



## Call for Papers

### “Crowd(ed) Futures”

#### A Special Issue of

#### *Coils of the Serpent: Journal for the Study of Contemporary Power*

**Guest Editors: Solvejg Nitzke (Dresden) and Mark Schmitt (Dortmund)**

Thinking about the future today means thinking about people in vast numbers. Everything seems to predict that space will be shared by more people – but whether ‘of us’ or ‘of them’ is a charged question depending on standpoint and scaling. However, whether you talk about ‘the human species’ on a planetary scale, ‘refugees’ on a national or transnational one, whether you are interested in political processes or the evolutionary make-up and ecological impact of human beings as a geophysical actor, crowds will shape the future. One can follow a strategy to either prevent (Paul Ehrlich 1968) or encourage (Pope Francis 2015) population growth, but common questions emerge: How to talk about the people – future or present – who are going to crowd the planet? How to provide for, let alone govern, many people? How to activate, mobilise, and address crowds? How to negotiate crowd power politically, socially and theoretically?

Judith Butler and Jodi Dean have recently provided new theoretical approaches to come to terms with collective political bodies and their public agitation. While Butler considers the assembly as a politically performative act which “delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity” (2015: 11), Dean views the crowd as “the fundamental unit of politics” (2016: 4) and challenges the negative connotations of crowds and the masses. Both take their cue from the idea that the individual alone is virtually impotent when it comes to overcoming its precarity and working towards a more egalitarian society, and it is primarily through concerted collective action that freedom can be gained. This strongly resonates with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call for “species thinking” (2009: 213) which abandons human intra-species distinctions such as race, class, nation, gender in favour of a naturalised collective. Thus, this idea makes crowd thinking and politics an existential condition of human culture and its future(s).

Recent years have seen an increasing demand for theorizing what Joshua Clover has called the “new era of uprisings” (2016). Public unrests such as the English riots 2011 or the Ferguson unrest 2014, among others, bespeak a spontaneously erupting collective desire to change the political, economic, social conditions at a given moment. Thus, there seems to be an inherent ambivalence in thinking crowds and crowd(ed) futures: on the one hand, vast numbers of people are potentially dangerous since they threaten ecological, social and political systems. On the other, however, crowds are potentially beneficial because only they can constitute the critical mass necessary for progressive change – that is, the point when, in Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou’s words, “uncounted [bodies] [...] start to matter” (2013: 101).

How can the concept of populism be applied to describe these new kinds of mass protest movement and the physical presence of crowds as political entities? How do these new types of protest relate to earlier forms of protest, crowd agitation, riot and strike, and what sort of future do they imagine? From Malthusian-shaped biopolitics to the theories of spontaneous uprisings, crowds stir up fears of an overthrow of established societal structures. Spontaneous assemblies are seldom in agreement with the status quo. Those who can afford or lay claim to individuality, space, time, privacy and undisturbed access to 'nature' seem to fear the emergent power of the 'faceless masses', yet are historically and presently not above trying to instrumentalise crowds for their own purposes. However, there seems to be an inherent potential of resistance, even anarchy, in large numbers that eludes external as well as internal control.

Another area where crowds and the masses have become relevant in recent times is the mass movement of refugees, i.e. the movement of populations threatened by war, economic pressures or ecological crises. Like the crowd protests of outraged citizens who, through appearing as collectives in public space, articulate the (perceived) precarity of either their national identity (especially in right-wing forms of protest) or the precariousness of their living conditions (in both left- and right-wing forms of protest), displaced populations also reach critical mass as "uncounted bodies". It remains to be seen whether these forms of public, vulnerable mass appearance indeed constitute "future politics" (Butler) – a form of agitation which will re-define governance as well as the political itself. Another open question is in how far these newly emergent forms of mass protest and agitation can be described as a "multitude" in Hardt and Negri's terms (2000) – a concept challenged by Jodi Dean in favour of collectivized progressive efforts (2016: 24-25) – or assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 2004).

Crowds form intricate entanglements of non-human and human actors, time and space. Rather than pursuing the futile attempt to disentangle crowds, in this special issue we seek to follow crowds as a kind of Ariadne thread through entangled relations and discourses. Thus, we aim at a parallax view: bringing into focus at once specific crowds and how they are framed.

In this special issue of *Coils of the Serpent*, we want to address these issues from a range of perspectives. We welcome contributions which engage with the notion of crowd(ed) futures in the areas of cultural studies, political sciences, sociology, environmental humanities and anthropology, to name but a few. We are looking for contributions to topics including (but not limited to)

- Crowds and political performativity: a future body politic?
- Riots, strikes and other forms of mass protest
- Crowds and the new populism(s): progressive or reactionary movements?
- Crowds and the body/corporeality
- Crowds and governance/governability
- Crowds, populations and bio-/necropolitics
- Crowds and ecology/ecocriticism/ecological catastrophe
- Crowds and the 'refugee crisis'
- Crowds and the future of the nation-state
- The rhetoric of masses and crowds
- Crowds vs. individualism
- Narrating and representing crowds
- The temporality and spatiality of crowds

Please send an **abstract** of approx. 500 words to the editors Solvejg Nitzke and Mark Schmitt (solvejg.nitzke@tu-dresden.de, mark.schmitt@tu-dortmund.de) by **31 March 2019**. Abstracts should include a topic outline, information on the kind of text (essay, statement, scholarly article) as well as the approximate length of the planned text. The editors will get back to you by 1 May 2019. **Full articles** will be due **30 September 2019**. The special issue is scheduled to be released in early 2020. Please read the journal's submission guidelines: <https://coilsoftheserpent.org/submissions/>

#### **Works Cited:**

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