

Living Communism

Theory & Practice of Autonomy & Attack

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May Day, 1987: thousands of black-clad Autonomen (“those who are autonomous”) riot in West Berlin. After a decade spent honing their street-fighting tactics, they stage an offensive against state repression by blocking streets, occupying buildings, and fighting a low-intensity urban war against the police. The Autonomen expand their liberated zone throughout much of the neighborhood of Kreuzberg that is their base. After a night of rebellious jubilation, they return to their squatted houses and social centers to nurse their wounds, curse the police, and celebrate a temporary victory. Although the German media depict the Autonomen as little more than violent mobs whose only motivation is destruction, the radicals have simultaneously constructed an extensive network of squatted alternative infrastructure across West Berlin and throughout West Germany.

During the 1980s, the Autonomen turned hundreds of abandoned buildings into group housing, social centers, movement bars, and cultural centers—spaces that provided both alternative forms of living and bases of attack. At their best, the squats constituted urban liberated territory in which thousands of young people practiced a communism of everyday life. More recently, in France, the Invisible Committee has drawn on the German autonomous experiences to theorize the commune as a *destituent* space of everyday communism. In this view, communes do not form a *constituent* power whose aim is to establish a new order with more representative state institutions. Rather, drawing on Giorgio Agamben, the Invisible Committee argues that communes *destitute* the state (i.e., render it inoperative and powerless) by challenging the *need* for state institutions. Development of new communal forms of life outside the state and capitalism provides the basis for “suppressing them *in a positive way*. To destitute is not primarily to attack the institution, but to attack the need we have of it.”¹ It is in this sense that communes provide the material foundation to “live communism” and attack the rule of capitalism and the state.

The Invisible Committee is a collective of post-autonomist communists (formerly operating under the moniker Tiqqun) who trace their intellectual lineage through Italian Autonomia and the German Autonomen, among others. Though born in the Parisian squatting scene, they grew disillusioned with the radical subcultural milieu and moved to the tiny town of Tarnac, where they live communally and collectively run a farm, bar, and general store. They were introduced to the American popular imagination primarily through the controversy surrounding their book *The Coming Insurrection* (2007, 2009), which Glenn Beck featured on his Fox News show, as well as engagement from friendlier groups like Endnotes and CrimethInc. The Invisible Committee continued to develop their particular variety of post-autonomist communization theory in *To Our Friends* (2014), which reflects on the European movements of the squares and associated spectacular, short-lived insurrections (especially in Greece). Their latest book, *Now* (2017), explores the possibilities and practices of communism within the fragmented world of capitalism. Although the collective is relatively widely read, their historical and theoretical background is less well known in the United States.

¹ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2017), 80. For a helpful introduction to destituent power by Agamben, see “What is a Destituent Power?” (*Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2014, 32) 65-74. In her translator’s introduction, Stephanie Wakefield summarizes the concept of destituent power: “In contrast to attempts to affirm a constituent power independent of a relation to constituted power, which for Agamben both reproduce the governmental structure of the exception and represent the apex of metaphysics, destituent power outlines a force that, in its very constitution, deactivates the governmental machine. For Agamben, it is in the sensible elaboration of the belonging together of life and form, being and action, beyond all relation, that the impasse of the present will be overcome. Ultimately, Agamben points not only towards what it means to become Ungovernable, but towards the potential of staying so.”

This article combines historical insights from the *Autonomen* with theoretical interventions from the Invisible Committee in order to make several related arguments. First, the commune form creates alternative worlds in which liberalism is combatted and collective struggle against alienation takes place. Second, communes operate according to a unique spatial logic that ruptures capitalist geography, promotes new spatial practices, and establishes non-alienated inhabitation of territory. Third, the *Autonomen* and the Invisible Committee theorize and act upon a new conception of communism as a collective practice of living the “good life” in revolutionary struggle rather than as solely a (future) economic system. Fourth, alternative infrastructure provides the means to practice this in daily life. Finally, revolutionary practice entails networks of autonomous communes seceding from the capitalist system to form liberated territories that function as bases from which to attack capitalist state power.

1. The Commune Form

“The commune is the basic unit of partisan reality. . . . All power to the communes!”

