To Call a Robbery a Robbery:
Land, Rent, Culture

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Introduction

'The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time', E.P. Thompson wrote in the preface to his account of *The Making of the English Working Class*: 'It was present at its own making.'[1] Today, more than sixty years after the publication of Thompson's best-known work, we appear to be at the end of a cycle: now, the working class seems to be going down, present at its own unmaking. While proletarianisation is still rampant, class formation seems on the wane. Following Thompson, we can sense a lack of 'common experiences' that could provide workers with an opportunity to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men'.[2]

Despite the obvious differences between the time Thompson talks about (c. 1780-1830) and the present moment, I find Thompson's observations still relevant to our understanding of the early twenty-first century. Especially, Thompson's analysis of *land enclosures* might provide a roadmap for comprehending what could be called *culture enclosures*. I will argue that both forms of enclosure force proletarians to scrape for central aspects of their *social reproduction*, that is, 'the socially necessary mental, physical, and emotional work that reproduces and maintains human life on a day-to-day basis, what some have summarised as "care work" or "people-making work"'.[3] Part of this reproductive work is also the 'sustaining [of] shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation'.[4] While land enclosure makes first of all access to the physical means of reproduction precarious, culture enclosure endangers access to the vocabulary of social cooperation.

Social reproduction is threatened by the appropriation of first natural and then cultural resources by one (small) group, which then forces everyone else to pay for accessing these essential necessities in the form of *rent*. 'Since its historical inception during the process of enclosures,' Carlo Vercellone suggests, 'capitalist rent has been the other face of the common. It is the outcome of a process of expropriation that is the starting point and essential feature of the reproduction of capital over time and space'.[5] While Thompson's peasants were often driven from the land by increasing rents, proletarians today once again 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', as

Phil Neel has asserted.[6] To understand this parallel, the term 'rent' is used here in the sense that 'includes taxation, interest paid on debt, land rent',[7] as well as payments for the use of 'infrastructure, platforms, public services, [and] utilities'.[8] Finally, I will argue that the pressure on social reproduction through various forms of rent leads to a much more silent and clandestine suffering than the more obvious exploitation of waged labour, and thus elicits a different response – by those that suffer from it as much as by those who support it: riots are met by rentier fascism.

1. Land Enclosures

Thompson dealt with questions of enclosure mainly in his chapter on 'The Field Labourers'. Here, he was first and foremost interested in the experiences, desires and actions of said labourers. Central to their experience is, of course, their wage. Contemplating the average wage of agricultural workers, however, Thompson found such wages very difficult to determine as no single figure would be able

> to show a score of other influences: payments in kind or at cheap rates: gardens and potato patches: the effect of enclosure: the effect of taxes, tithes, game laws, and poor-rates: fluctuations in rural industrial employment: above all, the operation of the Poor Laws […].[9]

It is rather common, at least for those who grew up in the second half of the twentieth century, to think of workers as waged labourers, earning a specific sum of money in order to pay for life's necessities (food, shelter, clothes, travel etc.); if the wage is not enough to cover the cost of living, bargaining and industrial action – in the form of strikes, for example – will try to effect a raise in wages. In discussing the situation of field labourers around 1800, however, Thompson realised that wages were by no means the only thing, and maybe not even the most important thing, that kept the labourers (and their kin) alive and well. Some food, for example, was still provided directly by farm owners, some was still grown in one's own garden, some was still sourced on common land; wood and turf for heating were collected from forests and peats; roofs were covered with thatch taken from riverbanks; festivities were self-organised; health care was reliant on herbs and received wisdom; etc.

Where such direct forms of access to the means of subsistence were not enough to cover for insufficient wages, state agencies stepped in. This was especially important in the realm of agriculture, with its constantly shifting demand of labour: 'labourers were employed for odd days or half-days,' Thompson discovered, 'and then turned back on the parish'.[10] While the employers

wanted the field labourer's work only when it appeared to be productive, the parish became responsible for making sure that the labourer would be ready when called up again. Here, the state was securing the labourers' social reproduction when they themselves could not. For this task, of course, the parish would use the 'taxes and tithes' the labourer had provided for. In other words: the field labourer had to pay a kind of rent for the (scarce) infrastructure of social reproduction the parish provided.

