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ECW An Open Letter to Those Who Would Condemn Looting

I. — Observations anthropométriques.

taille 1 ^m 66.6	tête.	long ^r 18.8	pied g. 27.9	n° de cl. 3	agé de 32
voûte		larg ^r 16.0	médus g. 12.0		né le 11 Octobre 18 59
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II. — Renseignements descriptifs.

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	Inclin ^a		dos car base rh		lob. c. a. m. D.	chvx d.	
	Haut ^r		Haut ^r Saillie Larg ^r		a trg. i. p. r. D.	Car ^{re} L' i.	
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But it was you who pleaded simpering for both the anarchy of the market and its martial defense. Now, when it shows its full consequences, you might have the rare decency to remember your words and stay quiet.

You cried out for this bed to be made. Now you cry when you find it to be hard, when you find it too loud outside to sleep peacefully.

May you have neither rest nor peace til the heavens fall,

ECW

Dear you all,

I fear we have nothing to say to each other.

What follows may therefore represent one half of a dialogue in the way that yelling at a iceberg does. Perhaps the sheer exertion of speaking - a certain quantity of hot air - will soften the surface a bit, but it's a pretty one-sided discussion.

After all, we've heard what you have to say. We too know the words by heart. We find it, at best, deeply unconvincing, and, at worst, bilious, evasive, racist, average, murderous pap not fit for mouths or ears. And there is very little that is best these days.

I expect you would say the same about our position, albeit with a different set of adjectives. Juvenile, destructive, unreasonable, and naive come to mind, if your previous history of accusations gives any indication. Unfortunately, given the structure of the media and the flow of information, we cannot but hear what you say while you can very easily continue to ignore what we do. Until lots of angry people are burning your city, at which point you might, in a fit of weakness, concede to listen to those who have some opinions on the matter. Unlikely, though. We live in noisy times.

It is too bad, though, because we actually agree on a few things. For you say of these riots, and this looting, that they are opportunistic. That they are unreasonable and stupid. That “this isn’t a protest, this is a riot.” That they are “not political.” That “this is about individuals using the excuse of what happened the first two nights to make sure what happens the third night is worse”. That this is “havoc.” That this is “criminality pure and simple.” That they do not “have the right” to do this. That “no benefit will come in the long term,” from “looting a local shop,” “setting a bus on fire,” or “nicking a mobile phone.” Above all, as you, Home Secretary put it, “There is no excuse for violence. There is no excuse for looting.”

And we agree.

There are some points of difference, it’s true. We don’t think “these people” are “apes,” rats,” “dogs”. But we believe that you truly see them that way, and that what happens now is not the reason for your belief: it is merely a confirmation of how you’ve always thought of those who are definitely more poor and often more brown than you. As for the claim that your error lay in that “we should have helped the IPCC come closer to the Mark Duggan’s family more quickly,” it seems that you have already helped the police come plenty close to his family, in the worst way possible. One can’t really say that it was the delay of the IPCC’s approach to the family that is the problem here, can we? Doesn’t it have more to do with the fact that he did not shoot at the police who murdered him?

Lastly, we disagree that “what we’re witnessing now has absolutely nothing to do with” that shooting. And that is the real difference,

order alone, are, above all, two things. First, the designation of *political* as a way to disavow what happens as apolitical and hence wrong. Second, the clarity of fully opposed positions, even as they are fully necessary at times. (That is, the difference between you who condemn and us will not be going away anytime soon.) Yes, we recognize real material separations between populations and their class background (one should be very clear in recognizing when a struggle is not one where one is welcome). Yet we strive to entirely abolish those separations. That is, to stop speaking of the looting *they* as if a different species. To stop imagining that what happens to “them” does not profoundly, utterly resonate, determine, and deform what life is like for those who may not feel a part of them. To do so is the crassest form of thinking class as caste, of making of the mass a sub-mass to which we do not belong, a trend and direction that does not exceed itself.

But for all these critiques of ourselves, all our slipping into distanced forms of condemnation and wishful thinking, still, yours is far, far worse.

Because you are not condemning those who loot because they loot. You have condemned them long before, condemned them to irrelevance and death. The fact that they loot just gives you some ammo in your long war of exclusion and denigration.

It is for this reason that we want nothing to do with you.

