

KEYWORDS FOR THE COMING INSURRECTION

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MANUAL

If, as everyone suggests, we should treat *The Coming Insurrection* as a kind of manifesto, we must also treat it as a manual—a how-to guide to something called insurrection. The distance between the manifesto, which lays out reasons why things must change, and the manual, which outlines how things must change, is crossed in an instant. Once you have been shown why you must abandon your attachments to the established order, you will need to know how to keep going, and how never to go back. The how-to / how-not-to portion of the text is presented in the last four sections of the book, totaling just a quarter of the whole. These sections form a clear sequence, strung out along a series of heavily-loaded keywords: first, the stirrings of refusal; second, secession and recomposition through the *encounter*; third, *self-organization* in all its facets; finally, *insurrection* itself, if indeed it ever comes.

INVISIBLE

That first moment is pivotal: as soon as there is a withdrawal from the prevailing consensus there will be an absolute acceleration. One starts with impatience and disillusionment, immediately bypasses any hesitation or detour, and arrives all at once at the realization that “we must choose sides.” (CI, 96) In order to choose sides, one must realize that there are sides to choose: the first choice is thus between visibility and invisibility. Visibility corresponds to the spectacular unity of the Empire, with its “radiant humanity, carefully reformatted, transparent to all the rays of power.” (IGC, #67) By contrast, invisibility begins as exclusion from the social order, a condition of anonymity and uprootedness that can be turned against the ruling powers. Tiqqun describes this conflict in terms drawn primarily from Agamben and Deleuze: on one side, social organization of any kind ceaselessly separates life from its full capacities and possibilities, setting a bare or naked life apart from the fungible and revocable array of “social-juridical identities;” on the other

side, the coming politics must maintain or restore “forms-of-life” capable of resisting biopolitical vivisection. In the broadest sense, a “form-of-life” insists, whether by word or deed, that a good life comes to be whatever it is precisely by learning what it shares most in common with others. The texts of Tiqqun return to this point repeatedly: the invisibility of contemporary forms-of-life, their elusiveness and indiscernibility, can compose a kind of liberated territory or “zone of offensive opacity” in the struggle against Empire. What invisibility seeks to render visible, then, is this state of generalized civil war itself, hidden under the unified image of Society.

WHATEVER

Throughout Tiqqun, there are references to the Imaginary Party, which is not a party at all, and certainly not a particular group with a specific program. Instead it designates, in a loose and never exhaustive way, all kinds of political energies working on this side of the civil war, “tissues of solidarities and dissensions that are impenetrable to power [pouvoir].” (IGC, #67) If the first moment had consisted of recognizing and marshalling one’s irreducible singularity as a resource and a weapon, the next moment—“find each other”—involves recognizing how other singularities, equally irreducible, can be combined with one’s own to form “by contagion” a “plane of consistency where friendships and enmities can be freely deployed and rendered legible to each other.” (IGC, #72) Every specialized theoretical term, every qualification in the text tries to make this coming-together-while-staying-distinct seem not only plausible but attractive. There’s a strange topography implied by the notion of the Imaginary Party: at times, it sounds as if it is threaded through every hole in the Empire, its unacknowledged and unassimilable counterpower. Virtually anybody might be connected through it, but if you have to ask if you belong, the answer is certainly no. At other times, it seems to consist of a few well-known examples: Argentine piqueteros, Zapatistas, protesters at Seattle and Genoa. When it is a matter of declaring sides, we are told in Tiqqun I “there are in this society only two parties: the party of those who pretend there is only a single party, and the party of those who know that there are in truth two. Already from this observation, one will know how to recognize ours.” (T1, 51) In *The Coming Insurrection*, we hear about “those who want order and those who do not.” (CI, 12) This way of drawing the battle lines can make strategic sense only if it is acknowledged that there must be some kind of order in the attitude of antagonism, a zero degree of staying-power built into the idea of the commune, just as there must be some kind of coherence holding together the singularity. But the text has

a hard time saying that. Instead, the coming-together of the commune is expressed in the most tentative terms: it unfolds through “the promise of the encounter.” The decision to form a bond with others comes upon us out of the vicissitudes of the moment, like the swerving atoms in Lucretius coming together to form a new body. Not historical materialism, then, but aleatory materialism.

BONDS

But how will it last? Perhaps that is not the right question. The “promise” that binds the communal group is not given by individuals or singularities, but only by the encounter itself. The problem of this promise is only partially the problem of locating the agents who might enact the performative declaration; it is really the problem of persistence and consistency. What kind of bond will stay together long enough to change the situation in a radical way?