Where the parish could no longer deal with the poor, as Thompson's student Peter Linebaugh added, a 'massive prison construction program accompanied the enclosure of agricultural production.'[11] That prisons become an apparent fix for an economic problem, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore observed in late twentieth-century USA, is thus not a bug, but a feature of capitalism which presents 'the relative surplus population as the problem for which prison became the state's solution'.[12] Where welfare became too costly, and thus would eat up too much of the 'taxes and tithes', prisons became 'a means of managing those who find themselves superfluous to the needs of a capitalist economy'.[13]

While welfare and prisons are central to understanding the state's role in shaping the population to the demands of capital, I am more interested here in the 'effect of enclosures' which both Thompson and of course Linebaugh addressed. Because, in a way, the enclosures made the parish provisions and the prison system necessary in the first place. Enclosures, Ellen Meiksins Wood has emphasised, are central to the definition of property rights that made the emergence of capitalism possible: 'Enclosure is often thought of as simply the fencing in of common land, or of the "open fields" that characterised certain parts of the English countryside', she writes, '[b]ut enclosure meant not simply a physical fencing of land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihood.'[14] Before enclosures became widespread, most peasants not only had access to their own piece of land, however small, but they also, as Marx wrote, 'enjoyed the right to exploit the common land, which gave pasture to their cattle, and furnished them with timber, fire-wood, turf, etc.'[15]

But, as Thompson observed:

> In village after village, enclosure destroyed the scratch-as-scratch-can subsistence economy of the poor. The cottager without legal proof of rights was rarely compensated. The cottager who was able to establish his claim was left with a parcel of land inadequate for subsistence […].[16]

Those field labourers who were able (and willing) to leave the agricultural sector were encouraged to migrate to the (urban) manufacturing districts, Thompson added, where the workers would be bereft of any means of subsistence and thus wholly dependent on wages. As Marx argued, 'the expropriation of the mass of

the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production'.[17] Only within a world of enclosures, the famous 'double freedom' of the workers comes into existence: 'freed' of the means of subsistence the workers are now 'free' to sell their labour-power, but in fact have no other choice than to do so.

Those field labourers that did not enter the factory system had to cope with a completely new situation. Not only did they have to pay 'taxes and tithes' to finance parish and prison, as smallholders they also had to rent the land off which they lived. As Thompson argued, 'the ground-swell of rural grievance came back always to access to the *land*'.[18] To be able to pay rent *and* produce food for subsistence, small-scale farmers had to get more out of the land than before. Landlords enabled and supported the 'improvements' necessary to produce surplus in many cases. But, as Thompson emphasised:

> we should remember that the spirit of agricultural improvements in the eighteenth century was impelled less by altruistic desires to banish ugly wastes or – as the tedious phrase goes – to "feed a growing population" than by the desire for fatter rent-rolls and larger profits.[19]

In sum, land enclosures produced urban wage labourers, but they also produced field labourers who 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', just as today's new proletarians.[20] Even though the field labourers weren't workers in the modern waged labour sense, they were by no means remnants of a pre-capitalist society, i. e. peasants, but an integral part of the system. They were integrated through predation, as Thompson commented: 'Enclosure (when all the sophistications are allowed for) was a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers.'[21]

It is important, however, that we do *not* understand the notion of robbery as a transferral of property and rights, but as the creation of new relations. 'The developments known as dispossession were simultaneously processes of propertisation', Eva von Redeker argues: 'things owned in indigenous and feudal forms were transformed into modern property, which permits not just usage and control, but also abuse and destruction.'[22] Enclosures, thus, did not *transfer* property, they *created* property (with all its implications), as legal scholar Radha D'Souza emphasises: 'Historically, rights transformed places into property. It transformed a relationship into a thing, a commodity.'[23]

Although it was owners (with the help of lawyers and law enforcers) who appropriated the land and made it their property, it was not 'property' that the poor lost: instead, they were robbed of a *whole way of life*. The 'social violence of enclosure', Thompson asserted, 'consisted precisely in the drastic, total imposition upon the village of capitalist property-definitions'.[24] What was destroyed, Thompson argued, were the 'customary relations' between land and people that

might not have been formulated in the language of rights, but which have been 'endorsed by the collective memory of the community'.[25] These 'customary relations' made up 'the economic and cultural universe of the rural poor', but were often incompatible with the rights of property.[26] Thompson would later call this 'economic and cultural universe' a 'moral economy', embedded in 'customary consciousness and customary usages'.[27] In other words, what is destroyed, or at least attacked and endangered by enclosures is 'culture' in Raymond Williams' sense of a 'whole way of life':[28] 'a whole vocabulary of discourse, of legitimation and of expectation'.[29]

In *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson tried to show how the moral economy of the poor helped to form a unified class consciousness, arguing that in 'the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers'.[30] Based on a common culture that had survived the onslaught of capitalism, together, they came to fight 'the exploitive and oppressive relationships intrinsic to industrial capitalism', as the conclusion of Thompson's book claims.[31] And for a long period, large swaths of the working class (at least in the capitalist centres) were indeed 'able to improve [their] quality of life by forcing capital to make concessions'.[32] Industrial capitalism, however, is no longer the name of the game; heavy machinery is giving way to the ethereal 'cloud'.