Because you, you who cry foul at any social programs that might exist to the side of labor, programs that might act as another circuit through which housing, food, clothing, medicine could pass to those who need it, you should not dare to let your thick tongues cluck at what follows from such an abjuration of care.

Instead, you just want to get to the cleaning up. In a sick parody of the viral spread of riot information through digital technologies, “mobs” are organized to sweep up. “Keep Calm and Clear Up” posters are made - *oh, how clever*. You urge all to keep a straight face, pull together, feel “beautifully British” after the defeat of those you do not consider British, and get on with it.

common attack on the thought and practice of those who aim to extend it: *you only know how to negate and critique, you just want to destroy, you cannot offer anything constructive.*

What is happening in London of late has been a lot of destruction. Buildings and cars have been smashed and burned. Nothing is being constructed. There is not a blueprint, plan, or program. One speaks of social negativity, and it shows itself in the destruction of a portion of what exists. It indexes a hatred: a hatred of police, of a city that keeps them shunted off to the side, of windows that guard things that cost too much to own, of being told you need to make your own way and getting arrested when you try to do so, of all those who look suspiciously at them when they pass because they wear hoods and have dark faces.

But this is not negation as such, even as it is part of the process of it. Negation, rather, is the removal of the relations that sustain a given order as it stands. Relations like property, law, and value. It is not obliteration, not a razing to the ground, but the placing of all under doubt and critique, often of a very material order. (Property shows itself highly resistant to arguments, no matter how well-worded.) It is an acid bath: privileging nothing, it removes the consistency that excuses the existence of things to see them as they are, see what stands, what falls, what has long been poisoning many.

It is that very difference, that slim one, between destruction and negation that makes up the *we* that has been speaking throughout here. Destruction happens. Not unbidden, not automatically (there are individuals who make real decisions to do so), but it is a constant fact. What is rare is to seize - yes, "opportunistically" - its visible emergences as the necessary occasion to extend that anger and disturbance beyond its flare-ups into a real, lived, sustaining thought of negation. A negation that is, indeed, *built*, built of the bonds that come hastily into shape when the previous relations that kept things afloat - commerce, policing, transportation, labor - find themselves tottering.

In this particular instance, what needs to be negated, which require analysis and development beyond what comes from material dis-

the tiny crack between us that widens into a yawning gulf, a division that cannot be squared.

For we want to understand the world in its historical particularity, how and why it has gotten to be the way that it is, and why that is insupportable. You, however, simply want to make sure that it goes on as long as possible. Regardless of the quality, regardless of the consequences, regardless of anything other than your collected capacity to declare that *it's a nasty world out there, but at least we have our decency. At least we sit high enough to look out over the killing fields. At least we got here by legal measures. And how dare they. How dare they.*

But despite this, you've said much that is entirely correct. Let us, then, begin with where we agree.

I This isn't political

"Political" here would seem to mean "that which has the character of politics" or "that which pertains to the set of concerns and questions addressed by the activity and category called politics." That seems clear enough.

What is meant by politics, not in general and always, but when we speak of it now?

Politics is the management of the social (i.e. the messy realm that acknowledges that there is not one person but many of them) and its contradictions. It does so through institutional representation of varying scales of involvement, ranging from the fantasy of one-to-one direct democracy to the election of presidents by millions of people. It runs alongside economics, which also bears on, determines, and relies upon the sphere of social existence. The economic order we have - the reproduction of capital - dictates a set of social relations between people and their world, and it un-

derstands those people, their time, and their exertion as a *resource* to be managed, extracted, tended, and circulated. Economics manages resources, through a set of relations dependent upon the material abstraction that is *value*. Politics manages subjects and their needs, through a set of representations dependent upon the material abstraction that is *citizenship*. One can't think politics without economics and vice versa, although there are periods of time in which one seems more determinant, in the first and last instance, than the other.

Given the polices you enact or support, it's hard to imagine you would disagree with this, although you probably don't like the language.

To take any account of this era, then, is to understand the rapidly increasing difficulty for either politics or economics to govern, handle, or structure the fact of masses, the fact of the social. This story shows itself most clearly in two ways.

