

Dis/entangling riots as terrains of struggle: Legitimacy, territoriality, civility

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Abstract

In this short commentary I draw out three intersecting threads from Dunlap and Kass' article *Rioting as legitimate abolitionist practice*. First, I consider the contested nature of legitimacy, and how this unfolds during and following riots. Second, thinking about the territorial dimensions of rioting opens up timely questions about the extent to which riots are inherently antisystemic, and how the social and spatial are brought together in riot situations. Third, I suggest that riots bring to light deeper forms of citizenship and civic virtue that both exceed and are anathema to dominant state-centred orderings of societies. In concluding, I reiterate the importance of understanding and appreciating the political significance of riots for imagining and building alternative futures.

Keywords

Citizenship, political geography, political legitimacy, riots, territory

The notion of riot evokes many feelings. It is variously viewed as a transformative moment of rupture; an outburst of criminality and wanton destruction; a cry for help; an 'orgasm of history' (Fremion, 2002). More importantly than an account of different discourses and narratives, Kass and Dunlap (2025) argue persuasively that riots can constitute an opening-up of political insights, terrains, or lines of flight, that might otherwise have been left unarticulated. As a space of possibility, the riot is a subject to be studied carefully – not simply as a scholarly exercise of observation and analysis but also as a method of harnessing the 'constituent power' of research (Shukaitis and Graeber, 2007: 11), through which paths toward radical change may be evoked and enacted. In this short essay, I explore three

entangled threads that are exposed through Dunlap and Kass' timely and important article.

Legitimacy

As a sudden and spectacular affront to established ways of expressing political (or, at times, more-than-political) feelings, riots evoke and bring to light struggles over legitimacy. Who make the rules around what is legitimate political expression? How are the boundaries of legitimacy policed and why? And under what circumstances do those

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boundaries shift? The George Floyd rebellion is one example of where those boundaries were – temporarily, at least – renegotiated: rioters brought about mainstream discussion of abolition in a way that could barely have been conceivable without rioting. In these and many other riots, we see the ways they outlive the specific event-space of the riot itself. In 2011, the riots that followed the police killing of a young Black man in North London, Mark Duggan, ushered in new dimensions to struggles around a range of matters – gentrification and displacement of working-class communities, racialised police violence, the social effects of fiscal austerity – that 14 years later are in many ways still resonant in popular political life. These struggles were a refocusing of existing political currents in some neighbourhoods, and new openings in others: attention to the geographies of (hyper)local political cultures shows how riots can become part of longer stories of a place and its people.

Nevertheless, the afterlives of riots can also become opportunities for the forces of the status quo to reassert themselves in new ways, and Dunlap and Kass clarify incisively how procedural abolitionist positions were strengthened following the George Floyd rebellions. Whereas procedural abolitionists knowingly or unknowingly played into the hands of the prison-industrial complex in the USA by deflecting energies back into state apparatuses, London's property developers were emboldened to attempt land grabs and social cleansing on an unprecedented scale after 2011, with support from multiple scales of the state. These groups – which had been prowling London's real estate markets for some years prior to 2011 – believed that clearing unruly, excess, undesirable (and implicitly racialised) populations was essential for helping riot-affected neighbourhoods to 'recover' (Horton and Penny, 2023; Ince et al., 2023). These examples, and many others, reinforce the importance of attentiveness towards how easily the varied responses to riots can leave dominant logics of order 'unquestioned' (Dunlap and Kass, 2025: PAGE), or even strengthened. Thus, to challenge and exceed state-centred procedural dimensions of anything – especially something so at odds with violent state-led modes of ordering like abolitionism

– must be foundational to any genuinely radical vision. (Indeed, as researchers, looking inward to the institution of the university itself, we also see its structures and strictures consuming radicals who have come to trust it.).

Territoriality

Attentiveness to the policing of legitimacy brings us to the spatial forms and dynamics of the riot itself, and how these spatialities contribute to rioters' challenge to the boundaries discussed above. States territorialise through strict binaries of inside/outside, seeking to render space calculable, controllable, and infused with imaginaries of 'organic' nationhood that seek to naturalise their artificial lines on the map. Yet, there is a claiming of space from below that operates simultaneously to this process, and usually through quite different logics. Riots can territorialise, often temporarily but also with aspirations for a longer presence in the physical and social landscape, as seen in Minneapolis and many other autonomous zones globally. These territories of struggle, as Dunlap and Kass show, not only create spaces of immanent bodily solidarities in the event-space of the riot but also longer-term relationships and mutualities that exceed the immediate riot situation. The affective and embodied bonds generated through such an experience – both the experience of physically 'being there' and more diffuse forms of 'being affected' – can be powerful and usher in deep ways of being together.

