



15

TOWARDS A NON-SPECTACULAR PAST: COMMODITY MEMORY AND THE RESISTANCE IN JALLIANWALA BAGH AND THE WATTS RIOT

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Abstract:

As Guy Debord analyzes the Watts riots of 1965 in his essay "The Decline and fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity-Economy", the past is given a different perspective altogether. While the official records highlight the casualties, arrests, shops looted, articles stolen – Debord tries to go beyond this documentary past and shows how this black riot of Los Angeles aimed at destroying the very spectacle-oriented documentation that ascribes a certain consumerist logocentrism to the very narrative of past itself. Thus, what gets reported as stealing and vandalism, is to Debord the revolutionary proletarian reduction of the commodity to its rightful place. The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is in sharp contrast to this where the power was in the process of showing the dominated its 'rightful' place of being just numbers, deprived of all the once ascribed glory of being the empire's soldiers in the World War I. With all his personal political agenda and limitations attached to them, Debord exposes the politics of dominant narrative as we construct our past and consequently our memory. The dominant narrative, as the paper would analyze basing itself on Debord's approach in the essay, may act in a strange way and often sides with both the warring factions in dialectic. Hence, in Jallianwala Bagh power would make a show of its strength by reducing a people to official documentation and validation of its atrocity; while in Watts the official documentation would carefully take the scrutiny away from resistance of the repressed and paint the same as atrocity. Thus the power would ceaselessly intend to control this foundation of the past, leaving the 'spectacle' to do the rest. The brutal show of its strength makes power in Jallianwala Bagh to quickly leap into justificatory documentation where the congregation shot at would be described as a marauding mob. The colonial resistance, like Debord's scathing assessment of the official evaluation of the riot, almost immediately could effectively go beyond the official narrative of the 'spectacle' and point at the horrid underbelly of empire. The paper would propose this de-spectacularization of memory and commodity to be the primary performance of resistance to let a non-fetishistic memory form itself.

Keywords: Memory, Commodity, Specacle, De-spectacularization, Resistance, etc.

Mechanical recognition of facts and events become attentive recognitions once the former is regularly intervened by what Henry Bergson terms as "memory image" (Bergson, 103). These 'memory images', to Bergson share a unique relation with perception. The external object producing sense- data from where the memory-images are shaped is as truer as it is the other way round. Thus, Bergson argues, we have "a circuit, in which all the elements, including the perceived object itself, hold each other in a state of mutual tension as in an electric circuit" (Bergson, 104). Hence when from the thirteenth to the sixteenth of August 1965, the blacks of Los Angeles organized the Watts Riot, they



were seen as reckless bunch of goons, looting shops, burning them down and even opening fire on police helicopters from the stolen arms. Law-enforcers, repeatedly beefed up, could not contain them and by the time the riot ended, the official record had 32 dead, including 27 blacks, more than 800 wounded and some 3000 locked up (Debord, 3). What marked the riot was its leaderlessness. The Chief of Police, William Parker refused mediations from any mainstream black organizations, quite correctly stating that there was no formal leadership among the rioters (Debord, 4). In fact, the mainstream of both black and the Left decried the event and even advocated for a putting it down with all necessary force, primarily because, as Guy Debord argues in 'The Decline and Fall of the 'Spectacular' Commodity Economy', the rioters aimed at destroying shops, stealing articles and setting business establishments in fire. In fact, the petrol bomb throwers caused a damage of 27 million dollars and caused one supermarket to go up in smoke. (Debord, 5) This of course places the Watts Riot in the perception of wasted aggression and both the establishment and the resistance would try to forget the same as an aberration.

Guy Debord would, however, differ. Foremost, he located in the riot an essential class character. The rioters did not spare the black shopkeepers or black drivers. Debord writes, "Even Martin Luther King, in Paris in October 1965, had to acknowledge that things had overshot the bounds of his specialization: 'These were not race riots', he said, 'They were class riots'" (Debord, 9). The issue of class in the riot was palpable in its revolt against commodity. A system that reifies human beings by hierarchically subordinating them to the touchstone of commodity, the blacks of Los Angeles radically discarded that system, albeit temporarily, by destroying the exchange-value of the objects displayed. It is the same exchange value that offers commodities their abstract, mythic value, creates a commodity-reality, the fulcrum *raison d'être* of the capitalist system that preselects all according the commodity relation. Thus contrary to the official response to the riots that projected it as nothing more but mass hysteria, the event emerges as the one that denudes the commodity of its fetishistic cloak and this to Debord, was the true liberating message of the riot: "To destroy commodities is to demonstrate one's human superiority to commodities: to free oneself from the arbitrary forms that cloak the image of the real needs" (Debord, 13).