First, the utter incapacity to provide adequate employment to an adequate number of people, such that the ranks of those who *cannot* be employed swells. This is a structural fact of the way capital develops. This is no accident of bad governance, though there is loads of ineptitude across the ruling board. This is not the fault of a "soft" immigration policy, in which growth rates would somehow have weathered the general collapse of manufacturing profitability for nearly forty years if only Britain could have been kept white, if post-colonial meant that those in the ex-colonies stayed put when the Empire found them too unruly to manage.

Second, the slow bleeding, coupled with a recent gutting unprecedented in its severity and rapidity, of the carcass of the welfare state, through attacks on social programs, housing, and pensions. Such that the ranks of those who are employed, but not rich, and those who cannot be employed are further distanced from the means to adequately reproduce their own lives and those of their friends and families. This inability to do so is coupled with the present and vicious face of an old fact: when the poor get poorer, their needs - and desires, that thing always mocked by the upper

bricks, the former rather than merely denouncing the latter. If one thinks that there should be a formal organization and structuring to what is happening, one should start doing that, rather than bemoan their lack of classical political form. If one thinks that what matters is to defend, with force, homes and businesses, then one should do that, together with others who think that, rather than wait for the police.

(This is not to say that the only thing for people to do is to put themselves in violent situations in which they could be hurt or killed. It is only to say that condemnations or suggestions of this order are irrelevant if they are not a material practice. Those who, understandably, want no part of this should take no part in it. They also should not condemn it or purport to give it advice.) For if we insist on thinking the insurrectionary aspect - that is, what makes of this more than just "criminality" and consumerism run amok, as it has been claimed - of what is happening, we see that it does not lie just in the severity of the violence or the degree to which it rattles the state. Alongside from the fact that many of those rioting are *getting themselves organized* in a very serious way (even though it does not look like what people recognize as political organization), the insurrectionary character is also, strangely, in the fact that shopkeepers and others are *taking care of themselves*, with baseball bats, that they are acting *against* an insurrectionary situation. Because it is here that there is a falling apart of previous lines of assumed allegiance, that there is a massive rupture in the consistency of every day life. A rising up not of all against the state in a clear division, but a rising up on many fronts. A boiling over of contradiction that indexes the full delegitimation of the state's capacity to manage its population in the eyes of that population. A taking action without waiting for the mediation of the police. Is such a thing pretty? No. Not in the least. But it is part and parcel of the negation of the given.

3. From this is perhaps the key distinction, albeit one that appears initially a flight into the overly abstract. That is, we have to insist on the difference between *destruction* and *negation*, for it is this difference that constitutes the particularity of communist thought and the elision of that difference that constitutes the most

Because people are going to get theirs, one way or another. Too bad if it doesn't sit well with you. Too bad for all of us that it comes to this, as there's no doubt that this will come to nothing, insofar as one might imagine coming to *something* as the construction of forms of collective action, development of infrastructure, and capacity to make otherwise. That clearly is not what is currently at stake.

But here we speak to ourselves, not to you, because for all your cruel inanity, we are far from innocent in the failures of thinking. And we - this amorphous we, but not "the left", however that may be defined - have slipped on at least three fronts.

1. We cannot allow the severity of what happens to occasion or excuse a call for the police to reinstate order. This is not because of social disorder being good or bad, those childish words tossed around. *It is because it is not for us to call.* It is what will happen, regardless of our opinion. As such, if we have anything to say about it, it can only be a critique of a) the way in which that kind of response is precisely what brings about situations like this in the first place and b) the way in which this situation will be used to retroactively justify the ongoing treatment of the poor as criminals, the very treatment that engenders such an explosion.

We utterly reject any such auto-verifying realism, anything which will confirm your condemnation. We do not consider it coherent to think that the solution to this "problem" is the further and more relentless application of that problem, the criminalization of the poor. We do not think that the confusion of the time justifies such a perversion of reason or its outcomes.

2. We cannot allow our critique to remain critique at a distance. We cannot remain afar and venture claims as to what "they" should or should not do, anymore than we should call on the state to do what it will or won't do regardless of our urging. To do so is to fall back onto the logic of condemnation, to appraise and judge a situation in which one takes no part. If one thinks that the rioters should attack large corporate stores instead of local businesses, one should encourage, actively, on the ground, with an armful of

and middle classes as if wanting something you can't afford means you are a moron - do not have the good grace to disappear. They get more desperate, the zones of the city get more rigorously divided, and the police get rougher.