We can, of course, note the many times that right-wing riots occur, such as the 2024 UK disturbances, the January 6 Capitol invasion in the US, or recent Hindutva pogroms in parts of India. All of them enacted territorial claiming of space, nominally at least, from below. Do these or similar territorialities still challenge statist orderings of space? The answer is undoubtedly entwined with the intentionality of the action and its afterlives: who is being defended or targeted, and what world is being prefigured through and beyond the riot? In simple terms: are they 'punching up' or 'punching down'? In these (far-)right-wing eruptions, there is usually an articulation of state-centric territoriality, of vigilante policing of social hierarchies, of bordering spaces

and subjects for the strengthening rather than dismantling of dominant relations of power. In a sense, such riots are also self-repressive and self-disciplining (Ince, 2025), violently reinforcing normative (hetero)masculinities on participants even if they may feel, in the heat of the moment, like these acts are somehow liberating. Thus, when we think of riots, we must attend to their content and intent (which might not always be easily discerned), and how they can be productive of a wide range of political and territorial imaginaries: these can range from the establishment of autonomous community-based alternatives to policing, through to funnelling new recruits into right-wing militias for undertaking sometimes-deadly vigilante border patrols. Crucially, the territorial imaginary of the state – even a liberal or social-democratic one – will always find closer affinity with fascists than anarchists, hence its tolerance of the former that Dunlap and Kass rightly note. In many cases, however, the political character of riots is much more diffuse and complex – even contradictory – and making sense of their political and spatial meaning is a particularly useful thing that geographers can do, both in the unfolding moment of rupture and in the longer-term struggles that emerge afterwards.

Civility

Place-based struggles over what constitute legitimate forms of protest, and what are legitimate causes more broadly, brings together the spatial and social in complex ways. Riots, since they can involve violence and destruction on an intersubjective level, are an affront to particular notions of civility on which liberal democracies are based. This creates a point through which ‘disaggregation’ of struggles can take place along the lines of violence/non-violence rightly highlighted by Dunlap and Kass (following Chua, 2024), but it also raises the question of how civility comes to be known and practiced. Civility is commonly understood as equivalent to ‘politeness’ or, in political terms, calm and rational debate with opponents – the antithesis of riot – as well as an appreciation of certain civic values and virtues that constitute a ‘good citizen’. Liberal-democratic appeals for ‘rationality’ and ‘calm’ have always become a

coded way of decapacitating revolutionary or insurrectionary impulses. Yet, these antisystemic politics carry their own, autonomous civic values and notions of good citizenship, emphasising immanent social bonds and solidarities across difference (e.g. Adams, 2019; Smith, 2019).

As Mohammed Bamyeh (2010) and others (e.g., Bookchin, 1995; Zerilli, 2014) have argued, dominant notions of civility and citizenship are appropriated by the mechanisms of the state, which are themselves entangled with everyday operations of class power and white supremacy. Riots offend this order, even if they and other forms of popular political violence can sometimes become memorialised in ways that align with dominant modes of citizenship (e.g., Suffragettes in the UK, civil rights in the USA). Bamyeh (2010) explains that citizenship long predates the modern state, which is a parasitical growth on, and an interruption of, a deeper and more immanent set of civilities and civic obligations to one another. The immanence of riots – both the physical proximity of bodies and the affective structures enacted during and after them – points to a model of civic expression that exceeds statism and highlights an indeterminacy and openness towards what future civility might involve. It is all too easy to see riots as the antithesis of civility, until we notice the many expansive forms of mutual aid and care that they can exhibit, as highlighted by Dunlap and Kass, including the varied autonomous institutions that can emerge unexpectedly after them. This is not to say that such civic-mindedness among rioters and their networks will *always* emerge, but given the right conditions, riots can and do usher in new constellations of self-managed, unmediated social obligations in communities. Indeed, this shows that any ‘abolition democracy’ that is ‘life-affirming’ (Dunlap and Kass, 2025: PAGE) can – and should – stem from below.

Taking riots seriously

The paper by Dunlap and Kass highlights vividly that what happens after riots is just as important as what happens during them: events are rarely, if ever, entirely contained in a particular time and place, and can resonate and take on new meanings

as they are recontextualised and reinterpreted. These afterlives form terrains of struggle, though which multiple possible futures are opened up, depending on how, and by whom, they are mobilised. Learning across these struggles and their varied contexts will be important as we continue through the current conjuncture, where it feels like popular political violence is becoming increasingly commonplace in many parts of the world. As geographers concerned with spatial patterns of uneven distribution of resources and power, and as activists in a world seemingly dogged by injustice and permacrisis at every turn, to ignore the riot as a legitimate mode of political expression feels increasingly untenable. Indeed, if we make the choice to see beyond the broken glass and burnt-out cars, taking riots seriously may help us to learn and act together to nurture new worlds at our fingertips.

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