The book’s pervasive suspicion of organization, obedience, identity and belonging in general poses a familiar challenge: as long as it is a matter of denouncing what actually exists, there is no shortage of good targets. It is hard to imagine a reader who could escape from the text unscathed by the thorough contempt for institutions, groups, milieus, not to mention all those people who dabble in Buddhism or pottery. As long as the text stays on the attack, it appears unanswerable. (By the way, the French security forces and Glenn Beck were quite wrong: this text does not have much to say about “armed struggle.” We should take its cautions against the “militarization” of civil war seriously. Maybe it shouldn’t be a surprise that a book that wants so badly to be used should also be so badly abused in the process.) But it is, paradoxically enough, just when it begins to talk about “self-defense” that the problem of persistence and consistency becomes urgent. Who or what is being defended?

It might be useful to contrast this moment in the text with a passage in Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, when a crowd in the street discovers that it is capable of attack and defense. (It is a scene of interpellation, in fact, quite different from the more famous example offered by Althusser some years later.) Here, Sartre writes,

I am running with all the others; I shout “Stop!”; everybody stops. Someone else shouts, “Let’s go!” or “To the left! To the right! To the Bastille!” And everybody moves off, following the regulatory third

party, surrounding him and sweeping past him, then the group reabsorbs him as soon as another third party, by giving some order or by some action visible to all, constitutes himself as regulatory for a moment. But the order is not *obeyed*. Who would obey? And whom? It is simply the common praxis becoming, in some third party, regulatory of itself and in all the other third parties, in the movement of totalization which totalizes me and everyone else.

(CDR, 379-80)

The Invisible Committee would like to maintain this dynamic as long as possible: indeed this is the very uncertainty and impersonality that must animate the commune. And so they would object to the trajectory of Sartre's account, where this fused group, always "in danger of dissolution" gives way to the statutory group, bound by the pledge of reciprocity, which is "reflective but permanent." (CDR, 420)

Does the composition of a commune require a pledge, that is to say, a performative statement of belonging? This is the kind of question that seems to call for protestations of political faith, rather than definitive answers. It is all very well to disavow obedience in all its forms, especially that contentless "obedience" that Paolo Virno has described at the heart of all political theory descended from Hobbes. In *Tiqqun II* we can read: "Everything social has become strange to us. We consider ourselves to be absolutely unbound by all *social obligation*, prerogative and belonging." (T2, 280) But perhaps there can be obligations that are not grounded in obedience, oriented toward sustenance and sharing rather than expropriation and subjugation. If we owe it to ourselves to revolt, what do we owe each other?

As I read it, this crucial third moment—get organized!—is full of contradiction. The introduction speaks derisively of "organization" as the matrix of separations, while calling for the birth of new "complicities," "sometimes ephemeral, but sometimes also unbetrayable." (CI, 15) That split runs all the way through: on one side, an unrelenting attack on "the ensemble of dependencies" that cripple subjectivity; on the other, "a massive experimentation with new arrangements, new fidelities." (CI, 42) The only way to resolve the problem is a kind of affective vanguardism: "We count on making that which is unconditional in relationships the armor of a political subjectivity as impenetrable to state interference as a gypsy camp." Here, in a single dramatic formulation, is the only permissible rule of organization: do not recognize any obligation that is not built on trust and love.

CARROTS

Is that enough? Who will grow the carrots?

I don't mean to be flippant here. This is not one of those questions always raised by clever skeptics against utopian schemes, always pointing out that nobody will want to clean the toilets after the revolution. I mention growing carrots because the text does: the Introduction dismisses, with withering scorn, the idea that "planting carrots is enough to dispel this nightmare." (CI, 15) Dropping out, setting up a self-sufficient farm, the whole rural option: this is evidently not the kind of radical commune they're talking about. And yet, oddly enough, this is exactly how some parents of the Tarnac 9 defended their children:

Our children have been categorized as radicals. Radical, in the dictionary, means: taking up the problem at its root. In Tarnac our children planted carrots without bosses or leaders. Because they naively think that life, intelligence and decisions are more joyous when they are collective.

(“Letter from the parents”)

Growing food takes time... so does learning "to set bones and treat sicknesses," and "understanding plankton biology and soil composition," and so do all those other tasks that must be learned, under the assumption of civil war. But in order for each commune to be its own base, to constitute its own world, to speak its own language, the bonds must last. How is that to be done? It is hard to say. To be sure: the insurrection does not begin with planting carrots, but perhaps it will have to end there.

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