These are the basic axes on which we turn and which hang, dead-ly, over the heads of the mass. In short, the conditions which ground politics and economics - namely, citizenship and value - and produce the grounding assumption that both are *natural* and *ongoing* are in a shuddering, terrified disarray.

To say, then, that these riots and this looting are "not political" is to understand something very key indeed. Namely, that politics as it heretofore stands has shown itself, for many years and more clearly than ever, to be utterly inadequate in addressing the concerns and needs of those who barely fall beneath its shadow to start.

To mourn this fact is merely to insist, as you do, that "these people" should go back to their parts of the city and to the official channels of complaint, the ones that can be recognized as political, that you can know as such when you see it (even extending as far as a peaceful rally that knows when to go home!). Back to taking impossible shelter beneath a relation that has serves only as a dividing line that keeps them out. Back to *not being considered as viable political subjects*. As such, only when they act "not politically" (skipping the mediation of citizenship and representation to appear) does that term even appear, as a negative definition. But you've never understood them "politically." You look the other way and hope that they do the same.

But we are in Janus times, albeit ones where the two faces are wrenching their shred head apart in an attempt to spit in the face of the other.

Riots are the other side of democracy, when democracy means the capacity and legitimacy to vote into place measures that directly wound the very population they purport to represent.

Looting is the other side of credit, when credit entails the desperate scrambling of states and institutions to preserve a good line, cost to those who might borrow that credit be damned.

(It is, to be sure, a coincidence that these specific few days have seen at once the riots, the lowering of the US credit rating, and severe turbulence on stock markets. But it is not incidental. Rioting and looting are as old as the economic extraction and political management of populations. In a time in which such extraction and management stop working so well, in which *work* itself is seized up, how can stopping and seizing not come more to the fore?)

And “havoc,” that which is being wrought? One of the earlier meanings of the word was not destruction as such (the thing wreaked) but the cry uttered that was the sign and injunction to start plundering. You cry havoc.

Havoc, then, is the other side of *class*, which itself meant - and means - both a division of people into classes for the purpose of extracting wealth (taxation) and a calling to arms. Havoc is held off by class and threatens to overwhelm it, the anarchic turn of stealing and laying waste that illuminates, negatively, this other relation, of legal theft and sanctioned destruction of lives and resources.

Havoc is the basic criminality of class. Are you surprised to see that it is hard to contain?

II **This isn't fair**

This is a common rejoinder, and again, it is entirely true. Folded into it is a fully legitimate recognition of the damage and trauma being done, primarily through loss of property, to many who clearly are nowhere near rich, who also scrape to get by, who build up a small life over many years.

VII **There is no excuse for this. It is just destructive.**

All the more because there is no excuse. There is no order or structure that excuses those who insist on the latter. Not in theory or concept (which may be easy enough, to put these words in our mouths and hands), but in doing what they need to get by and to not accept that they should *just* get by. That they may want, that they see everything that there is to offer that they can't have. That they are pissed about this. And now, they aren't having it.

There is no excuse for this, but this is a time in which one either makes excuses or takes them.

You make them. We stand both with those who take them and with those whose lives are disrupted by a situation in which such a taking is necessary. The very language of victims is wrong. But nevertheless, we can say that it is not true that you are on the side of those who are losing small businesses. It is the way in which you have left some to rot and allowed others to exhaust themselves in trying to go on that means that they will pitch themselves, and whatever rubble is found in the street, at one another. And you've long welcomed this state of affairs.

It was this that Hegel meant when he wrote of cunning, of the way in which the general idea - here, the ceaseless preservation of capital and its relations - doesn't pay its own penalty. As he put it well, “It is not the general idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background, untouched and uninjured.” And it allows the particular - the passions, desires, needs, days of those who live within and beneath it - to contend with one another, to hurl themselves against property and bodies. Sometimes, rarely, the passions exceed the idea and threaten to derail it, if only for a while. This may be one of those rare times, in all its bloody confusion and urgency, in which cunning stalls and slips.

seemed far away. I never expected it to happen in X too.

One can never expect this, the passage from a designated zone of poverty to a partially generalized impoverishment of the city as a whole. It necessarily comes as a moment of horror, even without a moral condemnation, for it is the coming apart of clear lines of demarcation and restriction. It is an unbinding. It leaves buildings and cars as black skeletons, and it does not have a general hovering over the battlefield map. It spreads.