2. Cultural Enclosures

'The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter.'[33] This is the bold claim of the 1994 internet manifesto 'Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age', published by the Progress & Freedom Foundation (PFF), which had close ties to Newt Gingrich, the then speaker of the United States House of Representatives and chief ideologue of the Republicans. The PFF was stoutly libertarian in its outlook:

> The Progress & Freedom Foundation is a market-oriented think tank that studies the digital revolution and its implications for public policy. Its mission is to educate policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public about issues associated with technological change, based on a philosophy of limited government, free markets, and individual sovereignty.[34]

Current social and economic problems, the text suggests, are merely a consequence of cast-iron economic structures that can easily be overcome in cyberspace.[35] The authors envision a three-step-model of economic development: 'In a First Wave economy, land and farm labor are the main "factors of

production". In a Second Wave economy, the land remains valuable while the "labor" becomes massified around machines and larger industries.'[36] Now that this model is running into serious difficulties, there is (apparently) little use contemplating a reform/overthrow of this industrial phase as it would soon be washed away by a third wave anyway: 'In a Third Wave economy, the central resource – a single word broadly encompassing data, information, images, symbols, culture, ideology, and values – is actionable knowledge.'[37] This 'actionable knowledge', as the central resource of this new wave economy, needs neither material production places nor the exploitation of labour: it is there for the taking and can easily be reproduced.

The 'internet Magna Carta' can be read as a reaction to a crisis of overproduction that befell the US economy (as much as most European economies) after a boom period post-WWII. Increased productivity through technological innovation, and cost-cutting through the movement of production sites to regions that provide cheaper labour, created an oversupply of affordable consumer goods. Long before the rise of the internet, therefore, immaterial properties – artificially made scarce – came to eclipse material assets, as Maxime Ouellet argues:

> since the physical production of goods is no longer the primary source of profits, companies have come to rely on research and development, patent production, advertising, and branding. In short, they concentrate on controlling information, knowledge, and image.[38]

The best thing about the new assets was that they did not even need to be produced. The new Magna Carta imagined endless immaterial fields, ready for the taking: 'Cyberspace is the land [sic] of knowledge, and the exploration of that land can be a civilisation's truest, highest calling.' However, the techno-utopians faced a similar problem as the pioneers of land enclosure: appropriation – even if immaterial, or rather: especially if immaterial[39] – had to be legitimised by property rights. Thompson, as outlined above, had emphasised that the land enclosures were a form of 'class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers'.[40] Accordingly, for enclosures to work in cyberspace 'clear and enforceable property rights are essential', and to establish these is once again a 'central function of government'.[41] The property rights are, of course, not to be granted to government itself, but to those the government represents: *the people*. However, 'the people', here, are not a community of whatever kind, but a conglomeration of individuals: 'the key principle of ownership by the people – [that is:] private ownership – should govern every deliberation. Government does not own cyberspace, the people do.'[42]

To be able to earn money from something that needs no production and thus provides no immediate opportunity to exploit labour-power, this something needs to be fenced in, in order to be rented out. As Matteo Pasquinelli put it:

> the central axis of contemporary valorisation is the 'expropriation of the common through the rent' (Negri/Vercellone). [This] explains the ongoing pressure for a stronger intellectual property regime: copyright is one of the strategic evolutions of rent to expropriate the cultural commons and reintroduce artificial scarcity. Speculation then is directed toward intellectual property, forcing artificial costs on cognitive goods that can paradoxically be reproduced or copied virtually for free.[43]

For this to happen, once again, customary rights had to be curtailed: endless lawsuits put an end to the file-sharing practices of the 1990s, itself a continuation of manual tape copying, in a similar way as courts suppressed the right to usufruct in the eighteenth century. Only with ownership, the way is paved for the collection of 'economic rent', which has become 'the most appropriate category for understanding the location of platforms in the capital accumulation process'.[44] Rent, today, is not restricted to land and realty, but has to be understood in a more general and abstract sense as 'the value exacted or extracted from the socio-natural world as a result of the relations of ownership and control of particular assets or resources, primarily because of their constructed degree of scarcity or quality.'[45]

Material assets like land and realty have not lost their importance, as Brett Christophers has shown in his book *The New Enclosures*: 'since Thatcher's election in 1979, two million hectares of British land – 10 per cent of the country's total surface area – has been sold off by public entities, in what amounts to the largest privatisation in national history'.[46] Increasingly, however, immaterial assets such as money and data have become even more important. On the basis (and entanglement) of both material and immaterial enclosures, today's economies are shifting towards 'the extraction of economic rents from the ownership and/or control of assets and resources, rather than profits resulting from the production and sale of new goods and services'.[47] And with that shift, many people once again 'experience class exploitation as largely a matter of rents, rather than wages', just as in Thompson's pre-industrial time.[48]

