

Beautiful Like an Impure Insurrection

comité invisible

Italians laugh at life: they laugh more than any other nation, and with more truth, more personal conviction, more icy contempt, than any other (...) Those who believe that the French are above all other nations when it comes to cynicism are mistaken. In this, the Italians are matchless. They unite a natural vivacity (superior to the French) with a cultivated indifference to everything and a scant regard for others, a consequence of their lack of society, which leaves them unconcerned with the esteem others hold them in — whereas French society, as we all know, exerts a great influence on its people, who, to the extent that their nature permits it, are as full of respect for individuals of their class as they are for those of other classes.

-Giacomo Leopardi, *Discourse on the Present State of the Customs of Italians* (1824)

“Beautiful like an impure insurrection”, proclaimed a tag on the Champs-Élysée on November 24th, 2018, while a barricade was built in the middle of the street, and burning machines from a nearby construction site sent up sparks into the light of the setting sun. On a different wall a bit further along, another read, “the enduring insurrection.”

Yet it is clearly not the insurrectionary dimension of the “yellow vests” movement that is being discussed today in Italy, but only the question of “violence” and the “political problem” that the movement presents. Events have a hard time crossing borders, as we know. And if they do manage to slip across all the same, it’s only after having endured such mutilation and distortion as to be unrecognizable on arrival. They are allowed to enter public discourse on the sole condition that they cease to speak their own language, to say what they have to say. Not only does the light of publicity obscure everything, it also ensures that each country lives as if inside an epistemological bubble. Since governing boils down to an exercise in communication, to maintain a certain state of public explanation is always also a mode of self-policing. It’s as if an invisible customs checkpoint functioned to ensure that existentially and politically dangerous content gets turned around at the border, while exacting its quota of meaning from anything else that passes through. This is particularly true of France and Italy. Such watertightness stems as much from a difference of customs that has remained more or less constant since Leopardi’s day, as it does from the interests of the ruling classes of each country. This explains why little was known in France of Italy’s ‘Creeping May’ during the seventies, nor of the movement of 1977, until a handful of *militanti* recently set about turning it into an ersatz political fantasy for their desperate milieu. This is also why hardly anyone has heard of the Invisible Committee in Italy,

which to date is the only country in Europe where their books have known only pirate editions, at best.

Although references to the Invisible Committee can be found in certain texts from *Tiqqun* as early as 2000, it is only in 2007 that the first book bearing its name, *The Coming Insurrection*, was published. Clearly written in the wake of the banlieue riots of 2005 and the victorious student uprising against the CPE, and obviously intended as an intervention in the context of Nicolas Sarkozy's election, *The Coming Insurrection* made a sufficient impact on one of the new president's "security advisors" that he sent forty copies to the heads of the country's police force. On the back cover of the book, one reads: "Faced with the evidence of the catastrophe, there are those who get indignant and those who take note, those who denounce and those who get organised. The Invisible Committee are among those who get organised." This was enough, apparently, to set off "alarm bells" at the French state police. An *anti-terrorist* investigation was soon opened, as is logical, and a year and a half after the book's publication a wave of arrests hurled a dozen people onto primetime nightly news, some of whom were explicitly accused of being part of the Invisible Committee. No evidence was ever found for their belonging to said Committee, and after ten years of legal proceedings a trial finally acquitted nearly all of the accused.

The incrimination of terrorism against people accused of straightforward sabotage against a high-speed train line (TGV), but above all of *having written a book*, naturally aroused some interest in its contents, which quickly became a bestseller and even sort of a classic. Translated as far away as Korea, demonized by the American neo-conservative right, debated in Germany and at Occupy Hong Kong, it began to be studied as a "possible scenario" by organs of the French army. From book to book over the next ten years, the Invisible Committee would continue to serve as an outlet of strategic enunciation for "the real movement that destitutes the current state of things." In 2014, after an inquiry conducted across several continents, *To Our Friends* sketched a balance sheet of the sequence of struggle that began with the "crisis" of 2008 and continued through the Arab Spring, before coming to a close with the various "movements of the squares." *Now* drew its point of departure from the struggle against the Loi Travail in France in 2016, to plumb the depths of our epoch. Thus, from book to book, the Invisible Committee became a specter that haunts the French ruling class and that, sooner or later, would always be cited in order to explain, condemn, or conjure away every new explosion of revolt, including that of the "yellow vests."

