
The coming of *The Coming Insurrection*: notes on a politics of neocommunism

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Abstract. A specter is haunting Europe: the specter of autonomous communist activism. A new party is expanding its ranks, The Imaginary Party, which has already unnerved the French establishment, rattled Sarkozy's government, and penned its own intriguing manifesto: *The Coming Insurrection*. Everybody agrees: current society is about to explode. Even the French daily *Le Monde*, was forced to admit: "one hasn't seen power become so fearful of a book for a very long time." Semiotext(e)'s recent English translation has rattled the Anglo-Saxon establishment, too, unleashing a spate of bourgeois paranoia, highlighting for all to see what intelligent people knew already: how very flimsy their hegemony really is, how weak their grip is on political reality. This article examines the coming of *The Coming Insurrection*, its theoretical basis, and its revolutionary potential. It suggests this uncompromising text is in the 'vanguard' of disseminating a new brand of Marxism, a non-class-based Marxism, a runaway Marxism that has at its core an incipient neocommunist impulse, one currently pitting its wits against an intransigent neoliberalism. Its card-carrying membership thrives off nonaffiliated people, whose platform is grounded in everyday life, not at the workplace. Importantly, *The Coming Insurrection* employs a vitality of spirit and a principle of hope, as well as the direct action anarchism necessary to reinvigorate classical Marxism. Yes, everyone agrees: an exodus from capitalism has already begun.

"Everyone agrees: it's about to explode"

In 2007 a strange little book called *L'insurrection qui vient* (*The Coming Insurrection*) was released in France under the auspices of the radical publishing house, Éditions la Fabrique. No author's name appeared on its plain-green cover; only the signature "Comité invisible"—Invisible Committee—gave clues to the culprit's identity (see Comité Invisible, 2007). 'Culprit', of course, implies some sort of guilt in a criminal act, and in this sense the said Invisible Committee pleads guilty as charged: it has knowingly unnerved the French establishment, rattled Sarkozy's government, and penned the most-radical radical book since Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1970), itself written on the eve of another great big coming insurrection. More recently, Semiotext(e)'s English translation has rattled the Anglo-Saxon establishment, too, unleashing a spate of bourgeois paranoia, highlighting for all to see what intelligent people knew already: how very flimsy their neoliberal hegemony really is, how weak their grip on political reality is. Indeed, it's just as the French daily *Le Monde* quipped last May (2009): "one hasn't seen power become so fearful of a book for a very long time."

"The book is important", one man said July past at an impromptu New York book launch party at Union Square's Barnes and Noble. "It's important because *The Coming Insurrection* speaks of the total bankruptcy of pretty much everything. We're living in a high-end aesthetic with zero content" (*The New York Times* 2009; cf *The New Yorker* 2009). It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and without prior permission a group of 100-or-so activists merrily fêted the book's US release in the huge East 17th Street bookstore. As an employee announced to the milling crowd that there was no reading scheduled that night, a man jumped onto a stage and began loudly reciting the opening

words of the book's introduction: "Everyone agrees. It's about to explode" (The Invisible Committee, 2009, page 9).⁽¹⁾ A security guard tried to thwart the gathering but couldn't; then the police arrived in force and the crowd exited, clapping and yelling, only to enter the nearby Sephora cosmetics store, resuming its mantra: "All power to the communes." Black-T-shirted security guards ordered revelers out, and a few minutes later the group marched into Starbucks. "I've no idea what's going on", said a young male latte sipper sat behind his laptop. "But I like the excitement" (*The New York Times* 2009).

It was such excitement that a few weeks later really got the goat of frothing-at-the-mouth reactionary Glenn Beck in his *Fox News* show, "The One Thing" (1 July 2009). Ostensibly mild-mannered, clad in neat-cut suit and red tie, Beck, author of the best-selling book *Common Sense* (2009), proceeded almost apoplectically, quivering with rage, to denounce *The Coming Insurrection*: "This is a dangerous book", he cried, "that calls for violent revolution. This is an anti-*Common Sense* book, written by the enemies within."

"As world economies go down the tank and unemployment continues to rise, disenfranchised people are set to explode.... This started in France and spread to countries like Greece, where people are out of work, out of money and out of patience. Now it's coming here A few years ago I said that Europe is on the brink of destruction. This is yet another sign that it's coming. Even in Japan where protests have been seen as taboo since the 1960s, young people angered over the economy and fearing for the future are taking to the streets, beginning to unionize. The Communist Party of Japan says they're getting 1,000 new members a month."

"It's important that you read this book", Beck concluded, "so that you know who your enemies are, so that you know what is coming and be ready when it does."

Insurrectional style

Much of the intrigue and bourgeois anxiety around *The Coming Insurrection* derives from the anonymity of its author(s), from the *clandestine* nature of its enterprise. The book's most radical element is, it seems, its invisibility, its veil of mystery, its ability to frighten, announcing that an opposition—an Invisible Committee—is out there somewhere, plotting something, and power isn't quite sure who or where it is. Debord always said that the more obscure and subterranean he became, the greater the media feared and loathed him; they were freaked by a mystique and mystery they could little fathom (cf Debord, 2006). In fact, the "Insurrectionary Style" of *The Coming Insurrection*, neatly put by an unlikely *New Yorker* magazine (2009), is quintessentially Debordian.⁽²⁾ Still, it's a style drier and less poetic than *The Society of the Spectacle*, more sober and elegant, more cutting, like the late Debord, like the *Comments on the Society of Spectacle* (Debord, 1991) he'd make twenty years after his original foray; as one commentator (Boltanski, 2009) wrote in the French journal *Tigre: The Coming Insurrection* has a burning style, a style that "'burns like ice'—in the words of Baudelaire."

