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The Coming Insurrection

Nothing will change without a revolution

Sam Cooper

17 November 2009

The instability of meaning within the society of the spectacle is such that a statement can contain two opposing messages simultaneously. In the overdetermined world of media representation, condemnation and commendation can be indistinguishable from one another. So when French Minister of the Interior Michèle Alliot-Marie warns that a book is “a manual for terrorism,” or when the Glenn Beck pantomime, with its usual hamfisted outrage, labels that same book “a call to arms for violent revolution,” the book is not blacklisted into obscurity but instead – thanks to what amounts to a savvy advertising pitch – enjoys a massive increase in sales. The book in question is *The Coming Insurrection*, authored by the anonymous Invisible Committee, allegedly the Tarnac 9, the group purportedly responsible for sabotaging train lines in France last year.

The coverage of the case against the Tarnac 9 has ranged from fearful predictions of the return of Action Directe-style “ultra-left” militancy to support from a number of big name academics, who denounced the state’s disproportionate response to the threat posed by the group of commune-living young graduates. Giorgio Agamben, friend of alleged ringleader

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Julian Coupat, has described the situation as tragicomic, revealing the French government's paranoid and hysterical treatment of people too easily labeled "terrorist." Certainly *The Coming Insurrection* prophesies increased violence of the type seen recently in Greece and in the Paris suburbs, but the weakness of the case against the Tarnac 9 – which Alberto Toscano called the "legal obscenity of basing arrests on a text" – indicates that this has become a symbolic battle for the Sarkozy government: a propagandist gesture made to maintain a state of fear that instantly criminalizes any radically oppositional voice. As Gérard Coupat, Julian's father, said: "They are turning my son into a scapegoat for a generation who have started to think for themselves about capitalism and its wrongs."

The Coming Insurrection is insistent that things are soon to change. Everything is at the point of collapse, of overflow, of transition. These changes are to be met by new forms of activism, forms that discard older logics of protest, visibility and organization and embrace instead spontaneity and invisibility. Where social control is predicated on the visual, invisibility is a tactical necessity, offering a safe space, however temporarily, for maneuvers beneath the spectacle. Meanwhile the recent uprisings in Paris and Greece reflect the wildcat spontaneity that will fuel *The Coming Insurrection* itself. This volatile political energy has spilled over the remits of orthodox politics to constitute a negation of politics or – more precisely – a politics of negation:

"No one can honestly deny the obvious: this [the 2005 French riots] was an assault that made no demands, a threat without a message, and it had nothing to do with 'politics.'"

Capitalism, as we are hearing more and more regularly, is in crisis. And as this perpetual state of crisis becomes more acute, insurrectionary violence will follow. The point is to harness these energies while also recognizing that a destructive principle must precede construction. Such destruction is not to be

plation to action. Underdeveloped theory will mature, answers will arise spontaneously; the task now is to mobilize, communicate and make connections. Though often obscure, this is a brave and ambitious book. It is not a manual for terrorism, but it is a call to action. It is an attempt to foresee the libidinal content of a change that has to come.

feared: *The Coming Insurrection* proposes an active nihilism informed by a libidinal energy, an affirmative self-belief and a willingness to throw off the shackles of both capitalist society and outmoded forms of opposition. “Attach yourself to what you feel to be true. Begin there.”

Attempts to locate the genealogy of this curious text have frequently drawn comparisons with the provocateurs of the Situationist International. While the tactics of mobilization and resistance offered by *The Coming Insurrection* are abstract and often vague, the Invisible Committee has clearly been influenced by the Situationist directive to create situations – moments of life directly lived – that undermine the dominant logic of passive consumption and alienated representation. Although the text is closer to the affective and rousing tone of Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* than to the dense Hegelian logic and historicity of Guy Debord, *The Coming Insurrection* takes for granted many of the theses of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. However, the pretense of substance and vitality that the spectacle once afforded us has now expired, and we live on the corpse of spectacular society, deceiving ourselves that it still lives and breathes.