– The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (117, 133)

The commune centers two core components: an anti-individualistic collective bond and a concomitant radical transformation of everyday life. In liberal ideology, which is grounded in the capitalist marketplace, human community is reduced to unmoored individuals who are forever in competition. In the face of this atomization, communes are formed around the desire to carry out collective projects. Communes arise when we transform our relationships with each other and face the world together. As the Invisible Committee defines it, “what constitutes the commune is the mutual oath sworn . . . *to stand together as a body* . . . a commune was a pact to face the world together. It meant relying on one’s own shared powers as the source of one’s freedom. What was aimed for in this case was not an entity; *it was a qualitative bond, and a way of being in the world.*”² Communes construct community out of isolation and replace individualism with collective self-determination and well-being. They form when groups of individuals attempt to directly “communize” their lives (put them in common) and face the problems of the world together.

Although capitalism has colonized every aspect of our lives, it is possible to resist and collectively establish alternatives. As radical geographer Alexander Vasudevan puts it in his book on squatting in Berlin, “the squat was a place of collective *world-making*; a place to imagine alternative worlds. . . . At stake here was the opportunity to build an alternative *habitus* where the very practice of ‘occupation’ became the basis for producing a different sense of shared city life.”³ Accordingly, the Invisible Committee argues that communes “immediately organize a shared form of life” according to alternative values.⁴ As one activist put it, “Aspiring [to] autonomy means first of all to struggle against political and moral alienation in life and work. . . . It means to reclaim our lives.”⁵ Further, as the historian of autonomous movements George Katsiaficas explains, “the *Autonomen* seek to live according to a new set of norms and values within which

² The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2014), 199-200. (Emphasis in original).

³ Alexander Vasudevan, *Metropolitan Preoccupations: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin*, (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 15.

⁴ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 208.

⁵ Quoted in Geronimo, *Fire and Flames: A History of the German Autonomous Movement*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 115.

everyday life and all of civil society can be transformed. Beginning with overt political beliefs, they seek to change isolated individuals into members of collectives within which egalitarian relationships can be created. . . . Their collective forms negate atomization.”⁶ The Autonomen organized around those collective values and everyday practices rather than a rigid ideology or party-line.

The Autonomen approached everyday life according to their values of self-determination, equality, and autonomy. Drawing from Italian *Autonomia* and the German autonomous women’s movement, they employed a “politics of the first person,” rather than a Marxist orientation towards the proletariat or an anti-imperialist one for Third World national liberation.⁷ In line with this foundational belief, autonomous activists emphasized self-determination within subcultures over traditional workplace struggle, embraced a “vague anarchism,” and called for “no power to no one.” Although they critiqued the “alternative movement” for its willingness to exist alongside capitalism, they emphasized the need to build alternative worlds that would form a basis to fight against the ruling order. The Autonomen organized themselves organically in small, non-hierarchical groups that faced everyday problems collectively and came together for larger actions. They sought to establish the possibility and reality of an autonomous, lived communism.

2. The Spatial and Cultural Production of Communes

“Every declared commune calls a new geography into existence around it.”
– The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* (229)

Communes challenge the spatial order of the capitalist world, establish an inhabited territoriality, and provide a setting for experimental spatial practices. Social space is important to contest because it performs an important material and ideological function for liberalism. As the Invisible Committee explain, “We inherit from modernity a conception of space as an empty, uniform, and measurable expanse where objects, creatures, or landscapes occupy their place. But the sensible world does not present itself to us in that way. Space is not neutral. . . . Places are irreducibly loaded—with stories, impressions, emotions.”⁸ Capitalist space presents itself as a non-political, static stage upon which the narrative events of history take place. But neoliberalism has fragmented the space of capitalism, and the Invisible Committee identifies a “new spatial ordering of the world.” In their most recent work, they posit fragmentation as the defining feature of contemporary social life, arguing that “we are the contemporaries of a prodigious reversal of the process of civilization into a process of fragmentation.”⁹ Fragmentation occurs on every level: Fordism becomes post-Fordism; the modern capitalist spatial organization of cities splinters; the last vestiges of collectivity, sociality, and non-market values are destroyed as humanity fragments into the “Needy Opportunists” who interact through screens. This fragmentation provides the situa-

⁶ George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 195.