But we will say that there is a basic ethical injunction of the present, and it is closely connected to this. It is the structuring condition of the real movement of what has long been called communism.

It is not the redistribution of wealth. It is the redistribution of poverty, which occurs in the process of those who have nothing finally starting to get and take theirs.

From this, the only ethical grounding we can have, and the only one we need, is to understand that there are two options, and they are mutually exclusive.

There is that which more evenly shares across us all the staggering violence and contradictions of our present.

And there is that which continues to demand that those most brutalized and left to fend for themselves should continue to bear the brunt of the trainwreck of contemporary life.

You insist on the latter, and you find plenty of ways to justify and reinforce this. We insist on the former. It is messy. It is harder going. It's been so for a very long time. And it will only continue to be so, more and more, the worse things get, the more you continue to parrot your skipping record of key phrases, while behind your words, jails crouch and swell, armies bristle.

And for those who would ask us, in hopes of mocking us, *yeah, but what if it was your house? Your car? Your shop?* we say:

We would be furious. We would be devastated. How could we not?

Because the point here has nothing to do with "legitimizing" violence or with disavowing the shock and horror of those caught in the crossfire. It is that insofar as the very standard of the political collapses, insofar as its basic capacity to adequately capture and express the contradictions of an enormous mass of lives, so too its basic conceptual standards.

Above all, the very notion of *compromise* which is fundamental to the blockage of real attempts to intervene in disastrous situations. The very idea of a cost-benefit analysis. And joined at the hip to economic concepts, the notion of equivalence and equality, such that you could adequate between the suffering and rage of desperately poor teen shat on by the country that mocks, loathes, and criminalizes him and the suffering and trauma of a poor shop-owner whose store was looted, whose capacity to get by is already stretched thin by gentrification-fueled rents, economic downturn.

For us to genuinely think beyond the deadly impasse of politics is to reject these forms of evaluation and weighing. To abjure fairness. And instead to say:

It is brutal that people are so cut off from access to bare necessities that they have to sell drugs and are consequently jailed for life for doing so.

It is brutal that a family watches their home burn because of a riot.

It is brutal that police shot first.

It is brutal that people need to defend their stores with baseball bats, in fear of losing them.

It is brutal that people have to spend their lives working in those stores, in fear of losing them.

None of these are mutually exclusive. They are all true. But it is precisely that notion of restricting dissent and struggle to “politics” that performs the operation of grouping them into sides, such that you could balance and weigh them.

They are incommensurable. They are also consequences of the same set of relations that make it extraordinarily difficult for much of the world to live.

And we are in a time in which such a double condition, of that which cannot be measured and that which cannot be accidental, rules. It rules in the breakdown of sides, of the metric of fairness, in the upsurge in the midst of all that we thought could be clearly divided. It is a scrambling of poles of identity. One doesn’t defend a riot. It is not “good” or “bad.” A riot is a scrambling of positions of belonging and of judgment.

Often, it is an internal dissolution of what might have appeared common lines of class.

It involves situations the likes of which we are sure to see more, the turning of the hopelessly poor against the poor-but-just-getting-by, between shop-owners and looters, between workers and rioters, between those breaking the windows and those who clean them, and, internally, between individuals themselves, who cannot always be split into one or the other.

This seems the way things are going now and are likely to go more in the coming decade, as the state recedes and regroups, intervenes brutally in explosive moments, but largely leaves both sides of the same poor to fend for themselves and to fight one another. They, and you, will come in only at the end to clean up the mess, take photos with brooms in hand, wring those hands, hope that everyone learned their lesson, and get back to the business of ignoring the legitimate concerns of those who are still there.

And of course what happens is terrifying, thrilling, idiotic, sad, staggering, and inevitable. Of course. We never expected anything otherwise. And neither did you.

those who are stellar, those who are mediocre, and those who are vile.

The difference is solely in how these tendencies get expressed. Those atrocious humans with enough money to stay within the law express it by beating their wives in private and cheating their workers out of fair wages. Some of those without the money to do so are those, in recent days, who are indeed acting horrifically, savagely. Anyone who justifies this is a moron, and we have as little interest in fetishizing all violence as such as we do in condemning all those who riot because some people are nasty pieces of work and see a good chance to fully act as such.

