

Performing Struggle: *Parrhēsia* in Ferguson

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Abstract ‘The enigma of revolts.’ You can almost hear the sigh at the end of this sentence. Foucault is making a statement here, published under the title ‘Useless to Revolt’, on that ‘impulse by which a single individual, a group, a minority, or an entire people says, “I will no longer obey”’. In this short piece, I question the two sides of the enigma—how to label the revolt—is the act of rioting, such as what we witnessed in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 ‘proper resistance’—and, how to understand the *ēthos* of the rioter. The label of counter-conduct, I argue clarifies the enigma as it allows us, challenges us even, to see the event as political. Counter-conduct provides a new framework for reading spontaneous and improvised forms of political expression. The rioter can then be seen as political and rational, as demonstrating ethical behavior. The *ēthos* of this behavior is represented as an ethics of the self, a form of *parrhēsia* where the rioter risks herself and shows courage to tell the truth, the story of her community.

Keywords *Parrhēsia* · Resistance · Counter-conduct · Riots · Ferguson

On 9 August, an 18-year old, unarmed black teenager with no previous criminal record was shot six times by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The outrage at this event stems from two things: that he was black and that it was a police officer who shot and killed him. Michael Brown, as the civil rights veteran Al Sharpton said at his funeral, ‘wants to be remembered as the one who made America deal with how we are going to police in the United States’ (McGreal and Carroll 2014). But he will likely be remembered for a riot. The days following the shooting saw protests and ‘violent clashes’ between the protestors and police—with people throwing glass bottles, looting businesses, burning down the local QuikTrip gas station and

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vandalizing vehicles. The state response was to form blockades of police in riot gear using tear gas, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon declared a state of emergency and imposed midnight curfews by 18 August when the riots showed to be continuing and, on seeing that these failed to control the violence, activated the Missouri National Guard to support police operations (the first time that the military has been deployed to quell civil unrest since the 1992 race riots in Los Angeles). Over 30 arrests, on charges of assault, burglary and theft happened on the night following the shooting alone—and since then these have increased, with 78 people being arrested following riotous behaviour after a second—apparently unrelated—fatal shooting of another young black man, 23-year old Kajieme Powell, on 20 August. President Obama described, or accused, the protestors of ‘stirring chaos’ and of ‘*giving in to anger*’, which only serves to raise tension, he said (Roberts 2014).

Ah, ‘[t]he enigma of revolts’ (Foucault 2002a, p. 449). It is an enigma that has two sides to it: how to *label* the event and how to understand the *ēthos* of the rioting chav or thug or underclass. As to *labels*, is the sort of unruly, spontaneous, improvised behaviour that took place in Ferguson ‘proper’ resistance? Compare this event to the UK Riots of August 2011, which had a similar impetus—the fatal police shooting of an unarmed, young black man—and a similar aesthetic of vandalism, looting and arson. Or to events that happened in Mexico less than 48 h from my writing this in response to the news that 43 student teachers were ‘disappeared’ by the police in the Southern city of Iguala, where the word ‘protest’ is used in contrast to ‘peaceful demonstration’ to describe violent actions (Tuckman 2014). The aesthetic of rioting is one of improvised, spontaneous performance, which combines the visual (spectacle) element of aesthetic with a way of behaving (*ēthos*). It is, furthermore, a spectacle but it is not *spectacular* (that is, it is revolution but rather mundane and ‘everyday’—see further Douzinas 2013, pp. 139–140). Ferguson is thus not the kind of spectacular protest of the Ukrainian Maidan (labelled the Hrushevskoho Street Riots of earlier this year) or the central business district in Hong Kong (where the ‘Umbrella Movement/Revolution’, contesting exclusionary electoral reforms since September 2014, continues to unfold). It is certainly not the type of ‘historical riot’ that teases out change and revolution (Badiou 2012, pp. 35–38). Nor is it the more civilized and thereby more politically palatable form of expression of frustration as the occupation of public, urban space that is the Occupy Movements. Not being able, by comparison, to label the unruly event as resistance means the event becomes labelled instead as *only* ‘stirring chaos’, or as *only* ‘criminality pure and simple’ (Cameron’s description of the 2011 UK Riots) or *only* ‘abstract negativity’ (Zizek 2011). The riot is thus apolitical and only criminal. However, we see a new way of reading political expression if we look beyond a ‘resistance’ framework and see the performance of struggle that took place in Ferguson as counter-conduct. That is, behaviour that counters the form of being governed *in that way*. A way of behaving that refuses, or struggles against, conducting power—which in this scenario (similar to London in 2011 and so many other unruly events dating back to the momentous May 1968 student protests in France) is police power. How then to understand the *ēthos* of this behaviour? The rioters become stripped of political agency and their behaviour criminalized. Yet, as rights-bearing citizens they are exercising the ‘new right’, the ethical (rather than