⁷ “We do not fight for ideology, or for the proletariat, or for ‘the people.’ We fight for a self-determined life in all aspects of our existence, knowing that we can only be free if all are free.” “Autonomous Theses 1981,” quoted in Geronimo, *Fire and Flames*, 173.

⁸ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 201.

⁹ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 26.

tion with which communes engage. Communes challenge fragmentation while mobilizing it for their own aims towards a new, inhabited spatiality.

Against the fragmented, unmoored movement of capital, communes propagate a logic of inhabitation. Over the course of centuries, capital has become increasingly detached from physical territory. Against capitalist abstraction,

the commune regards itself first of all as a concrete, situated rupture with the overall order of the world. The commune inhabits its territory—that is, it shapes it just as much as the territory offers it a dwelling place and a shelter. It forms the necessary ties there, it thrives on its memory, it finds a meaning, a language, in the land. . . . An intensely inhabited territory ends up becoming an affirmation in itself, an articulation, an expression of the life that’s lived there.¹⁰

Inhabitation of communes aims to make territory impenetrable to dominant power. By increasing the number of free spaces, deepening the connections and circulations between them, and overcoming our reliance on capitalist infrastructure, “the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to authority. We don’t want to occupy the territory, we want to *be* the territory.”¹¹ This is a diametrically opposed orientation to space from that of liberalism and capitalism.

Communes propagate an autonomous logic of geography and cartography. The territory of communes cultivates variety and fertility in place of the bleak monotony of capitalist space. Reading the Invisible Committee’s description of communal geography, we may appropriate the Zapatista slogan and call for “a world in which many geographies fit”:

Every declared commune calls a new geography into existence around it, and sometimes even at a distance from it. Where there had only been a uniform territory, a plain where everything was interchangeable, in the greyness of generalized equivalence, it raises up a chain of mountains, a whole variegated relief with passes, peaks, incredible pathways between friendly things, and forbidding precipitous terrain between enemy things. Nothing is simple anymore, or is simple in a different way. Every commune *creates* a political territory that extends out and ramifies as it grows.¹²

Communes thus call into being new communist geographies that are defined by a variety of collective forms of life. Vasudevan calls alternative spaces of everyday life “an expanded counter-geography through which alternative support networks were created, friendships made, and solidarities secured.”¹³ Communes thus form new geographies of possibility and non-capitalist relationality.

Commune inhabitants experiment with new collective spatial practices. Squatting enables practices of creative architecture and self-determination of living space that facilitates new forms of life. As Vasudevan explains, occupying dilapidated buildings “offered the potential for squatters to cultivate new forms of sociality and, in so doing, reconcile a ruinous artefact of urban

¹⁰ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 202.

¹¹ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007, 2009), 108.

¹² The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 229.

¹³ Alexander Vasudevan, “Autonomous Urbanisms and the Right to the City: The Spatial Politics of Squatting in Berlin, 1968-2012.” In *The City is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present*, edited by Bart Van Der Steen, Ask Katzeff, and Leendert Van Hoogenhuijze, 131-151. (Oakland: PM Press, 2014), 136.

modernity with alternative expressions of human collectivity. . . . Squatters responded to normative assumptions about living and the 'home' through the questioning of its more basic spatialities."¹⁴ For instance, squatters re-engineered buildings to produce enlarged communal space:

[W]alls were removed in order to increase the size of social spaces while stairwells were created to produce a new geography of movement through the building, now connected and held together by an interspatial network of doors, passageways, courtyards, and vestibules. These experiments with the built form became a key process for exploring a new micro-politics of alignment, interdependency, and connection.¹⁵

The spatial construction of communal life offers a chance to practice new forms of relationships with each other in an everyday communism of equality, autonomy, and democracy. Thus, "it is the very performance of architecture itself that has become, in this context, a key source of inspiration for a whole host of self-organized and collective everyday practices."¹⁶ This collective performance transforms its participants. Collectively building radical spaces produces what we may call a new, autonomous form of life.