On the basis of these parallels between 1800 and 2000, it has been suggested that we 'are in the middle of a second enclosure movement': 'True, the new state-created property rights may be "intellectual" rather than "real", but once again things that were formerly thought of as either common property or uncommodifiable are being covered with new, or newly extended, property rights.'[49]

The radical libertarians of the PFF refer to American history to legitimate a global future: 'the need to affirm the basic principles of freedom is real', they claim. 'Such an affirmation is needed in part because we are entering new territory, where there are as yet no rules – just as there were no rules on the American continent in 1620, or in the Northwest Territory in 1787.' 'Cyberspace is the latest American frontier', the new Magna Carta thus suggests, thereby aligning cyberspace with the idea of a 'virgin land' colonial settlers had made their own.[50] Following this ideological framework, the 'things' that should become private property were seen as just sitting there waiting for Google, Meta & co. to collect them, just like some apparently unprofitable wastelands were just waiting for the European settlers to improve them. It is not far-fetched, then, to think of current proceedings not only as a new round of enclosures, but as a new form of colonialism, as Nick Couldry and others have argued:

> Colonialism, and the appropriation of resources and knowledge, like all major historical phenomena, is not static: it goes on developing. Its latest form is data colonialism. Whereas historical colonialism grabbed land, the land's resources and the bodies to mine them, the latest phase of colonialism acquires something new to appropriate and grab: human life, seized through the medium of data.[51]

As we saw in Thompson, it is only in a very superficial way that we can say that 'land' has been stolen. Quite the contrary: the material entity of 'land' becomes a means of subsistence only insofar as it is entangled in relations between humans and between human and non-human nature. The idea that 'there were no rules on the American continent in 1620' blatantly denies the complex relationships thousands of communities had formed with the land over thousands of years before European raids. It is all too obvious that in the settlement of the American continent the introduction of property rights did not just rob people of their land, but violently destroyed their whole way of life (and in most cases, life itself). As Silvia Federici has argued, 'it was not only access to the land but also to community organisation and reproductive knowledge that stood in the way of urbanisation and proletarianisation'[52]. In other words: it was not only access to the material side of social reproduction that had to be cut off in order to produce proletarians dependent on purchasing commodities and selling labour-power; at the same time, communal forms of learning and caring had to be either privatised or institutionalised in order to deny direct access to the cultural side of social reproduction, Thompson's 'moral economy'.

The 'land' of the historical West is replaced today by 'data': 'we should consider data to be the raw material that must be extracted, and the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material', Nick Srnicek reports in his influential book on *Platform Capitalism*.[53] Speaking of data as the 'raw material

that must be extracted', however, obscures the second part of the sentence which sees 'the activities of users to be the natural source of this raw material'. When we speak of 'raw material' we usually think of unprocessed material (iron ore, for example) that people just find in the earth and which no human has touched before. To speak of 'raw data', however, would pose an oxymoron: data does not precede human activity, but is a product of such activity.[54] What is even more misleading, however, is to describe 'the activities of users' as a 'natural source'. It is, of course, a social activity and consequently a 'cultural source'. Just as 'the American continent in 1620' was surely not without rules, but entangled within a complex network of intra-relations between humans and between human and non-human nature, data is the product of such networks, too. To consider data as 'raw material', consequently, is to (ideologically) naturalise a social entity:

> Big Tech companies, such as Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft or Meta, as well as their Chinese versions such as Alibaba, Tencent and Weibo, like to claim that data is a new 'raw' material that is there for taking. A reservoir that waits to be discovered by capable actors, who will tap into it and release data's potential for the benefit of humankind. The latest spin of Google's chief financial officer, for example, was to abandon the metaphor of data as the new oil in favour of likening it to sunlight, implying that data is a 'replenishable, inexhaustible (especially as compared to finite oil) and ownerless resource that can be harvested sustainably'.[55]

What is taken, however, is not a natural entity, but a cultural product, a network of relations, a whole way of life, as Jodi Dean asserts: 'Communicative capitalism subsumes everything we do. It turns not just our mediated interactions, but all our interactions, into raw material for capital.' The tools of the platform economy '*enclose* every aspect of our life into the data form. […] Big data is the capitalists' name for this material that Marx understood as the social substance.'[56]

It is thus not a question whether data should be enclosed or not: data *is* the enclosure – of culture, of 'every aspect of our life', of our 'social substance'. Big data is, in Thompson's words, a digital form of 'class robbery': 'Rather than regarding data as a resource we should understand it as human experience and social relations that are 'datafied' and thus transformed into a commodity'.[57] Data would not exist without social activity, but it still has to be captured (by digital machines) and made profitable (through rent).