The Coming Insurrection has three sections: first there is an introduction to the exhausted state of modern life in the endgame of late capitalism. Then there are seven chapters that – as in Dante’s *Inferno* – are labeled circles. Each circle analyzes a different aspect of society (selfhood and subjectivity, schools and hooliganism, work and leisure, the metropolis and the network, the economy, the environment, the nation-state and the West). And four final chapters take a more pragmatic approach: signposting avenues for contemporary activism and spaces where opposition can still be mounted. Here *The Coming Insurrection* maps out a spatial politics of urban guerrillas and occupied territory. Drawing on accounts of the Paris commune, the Algerian War of Independence and the conflict in Iraq, the Invisible Committee argues that the West has honed

its methods of domestic control through its history of imperialism. They claim that the most effective forms of resistance have not arisen through demands made of the state or through conventional forms of political organization but through a military urbanism that reappropriates space and redraws the parameters of conflict. So, contrary to the “official” discourses, the 2005 Paris suburb riots were not a moment of control being lost, of “dispossession,” but instead a moment when territory was (re)possessed:

“People can burn cars because they are pissed off, but to keep the riots going for a month while keeping the police in check – to do that you have to know how to organize, you have to establish complicities, you have to know the terrain perfectly and share a common language and common enemy.”

The text is full of echoes of disparate voices from the last 60 years of critical and cultural theory, including Agamben, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze and Manuel Castells. One recurrent theme is that capitalist society can no longer suppress the irreducible antinomies that it has fostered for so long. Following *The Society of the Spectacle’s* assertion (and détournement of Hegel) that “in a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false,” *The Coming Insurrection* tells us that “the future has no future,” “from left to right, it’s the same nothingness,” and “it’s only against voting itself that people continue to vote.”

Unfortunately the relationship between *The Coming Insurrection’s* theoretical analysis and its calls for mobilization is not untroubled. On the one hand, for example, we are told that *The Coming Insurrection* is so inevitable that “it’s the privileged feature of radical circumstances that a radical application of logic leads to revolution. It’s enough to say just what is before our eyes and not shrink from the conclusions.” On the other hand we are told repeatedly that it is useless to wait, that we must intervene even if “we can no longer even see how an insurrection might begin.” *The Coming Insurrection’s* uneasy alliance of a Sit-

uationist critique (so concerned with the visual) with anarchist direct action (based on a retreat from visibility) can thus sometimes feel rather impatient. Yet such discrepancies are bound to arise when the Invisible Committee’s project is so esoteric.

The text’s critique of ecology and the green movement is equally opaque. The various arms of the green movement – especially negative growth and associated doctrines of voluntary austerity – are convincingly identified as capitalism’s self-reform, the birth of eco-capitalism. Cultural interventions like those made by *Casseurs de Pub* (the French equivalent of *Adbusters*) and the exhortation to “revalorize the noneconomic aspects of life” are written off as the testing out of new social ties that will lead to capitalism reestablishing itself in the green era. Here the Invisible Committee creates rivalries where alliances are necessary, disapproving of nearly all organized contemporary anti-capitalism and cultural opposition yet never clearly differentiating itself from these entities.

In 1962 Scottish Situationist and novelist Alexander Trocchi published an essay entitled “A Revolutionary Proposal: Invisible Insurrection of a Million Minds.” Trocchi’s intentions were similar to those of the Invisible Committee. They both imagine networks of individuals working behind the scenes to attack structures of alienation: Trocchi within culture and the Invisible Committee within everyday dissent. Both projects rely on invisibility: The refusal of clearly demarcated boundaries and visible social presence give the movements an amorphous invulnerability. The danger, however, is that the Invisible Committee’s project will fall at the same hurdle as Trocchi’s did. The invisibility that can evade surveillance is the same invisibility that can render a project perpetually vague and indecipherable to sympathizers.

The Coming Insurrection cannot provide activists with an insurrectionary how-to guide. Instead we must recognize the spirit that motivates the book, the sense that things have been deteriorating for too long, and we must move from contem-