Beyond architectural transformation, the internal world of squatted communes is organized to facilitate the construction of alternative modes of being. Life itself is structured differently within a commune: the very fact of group living forces previously atomized humans into contact with each other in daily life. As an open letter from the Berlin squatters council puts it, "when we occupied [buildings], it was not only for preserving living space. But we also wanted to live and work together again. We want to put a stop to the process of isolation and destruction of collective living. Who in this city is not aware of the torturing loneliness and emptiness of everyday life?"¹⁷

Communes often organize themselves around collective spaces. Most important, many squatters argue, is the kitchen, which operates "as the key 'socio-spatial centre of the house."¹⁸ Collectively running a kitchen makes several political interventions. First, it combats the gendered division of labor that relies on women to cook for men. Second, it connects food with community: collective meals establish a connection between people, as well as with the food they eat. Finally, "outside" political life is enhanced. As one squatter puts it, "[P]olitics assumes an entirely different relation to everyday life when last night's meetings are discussed over breakfast. Not only is the movement's progress accelerated, but truly important issues, ones which are lost in the shuffle when we live in isolation, are topics of immediate concern and action."¹⁹ Collective kitchens are but one example of radical uses of space.

Perhaps even more important for the Autonomen was the function of the squatted commune as a space of cultural production. Subculture, not work, was the driving force of everyday life. As a document of autonomous theses stresses, "we have not found one another at the workplace. Engaging in wage labor is an exception for us. We have found one another through punk, the 'scene,' and the subculture we move in."²⁰ Squats provided space for cultural activity controlled

¹⁴ Alexander Vasudevan, "Autonomous Urbanisms and the Right to the City," 141.

¹⁵ Alexander Vasudevan, "Autonomous Urbanisms and the Right to the City," 141.

¹⁶ Alexander Vasudevan, "Autonomous Urbanisms and the Right to the City," 149.

¹⁷ Quoted in George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 95.

¹⁸ Alexander Vasudevan, "Autonomous Urbanisms and the Right to the City," 149.

¹⁹ Quoted in George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 175.

²⁰ "Autonomous Theses 1981," *Fire and Flames*, 174.

by the movement. In the KuKuCK squat, for instance, “fifty people lived in a complex that included three stages, performance areas for ten theater groups, practice rooms for five bands, a studio, a café, and an auto repair shop.”²¹ Squats were also covered in beautiful art that hinted at the fertility inside. Finally, the Autonomes produced collective identity in the streets. Marching in black bloc produces a sense of exhilarating comradeship between accomplices and gives a shared identity to the movement: “[T]he black leather jackets worn by many people at demonstrations and the black flags carried by others signaled less an ideological anarchism than a style of dress and behavior—symbols of a way of life that made contempt for the established institutions and their U.S. ‘protectors’ into a virtue. . . . Black became the color of the political void—of the withdrawal of allegiance to parties, governments, and nations.”²² Writing in a similar context, anarchist anthropologist David Graeber stresses the connection between punk and street actions in his ethnography of the North American anarchist scene. He quotes an activist who explains that

[i]n a mosh pit at a punk or hardcore show, all the kids are going nuts, all together, stage diving, circle pits, crowd surfing, asshole bouncers twice your size, so you develop a feel for space, for fluid motion and action. Linking arms to force a wedge through police lines at an action is just like forcing your way to the front of a crowd at a show with slow steady pressure. It’s not that all Black Bloc’ers are punk rockers, or vice versa, but when the Black Bloc’er leapt over the heads of riot police at the navy memorial during George W. Bush’s inauguration in 2001 to escape arrest, he was just stage diving and body surfing.²³

3. Living Communism

“The real communist question is not ‘how to produce,’ but ‘how to live.’”

– The Invisible Committee, *Now* (154)

Autonomists act on the desire to experience communism today, in our everyday lives, even within the bleak world of capitalism. Rather than naive nostalgia for the world we have lost, the Invisible Committee invites us to embrace fragmentation and fight where we stand: “One can deplore [fragmentation] and try to swim back up the river of time, but one can also *begin from there* and see how to proceed.”²⁴ Fragmentation brings numerous problems of which we are all too aware, including atomization, alienation, and isolation. But it also brings new possibilities, for “with the endless fragmentation of the world there is a vertiginous increase in the qualitative enrichment of life, and a profusion of forms—for someone who thinks about the promise of communism it contains.”²⁵ Fragmentation leads to the possibility of the good life within the fragments of the world that we come to inhabit and control. Indeed, “in the fragmentation there is something that points toward what we call ‘communism.’”²⁶ In a fragmented world, bringing people and places into contact becomes ever more crucial. As the Invisible Committee puts

²¹ George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 95.