"Government," writes Machiavelli, "consists in nothing else than in so controlling your subjects that it shall neither be in their power nor in their interest to harm you." Since they are accustomed to conspiring to maintain their own power, it is hard for governments to believe, when an insurrection breaks out, that it is not likewise the work of a handful of conspirators, networks of organized "radicals", "dissidents", and "rioters" — in short, the work of "professionals of disorder" who demand to be put down by force. But insurrections do not function the way political offices do: there is no summons sent from a minority of high-ranking officials that is then carried out by hordes of subordinates. Insurrections ripen under ice, like a mass desire to trample on all that has trodden us down, a sudden burst of dignity after decades of humiliation, a will to put an abrupt end to all that we have suffered for no reason. They mobilize infinite reserves of courage, unforeseen stocks of tactical intelligence, and a lucid generosity many believed to have disappeared into the icy water of egotistical calculation. Rulers find themselves confronted by a compact, basalt-like irreducibility of which they understand nothing, and which seems to grow stronger with every maneuver they hurl against it. Contrary to what leftists and

rulers like to think, it is not revolutionaries who make revolutions, it is revolutions that make revolutionaries. You'd have to be Toni Negri or Alfredo Bonanno — who still have not shelved their incurable Leninism — to believe that insurrections wait for insurrectionists. In France last winter, there was no need for ZADists to set up micro-ZADs on roundabouts, for leftist blockaders to go out and block everything, for the thinkers of the “whatever singularity” to invent the yellow vest. These days, it is the least “politicized” who are the most radical. *No revolt is more terrible than that of citizens who have been taken for fools.* If something like an insurrection suddenly appears, it is precisely because people did not intend to make an insurrection, but because they desire, beyond this, however confusedly, a revolution. A revolution whose contours are blurred, dressed in the hastily recut garb of 1789, mixing constituent and destituent affects, the need for preservation with the desire to turn the world upside down. A revolution fueled by the complicities that it teases out, and which must confront the fact that it is the entire material organization of the world that must be dismantled, its sole certainty being that *it is not with those who have wrecked the world that we will repair it.*

One way of sterilizing the truths that the Invisible Committee have exhumed and expressed in the course of these years has been to situate them somewhere between anarchism and the extreme left. In fact, if there is one thing that has become clear through the uprising of the “yellow vests” — whatever its dénouement, and whatever recuperations it may still be subjected to — it is how much the disgust with politics (including alternative politics), the rejection of trade unions, the desire to live and not merely to survive, the decisive character of the encounter in the construction of any force, the weariness of the social lie, the hatred of the police and of the left for its intolerable moral blackmail, the abhorrence of the untenable forms of metropolitan life, the refusal to let oneself be governed, are not political or existential choices, *but the truths of our epoch.* Truths that the Invisible Committee, in its anonymity, in its eager determination to be their scribe, was able to articulate step by step. No movement has illustrated better than the most recent revolt in France how “riots, blockades, and occupations form the basic political grammar of the epoch” (*Now*), a movement that was the doing, for the most part, of people who read few books. That is because the motifs of the uprising are ethical before they are political. It does not issue from a plan, from an ideology or a *political* will, but from all that remains of salutary instincts among beings.

Those who have launched attacks on police headquarters, barracks, town halls and ministries in the winter of 2018–19 in France did not obey a mental construct, they simply drew conclusions from their own experiences, from what they live and *see*. And they have done so with the innocent joy of all logical revolts. Where rulers, with their limited field of vision, perceive nothing but the monstrous fury of the crowd, there is on the contrary a profound rationality at work: in a world where the stranglehold of control around each individual tightens a little more with each passing day, popular insurrection becomes the only effective way of acting *that does not add up to suicide*, since the mass functions as protection for each of its elements. That is what thousands of citizens without history learned by themselves at great speed in the experimentation of those days, and without the need for any “manual of subversion.”

It is not hard to see the noose from which the political disaster of Italy hung in recent decades. Every time open revolt manifests itself — as in Genoa in 2001, at the riot on December 14th, 2010 at the Piazza del Popolo, on October 15th, 2011 in Rome, at the Val de Susa, or else during demonstrations against the World Exposition in Milan on May 1st, 2015, it is always the same old arsenal of counter-insurrection that is set in motion, and which has remained unchanged since the *emer-*

genza of the 1970s: a unanimous consensus among journalists to indulge in pure propaganda, dissociation on the part of all those who position themselves on “the left”, a campaign of police and judicial terror, a witch-hunt targeting the autonomous movement, democratic blackmail, etc. Sometimes it seems as if the sole legitimacy for governing in Italy comes from the infinitely reiterated annihilation of revolutionaries, as the odious spectacle of Cesare Battisti’s extradition reminds us once again. As if the passivity of the population depended on the repetition of the original trauma of the “strategy of tension.” As if the devastation of an entire generation through repentance, dissociation, assassination and incarceration had liquidated all faith in the possibility of revolution — or else condemned itself to doing nothing more than simulating it.

It must be admitted that the opportunistic rewriting of the history of the years 1960–70 by Negri and his consorts in order to please the judges, the constancy of their triumphant rhetoric masking their own mistakes, shallow thinking, inconsistencies, and disavowals, their denial and repression of the diffuse hypothesis of “Mirafiori’s invisible party”, and the passage, without transition, from a logic of separation to one of mediation does not really speak in favor of revolutionary leaders. But who said revolutions need leaders?