3. App/ropriation and Rent

In order to understand how such robbery can go unnoticed, or at least unchallenged, it is necessary to take a closer look at how exactly the robbery is performed in practice. Thompson's 900-page analysis of the emergence of the working class has produced some memorable and often quoted lines, but its real strength lies in the meticulous reconstruction of working-class experience. We need to be as meticulous when chronicling its demise, using the archive, like Thompson, but also ethnographic means to reconstruct patterns of experience.

The digital platforms that dominate the contemporary economy can be described as being at once *intermediaries* and *data hubs*.[58] As 'intermediaries', contemporary digital platforms act as employers, trying to exploit the labour-power of those who work for them in a gig economy that very much resembles the situation of Thompson's field labourers: Uber drivers, Amazon delivery workers, Just Eat riders, etc. However, as 'data hubs', platforms try to make a profit seemingly without exploiting labour, but through collecting rent. And the latter, as I argue, has become the more dominant form of profit-making in the digital economy. According to Dean, this move is exemplary for the current conjuncture:

> In the contemporary global economy, rents and predation are more effective accumulation strategies than commodity production [...]. Globally, in the knowledge and tech industries, rental income accruing from intellectual property rights exceeds income from the production of goods.[59]

Let me give a localised example of this global trend from a recent study we conducted among riders working for food delivery companies in Hamburg (Germany) during the Covid pandemic.[60] In a way, these 'riders' are the contemporary equivalent of Thompson's field labourers. Relying on short term contracts, enjoying little job security, for many the job offers the only way to social reproduction: partly through a meagre wage, but mainly through access to credit and welfare. One of the biggest players in this new economic field in Germany at the time of research was Lieferando. The company's role as a player in a temporary staffing industry, however, might only be a phase towards a focus on its function as a data hub. In 2020, food delivered by riders employed and paid by Lieferando made up only ten per cent of all orders, the rest was handled by restaurants themselves. Like its competitor Deliveroo, Lieferando loses money with every delivery made by the riders they employ.

Once the company had achieved near-monopoly status in Germany (mainly through the acquisitions of rival companies and their data bases, financed by venture capital),[61] Lieferando began to ask itself whether it actually wanted to continue employing riders at all, even in the current, low-cost and temporary

form. Indeed, Lieferando openly questioned whether it would ever be able to make a profit on the basis of waged labour in whatever form. Ideally, the managing director of Lieferando suggested, the company should focus on its app, which increasingly monopolised the knowledge communication between empty restaurants and hungry consumers; only if the restaurants themselves deliver the meals, the managing director concluded, Lieferando can find a sustainably profitable business model. Within this new business model, Lieferando merely licenses, or rents, information to customers and producers. You cannot buy the database; you can only use the results of your momentary search: what you get is 'actionable knowledge', assumed to be the intellectual property of the platform. (On other platforms, rent is paid by advertisers who use the 'actionable knowledge' to target consumers.)[62]

If we accept the premise that the data in the database is a product of enclosure, we must once again pose the question of robbery. Lieferando's algorithms claim to know what 'the people' usually want to eat, who the finest producers are, how consumers rate them, and how reliable they are; they purport to know the best matches between producers and consumers, as well as the quickest transport routes. Lieferando prides itself on possessing such knowledge, because they have been gathering data from the actions of consumers and the activities of its riders. Only Lieferando has an exclusive overview of the transaction details of all actors. Its system of evaluation and reputation is designed to build trust in the expectation that the consumers will always get what they want, as fast as possible. Ideally, in the eyes of Lieferando, this information is to be used to *connect* consumers and producers only; the *realisation* of any transaction is then left to producers and consumers.

While Lieferando participates in the apparent 'extraction' of data through their customer app, much of the data that Lieferando gathers is the product of the riders' activities using their socially-acquired knowledge of the urban infrastructure to navigate the city. In fact, the customers also use their acquired, *socially-formed* taste to evaluate restaurants. If their knowledge was not social, it would not be of any use value: if their liking of some food was strictly idiosyncratic, it would be of little use to others. Thus: 'Data is not out there waiting to be discovered as if it already exists in the world like crude oil and raw ore'. Instead: 'Data is a recorded abstraction of the world created and valorised by people using technology.'[63] This appropriating abstraction is performed through the app.

To understand what is going on inside the app, let us take a step back and look at the advertising agencies of the 1980s whose marketing activities were supposed to counter capital's accumulation crisis by stirring up consumer demand. In my view, these agencies did not so much *produce* but *appropriate* images of urban creativity and symbolic behaviour. For the new, post-Fordist agency

worker that Paolo Virno described, what 'is learned, experienced and consumed in the time of non-labour is then utilised in the production of commodities, becoming a part of the use-value of labour-power'.[64] Advertising agencies tapped cultural knowledge by hiring the avantgarde of the so-called creative class that was willing to commodify its cultural knowledge – and able to ask a good price for it.

