

It's The End Of The World As They Know It, And They Feel Fine

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The Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. MIT Press, 2009.

In their astute history of the anarchist tradition, Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt suggest that anarchists generally practice one of two broad strategies: insurrectionist anarchism or mass anarchism. The insurrectionist tradition “argues that reforms are illusory and organized mass movements are incompatible with anarchism, and emphasizes armed action—propaganda by the deed—against the ruling class and its institutions as the primary means of evoking a spontaneous revolutionary upsurge” (123). The second strategy, mass anarchism, “stresses the view that only mass movements can create a revolutionary change in society, that such movements are typically built through struggles around immediate issues and reforms (whether around wages, police brutality, or high prices, and so on), and that anarchists must participate in such movements to radicalize and transform them into levers of revolutionary change” (124). Arguably, insurrectionist strategies have played a “decidedly minority part” within the anarchist tradition (128); however, in the past decade insurrectionist practices, especially by Neo-Situationists and Anarcho-primitivists, have received inordinate attention, and the general public has come to view all anarchisms as insurrectionist, if anarchism is considered at all. Internally, anarchists have always maintained a healthy debate over strategies, as witnessed by platformist Wayne Price’s recent essay on “The Two Main Trends in Anarchism.” The publicity surrounding the publication of *The Coming Insurrection* ensures that these trends will continue.

Price’s “two main trends” roughly correspond to Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt’s distinction between insurrectionist and mass anarchism; Price does not see labels as terribly useful, but their respective positions on revolution, class, and unions are important. Uri Gordon recently described the division as “Old School” versus “New School,” and David Graeber ascribes the labels “big-A” and “small-a” anarchism. Clearly, *The Coming Insurrection*, anonymously authored by The Invisible Committee and published in France in 2007 (and officially translated into English in 2009), reflects the traditions of insurrectionist, New School, small-a anarchism. I would add to that list “academic,” since many of the New School anarchists embrace ideas that became canonical in Western graduate programs during the past forty years. In the

case of *The Coming Insurrection*, the label of “academic anarchism” may also apply because the suspected author, Julien Coupat, wrote a dissertation on Guy Debord at the EHESS (L'école des hautes études en sciences sociales).

Of even greater significance than these theoretical disputes, however, is the context of *The Coming Insurrection's* circulation. Much like the “Unabomber Manifesto,” the publication of *The Coming Insurrection* was replete with charges of terrorism against its author(s) and endorsements from celebrity leftists (Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek, etc.). On November 11, 2008, twenty French youths were arrested in Paris, Rouen, and Tarnac, on trumped-up charges of terrorism related to a variety of attacks on high-speed train routes. After eleven suspects were freed, the remaining suspects became known as the Tarnac Nine; the accused had developed an organic co-op in their home village.¹ Coupat, the last of the Tarnac Nine, was released from “preventative arrest” in May 2009.

By July 2009, 27,000 copies of *The Coming Insurrection* had been sold. Glenn Beck, celebrated loon of Fox News, reviewed the book as some kind of representative for militant leftism. *Adbusters* editorialized the book “may become a key manifesto of our generation’s uprising.” But few bothered to examine the manifesto’s ideas.

At its heart, *The Coming Insurrection* reads like a cross between Anarcho-primitivism and Neo-situationism. It is part jeremiad, part intervention: a clever combination of astute observations and half-considered, apocalyptic solutions that recommend taking up arms (in self-defense), forming an “assembly of presences” rather than a General Assembly (123), and finding the means to “permanently destroy computerized databases” (116). Conceived in the context of the 2005 Parisian uprising, *The Coming Insurrection* describes the collapse of the welfare state, the end of political representation (23), and “the emergence of a brute conflict between those who desire order and those who don’t” (12). In such a “crisis situation” emerge the “many opportunities for the restructuring of domination” (13), a domination called Empire. Readers of Hardt and Negri will recognize the Invisible Committee’s definition of Empire:

Empire is not an enemy that confronts us head-on. It is a rhythm that imposes itself, a way of dispensing and dispersing reality. Less an order of the world than its sad, heavy and militaristic liquidation (13).

¹ For a more complete history of the document, see Alberto Toscano, “The War Against Preterrorism: The ‘Tarnac Nine’ and *The Coming Insurrection*.” January 16, 2009, www.anarchistnews.org/?q=print/6030.

Against Empire stands the insurrection, “not like a plague or a forest fire—a linear process which spreads from place to place after an initial spark. It rather takes the shape of a music, whose focal points, though dispersed in time and space, succeed in imposing the rhythm of their own vibrations, always taking on more density” (12-13). The Invisible Committee’s writing is dense and metaphorical, sprinkled with poststructuralist tendencies. Power, for example, “is no longer concentrated in one point in the world; it is the world itself, its flows and avenues, its people and its norms, its codes and its technologies” (131).