Thus abounds the little rumor, somewhat implausible, that Debord himself wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, that he never really committed suicide, that he lives on reclusively in Champot Haut, in his tiny hamlet, in lost and lonely Auvergne, under

⁽¹⁾ All page references in this essay refer to Semiotext(e)'s edition. The Invisible Committee's "Introduction" to the English translation was written in January 2009 and didn't appear in the original French version.

⁽²⁾ Debord (1970) actually uses the expression "*insurrectional style*" in *The Society of the Spectacle* (section 206), describing the young Karl Marx's "style of negation" from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Marx, 1975). Debord italicizes the concept in his text.

its volcanoes; that his taste for intrigue and scandal, like that of his hero Arthur Cravan,³ meant he fabricated his own disappearance in order to better survey the world, to critique it, and secretly mastermind its eventual overthrow, four decades down the line. (Didn't somebody spot Debord with wife Alice recently in the Haute-Loire, wandering around the summer *marché du soir* at Chomelix?) Remember what he'd said near the end of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1970, section 220): those who want to overthrow the spectacle "must know how to wait". And so here Debord is, after waiting so long, finally announcing the coming of *The Coming Insurrection*.

But if truth be known, the style of *The Coming Insurrection* is younger at heart: its voice is too fiery and naïve, too innocent and agile to be crafted by any ageing, seventy-something revolutionary—dead or alive. It has the stamp of somebody on the brink of mastering their art, a Young Turk who, for the time being anyway, has less to lose, and everything to gain: the world is ahead of him (or her), and it's time to act *now*, before one gets too old, too cynical, too embittered by past failings. As such, the idea that a thirty-three-year-old freelance rebel, a certain Julien Coupat (born 1974), is the hand behind the deed, seems the most likely, increasingly the most touted media thesis. A brilliant polyglot philosophy student, graduating from Paris's elite *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* with a doctorate in Debordian thought and Situationist theory, Coupat has all the intellectual credentials, all the subversive wits for the job. Equally steeped in Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben, Coupat, who fervently denies he wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, also has Debord's talent for obscurity and conspiracy, for lying low while plotting high.

Since 2005 Coupat and several comrades assumed proprietorship of a farmhouse at Le Goutailloux, a little hamlet about the size of Debord's own Champot, a couple of kilometers outside Tarnac, a prim village of 350 inhabitants in the Corrèze department. There, in one of rural France's most sparsely populated corners, perched up on the Limousin's bleak Millevaches plateau, cut off and miles away from any discernible urban life, Coupat and his crew have created their very own ecommunity and velvet underground, rehabbed an ancient cottage, reenergized a worn out bar, reorganized as a cooperative an adjacent *épicerie*, helped out with the running of a mobile library and *ciné-club*, and participated in the daily affairs of the traditionally communist commune, giving it an autonomous leftwing bent, as well as a convivial (if grungy) atmosphere of resistance. Here are young(ish) people who think differently, act differently, dream differently, and have different practical models about how to live; they've had enough of what the capitalist supermarket and labor market offer them, all of which unnerves the powers that be, threatens their status quo because it somehow changes the dominant order of things. Power gets twitchy once it loses its grip on ordinary everyday life, once it sees another sort of everyday life it barely understands.

Accordingly, in the early hours of 11 November 2008, 150 heavily armed riot police, with helicopters overhead, made a sweeping raid on the sleeping hamlet, amid barking dogs, nonplussed goats, and terrified chickens, arresting nine humans. Accused by the Sarkozy government of sabotaging a TGV train near the German border, as well as

³Poet–boxer, Dadaist, and wild man “deserter of seventeen nations”, Cravan, one morning in 1918, set sail in a small fishing boat into the Gulf of Mexico; his craft breezed out to sea, dipped on the horizon, and nobody ever saw Cravan again. For details of Cravan's short-lived life and everlasting thought, see Merrifield (2004). In a fascinating novel, *Arthur Cravan n'est pas mort noyé*, Philippe Dagen (2006) reinvents Cravan's shadowy world of flight and eternal dislike, bringing him back to life in Geneva during the 1960s, claiming he didn't die, drowned, in 1918, that it was yet another prank from an arch-mystificateur.

illicit political activity, the so-called ‘Tarnac Nine’ immediately faced charges in a Paris court of “criminal association for the purpose of terrorist activity”, an offence that carries up to twenty years in jail. In early December, with no supporting evidence, all but Coupat were acquitted under judiciary control. In May 2009, after six months of ‘preventive detention’, Coupat, too, was eventually released. But as Coupat said in an interview with *Le Monde* (2009), “anti-terrorism, contrary to what the term itself insinuates, is not a means of fighting against terrorism, but is the method by which one positively produces the political enemy as terrorist.”⁽⁴⁾

Several days after the Tarnac arrests, the ‘Anti-Terrorist Division’ of the ‘Central Police Judiciary and Prosecutor’ drafted a criminal report in Paris (see *Rapport de la sous-direction antiterroriste* 2008). It makes for a fascinating, if scary, read. Apparently, secret police had now “dismantled a clandestine autonomist–anarchist structure based in France that devotes itself to destabilizing the state by violent actions” (page 1). This group, “constituted around the charismatic and ideological leader Julien Coupat, keeps itself on the margins of large political events” (page 1) and has hitherto been “engaged in the sabotage of transport infrastructure” (page 1), “participating regularly in political demonstrations” (page 3), like at the G8 Summits at Evian in June 2003 and at Isola San Gorgio (Italy) in 2004; at assorted ecological forums; at anti-anti-immigrant legislation gatherings; at a festival of support for protesting Greek activists at Thessalonica in September 2008; and at a demonstration in Vichy in October 2008 during a meeting of twenty-seven European Union ministers of interior. “These activists”, the report adds (pages 3–4), aren’t just a group of reveler “*casseurs*”—rioters—but constitute “a group well versed in techniques of urban guerilla warfare and act in a planned and concerted manner.” Moreover, their discourse is “very radical and they have links with foreign groups” (page 4).