²² George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 90.

²³ David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 419.

²⁴ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 40.

²⁵ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 44.

²⁶ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 45.

it, “[T]he thing to do, it would seem, is to leave home, take to the road, go meet up with others, work towards forming connections, whether conflictual, prudent, or joyful, between the different parts of the world. Organizing ourselves has never been anything else than loving each other.”²⁷ Ultimately, this means living communism *now*, in our practices, gestures, and relationships.

Challenging traditional Marxist and anarchist conceptions of communism that focus solely on seizing the means of production, the Invisible Committee highlights a communism of everyday life. For them, communism does not exist someday in the future; it is not just an ideal to struggle towards but is instead something to live and practice. Indeed, “it’s not a question of fighting *for* communism. What matters is the communism that is lived *in the fight itself*.”²⁸ This is not an anarchistic prefigurative politics that models the world in which we hope to someday live; instead, we must *live communism now*, in today’s conditions and struggles. Communism is to be practiced in each of our actions and relations. “Communism does not hinge on self-renunciation but on the attention given to the smallest action. It’s a question of our plane of perception and hence of our way of doing things. A practical matter.”²⁹ It is an affirmative response to the horrors of life under capitalism. This is why “we need to give the same care to the smallest everyday details of our shared life as we give to the revolution,” and “the first duty of revolutionaries is to take care of the worlds they constitute.”³⁰ Communism is a question of the everyday practices of healthy community, not solely of the organization of production. The goal of communism is not just socialization of the means of production or the “superior economic organization of society,” but rather “it is the great health of forms of life. This great health is obtained through a patient re-articulation of the disjointed members of our being, in touch with life.”³¹

We should be clear, however, that possessing the means to produce non-commodified goods—and life itself—is crucial to living communism. The Invisible Committee is perhaps too eager to distance themselves from the traditional Left, so they underemphasize the importance of the means of production. They do, however, recognize the importance of controlling the production of our own means of life. In their discussion of blockading infrastructure, they concede that “a blockade is only as effective as the insurgents’ capacity to supply themselves and to communicate, as effective as the self-organization of the different communes. How will we feed ourselves once everything is paralyzed? . . . Acquiring the skills to provide, over time, for one’s own basic subsistence implies appropriating the necessary means of its production.”³² But the Invisible Committee encourages establishing our own means of production rather than expropriating those of capitalism. For the problem is that

capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence... In doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate. Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon’s warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, Dassault, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and their poisonous merchandise? . . . No one with any sense.³³

²⁷ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 49.

²⁸ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 80.

²⁹ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 143.

³⁰ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 164, 194.

³¹ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 137, 143.

³² The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 125.

³³ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 85.

While the Invisible Committee perhaps overstates it, this line of reasoning is compelling. What might it look like to establish our own infrastructure as the basis of constructing alternative worlds?

4. Alternative Infrastructure

“A revolutionary movement is not just a result of ‘objective conditions’: it is the result of the structures we are able to build.”

– Arbeitskreis Politische Ökonomie, quoted in Geronimo, *Fire and Flames* (89–90)

The Invisible Committee locates contemporary power in infrastructure. Power resides in the material functioning of the world, the networks of just-in-time production, and the unending flows of commodities, people, and ideas. Thus, “in the era of networks, governing means ensuring the interconnection of people, objects, and machines as well as the free—i.e., transparent and controllable—circulation of information that is generated in this manner.”³⁴ The consequences of this are far ranging, but two implications are particularly relevant here. First, power’s location within infrastructure makes it vulnerable to attack. Sabotage, blockage of infrastructural projects and disruption of flows immediately limits power’s ability to manage the world.³⁵ Second, our ability to construct counter-infrastructure of our own takes on new importance. Alternative infrastructure takes many forms, from collective houses and squats to community gardens, women’s health clinics, and free schools.³⁶ Construction of alternative infrastructure becomes itself an affirmative attack on capitalist power—or, as the Invisible Committee prefers, a destitution of power—and provides the base for sabotage and other assaults. But perhaps most importantly, alternative infrastructure provides the space in which it is possible to live communism. It establishes the conditions within which we may live differently, relate to each other in new ways, and fully inhabit our lives in connection with the earth. Yet both the Autonomen and the Invisible Committee have a fraught relationship with alternative institutions and infrastructure. They are to be used and exploited for revolutionary purposes but also critiqued and radicalized.