But it is entirely unacceptable to extrapolate a general case from this. As it is to imagine that you could clearly sort out a few very nasty people from a situation in which many people have lived through some very nasty situations and, frankly, don’t care a whit about offending the propriety or ruining the property of those who have had an easier time of it. Who know very well what they are doing.

Those who speak of looters as “mindless” are saying, in essence, that they literally cannot fathom a state of mind in which it would make perfect sense to loot. That it might be a very conscious decision. That they have no interest in grasping why some people may not find these distinctions - between local and corporate, for example - to matter much.

We understand why such a desperate rescue measure of condemnation is necessary, though. For what is at stake is less the prospect that people will support what happens than the very real fact that what is happening is a rupture of the enclosures of rent, privilege, and race, that are supposed to keep the poor in their part of town, where they can be left to “prey” on one another, in zones from which all social services are abandoned other than the police.

Therein the common refrain ringing out all over now: *I can’t believe this is happening in X. I’ve been following the news, and it*

4) people should return home to start having those conversations, assured (and scolded) that if they just made use of the proper channels of voicing their opinion - voting, community forums, pre-sanctioned marches, letter writing campaigns - then those with the power to materially better these situations will happily consider doing so.

To simultaneously assert that this havoc is not the way to be heard and to encourage people to return to the modes of giving voice to rage which you have concretely proven for the last decades to be utterly uninterested in hearing is to directly and unequivocally tell them that they are heretofore mute. That there is no possible manner of articulating a position that will be registered or taken into account.

(To say, as some of you do, that these unfortunate events show that we all should need to listen more closely now is to admit - *gasp!* - that violent disorder actually gets attention. But you couldn't possibly be saying that...)

Unfortunately for you, though, a riot is not a mode of language. Especially not a persuasive one. It is not trying to prove a point or win you over. It comes out of the frustration of mouths that may as well be without tongues for how much they are heard. But it is not a speaking. It knows damn well where that gets us all.

VI

This is indiscriminate violence, it isn't being targeted

Another point of clarity is crucial here. Despite what you think, class status and human decency are not identical. (Barring the rich, who are almost universally rapacious assemblages of fecal matter and ego.) It's a shame, as it would make class war so much easier, divisions of allegiance so much cleaner. But from the extremely poor through the middle class and back again, there are

III

They are just being 'materialistic,' stealing things they can't afford

Do you really expect people to riot immaterially? You expect them to loot only what they could afford?

But as before, we agree in the letter of your condemnation: people are taking this material situation as an opportunity to steal things they cannot afford - or can only with real difficulty - to purchase. That is entirely true.

But in saying so, there are two separate issues, twin intertwined strands of bullshit.

First, this recurrent accusation of "materialistic" signals a broader refusal not of consumerism - with which you are well familiar and for which you cheerlead full-throated - but of the material fact of social disruption. To speak, with disdain, at the materialistic nature of these days is to speak, beneath your tongue, of a desire that people should go back to "protesting" in ways that remain representational: be counted, be seen, be ignored, go back to the places they live, remain there. It marks your horror at what it looks like for "protest" to become material, and, at that point, no longer protest.

To recognize this is not to give up any degree of judgment: one can of course - and should - think hard about the inflections of this shift, about what it means for this *material critique of the city* to hit indiscriminately, to not differentiate between corporate chains and "local business." And to think hard about this means to act in such a way as to contribute to that inflection, to throw oneself into or in the way of it, as one wishes. But buried beneath the attack on the "crass materialism" of the looting is a nastier worm, that of distance and sheen, that supports critique and dissent *precisely to the degree it remains irrelevant and immaterial*, that it is to be seen and heard and not ever felt.

More particularly, though, this condemnation of being “materialistic” marks both a startling absence of self-reflexivity and an insistence on pathologizing, racializing, and dehistoricizing the poor and angry.

Because let us be very honest. You who work, who have the opportunity to do so, who perhaps had it handed to you or who fought tooth and nail to get that opportunity, you who “earn an honest living”: do you truly work only to cover the bare necessities? Do you work just enough to pull off a base level of caloric intake, a hair shirt, an empty room, an indulgent pint at the end of the week, and bus fare to get you to your job? Do you disdain desire beyond that?