According to the report, secret police surveillance uncovered the Tarnac Nine’s plot to sabotage a rapid train line in the Moselle, and sabotage, the prosecutor reminds the jury, is exactly what *The Coming Insurrection* advocates. However, during the police ransacking of Coupat’s house, police found no explosives or weapons of mass destruction, no Molotov cocktails or monkey wrenches, only “documents containing detailed information on railway transportation, including exact arrival and departure times of trains.” And, as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben wrote in his defense of the Tarnac Nine (Agamben, 2008), “in simple language”, what all that boils down to “is a SNCF [French National Train] schedule.” Police, too, confiscated “climbing gear”, which again, “in simple language”, Agamben says, means “a ladder, such as one might find in any country house.” In short, there’s little there for convicting anyone of terrorism. For Agamben the

“only possible conclusion to this shadowy affair is that those engaged in activism against the way social and economic problems are managed today are considered *ipso facto* as potential terrorists. We must have the courage to say with clarity that

⁽⁴⁾ Cf Debord (1991, page 24, emphasis in original): “Such a perfect democracy constructs its own inconceivable foe, terrorism. Its wish is *to be judged by its enemies rather than by its results*. The history of terrorism is written by the state; it is therefore instructive. Spectators can certainly never know everything about terrorism, but they must always know enough to persuade them that, compared with terrorism, everything else must be acceptable, or in any case more rational and democratic.” Gérard Coupat, Julien’s father, says of the affair: “They are turning my son into a scapegoat for a generation who have started to think for themselves about capitalism and its wrongs and to demonstrate against the government . . . The government is keeping my son in prison because a man of the left with the courage to demonstrate is the last thing they want now, with the economic situation getting worse and worse. Nothing like this has happened in France since the war. It is very serious” (cited in *The Observer* 2009).

today, numerous European countries (in particular France and Italy), have introduced laws and police measures that we would previously have judged barbaric and anti-democratic...laws that criminalize association and that allow the classification of political acts as having terrorist ‘intentions or inclinations.’”⁽⁵⁾

Revolters without qualities

Agamben’s own *The Coming Community* (1993), as its title implies, hasn’t been innocent in shaping Coupat’s political imagination.⁽⁶⁾ The coming community, Agamben says, is something that humans are and have to be. Yet the solidarity people forge amongst each other doesn’t concern any essence like a “united working class”; rather, Agamben affirms an “inessential commonality”, a belief that one’s existence *now* hinges on one’s possibility or potentiality, on what one can become in the future. Agamben beckons us to enter with him and with others into a mystical and blurry “zone of indistinguishability”, the realm of liberation and friendship, in which, in the words of Coupat’s journal of political ideas and analysis, *Tiqqun*, we can become card-carrying members of “an Imaginary Party”.

Tiqqun, “the Conscious Organ of the Imaginary Party”, which takes its name from the Hebrew Cabbalist *tikkun*, to repair, to transform, to heal, saw only two issues⁽⁷⁾: one of 162 pages at the beginning of 1999, the other of 292 pages in October 2001; yet these two book-length treatises are full of startling analysis and stinging polemic, of dense philosophical discourse and imaginative utopian desire, reminiscent of the pages of the early *Situationist International*, or of the Lettrists’ home-baked *Potlatch* from the early 1950s. Perhaps Cravan’s equally short-lived *Maintenant* (five issues) is dearer to the heart of *Tiqqun*, whose goal was a little like *Tiqqun*’s goal, or the Imaginary Party’s goal: “to present itself simply as a community of defection, as the Party of Exodus, as the slippery and paradoxical reality of subversion” (see “Thèses sur le Parti Imaginaire”, *Tiqqun* 1999, page 50). At any rate, in *Tiqqun* the “Imaginary Party” declares war on the bourgeois status quo, and lays down a few theoretical and political seeds that several years later would practically bloom into *The Coming Insurrection*.

Indeed, one of the most brilliantly enduring concepts from the ephemeral pages of *Tiqqun*, something that reappears unnamed in *The Coming Insurrection*, is the beguiling “*théorie du Bloom*”—“the theory of Bloom”. To bloom suggests the act of growing: a person, or a community, taking root somewhere, trying to assert itself, reaching out to push up from this sad earth, out of ashes that fertilize, emerging from the decomposition of the old world, blossoming, blooming anew. Thus the theory of Bloom is the theory of the coming community, an insurrection announced, a chronicle of a capitalist death foretold; Bloom, of course, is an honorary member of the Imaginary Party and whose first name could easily be Leopold, the everyman Bloom, citizen Bloom from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the outsider in a hostile sectarian land, who’s mocked for his

⁽⁵⁾ Another thing that strikes about *The Coming Insurrection* and the arrests of Julien Coupat and the Tarnac Nine, relates to the role of radical publishing today: whether writing (and publishing) a book is the same as doing in kind, whether to provoke on the page is sufficient to be guilty of the act. Nowadays, it’s perhaps too messy to ban a book when you can just as easily arrest its supposed author. Even the publishers, Éditions la fabrique, headed by veteran lefty Eric Hazan, had to face the state heat. Antiterrorist police called Hazan in for questioning and subjected him to four hours of abusive interrogation about the author’s identity. Needless to say, Hazan refused to comply.

⁽⁶⁾ Agamben taught Coupat at Paris’s *École des hautes études* for a while and collaborated in Coupat’s short-lived journal *Tiqqun*.