In May 1955, without any hope of being heard, the communist writer Dionys Mascolo stated that, “all that is deemed to be *of the left* is already dubious. But even more so, all that counts as ‘the left’. All that which is not straightforwardly and absolutely of the right, or reactionary (or fascist), all that which is not veritably revolutionary is considered the left’s kingdom — dubious, unstable, composite and inconsistent, prey to every contradiction, prevented from being itself by the indefinite plethora of ways of being united that suggest themselves to it, ripped apart once again, as they say, and never by misfortune, malice, or clumsiness, but by its nature” (*Sur le sens et l’usage du mot gauche*). It is not hard to see how the left’s congenital weakness, its *love of weakness*, has allowed the themes such as “liberty”, “revolution”, even “democracy” to slip into the pockets of conservatives and fascists. Unable to produce the least *affirmation* in the midst of a world that is destroying itself, the left has allowed itself to believe that by combining anti-fascism, anti-racism, and anti-sexism, sometimes even anti-speciesism, along with a prudent anti-capitalism, it could miraculously produce through an accumulation of negations the positive aim that is lacking. In its sloppy dogmatism, postmodern opportunism, in the pure comfort of its idealism, it has thus occupied and banished the place of any new beginning. By dint of its claim to embody the party of the Good while proffering only slavish whining, common sense was led to deduce, by a sort of syllogism that has since spread across the globe, that to be free must mean to act like an asshole, since being good means speaking like a slave. By dint of its chronic defiance of anything revolutionary, the left has logically induced the idea that true revolution is conservative. Although it is not easy to admit that fascism is a phenomenon of the left, in spite of Keynes’ well-known admiration for Mussolini, it is clear enough that it is disgust *with the left* that produces fascists. The hysterical, brutal, and hateful reactions secreted by the left supply a precious fund of arguments and an ultimate justification. Its feeling of being in the right by avoiding the real feeds on the ignominy of what confronts it. Dueling idiocies thus chronically polarize public debate, whether in France, the U.S., Germany, or Italy. This is how the real is conjured-away, day after day. And it is enough for the first puppet who comes along to string together a series of anti-left provocations, while passing himself off as an enemy of the system, to be elected by a landslide. Where Italy is concerned, this leftist logic has permeated even its movements, which accounts both for their ghostly state today, as well as their difficulty in escaping their chronic passivity.

That said, and against the grain of everything that they would have us believe today, if there was one revolutionary venture that dared to break with the left, that exited the socialist tradition of the workers' movement, that affirmed its separation from "society" and put into question the democratic fiction, it was without a doubt the Italian Autonomia movement. This was its unforgivable crime, for which it will not be forgiven. What's more, there has been no shortage of those who have repented and dissociated, who sought to bury the memory of this scandal — dissociation as a "slogan of hope", as Professor Negri wrote to the public prosecutor, Sica, in 1981. Those who proclaimed proudly, "there used to be a left; now there is the movement!" were forced to eat their words, while others loudly trumpeted, "there used to be a movement; now there is the new left!" Thus was lost that intelligence of the half-conspiratorial and criminal nature of *any revolutionary undertaking*. This is also the origin of the joke about the *legalism* of the Italian left in a country that, no matter what level of society one considers, is profoundly illegalist. In this way, any revolt against an obviously unbearable situation finds itself preventatively discouraged. Only a *mass conspiracy* can bring down a society so full of lies.

The epoch is mad, deranged by the thicket of lies transmitted to us under the name of "History." The history of the Italian 1960s and 1970s is among the most thickly concentrated mystifications, travestied even by those who took part in it, a feat of counter-insurrection. In effect, such disavowal and repression condemns us to never being the contemporaries of our times, denying us access to what silently structures it. Against this, it is quite futile to nostalgically deconstruct the beautiful story of *operaismo*. Perhaps we must go further back, to the opening that rendered the birth of all autonomies possible — to poetic speech itself, in Fortini, Vittorini, Cesarano, Carlo Levi or Pasolini. Sometimes, to begin again from nothing, it is necessary to turn back and work through a past that continues to work itself out across us. One thing is certain: the revolution is no longer a political or cosmopolitan question, it is an *anthropological* question. What is at stake in the current catastrophe is a certain way of life that is believed to be the culmination of civilization precisely because it is the most artificial, the most precious because it is the most fragile. It is no longer a question of repossessing or taking hold of a tattered society in an external fashion, but of *repairing souls in the very act of repairing the world*. It is this coincidence between the changing of circumstances and sensuous self-transformation of the human that the Invisible Committee calls "destitution," and which others have described as "a communism stronger than the metropolis."

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