The Autonomen were based in the alternative movement’s infrastructure as well as networks of squatted buildings that they directly controlled. Throughout the 1970s, networks of radical spaces were established to support the movement. As one Autonomen member known by the pen name Geronimo explains, “in the beginning, many of the alternative projects saw themselves as everyday support structures for the general political struggle: left-wing bookstores, bars, cafes, print shops, etc.”³⁷ Alternative activists believed in the “strong ‘utopian’ element: all of these projects should provide tangible examples of a future socialist society established in the midst of

³⁴ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 104. Or as they put it earlier, “[P]ower now resides in the infrastructures of this world. Contemporary power is of an architectural and impersonal, and not a representative or personal nature.” Hence, “government is no longer in the government. ... Power, henceforth, is the very order of things, and the police charged with defending it. ... [G]overnment ... arranges life through its instruments and its layouts.” The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 83, 85–86.

³⁵ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 111, 125.

³⁶ George Katsiaficas describes the alternative movement as “a collection of self-managed institutions built up to serve the everyday needs of the movement. Bookstores, bars, free schools, ecology centers, food stores, cooperative living groups ... and day-care centers.” The Kreuzberg neighborhood in West Berlin was the epicenter of the movement. *The Subversion of Politics*, 102.

³⁷ Geronimo, *Fire and Flames*, 61.

capitalism. In this sense, the beginning of the alternative movement was strongly connected to the autonomous impulse of rejecting wage labor and resistance in everyday life.”³⁸ This developed into the central strategic commitment to squatting. As a group called Proletarian Front put it, “to squat means to destroy the capitalist plot for our neighborhoods. It means to refuse rent and the capitalist shoe box structure. It means to build communes and community centers. It means to recognize the social potential of each neighborhood. It means to overcome helplessness. In squatting and in rent strikes we can find the pivotal point of anticapitalist struggles outside of the factory.”³⁹ Alternative infrastructure thus provided a new world for its inhabitants—one based in solidarity, self-determination, and equality. It was seen by many activists as both communism in action and as the foundation upon which anti-capitalist struggle was based.

However, the alternative movement began to emphasize the importance of alternative infrastructure for its own sake, especially as the West German working class largely continued to accept the payoffs of social democracy rather than revolt. The Autonomen were clear that although they “use the alternative movement’s infrastructure . . . our ideas are very different from those of the alternative movement. . . . We are aware that capitalism is using the alternative scene to create a new cycle of capital and labor, both by providing employment for unemployed youth and as a testing field for solving economic problems and pacifying social tensions.”⁴⁰ As time went on, alternative institutions were progressively pacified and integrated into the capitalist economy. The Invisible Committee is also critical of the alternative or “solidarity” economy. They write in 2014, soon after the movements of the squares (the Spanish indignados, Greek anti-austerity protests, and Occupy Wall Street in the US), of a recent proliferation of networks of cooperatives that respond—inadequately—to a desire to escape the capitalist order of the world and the alienation of wage labor.⁴¹

At their best, cooperatives support social movements by providing a concrete alternative to traditional capitalist economic organization. Yet cooperatives as such pose no threat to capitalism, and indeed the most successful of them often become like any other capitalist business. Instead of thinking in terms of economic production for the market, we should approach the alternative economy in terms of needs, use, and complicity. The commune, the Invisible Committee says, “seeks to dissolve the question of needs. It seeks to break all economic dependence and all political subjugation. . . . The commune addresses needs with a view to annihilating the being of need within us.”⁴² The correct orientation towards cooperatives is thus to use their equipment, host meetings in their spaces, commandeer production to fulfill the needs of the movement, and so on. In any case, “the fact remains that we must organize ourselves, organize on the basis of what we love to do, and provide ourselves the means to do it.”⁴³ Communes can also connect the networks of the solidarity economy and push them to replace power’s control of infrastructure.

The commune coordinates networks of cooperatives in order to build our capacity to exist autonomously. It “is what brings all the economic communities into communication with each other, what runs through and overflows them; it is the link that thwarts their self-centering

³⁸ Geronimo, *Fire and Flames*, 61.