⁽⁷⁾ Coupat’s hard-line francophone *Tiqqun* shouldn’t be confused with Michael Lerner’s Jewish-American liberal *Tikkun*.

superior intellect, for his preaching of love: “I mean the opposite of hatred”, he stammers (Joyce, 1946, chapter 12 “Cyclops”, page 327). Joyce’s Bloom wanders through the pages of *Tiqqun* as he wanders through the streets of Dublin, almost invisibly, clandestinely, searching for reconciliation; Leopold Bloom’s presence is implied, suggested, hinted at only in the epigraph to the *théorie du Bloom*, where *Ulysses* is cited (Joyce, 1946, page 55), where Bloom over a breakfast of fried kidneys offers milk to his purring cat, musing on this furry friend: “They call him stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them.”⁽⁸⁾

They call us stupid, but we understand them better than they understand us. That’s why they fear us; hence their paranoia, their mania with trying to survey us, to infiltrate us, to criminalize us, to prosecute us. Such is the logic of the theory of Bloom. “Bloom can be defined as what resides inside each of us beyond advertising stunts and which constitutes the form of *universal* existence common to particular people who live inside the Spectacle. In this sense, Bloom is first of all a hypothesis, but it’s a hypothesis that is becoming *true*” (*Tiqqun* 1999, page 25).⁽⁹⁾ Bloom signals an inner human potentiality, the becoming of a man and woman *without qualities*, a person who determines their own worth and whose worth is not ascribed by an external force, by any institution or ruling power. Bloom is nothing, *rien*, a person without qualities simply because they are a certain quality of person, someone who is indifferent to the dominant order, who *prefers not to*. To be sure, it’s evident that Bloom’s kindred souls might also bear the name Ulrich, from Robert Musil’s *Man without Qualities* (1997), or Bartleby, from Herman Melville’s story about the passively deferring scrivener. “At the same time”, *Tiqqun* (1991, page 35) says, “it is certain that Bloom bears within himself the ruin of the society of the commodity”, of the spectacular society, because within this character we find the vocation of the “I prefer not to”, the “I prefer not to be a little reasonable” because *we* want to do something else.⁽¹⁰⁾

Neocommunism

The Coming Insurrection comes in two distinctive parts: the first draws us into a Dantesque inferno, yet instead of nine circles descending into a hell of fierce and hideous monsters, we plunge into seven circles of a grubby hell that’s everyday and commonplace, and above ground. It’s the neoliberal, antidemocratic hell before us now. The breach between the professional world of politics and ‘the political’ has widened to such a point that the two no longer have anything to do with one another, and we’re freefalling into a dark chasm between the two. This is the present order that has ‘no way out’ if you follow its logic, if you accept its rules, or let yourself fall, the ‘I AM WHAT I AM.’ You’re not: you’re programmed by somebody else. Your body does

⁽⁸⁾In 2004 the *Théorie du Bloom* from *Tiqqun* appeared in stand-alone book form (see Parti imaginaire, 2004).

⁽⁹⁾Throughout *Tiqqun* the Debordian concept of spectacle is always an uppercase Spectacle.

⁽¹⁰⁾Cf Melville (1990, page 19). Agamben, in a 1993 essay called “Bartleby, or on contingency” (1999), was one of the first contemporary theorists to shine philosophical and political light on the rebellious law-copyist Bartleby. Bartleby’s refusal is a form of quiet negation and political potentiality more recently emphasized by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) and by Slavoj Žižek in *Parallax View* (2006). One interesting commentary on Bartleby that predates them all is Gilles Deleuze’s (1989) postface to Flammarion’s 1989 French translation of *Bartleby*. Deleuze’s approach is literary based, but is interesting politically because he draws out the radical lineage—the radical ‘formula’—between Melville’s Bartleby, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s underground man, Musil’s Ulrich, and Franz Kafka’s Gregor Samsa. Each was a person with neither qualities nor particularities who conveyed a “new logic”, says Deleuze (1989, page 191); or rather leads us towards another logic that has little to do with reason. “Bartleby isn’t sick”, Deleuze says (page 203): “but the doctor of an American malady, the medicine man, the new Christ, a brother to us all.”

not belong to yourself: YOU ARE NOT WHO YOU ARE. So, the ‘imaginary collective’ suggests that you (we) desist from partaking in this hell, that together we might prefer not to, that we affirm our *inadaptability* as the point of departure, as the meeting point, for “new complicities” (page 34): “We’re not depressed; we’re on strike. For those who refuse to manage themselves, ‘depression’ is not a state but a passage, a bowing out, a sidestep towards a *political* disaffiliation” (page 34). Thus unfolds a political struggle to create a community and language in which a new order can express itself, a commonality that conveys something affirmative, that gets going, that finds itself, organizes itself, and rises up. This is really the second part of *The Coming Insurrection*, its utopian element, the most innovative and original path to paradise voiced for a very a long time.

“Excuse us we don’t give a fuck” (page 44) sets the subversive tone of the opening sequences to *The Coming Insurrection*, updating Bartleby’s discourse of quiet rebellion, turning the screw of mild effrontery and passive refusal. On the one hand, comes a sensitive cry, an appeal for gentle intimacy, for “everything that has so obviously deserted contemporary social relations: warmth, simplicity, truth, a life without theater or spectacle” (page 41); on the other hand, comes an angry, seething demand, a wish to see it all blow up, a call for *wildness*, “for a wild, massive experimentation with new arrangements, new fidelities” (page 42). What’s being offered here is a new, more experimental communist ideal, explicitly anarchistic in its call for autonomy and loathing of the state, for its invocations of sabotage; but implicitly Marxist, too—though in a mischievous sense, in a piratical and fruitful sense, in the sense that follows Marx through his utopian pages of the *Grundrisse*. There, Marx’s yearning was to replace the realm of necessity—the grim reality of endless work and endless alienation—with the realm of freedom, with the dream of working less or even not at all. Communism, Marx says (1968, page 343), means a state where “the overwork of the masses has ceased to be a condition for the general development of riches.” Individual free development, he says,

“is no more a question of reducing the time of necessary labor vis-à-vis overwork, but to reduce to an absolute minimum the necessary labor time in society. From the free-time liberated, and the means created to the benefit of all, this reduction supposes the artistic, scientific, etc development of individuals.”