No. You don’t. We don’t. Even if you are among those who can rarely afford them, you want, and you work and scrape and cheat and borrow to get, expensive trainers, big screen TVs, sport utility vehicles, prams that resemble sport utility vehicles, expensive vodka, pants with the name of a certain brand on the ass and that make your ass look good, earrings, cologne, cigarettes that don’t taste like cardboard, video games, diamonds, good quality beef.

(Or worse, you play at being above that. And so you want a brand new hybrid, soap made from hemp, something locally farmed, a flat with bamboo floors, the complete works of Matthew Arnold.)

And so, even before the question of criminality emerges (how those goods get gotten), you are condemning the looters for something else: for wanting the very objects you want.

You are condemning them for your desire.

You are declaring that desire to be abject and unacceptable, as soon as it is untethered from the legitimization of labor. You think, then, that they are supposed to desire and be refused its payoff. That such is the fundamental condition of the poor: to want and to go wanting. That want is supposed to be identical to access.

Such that when you bend the stick toward counterfactuals (as many

So indeed, they are being opportunistic. They are taking the excuse of a “legitimate cause for concern” (the murder of a young man), and they are using it to produce a situation in which one can access material goods and wealth which they are otherwise banned from touching.

To blame anyone for this is to share in a profound and inane mystification of the world. As though the basic workings of capital were not fundamentally oriented around the seizing of opportunities. (Such as, for example, taking the opportunity of excess populations of the poor and the global character of labor to keep wages down.) As though only the poor took opportunities. As if one should be restrained from taking a risky chance to better one’s life. As if fighting, in however “loathsome” and violent a manner, against a loathsome and violent social order was supposed to remain political and therefore ignorable. As if, after all, the stakes of all this was not material, not about how one does or does not live a life, not the very disaster of the social.

V

They have no right to do this. This isn't how you protest.

Of course they have no right to do this. It is for that reason that it is not a protest.

A protest is that which one has the right to do. It is that which you recognize the minute you see it and forget as soon as it passes from your immediate field of vision.

Perhaps the worst article of your faith, the thickest bile on your tongue, is to now dare to suggest that 1) there are some legitimate concerns behind this, 2) that, as Tim Godwin (Acting Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police) put it, “they are conversations we need to have, but they don’t excuse what is happening”, 3) the riots are not going to make those conversations happen, and

crisis of full employment. It is high-risk, precarious, informal potentially high-yield activity. Those who loot are trading a portion of their time - a few brief minutes or hours, but with the potential for years in jail or with death, such that the hourly wage is highly uncertain - and intellectual and physical skill and energy in exchange for access to a set of goods which they are not alone in wanting.

They are working, in a time in which work is hard to come by. They are working *together*, which, we all know, is really what scares you all. *We know we told them to band together and work as a community to improve their lives, but we didn't mean it like this...*

And to give an adequate account of what is happening, we can't reduce it to ransacking consumables or goods for home use. (Besides, having a huge flat-screen TV doesn't make it any easier to pay the cable bill.) For immediately after the looting of an electronics store, people were immediately trying to hock laptops for 20 pounds, something close to 2.5% of their original retail value, if not less. Meaning not only that one sees the much-fêted entrepreneurial spirit that the working, and non-working, poor are supposed to combine with their bootstraps to pull themselves out of poverty.

It means also that your claim that it is somehow morally reprehensible, or tactically misguided, for people to take these items instead of the "bare necessities" is, strictly speaking, an idiotic one. Are we to insist that along with restricting the scope of their desires, the poor are not supposed to understand the fundamentals of exchange-value? That they should have been loading shopping carts with flour and beans, rather than with computers which could, in theory, be sold for a larger quantity of flour and beans? Or kept and used, because access to the internet, the ability to write friends or stories, to listen to music, to look at photos of those you love or might like to: last time we checked, poverty doesn't abolish the desire to try and enjoy the existence one has and to share that with others, however blighted this era may be.

of the condemners slightly left of center do) and say, *well, it would be different if they were just taking food, nappies, medicine, you know, the things you need to get by*, what is being said is that they should steal only goods of a quality equivalent to their social standing. The poor, whose standard of life is not very high, should have goods whose standard is not very high. They should not be taking pre-rolled cigarettes. They should not be taking champagne, or at least not the good stuff and only for special occasions. They should not be taking large televisions. *For they do not deserve these things.* And they should know better.