³⁹ Quoted in Geronimo, *Fire and Flames*, 53.

⁴⁰ “Autonomous Theses 1981,” *Fire and Flames*, 174.

⁴¹ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 209.

⁴² The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 102; The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 214-15.

⁴³ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 110-111.

tendency.”⁴⁴ The creation of new institutions is meant to suppress the institutions of capitalist state power: “Withdrawing from the institutions is anything but leaving a void, it’s suppressing them *in a positive way*. To destitute is not primarily to attack the institution, but to attack the need we have of it.”⁴⁵ Used correctly, alternative institutions become weapons of destitution and replace our dependence on established power with an organic dependence on each other. Liberated territory proliferates via movement of people, ideas, and things between communes.

5. Secession, Attack, and Insurrection

“Escape, but while escaping look for a weapon.”

– Gilles Deleuze, quoted in *The Invisible Committee, Now* (80)

Rather than orienting towards seizing and wielding power, networks of communes attempt to secede from power’s grasp and destitute its institutions. Secession does not mean establishing new borders but instead practicing communist forms of life and promoting counter-circulation between a growing archipelago of autonomous territories.

Seceding means inhabiting a territory, assuming our situated configuration of the world, our way of dwelling there, the form of life and the truths that sustain us, and *from there* entering into conflict or complicity. So it means linking up strategically with other zones of dissidence, intensifying our circulations with friendly regions, regardless of borders. To secede is. . . to trace out a different, discontinuous geography, an intensive one, in the form of an archipelago.⁴⁶

This is how communism is built on a large scale. Territory is inhabited and controlled, the people living within this archipelago of liberated territory establish contact and material links between themselves, learn to provide for their needs, and establish liberated relationships with each other and the land. The means of existence are appropriated and/or collectively constructed. Organic gardens and farms are established to directly feed people, free clinics to heal the sick, and worker cooperatives to produce for the needs of the community rather than profit. The material construction of another world deprives capitalist state power of its capacity to manage and control us. This is ultimately what the Invisible Committee means by destitution, by “becoming ungovernable.”⁴⁷ Secession happens not just in isolated rural communes, but in the hearts of cities, in small college towns, and in the connections between communes everywhere.

Dominant power knows its vulnerability, however, and communes cannot secede without a fight. The struggle against capitalist state power is based in the communal territories. Communes are not only centers of alternative life but also bases of liberated territory from which to attack the state and capitalism. Attack is an affirmative component of revolutionary life. As one autonomous activist puts it, “[W]herever people begin to sabotage the political, moral, and technical structures of domination, an important step toward a self-determined life has been made.”⁴⁸ Destitution attacks and suppresses capitalist state power while constructing a new world. The Invisible Committee frames it like this:

⁴⁴ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 210.

⁴⁵ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 80.

⁴⁶ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 184-85.

⁴⁷ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 81.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Geronimo, *Fire and Flames*, 115.

[T]he revolutionary gesture no longer consists in a simple violent appropriation of this world; it divides into two. On the one hand, there are worlds to be made, forms of life made to grow apart from what reigns, including by salvaging what can be salvaged from the present state of things, and on the other, there is the imperative to attack, to simply destroy the world of capital. . . it's clear that the worlds one constructs can maintain their apartness from capital only together with the fact of attacking it and conspiring against it. . . . Only an affirmation has the potential for accomplishing the work of destruction. The destituent gesture is thus desertion and attack, creation and wrecking, and all at once, *in the same gesture*.⁴⁹

We must connect destruction with creation, attack the world of capitalist state power as we build our own, and defend ourselves while escaping from capital. This is the work of destitution.