The Coming Insurrection’s call “to get going” (page 95) bases itself on a new form of Marxist organization, on a notion “of finding each other”, on a solidarity that moves beyond the narrow confines of a unified ‘working class’. In fact, it offers another brand of Marxism, a more open and appealing one, perhaps even a less sectarian one, certainly a more radical and threatening version than that espoused by aficionados and purists. We’ve only to remember how little Marx himself spoke of ‘class’, and how foremost of all he set himself the task of probing the possibilities of overthrowing the economic and political system we call ‘capitalism’. To downgrade the ‘historical mission’ of the working class isn’t, then, to downgrade the historical mission of Marxism: it’s to suggest that, above all else, Marxism is a theory and practice of how to live beyond capitalism, of how to undermine capitalism, of how social solidarity is forged between assorted people, irrespective of whether they belong to the ‘working class’ or not. To be Marxist is to be communist, and *The Coming Insurrection* proposes a *new* communism that’s getting “elaborated in the shadows of barrooms, in print shops, squats, farms, occupied gymnasiums” (page 15). Communism is “a sharing of sensibility and elaboration of sharing, the uncovering of what is common and the building of a force” (page 16). By advocating a new communist structure of feeling, *The Coming Insurrection* justly sparkles as a novel document of a *neo-neo-Marxism*, of what I’d like to call “Magical Marxism” (see Merrifield, forthcoming).

These days, activists around the world don't necessarily identify themselves with 'work', nor with others in the act of work. Neither do these people want to empower themselves in work, seize control of work. Rather, they want to *free* themselves from work itself, to reject the nature, content and (non) meaning of work, as well as the traditional strategies and organizational forms of the workers' movement. This is the historical mission of the Tarnac Nine, and *The Coming Insurrection* is their Neo-Communist Manifesto. Once upon a time, says *The Coming Insurrection*,

"pioneers of the labor movement were able to find each other in the workshop, then in the factory. They had the strike to show their numbers and unmask scabs. They had the wage relation, pitting the party of capital against the party of labor, on which they could draw lines of solidarity and of battle... We have everyday insubordination for showing our numbers and unmasking cowards" (page 99).

Now, solidarity and battle lines have opened out onto a global scale, out onto the totality of social space, while cutting deeper into everyday life. Now, the struggle is about taking back and redefining nonwork life, about everyday anticapitalism and postcapitalist communality.⁽¹¹⁾

Alberto Toscano (2009) recently attacked *The Coming Insurrection's* "diagnosis of the dissolution of class solidarity as a foothold for social critique", suggesting it spells "an indifference to a Marxist discourse of class struggle" and a "de-linking of anti-capitalism from class politics." But Gorz himself gives a nice rejoinder to Toscano's accusation, remarking that the former doesn't necessarily imply the latter, that the dissolution of the working class doesn't necessarily mean that Marxism has dissolved as a guide for revolt. And so it goes in *The Coming Insurrection*. "The negativity which, according to Marx, was to be embodied in the working class has by no means disappeared", notes Gorz (1982, page 68).

"It has been displaced and has acquired a more radical form in a new social area.... It has the added advantage over Marx's working class of being immediately conscious of itself; its existence is at once indissolubly subjective and objective, collective and individual. This non-class encompasses all those who have been expelled from production by the abolition of work, or whose capacities are under-employed as a result of the industrialization (in this case, the automation and computerization) of intellectual work. It includes all the supernumeraries of present-day social production, who are potentially or actually unemployed, whether permanently or temporarily,

⁽¹¹⁾ You get the impression that the Invisible Committee has read its André Gorz and agrees with the man who bid farewell to the working class and who wants to free us from work and to find a path to postindustrial paradise. "It's no longer a question of winning power as a worker", Gorz says in *Farewell to the Working Class* (1982, page 67), "but of winning the power no longer to function as a worker. The power at issue is not at all the same as before. The [working] class itself has entered into crisis." See especially Gorz's (1982) persuasive chapter, "A new historical subject: the non-class of post-industrial proletarians". If we believe Gorz's idea that there's now no such thing as a working class, then the old chestnut between Marxists and anarchists about the role of the state in the "dictatorship of the proletariat" becomes redundant. Since there's no longer any definable or significant proletariat, there's presumably nothing left to dictate over. Consequently, anarchists and Marxists have no real beef with one another, seemingly concurring with what Henri Lefebvre told us long ago: that there's essentially no distinction between anarchism and Marxism. Like Gorz, Lefebvre always clung to a looser Marxism—an *altermarxisme*—that posited an open *autogestion* rather than narrow dictatorship of the proletariat, being fascinated more by fête than productivism, by the Paris Commune than the storming of the Winter Palace. We should recall here the incident of when someone once asked Lefebvre whether he was really an anarchist: "No", he said. "I'm a Marxist, of course, so that one day we can all become anarchists!" (cited in Soja, 1996, page 33).

partially or completely. It results from the decomposition of the old society based upon the dignity, value, social utility and desirability of work.”⁽¹²⁾

“*Don’t back away from what is political in friendship*”, says the Invisible Committee (page 98). This is a novel idea that gives political muscle to a politics of *affinity*, as well as to an *affective politics*.

“We’ve been given a neutral idea of friendship, understood as a pure affection with no consequences. But all affinity is affinity *within* a common truth. Every encounter is an encounter within a common affirmation. No bonds are innocent in an age when holding onto something and refusing to let go usually lead to unemployment, where you have to lie to work, and you have to keep on working in order to continue lying” (page 98).

A movement comes into being here when like-minded people find each other, when they get along with each other, when they make friends, when they decide upon a common path together. They come together because they would prefer not to, because they prefer to do something else, together. And they don’t find each other because of some abstract ideal, some specific consciousness with which they *should* associate themselves, that assorted theorists, leaders and politicians tell them is in their best interests to identify with; instead, they wage war around “things they can touch with their own hands”, as Colonel Aureliano Buendía, an *altermondialiste avant la lettre*, put it in García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978, page 85).