This is exactly where the event of Jallianwala Bagh becomes philosophically similar to that of the Watts Riot. The backdrop of the event lies in discontent. India had provided for the multi-million 'War Fund' of Britain, saw her youth getting forcibly recruited and experienced a sharp rise in price of essential commodities because of the war and ensuing trade crisis. The rains failed in 1918, resulting in famines in several parts of the country. At this, after emerging victorious in the war, the British government, instead of instituting reform, adopted a policy of repression; its height reached with the Rowlatt Act of 1919. The official Indian responses to the Britain's oppression in this period, both non-violent and otherwise, had one streak in common: they projected the Indians as the political antagonists of the empire. The Ghadar league's war cry in their eponymous mouthpiece read: "Today there begins in the foreign lands...a war against the British Raj...What is our name? Revolt! What is our work? Revolt! Where will this revolt break out? In India" (Sahni, 9). The league actually projected themselves in particular and the Indians in general to be that worthy antagonist against the British empire who have attained the eligibility of breaking into revolt. Tonally poles apart, Gandhi's declaration on 1st March 1919, the day he launched the *satyagraha* against the Rowlatt Bill, too had the image of Indians as mature political rivals of the repressive Raj: "Being conscientiously of the opinion that the Bills.. are unjust, subversive of the principles of liberty and justice...we solemnly affirm that in the event of these bills becoming law and until they are withdrawn, we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws...We further affirm that in the struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence in life, person and property" (Sahni, 17).



The popular forms of the protest against the Rowlatt Act too followed very civil and refined forms. For example, on 21 March 1919, a cartoon appeared in the Amritsar paper *Waqt* projected the British betrayal. The cartoon showed Britain's Secretary of State for India presenting India its charter of freedom and Mr. Rowlatt, just then, opening his briefcase and – instead of producing the charter – letting loose a black snake on Indians. The point remains that Indians, in spite of the gross betrayal of the masters, thought themselves to be eligible of hurling black humours on the oppressors. This is serious claim to a political right to protest and it is this that the Empire was eager to crush. What Jallianwala Bagh massacre drove home is the point that the mainstream opposition was painting a wrong picture of themselves. They were trying to emerge as the democratic opposition, while the near two thousand rounds of imperial bullets reduced them to their rightful place. The violence of Watts liberated the humans from the web of commodity; the brutality of Jallianwala Bagh reduced the liberation seeking humans into the commodities of the Empire.

The desire of this reduction was evident in the announcement of the official drum beat in and around Amritsar on 13 April morning: “No person residing in this city is permitted to leave the city without a pass. No person residing in Amritsar city is permitted to leave his house after eight. Any person found in the streets after eight are liable to be shot. No procession is permitted in the city. Any gathering of four men would be looked upon and treated as unlawful assembly and dispersed by force of arms, if necessary” (Sahni, 46). As the Indians get reduced down to virtual nothingness in the design of the empire, the blacks in the United States have historically faced alienation. It goes to the extent that several Los Angeles trade unions refused to accept the blacks until 1959 (Debord, 21). Facing the unprecedented marginalization where both oppressor and the opposition desert them, the blacks could locate the essential inhumanity of the system in the commodity-hierarchy driven economic order. Thus what they did was an elaborate act of destruction of the ‘spectacular’ values of commodity. In many cases, they looted electric-run appliances when many of their homes did not have electricity. In this way, the rioters freed the commodity from the mystification of exchange value, and to the power therefore they appeared grotesque and uncivilized. Debord sarcastically records: “For those who reduce human beings to objects, objects seem to acquire human qualities, and manifestations of real human activity appear as animal unconsciousness: for William Parker, chief Humanist of Los Angeles, the Watts rock-throwers were behaving like monkeys in a zoo” (Debord, 17).

This emerges uncannily similar to the Martial Law that followed the massacre. Imposed on 14 April, the law ordered Indians to crawl on stomachs and made public flogging a new normalcy. Stripped off the glory of the progressive democratic opposition, the Indians now stood shocked and dehumanized.

That this reduction was in the official plan of action behind the massacre is evident in the comment of General Dyer in front of the Hunter Commission. He was asked if it was his plan to “strike terror not only in the city of Amritsar but throughout the Punjab.” His reply was crass and unapologetic: “yes, throughout the Punjab. I wanted to reduce their morale, the morale of the rebels.” (Sahni, 53) To Debord, this reduction is the ploy that the bourgeois power centre will exercise on the people to fortify the culture of commodity-spectacle. Capitalism in its neo-liberal state would ceaselessly produce ‘false-needs’ and would preach the perverse principle of ‘to each according to his false needs’ (Debord, 13). This would emaciate the people and make them subservient to the mythic spectacle of commodity. With the blacks, the thing is a little more complicated. Debord analyzes this scathingly: “So long as the human riches of American blacks are despised and treated as criminal, monetary riches will never make them acceptable to the alienated society of America: individual wealth may make one black rich, but blacks as a whole *must represent poverty* in a society of hierarchically distributed wealth” (Debord, 18).