However, and this is my central point, these knowledge workers sold something they never owned in the first place: no fashion, no trend, no craze, by definition, can ever be individually produced, its essence is always elsewhere, deferred. In other words, the knowledge workers were paid well to appropriate, that is: to rob, what was a collective practice, an intersubjective relation. The Lieferando riders of today, however, are beyond such notions of a 'creative class'; they do not explicate and thus valorise their cultural knowledge; they do not, they cannot sell out. Their affective condition, instead, allows for an appropriation on an almost subliminal level. It is the app that does the appropriating now. Unlike the entrepreneurs of the creative class, the deskilled and precarious workforce of Lieferando is made to fail at appropriating the informational product of their labour. Instead, the algorithms of the smartphone-app expropriate (or dis-appropriate) the information the riders produce before it can be incorporated and appropriated by the riders themselves. This information is then stored on the company's servers, and 'what these servers store is us, the social substance, the general intellect, all the data that our interactions and lives generate'.[65] The riders are left with nothing.[66]

Just as the land enclosure of old 'was a plain enough case of class robbery', as Thompson had put it, the appropriation of commonly produced cultural knowledge must be understood as a similar case of robbery, not by means of fences, but by means of 'terms of use'. We have to understand culture, like land, as a 'resource, *produced* by all in common', that is 'seized, enclosed, and privatised in a new round of primitive accumulation'.[67]

However, this does not mean that the platforms have transcended capitalism and managed to create profit without exploiting any labour at all. As Lieferando suggests getting rid of their riders, the company still assumes the actual value-producing labour to be done elsewhere, that is, at the place of the restaurant. Such a move transfers centralised labour, which was at least under some control from workers' councils and labour laws, towards a less regulated, more informal realm of small-scale, often family-run businesses. Here, the gendered and racialised exploitation of low-income service workers becomes even less visible, but all the more real. While the platforms collect profits through rent, the service workers are forced to exploit their own labour-power, as Dean neatly summarises:

More and more of the people forced to sell their labor power to survive sell this labor as services to those looking for deliveries, drivers, cleaners, trainers, home health aides, nannies, guards, coaches, and so on. The buying and selling of services are enabled by new intermediaries, technological platforms whose owners insert themselves between service offerers and seekers, being sure to exact a fee along with the data and metadata that accompany the transaction.[68]

4. Conclusion: Riots and Rentier Fascism

In both the early-industrial period Thompson writes about, and the late-industrial times of today, rent is a central means for generating profits, and both then and now the appropriation of common goods rather than the organised exploitation of labour-power is the basis for generating profits. Just as the robbery of land was a necessary condition for collecting land rent, the robbery of culture is now a necessary condition to produce digital rents. Thus, enclosures 'are not a one time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism',[69] as it is sometimes thought, but an ongoing process, both in the form of neo-colonial land enclosures (not only) in the Global South, and as culture enclosures (not only) in the capitalist core regions. As Dean argues: 'Processes long directed outward – through colonialism and imperialism – are turning inward in ways that […] repeat accumulation strategies typical of feudalism: rent-seeking, plunder, and political control.'[70] Or as Maximilian Jung puts it: 'Digital companies seeking to maximise profits have penetrated into ever more layers of human life itself enclosing and colonising previously non-commodified, private times and space'.[71]

'The loss of the commons entailed, for the poor, a radical sense of displacement', Thompson observed.[72] The riders of our case study have no relation to the articulations of trends, values and norms they help to produce; they are entirely dissociated from what they effect. And despite the early promise of user-generated content, social media users more and more experience a similar impotence in relation to the trends, the values and norms the algorithms generate from their activities. This, then, becomes not only an economic issue, but also a political one: the dissociation from culture through appropriation makes the 'social cooperation' necessary for social reproduction impossible, or at least precarious, creating a sharp sense of 'political incapacity'.[73]

Thompson highlighted the 'vehemence in some of the protests against enclosure' and reports of 'enclosure-riots', but he also noted the 'patchy character of resistance by the poor'.[74] In a similar way, Dean interprets the 'years of riot and protest' after the financial crash of 2007/2008 as 'the political struggle of a knowledge class whose work is exploited and lives are expropriated by communicative capitalism'.[75] The 'radical sense of displacement' that today's 'class

robbery' is causing, is not simply a matter of dispossession, as I argued, but the result of robbing a class of the opportunity to socially reproduce themselves. Riots, both then and now, can thus be understood as 'practices arrayed against threats to social reproduction', as Joshua Clover suggests.[76] In this sense, riots and related forms of protest (blockade, occupation, sabotage etc.) are an articulation of class grievances, despite not being fought at the point of production, but at the dispersed points of rent collection instead:

> Debt, cost of living, transportation, education, health, and housing struggles all take on the expropriative practices of asset holders. These struggles are not fought against capitalists as the bourgeois class of owners of the means of production. They are fought against landlords, banks, and the state that imposes cuts, fines, and force on the many in the interest of maintaining the power of the few.[77]

The politics of the riot remain unclear, however, wavering between the radical and the reactionary. In the present moment of the mid-2020s, 'ignoble feelings like envy (of the disempowered for the powerful) or paranoia (about one's perceived status as a small subject in a "total system")' seem to be more easily articulated when it comes to addressing 'a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such'.[78] (It doesn't matter much, when addressing such grievance, 'whether the obstruction is actual or fantasised'.)

