politics”. The ghetto is treated as a space of “purity” – it offers the illusion of solid foundations on which its inhabitants can stand and cast judgment on other attempts to escape this world. Capital is seen as an outside “alien” force, rather than as something that is inherent in all social relations.

Summit protests can be moments of great intensity and tremendous creativity; moments during which an enormous amount happens in a very short period – the acceleration of time and the expansion of the space of possibilities. As we wrote of the mobilisation against the G8 summit at Gleneagles, Scotland, in July 2005:

It's the intensity of it that makes you feel so alive. ... [E]verywhere you looked there were groups of people gathered in intense and passionate discussion. Talking, thinking, planning, arguing, agreeing, cooperating. Intense communication permeated the whole [convergence centre] like an electric charge. It comes from that realisation that no one's in charge, that there's no secret committee with a secret plan who are going to come and save us. If this summit is going to be blockaded it's down to us, collectively. We were all moving so fast. One evening we emerged from one meeting at 11.30 and realised we needed to rush to grab something to eat as we had to be at another in half an hour. Who on earth arranges meetings at midnight? We had to, time was tight. It all made perfect sense. Meetings are normally painful exercises in frustration, but here it was different. There was such an intense concentration of effort, such focus, that creativity, wit, imagination, flexibility and good sense seemed to come naturally. You could stagger out of a meeting drunk on the sense of connection with the other people. Vibrating with it. It was that visceral. Then, on the Wednesday of the blockades, in the fields next to the road that intensity was ten-fold. Decisions were made so quickly you barely had time to think. (Free Association 2005b: 18)

This affect of intensity is caused by a variety of factors including the time-limited nature of the event, the novel mixtures of participants and the very real dangers of arrest, injury or even death. This can be experienced as a feeling of precariousness. With the shattering of the subjectivities relied on in the habitual world it can feel as though the ground has been cut from beneath your feet. However this intensity is intimately linked to the reintroduction of politics back into life. People are forced to make ethical decisions from an incredibly open range of possibilities. The consequences of these decisions can have real importance and the collective fashion in which they are made can provoked affects of tremendous new capacities which can carry over into everyday life.

These more spectacular aspects of counter-summit mobilisations – the “macro” moments of excess, the blockades, the tearing down of fences and so on – would not be possible without the almost infinite number of localised events, the “micro” moments: plans hatched in a tiny meeting, insights gained whilst sharing a drink with a few friends, a flash of inspiration whilst surfing the internet at work... the constant and ongoing activities of discussing, thinking, laughing, communicating, negotiating, learning, sharing, inventing. In short, the practice of being (and becoming) human. And it is the recognition of the “micro-political” aspect which also allows us to begin to grasp the connection between moments of excess and “everyday life”, to realise the difference between them is one of intensity not one of kind. This realisation can have important political consequences but before we examine them further we need to look at moments of excess from a different angle.

## **6. Excesses and Power**

During a discussion with Foucault in 1972, the Maoist leader Benny Levy, going under the pseudonym Pierre Victor, outlined his view of a revolution carried out in stages.

At the first stage of the ideological revolution I'm in favour of looting, I'm in favour of “excesses”. The stick must be bent in the other direction, and the world cannot be turned upside down without breaking eggs... At the



first stage there can be an act of retribution against a boss which is an act of popular justice... Even if things go too far, if he gets three months in hospital when he really only deserved two, it is still an act of popular justice. But when all these actions take the form of a movement... then you have the setting up of regulations, of a revolutionary state apparatus. (Foucault 1980: 32)

This is all too obviously a moment of excess seen from the point of view of constituted power (Negri 1999). It is seen as a period when there might be some excesses, when participants might get a bit carried away and go too far. There are traces here of late nineteenth-century crowd theory, which saw such collective moments as atavistic pathologies.<sup>x</sup> Here though the pathology is productive. After all, the excesses are caused by the rigidities and injustices of the previous system that have acted as a limit to the realisation of people's desires. The frustrations well up and then burst forth, sweeping people along towards actions they wouldn't otherwise commit. It's important to note that underlying this schema is an implicit recognition that the energy and innovation comes from what Deleuze and Guattari would call "liberated desire" (Deleuze 2004: 267). It is this that exceeds the juridical forms and provides the rupture but for Levy the task of the revolutionary in the second stage of revolution is to capture this excess with a new state apparatus.<sup>xi</sup>