It’s the realm of affects that binds, that’s causal in any social movement formation. Affinity becomes the cement that bonds people across frontiers and barriers. In desiring another reality, in inventing it, in dreaming it up, people find their kindred souls, perhaps nearby, perhaps faraway; and in finding one another they struggle together for the realization of their common hopes. Struggle becomes a flesh-and-blood practice that tries to realize a deep desire, a friendship, a collective dream, maybe even a collective fantasy. In so doing, along the way, like a rolling snowball, participants discover other people desiring likewise, and they gather both size and momentum. And in struggling together, struggling to realize common dreams, maybe beyond work relations, beyond the state, beyond working-class affiliation, political engagement becomes a real fantasy. People discover an ‘interpellated’ group commonality hinging upon a double movement, upon a dream and a hatred; a hatred of what is done to them in today’s system of circulation and accumulation of capital; a dream of opting out and releasing themselves from political subjugation, of doing their own thing. And in struggling together, in organizing themselves around their own thing, power frequently rears its ugly head in concrete form. To that degree, struggling to realize common desires usually means protagonists encounter a common enemy. Resistance seeks to *neutralize* this power, to subvert it, to sabotage it. The power of organizations isn’t needed when people are empowered to organize themselves.

⁽¹²⁾ Arguably, class continues to evoke something meaningful only in the context of a *class-conscious* ruling elite; those who don’t rule, on the other hand, the bulk of us, are an assorted and fragmented laying of disparate peoples—Gorz’s ‘nonclass’—who are neither conscious of our class nor motivated to act in the name of any class. Nevertheless, these peoples *are* often motivated by a desire to act against a ruling class, against a system that this class so evidently props up, against a system from which a nonclass feels alienated. As Gorz says (1982, page 75), this nonclass “is no more than a vague area made up of constantly changing individuals whose main aim is not to seize power in order to build a new world, but to regain power over their own lives by disengaging from the market rationality of productivism.”

Methodology of moving through walls

Some of the most oft-cited passages of *The Coming Insurrection*, used as incriminating evidence by an inquisitorial Sarkozy state, are those on the necessity of *sabotage*, on the necessity of “removing obstacles, one by one” (page 110). Sabotage is valid retribution for the incivilities that reign in our streets.

“The police are not invincible in the streets, they simply have the means to organize, train, and continually test new weapons. Our weapons, on the other hand, are always rudimentary, cobbled together, and often improvised on the spot. Ours certainly can’t hope to match theirs in firepower, but can be used to hold them at a distance, redirect attention, exercise psychological pressure or force passage and gain ground by surprise” (page 116).⁽¹³⁾

The power of *surprise*, of secret organization, of rebelling, of demonstrating and plotting covertly, of striking invisibly, and in multiple sites at once, is the key element in confronting a power whose firepower is vastly superior. “FLEE VISIBILITY: TURN ANONYMITY INTO AN OFFENSIVE POSITION” (page 112): *anonymity* must be used to provoke fear and distraction, to spread rumor, to conspire in “nocturnal or faceless actions, creating an invulnerable position of attack” (page 113). To be explicitly visible—in a maneuver, in organizing “is to be exposed, that is to say above all, vulnerable.” Here black ski masks become emblems of veritable nobodies, of invisible Bartlebys and underground men and women, of people without qualities who want to disguise their inner qualities, who shun visibility in public, who have little desire to be the somebody the world wants them to be, insists they can be: “just looking at the faces of some of this society’s *somebodies*”, jokes the Invisible Committee, “illustrates why there’s such joy in being nobody” (page 114).

A black-masked Subcomandante Marcos, staked out in the Chiapas jungle, comes to mind here, the hero Marcos whose Zapatistas symbolize grassroots rebellion and revolt against a dominant neoliberal order; Marcos who keeps his cover for as long as it takes, until it’s no longer necessary to wear a disguise, until the threats are over, until it’s safe to expose himself, until his ‘nakedness’ renders him free not fair game. “Why hide your face?” a journalist once asked Marcos, just after the Zapatistas had captured key towns in Mexico’s southernmost state in January 1994. “What are you afraid to show?” *El sup* thinks of removing his mask yet suddenly the people cry “No, no, no!” So the mask stays, the allure persists, and an icon is in the making.⁽¹⁴⁾ Behind the mask Marcos does away with his own self and creates another self, the nonself of the everyman and everywoman in revolt: “To be socially nothing isn’t a humiliating condition”, concurs *The Coming Insurrection*, “the source of some tragic lack of recognition—from whom do we seek recognition?—but is on the contrary the condition of maximum freedom of action” (page 113).

Power, wealth, and ruling institutions reside in the metropolis, and thus the metropolis is an obvious target for covert sabotage. The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is most vulnerable to subversion, most vulnerable to hijacking and *détournement*, most vulnerable to be scuppered and tampered with. Once sabotaging work, thwarting work, slowing down the speed of work, breaking up the machines, working to rule, comprised a valid *modus operandi*, an effective weapon for hindering production and for lock-jamming the economy; now, the space of 21st-century urban flows, the realm

⁽¹³⁾ At the end of *Vers le cybernanthrope*, Lefebvre suggests that the insurrection will vanquish by a new style, homemade and home-baked, at once organized and spontaneous, valorizing desire and passion, pitting slingshots against tanks, nets against armor, and clatter against chatter (1971, pages 211–213).

⁽¹⁴⁾ The mask incident is recounted in Juana Ponce de León’s “Editor’s note” (2001) to Subcomandante Marcos’s selected writings, *Our Word is Our Weapon* (2001).

of metropolitan circulation, of the ceaseless and often mindless *current* of commodities and people, of information and energy, of cars and communication, becomes the broadened dimension of the “whole social factory”, to which the principle of sabotage can be applied. Wire networks, fiber optic channels, energy grids, all that can now be attacked, brought down in order to construct something saner, saner to this “hopeless mobility”:

“Nowadays, sabotaging the social machine with any real effect involves re-appropriating and reinventing ways of interrupting its networks. How can a high-speed TGV train line or an electrical network be rendered useless? How does one find the points in computer networks, or scramble radio waves and fill screens with white noise?” (page 112).