In this sense, the 2024 riots in England were widely interpreted as being right-wing motivated. As the BBC (and various other media outlets) reported at the time: 'The violence, in towns and cities across England and in Northern Ireland, has been fuelled by misinformation online, the far-right and anti-immigration sentiment.'[79] A report by England's Children's Commissioner, based on qualitative interviews with a significant number of children and young adults involved in said riots, however, revealed the media's interpretation as fitting the script a little too easily: 'What these conversations do not support is the prevailing narrative […] that online misinformation, racism or other right-wing influences were to blame for why young people were enticed to join in the aggression', the Commissioner reports.[80] One young person said in their interview: 'Half the young men there don't even know what far right means. We're in such a deprived area … they don't even know what politics means'.[81] Instead of an overtly political motivation, the Children's Commissioner found feelings of being 'disaffected and disempowered', as well as experiences of a 'lack of opportunities in their community', as the central grievances of young rioters.[82]

In a situation of deprivation, feelings of disaffection and disempowerment reveal an insecurity about the possibilities of social reproduction; 'the socially necessary mental, physical, and emotional work that reproduces and maintains

human life on a day-to-day basis' becomes increasingly difficult to be carried out.[83] With state and capital mainly absent from these deprived areas, the people living there once again experience their plight mainly as a matter of rents, rather than wages. It is the rent they cannot pay that bothers them, rather than the wages they do not get – scraping by on odd jobs, informal and unregulated work, Universal Credit, housing and winter fuel allowances, criminalised activities, food banks, etc.

During the post-war period of the twentieth century, problems of social reproduction were mainly experienced as the result of inadequate wages. If the pay check was not big enough to pay the bills for housing, food, clothing, mobility etc., raising the wages was seen as the solution; if a pay raise was not granted, a strike could give weight to collective demands. The situation that forms the background to the 2024 riots in England, however, is usually described as a cost-of-living-crisis: a crisis of too high prices for accommodation, fuel etc., rather than a crisis of too small wages. While 2022/2023 saw a strike wave the size the UK had not seen in decades, these strikes of NHS nurses and doctors, teachers and civil servants were mainly asking the state to provide for adequate resources to ensure social reproduction, rather than bargaining with producers; in other words, these were strikes about the just distribution of tax money, and thus struggles about rent, too.

Industrial production and manufacturing have shrunk considerably in the UK since 1980, and with it the basis for strikes. Instead, the same period saw an increase in rent-seeking economic activities: 'Since the beginning of the 1980s, there has been a broad-based shift towards economic activities conducted by 'rentiers' in the sense that they are structured around the control of, and generation of income ('rents') from scarce assets', Brett Christophers has analysed.[84] Especially 'those corporations at the heart of digital capitalism – Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Microsoft (GAFAM) – are accumulating value through rentier practices'.[85] While rents bring large profits to companies, these profits offer few opportunities for workers to bargain for a fair share as these profits are not the result of exploiting labour-power in production, at least not directly. Strike, thus, is not an option; rent-seeking companies avoid unionisation and collective bargaining. Accordingly, a smaller share of profits returns to the worker. The consequence of unfettered rentier capitalism is thus 'the extreme polarisation of wealth between an extremely rich minority and a mass of precarious or even obsolete workers'.[86] However, processes of enclosure and rentierisation are not only widening the gap between the owners of assets and those that have to pay for access to these assets, they are also 'draining resources from the public sector,' as Cédric Durand argues. The 'massive upward redistribution has made it increasingly difficult for local public administrations to provide

social amenities, from affordable accommodation and hospitals to leisure facilities, playgrounds and parks.'[87]

Most governments that are considered right-wing are supportive of rentier capitalism, praising its apparent capacity to increase GDP. The political aim, despite such labels as 'authoritarian' or 'populist', is usually 'not to centralise authority in the state, but rather to empower private interests at the expense of public institutions […] trying to emancipate the most bullish fraction of capital from any serious federal constraints'.[88] With less earnings through taxes, most states became increasingly reliant on debts, which in turn lead to drastic spending-cuts: 'debt is the instrument by which global financial institutions pressure states to slash social spending, enforce austerity, and generally collude with investors in extracting value from defenseless populations'.[89] The increasing need for private consumption (because there is less and less public provisioning) has the biggest impact on people with low income. This is exacerbated by the 'poor tax' of inflation, and drives many 'obsolete workers' into debt: 'As one of the poorest generations in recent history, debt and rent are the defining features of our lives', Neel contends.[90] As a consequence, social reproduction