The moment of excess is seen as a period of exception. In fact, the excess creates the state of exception. We might also recognise this state of affairs in the actions of the existing state apparatus, which could be prompted to apply exceptional or special measures to deal with the breach. From their point of view normal laws do not apply because they have been exceeded. Indeed a common strategy political activists have applied to moments of excess is to use them as pedagogical tools. The police are provoked into going too far in order to reveal the iron fist beneath the velvet glove. A state of exception is provoked to reveal the fact that the normal functioning of power ultimately rests on exception from its own laws.

This is the model of sovereignty that Giorgio Agamben extracts from the Germanic tradition of exception. For him, "the paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same

time, outside and inside the juridical order” (Agamben 1998: 15). Sovereignty rests with whoever can make the decision to suspend the constitution or the operation of law and right. The state of exception is the means by which sovereignty captures what is outside it via an “inclusive exclusion”: “If the exception is the structure of sovereignty, then sovereignty is not an exclusively political concept, an exclusively juridical category... it is the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it.” (ibid.: 21 & 28)

Antonio Negri (1999) draws a similar ontological distinction when he differentiates between constituent power and constituted power, the former animating the later. Once again the exceeding of juridical forms and the subjectivities of habitual life is the foundation for innovation in the sphere of sovereignty. Yet both of these conceptualisations try to recognise the animating force through the movements of the apparatus of capture. They are ways of conceptualising moments of excess through its effects on sovereign power. Underlying both concepts is the idea that “the source of the political is always outside conceptualisation and codification... the foundation is always open and indeterminable” (Jameson 2005: 161). Just as life always exceeds capital so it always exceeds constituted power. It is not moments of excess that are pathological but the siphoning off of excess energy into transcendental illusions. The fact that the difference between moments of excess and everyday life is one of intensity not one of kind raises the possibility that a new apparatus of capture can be warded off.

## **7. What is to be done with moments of excess?**

In his discussion with the Maoists, mentioned above, Foucault (1980: 34) responds by arguing against: “taking the place of the juridical system”, against the re-imposition of a state apparatus. But is the alternative to merely trust in the spontaneous development of liberated desire? In a later interview Felix Guattari comments on Foucault’s discussion, saying that he believes “not in a

definitive end to history, and not in provisional excess” (Deleuze 2004: 266). Firstly he rejects universal history. As Fukuyama (1993) has shown, it is capitalism and liberal democracy that has pretensions to universality. We are provided with a linear temporality because history is written by the victors. Moments of excess explode that temporality providing that “excess of history” mentioned by Virno (2004). By allowing so many to make history, moments of excess destroy all pretensions to universality and raise a spectre of a world containing many worlds. It is only capital’s universality that draws us towards such linear and universal concepts as post-capitalism.

But if Guattari wants to escape universal history he goes on to say that: “The moments of excess, the celebrations are hardly more reassuring.” In part this is a recognition that if universal history is rejected there is the danger that moments of excess might act like a Bakhtian carnival, as a safety valve that releases built up pressure through a bounded performance of a world turned upside down (Bakhtin 1984). More importantly though is the idea that we can’t escape the reintroduction of a state apparatus merely through a celebration of spontaneity. Guattari continues:

The revolution clearly needs a war-machine, but that’s not a State apparatus. It also needs an analytic force, an analyzer of the desires of the masses, absolutely-but not an external mechanism of synthesis... as long as we stick to the alternative between the impotent spontaneity of anarchy and the hierarchical and bureaucratic encoding of a party-organisation, there can be no liberation of desire. (Deleuze 2004: 267)

This raises the question of the function this immanent analytical war machine might perform. Clearly one function is to ward off the state and other forms of capture but it also raises another aspect of the moment of excess. What is it in excess of? It is excessive for capital and constituted power but these might prove not to be the absolute limit. Such moments might also prove excessive for the body on both its individual and collective scales. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) repeatedly urge caution against wildly destratifying. It’s dangerous to stay in such an intensive state too long there is always the possibility that you could spin off into a black hole. Such intensity can be immensely productive but it can also be frighteningly destructive. While our starting point must

always be that: “No one knows what a body can do” (Spinoza 1970), establishing its thresholds must be a task of cautious experimentation.