And you are misunderstanding this, fundamentally, if you reduce it to simply a desire for goods. An act of taking is not a neutral redistribution of commodities on the market.

For what is it to loot? To loot is not to shoplift. It is not to steal, which implies the coherence of a relationship between potential property owners, from the one who owned it to the one who takes it, such that the latter comes to own it, as property, however "ill-gotten." This is not looting. Looting is not consumerism by other means. Looting is going for broke and, in so doing, breaking down the consistency of property as a title and a transfer between particular subjects.

Looting is necessarily collective: fantasies of a proletarian Rambo aside, it is not a solo endeavor. It is a horde of people taking everything, for it implies also the total nature of the theft. Not tactical, nor careful, not sly. It is a moment of total abandon, defined by the fact that it treats all it comes into contact with as within reach. The verb is just a version of the noun *loot*, which means "booty" or "stolen property." And so too the relation it has to the stores, streets, city, and world in which it takes place: it sees all as already booty, property already theft, gathered, hoarded behind glass and steel.

It is, therefore, a genuine collapse of this very logic you trumpet and with which you scold, of deserving, of being adequate to your cash flow, of being and wanting nothing more, of having the realism of frustration that the poor alone are asked to accept. It is an attack.

Your nervous, pacing anxiety at this is entirely understandable, given that it has very little to do with “them.” Rather, it points up the way you understand your own property, your own lusts, your own taste. Namely, that you have no particular interest in a nice pair of trainers because they are comfortable/look good/help you run fast. That is incidental. The specificity of your desire is negative. It is that you don’t want other people to have them. That what you crave is not plenitude as such, especially not for the many, but the condition of general scarcity over which your meager holdings rise like a tower. All the more so because you will deny and denounce it, play it down (after all, displaying wealth on the surface is supposed to be the province and practice of the poor and tasteless), not even have the decency to flaunt it. *Well, times are tough, but I’m getting along OK. We all have to tighten our belts a bit sometimes.*

You condemn, then, those too hungry, pissed off, bored, sick and tired, and desperate for not having in practice the self-denial you ape. With one exception. There is one thing they are supposed to want and are supposed to do whatever possible to get them: jobs. And so...

IV

They don't work, they are criminals

Yes. To not work under capital is criminal. It is structurally so: a fault, an offense, that which calls out for punishment - hunger, jail, coercion. Now that we have left behind the era of general wars, home ownership, and the cross-class production of children, full-time work is the guarantor of adult status, of citizenship, of being a proper subject. The absence of work - that is, labor recognized as such - is a general criminalization of populations, before any legal transgression technically occurs.

It is locally so, because insofar as *work* means sanctioned labor, then to not work means that one must labor in modes that are tech-

nically criminal: steal, sell stolen goods, sell drugs, sell your body, con, beg, squat, loot.

And in a time when there aren’t enough jobs to be had, or, God forbid, when people don’t *want* to labor, don’t want to throw their lives into hours of toil and boredom from which they, their families, their friends, their parts of town will only reap only the smallest portion of reward, in such a time, to keep telling people that *this isn’t the right way to go about things* is literally, and precisely, to say to them: *you will not be able to work, and you will not be able to not work. You should scrape by, and you should be quiet about it.*

However, it would behoove you, and us all, to clarify just what is meant by *work*.

In brief, it is the exchange of one’s time and exertion - a portion of a life - for a certain quantity of commodities, money being the most common and infamous one. The specificity of such labor under capital is that the value of commodities returned to the worker is not equivalent to the value generated by her labor: that’s what Marxists mean by *surplus-value*. That’s what capitalists mean by *making a killing*.

Work does not have a constant rate of return for the worker. Wages are not identical, and an adequate portrait of the world economy makes it clear that barring certain overall correlations for highly trained work (surgeons, assassins, jazz pianists) and excluding our fantasy that it must be the case that wages and worth are commensurate, the amount earned bears very little relation to the quality or quantity of labor performed. Some work is unskilled and paid very little. Some work is unskilled and paid a lot. Some work is highly skilled and paid a lot. Some work is highly skilled and paid very little.

I’m sure we can all agree on this, even if you don’t particularly enjoy doing so. After all, it is true.

It is also true, then, *that this looting is a form of labor, even as it ruins the category of labor*. It is, like credit, an inflection of the