As such, “jam everything” becomes a reflex principle of critical negativity, of Bartlebyism brought back to radical life, of one part of the weaponry for all those who rebel against the present order. Ironically, the more the economy has rendered itself virtual—the more value derives through the interconnectivity of circulation as well as production, the more ‘delocalized’, ‘dematerialized’, and ‘just-in-time’ its infrastructural base—the easier it is to take down, to stymie, and to redirect. The recent movement in France against CPE bill (*contrat première embauche*), the first of a series of state laws to make job contracts for young people more insecure, “did not hesitate to block train stations, ring roads, factories, highways, supermarkets and even airports. In Rennes, only three hundred people were needed to shut down the main access road to the town for hours and cause a 40-kilometer long traffic jam” (page 125). Blanqui, too, during the 1871 Paris Commune, recognized how urban space isn’t simply the theater of confrontation; it’s also the means and stake in an insurrection, the battleground of a guerrilla warfare that builds barricades and gun turrets, that occupies buildings and employs the methodology of moving through walls.⁽¹⁵⁾

“There’s no such thing as a peaceful insurrection”, says *The Coming Insurrection* (page 128). “Weapons are necessary.” And yet again like the Zapatistas, participants know that

“it’s a question of doing everything possible to make using arms unnecessary. An insurrection is more about taking up arms and maintaining an ‘armed presence’ than it is about armed struggle. We need to distinguish clearly between being armed and the use of arms. Weapons are a constant in revolutionary situations, but their use is infrequent and rarely decisive at key turning points” (page 128).

The insurrection can triumph as a *political force*: “It’s not impossible to defeat an army politically” (page 128). It’s important, at first, to dispose of power at the local level, to move on from there, to spread outwards, to be like a maggot in an apple, progressively eating itself outwards, to block circulation, to fight in the streets, to sabotage and subvert, to organize and paralyze, to expand one’s base and make every action irreversible. But what’s vital in any struggle, what has to be a perpetual source of concern, is “that out of so much hatred for the military, out of fighting them so much and thinking about them so much, you end up as bad as they are. No ideal in life is worth that much baseness.”⁽¹⁶⁾

⁽¹⁵⁾ Louis-Auguste Blanqui (1805–85) spent half of his life rotting in French jails because of his threatening utopian communist ideals. He came of age between the revolutions of 1830 and 1848. Marx and Engels admired Blanqui’s writings and activism and Marx saw him “as the heart and head of the French proletarian party” (see Marx, 1955, page 25). For details of Blanqui’s tactics for insurrection and handy tips on barricade building, see his 1868 essay “*Instruction pour une prise d’armes*” (Blanqui, 1955).

⁽¹⁶⁾ The citation is General Moncada’s from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (Garcia Marquez, 1978, page 135), addressed to Colonel Aureliano Buendia, fearing that such was the latter’s loathing of despotism that he’d turn into Macondo’s most brutal despot.

Vive la commune!

A movement's capacity to negate, to jam, to orchestrate chaos, is only as effective as its ability to create something positive, something ordered and organized, to live at war while knowing how to live together in peace. At the heart of *The Coming Insurrection*, perhaps its most innovative heart, lies an appeal to create new liberated territories, new communes, and "multiple zones of opacity". Attach yourself to what you feel to be true, the book urges, experience the joy of encounters, of people who've shrugged off individual straightjackets and accepted modes of "normal" behavior. "What's strange", asks the Invisible Committee, "isn't that people who are attuned to each other form communes, but that they remain separated. Why shouldn't communes proliferate everywhere? In every factory, every street, every village, every school?" (page 101). Bit by bit, communes displace the dominant institutions of society, form each time a group of people decides to rely upon themselves, to measure their collective strength against an external enemy, a reactionary force. Every commune is at once a territorial and political entity, a milieu as well as a moment, a space as well as a flow; a commune's collective force is only as strong as the "density of ties. Not by their membership, but by the spirit that animates them" (page 102), that connects one commune to another, by the passion and imagination that *gels* them together.

Moreover, communes organize themselves in order that people no longer have to work. This gives a new twist to the famous Situationist mantra of "*ne travaillez jamais!*"—*never work!* (see Merrifield, 2005, chapter 1)—because it draws the distinction between working hard and *not earning a living*, not selling one's bodily and mental capacity to another, not frittering away the bulk of one's daily life doing something you hate, something stupefying, alienating. So far as exchanging oneself within a *wage relation*, the 21st-century communitard *prefers not to*; instead, they want to make themselves useless, useless as a labor-powering commodity, yet *useful* as a worker, as a person who works willingly and meaningfully, productively for him or herself and for the commune. The commune comes together because of a pooling of dreams, because of the work of *dream-power*, dreams of wanting to return to the land, of living off the land, of farming organically without an organic label, of baking bread, of raising goats, of inventing shoestring enterprises, of building housing and new urban life. And in practically engaging with their dreams, these people discover other people en route, people with similar dreams who've likewise acted practically; and in seeing each other and in seeing how they share common values, plus that common foe, they're nurturing a new community based around active bottom-up-will, not around worthless handouts from above.

True, a commune needs money, needs some sort of market, even if it's only a black market; true, too, it "plunders, cultivates, fabricates" (page 104), any way it can, needs to find its very own hustles and scams to keep it afloat. That its 'concrete' labor has to be enacted in accordance with a plan of production and exchange is likewise acknowledged; yet here production and exchange "are transparent in their simplicity", as Marx says in *Capital*, and exist within an association of producers and distributors, all of whom buy and sell fairly amongst themselves. Liberation from wage-labor doesn't, however, mean time for a vacation, for doing nothing, for hanging out; the commune isn't a hippy commune: "Vacant time, dead time, the time of emptiness and fear of emptiness—this is the time to work. There will be no more time to *fill*, but a liberation of energy" (page 104).