juridical) right to ‘stand up and speak to those in power’ in an attempt to alleviate suffering (Foucault 2002b). This new right represents an *ethics* of the self which, when applied to the private individuals in Ferguson, hints that refusing the form of being conducted through looting, arson and vandalism might be an exercise of *parrhēsia* allowing individuals to refuse suffering and refuse governments that have neglected to recognize the social situation of poverty and disaffection in which they are forced to live.

The Ferguson events were not then a ‘giving in’ to anger but an *ethical* and acceptable response to a form of conducting power that it was no longer proper to obey. ‘The police were the problem, and they had to be stopped’ (Stephens 2014). Ferguson is largely an African-American community—about two-thirds of the city’s 21,100 residents are black. The police force has 53 members and, strikingly disproportionately, only three of the officers are black. The *Washington Post* reports that relations between residents have been ‘very hostile’ (quoting a local resident) for years—everybody, for instance, has been a victim of DWB [‘driving while black’] (Lowery et al. 2014). What does this show? It shows that calling the event a *riot*, determining that the protestors are ‘stirring chaos’ and declaring that their *anger* is misdirected, is not enough. It is not enough because it ignores the nature of this as a *political* event and denies political agency to the protestors, dismissing them instead as irrational and apolitical. The rioters, I suggest, can instead be seen as *parrhēsiasts*, who engage in fearless speech and truth-telling about the pain and fear of an entire community as perpetuated by the lying rhetorician, who is represented by the state (specifically the police). They fulfill the conditions of *parrhēsia*, as risk and courage (Foucault 2011, 2001); they risk excessive punitive response from the state in the form of arrests (and disproportionately high criminal sentences as we saw in the judicial response to the UK Riots) and military presence, and so are courageous in expressing their disaffection. Perhaps they do not fulfill the condition of being the ‘decent people’ (*khrēstroí*) who deliberate and take decisions within the city—perhaps they are more akin to the mad, the insane, who are not even given the right to speak. What then of the activists and leaders from the New Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, Christian Groups such as Disciples of Justice, and known civil rights campaigners such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton who actively participated—can *they* speak the truth? Could not the looters, protestors, bystanders in Ferguson be likened to the spontaneous, improvising ‘tellers’ of (Playback) theatre (Fox 2003)—since they take on a raw, ‘animal-like’ persona to tell the truth, the story of their community? The story being that policing in Missouri, in the United States, uses excessive force against rights-bearing citizens and that we will not stand for this. Much like the actors of non-scripted theatre, they are acting in collaboration and alone—they must be able to be good group members or else the whole performance will not work. And as a performance the riot is, far from being *only* ‘abstract’ and ‘chaotic’, acted out according to certain rules (where to meet, what posters to hold, how to communicate).

The ‘enigma of revolts’ is thus made easier to understand through a counter-conduct framework, which presents a new way of reading political expression. Counter-conduct reveals an *ethical* form of behaviour—so the events in Ferguson reveal an ethical position towards conducting (police) power. It is an *ēthos* that is

characterized by the free speech of the courageous truth-teller, even where that individual is a black citizen from a low-income background (or a ‘chav’ or ‘mindless thug’, as the rioters in London have been labelled). The challenge is to recognize the behaviour of animal-like, spontaneous performers with rights as political acts and not dismiss them and thus the story of their communities as purely criminal or ‘abnormal’.

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