As power resides in and works through infrastructure, sabotaging or otherwise attacking infrastructure becomes central to revolutionary political practice. Given the development of post-Fordist just-in-time production, blocking infrastructure and circulation has become an even more potent weapon against the capitalist system. Chokepoints can be targeted by relatively small groups of people whose force can be greatly multiplied. Charmaine Chua, a theorist of circulation and logistics, argues that disruptions and blockades of supply chains serve a dual purpose: not only do they disrupt capitalist circulation/production, but “we might also envision such episodes of disruption . . . as an *ethics* that reproduces other possibilities for communization and community where capitalist accumulation has left so many excluded.”⁵⁰ Alongside sabotage of already-existing circulation, the blockade of new infrastructural projects combines sabotage with the construction of alternative worlds. Blockades were one of the primary weapons of autonomous groups. In West Germany, the struggle against nuclear power plants helped constitute the Autonomen. In what activists called the “Free Republic of Wendland,” which was established in 1980 to block a nuclear dump site in Gorleben, George Katsiaficas says that “we became human beings in some essential meaning of the term, sharing food and living outside the system of monetary exchange. An erotic dimension was created that simply could not be found in normal interaction. Wendlanders lived together not only to build a confrontation but also to create a space for autonomous self-government through political discussion.”⁵¹ In this way, each attack is simultaneously the creation of a new world, and vice versa.

Establishing a new world while destroying the old is ultimately a question of insurrection. This will not necessarily take the form of the Bolsheviks storming the Winter Palace, nor an extended riot measured by the number of molotovs thrown and streets liberated from police. As the Invisible Committee says in *The Coming Insurrection*, “[A]n insurrectional surge may be nothing more than a multiplication of communes, their coming into contact and forming of ties.”⁵² Liberation comes through political victories and control of space, not just through armed confrontation. “*Liberate territory from police occupation. . . . Take up arms. Do everything possible to make their use unnecessary. Against the army, the only victory is political. . . .* When power is in the gutter, it's enough to walk over it.”⁵³ After the more recent experiences of failed insurrections,

⁴⁹ The Invisible Committee, *Now*, 86-88.

⁵⁰ Charmaine Chua, “Logistics, Capitalist Circulation, Chokepoints,” *The Disorder of Things*, 9 September 2014. <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2014/09/09/logistics-capitalist-circulation-chokepoints/>

⁵¹ George Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 84.

⁵² The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 117.

⁵³ The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, 127-28.

the Invisible Committee is more cautious, warning of the growing appeal of fascism. Thus, they conclude *To Our Friends*: “Thinking, attacking, building—such is our fabulous agenda. This text is the beginning of a plan. See you soon.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Autonomes were unable to transcend subcultural marginality in order to build beyond a certain level. From a brief high point in the 1980s, when it appeared that the autonomous movements had the potential to develop into a truly revolutionary force that could challenge the reign of the state and capitalism, they rapidly disintegrated in the 1990s. The reasons are numerous, including the world-changing collapse of the Soviet Union, but perhaps foremost is that the Autonomes were never able to truly build lasting counter-power or launch a sustained offensive against capitalist state power. Of course, one could take a more classical Marxist stance and say that they failed because of their lack of a working-class base. There is truth in this, but it is useful to evaluate them on their own terms as well. Though they could win individual battles with the police, defending squats took up an enormous amount of energy and resources. Most fell victim to the state’s carrot-and-stick strategy that offered favorable leases to squats that agreed to legal regularization and attacked those that resisted with unrelenting force. The Autonomes were never able to move beyond a strategic equilibrium into meaningful secession and destitution of power. Indeed, defending a squat from the police or rioting in the street does not destitute the power of the police as a state institution. What, then, would it take to overcome such forms of state power?

The Invisible Committee is motivated in large part by a desire to understand the failure of autonomous movements and correct their mistakes. Thus, they focus not only on living communism but also thinking seriously about the contemporary nature and form of power and how to attack and neutralize it. Their answer lies in blockage, secession, and destitution. In the wake of the 2011–12 movements of the squares, many recent irruptions have taken these forms, from the *Notre-Dame-des-Landes ZAD* (Zone to Defend: an autonomous zone that successfully blocked construction of an airport in France, one of a dozen ZADs across the country)⁵⁵ to the Olympia railroad blockade⁵⁶ and Occupy ICE actions across the United States over the years. After their latest book, the Invisible Committee have largely remained silent, choosing instead to immerse themselves in political work on the ground within the ZADs. New innovations, as always, will come from struggle itself.

⁵⁴ The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 239.

⁵⁵ See for instance the “Zad Forever” blog which is the central English-language source of information <https://zadforever.blog/>

⁵⁶ Anonymous Contributor, “Commune Against Civilization: Dispatches from Olympia Blockade,” *It’s Going Down*. 20 November 2017. <https://itsgoingdown.org/commune-civilization-dispatches-olympia-blockade/>

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