For a commune to survive, self-organization is always in constant need of expansion, in need of a practice that can simultaneously *occupy* and *be* a territory; the commune needs to increase the density of its member communes, of its nodes of circulation and modes of solidarity. The ideal point is where a commune's own

territorial demarcation becomes unreadable, is “opaque to all authority” (page 108). As a basic rule, “the more territories there are superimposed on a given zone, the more circulation there is between them, the harder it will be for power to get a handle on them” (page 108). Bistros and bars, sports facilities and garages, wastelands and second-hand bookstores, building rooftops and improvised street markets, “can all easily be used for purposes other than their official ones should enough complicities come together in them.” Eventually, this kind of local self-organization “superimposes its own geography over the state cartography, scrambling and blurring it”, to the degree that the commune produces nothing else than “its own secession” (page 109).

How to interrupt urban flows, build new communes in the ruins, in abandoned countryside, in overbuilt cities, how to restore local food production, create urban vegetable gardens as Cuba did to withstand an American embargo and the implosion of the USSR? How can little assorted islands of Robinson Crusoes form one great big new continent of liberation? Communes will find their own answers, says *The Coming Insurrection*, or they’ll get crushed mercilessly; nothing else is possible. The Imaginary Party is starting out from a point of extreme weakness, from relative isolation. That it knows. The insurrection can begin only from the ground up: “Nothing appears less likely than an insurrection, but nothing is more necessary” (page 96).

World music in the woods

There are signs, whispers, hearsay, rumors, hints that these ideas are taking root and taking shape, that they are *present* realities as much as futuristic yearnings: from the folks at Tarnac to angry students in Greece, from disaffected youth in the French *banlieues* (the *racaille*—scum—that Sarkozy indicts) to citizens protesting the CPE law, from the ecocommunities sprouting up across rural Europe to squatter and landless movements in urban Latin America, *The Coming Insurrection* seems to describe an insurrection that has already come. And in the apocalyptic devastation of post-Bushian America, *The Coming Insurrection* is also creating a stir, arousing excitement about an alternative future, and this not only at the counter of Starbucks. Meanwhile, Portuguese and Spanish translations are apparently on their way, ready to hit Brazil and other parts of Latin America, perhaps engendering there another revolution in the revolution.

But, for the time being, whether *The Coming Insurrection* plots a real or imagined insurrection isn’t the point; what’s important is the book’s unquestionable ability to motivate and provoke, to incite and excite, to inspire and to unsettle the status quo and to rile those in power—those who fear losing their power, those who have already revealed that their power is shaky, that it is threatened by the contents of a strange little book. The experimental communes the Invisible Committee evoke and invoke are radical not simply because of their reality principle but also because of their *principle of hope*: they flag out the passage through which people can come together, can find one another in a “*network of hope*”, an idea so dear to the mystical German Marxist Ernst Bloch. Near the beginning of his great three-volume paean to hope, Bloch (1986, page 75) describes the “naked striving and wishing” that surges within us, that expresses itself first as a “craving”, as “an expectant counter emotion” which reaches outwards, urges us on, keeps us hoping. Soon this counteremotion burns away inside us, becomes a “hunger”, a source of rebellious consciousness in the making, “the No to the bad situation which exists and the Yes to the better life that hovers ahead.”

The Coming Insurrection has kindled passionate debate not only about the nature of insurrection, but also about the nature of *insurrectional Marxism*. There’s a lot Marxists can take from this book for breaking out of a formalist straightjacket, for drafting a rawer conception of Marxism, a more dynamic, challenging, and radical one, a Marxism that

abandons old trusty shibboleths, old crutches that prop up a crippled geriatric. It suggests a Marxism that can no longer be an abstract model of revolution imposed from above, pushed down onto the masses of people who might (or might not) identify themselves with the working class. Instead, Marxism is a utopian vision, an expectant counteremotion of how people can live *postcapitalistically*. From this standpoint, it's a practice that won't nor cannot be universal, applicable to everybody, everywhere—at least in the short term; it holds for some people, those who, on the basis of what they know and feel, chose to opt out, decide to live differently, to create postcapitalist communes of like-minded adventurers, people who work together, practically, energetically, while expanding their individual selves: they make their project of life a life-project that blooms. This Marxism gets nourished in everyday life and stays there, at ground level; it happens when communes make friends and connections, theorize and act in unison, expand their networks, strengthen the densities at their core, grow stronger and stronger, and edge themselves outwards to embrace other communes. Soon, one commune might congeal into another, and mutually exchange know-how and labor; after a while more people opt out and join in, pool their passions.

Before long, what were once particular, fragmented communes enlarge into more widespread modes of existence, denser communities, new kaleidoscopes of possibility: this is how the revolution evolves, how the insurrection takes hold. It doesn't get set alight like a forest fire, by the storming of any winter palace, or by a decisive spark that spreads linearly, through some necessary 'historical' logic; rather the insurrection *resonates*, "takes the shape of music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythm of their own vibrations ... To the point that any return to normal is no longer desirable or even imaginable" (pages 12–13). And, after a while again, people begin to dance, to sway to this music, and the groove becomes instinctive, a kind of *world music* that goes beyond any single language, even beyond words, corporeal as much as intellectual, something *absorbed* as well as understood, a giant rave done by madmen and women living in the woods:

"In 1940, Georges Guingouin, the 'first French resistance fighter,' started with nothing but the certainty of his refusal of the Nazi occupation. At that time, to the Communist Party, he was nothing but a 'madman living in the woods,' until there were 20,000 madmen living in the woods, and Limoges was liberated" (page 98).

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