> no longer depends solely on the relationship of wage domination, but largely on the ability of households to obtain credit. This does not mean that labor as a central form of social mediation – and domination – has disappeared, but rather that its role has changed. The main function of employment is now to obtain a minimum wage salary in order to acquire sufficient financial credibility to access credit and repay part of one's debts.[91]

The social-democratic consensus of the third quarter of the twentieth century was based on the high profitability of manufacturing (thanks to environmental plunder and 'third world' exploitation), which allowed for successful collective bargaining. While this provided families with relatively stable incomes, the situation has changed dramatically in the twenty-first century: 'as low-waged, precarious service work replaces unionised industrial labor, wages fall below the socially necessary costs of reproduction', Nancy Fraser contends, and in such a situation, 'continued consumer spending requires expanded consumer credit, which grows exponentially'.[92] Where high national debt forces states to disinvest from social welfare, privatised debt – *the* rent-seeking mechanism per se – becomes a pivotal means of '*managing the crisis*', as Veronica Gago argues:

> nothing explodes, but everything implodes. It implodes within families, in households, in workplaces, in neighborhoods; the financial obligation makes relations more fragile and more precarious because they are submitted to the permanent pressure of debt. The structure of mass indebtedness […] is what gives us clues to the shape the crisis takes today: as individual

responsibility, as an increase in domestic violence, as the growing precarisation of existence.[93]

High prices are experienced while shopping, while paying bills, or while trying to settle debts, rather than while working. Consumption and debt-settling are highly individualised procedures, private, even shame-associated matters; 'common experiences' that could provide people with an opportunity to 'feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men' (as Thompson saw around 1800) are difficult to attain today,[94] and only momentarily articulated in the riot, the camp, or the assembly. The abstraction and commodification of culture, and thus the loss of 'a whole vocabulary of discourse, of legitimation and of expectation', which according to Thompson still existed around 1800, makes it increasingly difficult to transcend the lack of a common experience.[95] Put drastically, datafication brings 'the end of the common world, which is a condition for the possibility of politics'.[96]

Right-wing parties react with anti-political practices of exclusion to the demand that they should compensate for the fact that average wages cannot ensure social reproduction: the 'welfare scavenger' and the 'underserving immigrant' are taken from the well-established imagery of the far right,[97] and turned into scapegoats for the effects of rentierisation. This is what I would like to call *rentier fascism*.[98] Both the conservative *and* the social-democratic parties of Western states remain tied to an economy that is centred on waged labour; while they might support different sides of the worker-owner divide, they are united in their belief that labour-based profits and taxes can fully support social reproduction. Rentier capitalists, however, have little need for labour to exploit directly, and therefore neither for the systems that support this exploitation: family, welfare, education etc. Rentier-friendly governments and movements (from Milei's La Libertad Avanza to Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia to Weidel's Alternative für Deutschland) might pay lip-service to some of the labour-based institutions (e.g. 'the family'), but they do no longer believe in full employment and a labour-based society. Instead, they turn to fascist strategies in order to reduce the number of 'obsolete workers' they have to pacify by devaluing and dehumanising various groups of people that can then be more easily pushed into irregular and/or informal forms of labour – which is, as I explained, still needed for value production, but not for profit-making. Where the 'mute compulsions' of waged labour no longer apply,[99] widespread imprisonment, violent border regimes and necropolitcal modes of 'letting die' are on the rise.[100]

Thompson wanted to rehabilitate those that had struggled against the subsumption of their lives by capitalism: the famous 'poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper' and 'the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver' who 'lived through these times of acute social disturbance'.[101] They might have been 'deluded', even 'backward-looking', Thompson concedes, but their actions were a consequence 'of their

own experience'; they did not want enclosures, but they bore the brunt of what followed from them. In a similar way, the destruction of shop windows and the looting in today's riots might not always be progressive in itself. But these actions are often a genuine articulation of discontent from those, to use Thompson's words, who 'lived through these times of acute social disturbance'. As Stuart Hall emphasised when the 'Great Moving Right Show' first got underway, the 'success and effectivity' of a fascist party 'does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions'.[102]

Thompson knew that the left had to address these 'real problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions' – if they fail to do so, the right will succeed. In order to be able to address the 'real problems', the left needs a clearer understanding of an economy based on enclosures and rent rather than waged labour: not to throw themselves into the arms of asset holders like the rentier fascists do, but to call a robbery a robbery and demand the return of the loot.

Notes

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