This was what the bullets of Dyer tried desperately to convey to the people of India. In spite of India's nationalist desire to internalize the global spirit of resistance, the empire wanted to teach Indians that they remain a colony and must appear so. Talking of the global linkage of the Indian nationalist movement of the time, the Home Rule found its affinity with the Irish, the Khilafat had a direct root in the crisis of Turkey, Ghadar had its genesis in Canada and even Gandhi's experiment with the *Satyagraha* had distinct South African origin. The people of India in the new century, evidently were finding themselves in tandem with the international wave of resistance and thus were locating themselves in the global map of progressive, democratic people. This was making the empire nervous; not only because its atrocity is getting a widespread publicity, but that the people it had dominated for such a long time were finding a voice and an identity. This had to be crushed down and no amount of severity seemed uncalled for in this regard. No wonder, the men of General Dyer fired till their ammunitions ran out and the man himself could pronounce the following statement to the General Staff Division on 25 August, 1919: "If more troops had been at hand the casualties would have been greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present, but more specially throughout the Punjab" (Sahni, 50-51). Actually, the message was for the entire country and her people; that in spite of all the global linkages of them, they remain what the empire had always viewed them to be, subjects.

Thus, what on the surface appears to be an unprecedented atrocity was actually a manifestation of what the colony was experiencing throughout. Jallianwala Bagh thus stands in the long line that has the Plassey Plunder, repression of 1857 revolt, Permanent Settlement as its predecessor and is followed by the Great Bengal Famine and the communal riots before and after the partition. What makes it stand apart is the sheer spectacular nature of the crime. It is the spectacle that helped the empire gain the upper hand in the hierarchy back, albeit temporarily and provided the rudest shock to the reformists within the Congress. This is once again similar to the chronicle of Watts Riot. Debord states: "Hitherto, civil rights demonstrations had been kept by the black leadership within the limits of the legal system which tolerated the most appalling violence on the part of the police and the racists, as for instance in Alabama the previous March, during the Montgomery march; and, as if the outrage was not sufficient, a discreet agreement between the Federal government, Governor Wallace and Pastor King had led the Selma marchers on 10 March to fall back at the first request, in dignity and prayer" (Debord, 7). This 'dignity and prayer' is tantalizingly similar to the first decades of mainstream Indian nationalist movement and Jallianwala Bagh reduced this approach to ashes in its raging inferno.

This is where memory starts attaining a critical overlapping of attentive recognition and perception. The way Watts Riot is revisited by Guy Debord shows a clear break from the accepted paradigm of understanding and thereby constructing the memory. Jallianwala Bagh in itself served as the cruel narrative that denuded the empire from the abstraction of welfare and the fact that it is primarily driven by the enlightened philosophy of a superior race. The cold blooded massacre would be viewed by the luminaries like Rudyard Kipling in a ghastly nonchalant way. The author declared that Dyer "did his duty as he saw it" (Collett, 430). Dyer himself falsely claimed the gathering to a "revolutionary army" and his superior Major General William Beynon comforted him saying: "Your action correct and Lieutenant Governor approves" (Collett, 267). This came as a rude shock, almost similar to the gun firing itself to the native liberals. As Tagore renounced his knighthood in a symbolic act of protest, his letter to the Viceroy points at the shock awakening into a new perception: "The enormity of the measures taken by the Government in the Punjab for quelling some local disturbances has, with a rude shock, revealed to our minds the helplessness of our position as British subjects in India" (Sen Gupta, 3) The novel perception was realigning the memory of the colonial rule as the one



that always wanted to reduce the Indians to 'subjects' in their own land. As this happened, and the present of the massacre stretched to the immediate past and reconfigured it, the response started affecting the immediate future as well. As the history of the Indian freedom struggle took a decisive break from prayers and petitions and adopted a more decisive path, Jallianwala Bagh remained as the wormhole that ramified the past and the future into a fascinating coming together. It is that state which Bergson defines in the following term: "My present is both a perception of the immediate past and a determination – a 'protention', as one might say – of the immediate future" (Bergson, 138).

This realignment of memory is similar in its spirit for both Watts and Jallianwala Bagh. Debord records the account of a young black sociologist's statement who hailed from the district: "Before, people were ashamed to say that they came from watts. They'd mumble it. Now they say it with pride" (Debord, 16). The pride was in the newfound identity. The sociologist, Bobbi Hollon, speaking to the *New York Herald Tribune* added, "All that Christian blah has been used too long against the blacks. These people [the rioters] could rob for ten years and they wouldn't get back half the money that has been stolen from them all these years" (Quoted in Debord, 16). This dignity of identity is evident in the statement of Udham Singh after he shot Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab at the time of the massacre, dead at Caxton Hall in London on 13 March 1940: "He deserved it. He was the real culprit; he wanted to crush the spirit of my own people...What greater honour could be bestowed on me than death for the sake of my motherland?" (Sahni, 53) Evidently, it is the violence and the memory of the same that restructured two different populations, poles apart in space and time. Their spirit had the same resistance to reductive spectacularity as they refused to belittle themselves into becoming components of commodity memory, and the desire to become active agents with a present that simultaneously re-examines the past and opens up the possibility of an unforeseen future.

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