After each moment of excess there must be a retreat back to a “safe space”, back to a stratified body of some kind in order to assess and recuperate before sauntering forward on another intensive experiment. In the context of summit protests we can point to the development of convergence centres as safe spaces. We could also point to the role of consensus decision-making meetings that can be used during protests to slow down the speed of decision-making and reduce the level of intensity. A temporary safe space can act as an immanent analyser allowing a wider range of subjects, moving at different speeds to cohere with each other.

Organising like this is an art, we might say the art of the multitude (Hardt and Negri 2000). This art form has a rhythm of intensity and assessment with different speeds of action and decision. It’s a rhythm of expansion and contraction, of stratification and de-stratification. The art lies in following the rhythm but also designing technologies, institutions and subjectivities that allow you to open up to a moment of excess and then prevent you from spinning off into a destructive delirium.

## 8. Concluding Remarks

In this article we have proposed the concept of *moments of excess* of a way of conceptualising heterogeneous “social”, “political” and “cultural” events and movements. We have suggested that moments of excess share a number of characteristics, including: great intensity, enormous collective creativity, a sense of the compression of time and expansion of the space of possibilities. Moments of excess can thus be considered as *singularities* in social space-time. We have suggested that the concept performs a number of functions. *First*, it helps us recognise the resonances between seemingly dissimilar events within apparently unconnected social spheres. *Second*, it allows us to trace the gestation of “spectacular” moments of excess back to the more “mundane” excesses of

“everyday life” and more “micro” moments of excess and thus to understand that moments of excess are, in fact, less exceptional than they might at first appear. Having briefly considered such moments from the perspective of “constituted power” or sovereignty, we finally suggest that moments of excess is a productive concept, since its problematic is not the capture (and hence limitation) of creativity or the restoration of sovereignty; rather, its problematic is to probe the open and indeterminate absolute limit of life, through experimentation, both cautious and audacious.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Virno (2004) discusses the concept of an “excess of history.”

<sup>ii</sup> The best history of punk we have come across is Savage (1992). See Negri (1991) or Cleaver (1992) for a discussion of the concept of self-valorisation. Milburn (2001) discusses punk as a moment of self-valorisation.

<sup>iii</sup> Reynolds (2005) charts these myriad cultural/musical movements, all of which he includes under the term “post-punk”.

<sup>iv</sup> Howard Devoto of Manchester band Buzzcocks is the best-known example.

<sup>v</sup> Of course, in punk’s moment of excess, some people did simply climb onto the stage and produce such a cacophony, but this is only really interesting the first time.

<sup>vi</sup> The concept of the “reluctant warrior”, the “reluctant struggler” comes from Asian Dub Foundation’s song, “Committed to Life”, on the album *Community Music* (2000). Asian Dub Foundation are a great example of the re-emergence of punk a quarter-century on, interacting productively with other cultural and political movements and musical genres.

<sup>vii</sup> On the present anti-globalisation movement, see, e.g., Notes from Nowhere (2003), Tormey (2004) or Solnit (2004).

<sup>viii</sup> This was essentially the path chosen by the *Brigate Rosse* [red brigades] in response to the Italian state’s “strategy of tension” in the 1970s.

<sup>ix</sup> No-border camps were first set up in 1998, by the No Border Network ([www.noborder.org](http://www.noborder.org)) to protest against the increasing use of frontier controls and restriction of movement both within and outwith the European Union.

<sup>x</sup> For the classic example of crowd theory see Le Bon (1920)

<sup>xi</sup> It is in far from equilibrium situations like this that the form of an assemblage is most fully revealed. In this case we can see how apparatus of capture are tied to measure but also just how ludicrous and corrupt such measure is. Here is a view of justice as a denumerable, quantifiable entity that demands two months hospitalisation but not three.