The Invisible Committee claims to advocate for a middle ground between insurrectionist and mass anarchism; however, most of its advice (not to mention the title) is decidedly insurrectionist. For example, the Invisible Committee writes,

There is no need to choose between the fetishism of spontaneity and organizational control; between the ‘come one, come all’ of activist networks and the discipline of hierarchy; between acting desperately now and waiting desperately for later; between bracketing that which is to be lived and experimented in the name of a paradise that seems more and more like a hell the longer it is put off, and repeating, with a corpse-filled mouth, that planting carrots is enough to dispel this nightmare (14-15).

Almost immediately they declare organizations to be “obstacles to organizing ourselves,” recommending instead forms of affinity grouping based on “the intensity of sharing” (15). In the context of societal collapse—when “the general misery” is exposed as “a thing without cause or reason”—they locate “the possibility of communism” (16). “Cultural and activist circles” should also be avoided, they argue, because they are “old people’s homes where all revolutionary desires traditionally go to die” (100). Instead, the Invisible Committee calls for the formation of communes:

Every commune seeks to be its own base. It seeks to dissolve the questions of needs. It seeks to break all economic dependency and all political subjugation; it degenerates into a milieu the moment it loses contact with the truths on which it is founded (102).

The definition of commune is, naturally, a key element in *The Coming Insurrection*. The Invisible Committee articulates its preferred organizational principle through this concept, and it’s an anti-organizational principle at once appealing as a tactic and somewhat delusional as a long-term strategy. Who can deny the appeal of this sentiment: “communes come into being when people find each other, get on with each other, and decide on a common path” (101)? Within this category the Invisible Committee includes “every wildcat strike” and “every building occupied collectively,”

as well as the “action committees of 1968,” “the slave maroons in the United States,” and “Radio Alice in Bologna in 1977” (102). But the long-term effectiveness of such a tactic—especially against a class war machine that plots and executes with the luxury of enormous time, wealth, and resources—is limited, and perhaps this is why mass anarchism has dominated the anarchist tradition historically.

At times the writing in *The Coming Insurrection* is splendidly declarative, ready for immortalization on a car bumper sticker (“We are not depressed; we’re on strike”; “We have to see that the economy is not ‘in’ crisis, the economy is itself the crisis”; “Attach yourself to what you feel to be true”); at other times, often concomitant with the sloganeering, the propositions resonate but do not educate or prepare (“Get organized in order to no longer have to work”; “Create territories. Multiply zones of opacity”). Typical of the clash between prosaic revolutionary sentiment and pragmatic resistance in *The Coming Insurrection* is its characterization of “territory”:

For us it’s not about possessing territory. Rather, it’s a matter of increasing the density of the communes, of circulation, and of solidarities to the point that the territory becomes unreadable, opaque to all authority. We don’t want to occupy the territory, we want to be the territory (108).

The sentiment is reasonable: create overlapping practices and affiliations so dense that authorities no longer recognize the patterns of your existence. However, there is a good reason people *possess* certain territory, rather than *become* the territory: only some land is arable, some water drinkable; certain territory is coveted because it sustains human populations. States understand this principle quite well.

The antiorganizationalist perspective of *The Coming Insurrection* “is flawed by its failure to consider the dangers of informal organisation and its dogmatic view that it is impossible to establish a formal organisation compatible with anarchist principles” (Schmidt and van der Walt 262). The primitivist ethos of the tract—for example, its belief that the “only realistic option” that remains in the struggle against Empire “is to ‘break the bank’ as soon as possible” and spur civilizational collapse (82)—frames our options in terms that favour people with mobility and access to arable land. In other words, this is a privileged perspective with no organizational principle for working class self-emancipation or against statist or nationalist propaganda. “At this juncture,” *The Coming Insurrection* proclaims, “any strictly social contestation that refuses to see that what we’re facing is not the crisis of a society but the extinction of a civilization becomes an accomplice in its perpetuation” (94). Certainly, ecological collapse is probable, maybe inevitable; however, the collapse will occur unevenly over an unspecified period of time—thus suggesting the uniform declarations of the Invisible Committee could use some modifications for context, and the Anarcho-

primitivist suppositions suffer from a preponderance of Western white privilege, an idealization of hunter-gatherer societies, and a deficit of pragmatic thought.

One particular dilemma—and this is where the “middle ground” between insurrectionist and mass anarchism should be defined—seems to interrupt the insurrectionary sentiment: “How will we feed ourselves once everything is paralyzed?” the Committee wonders (125). Or, similarly, “How will we communicate and move about during a total interruption of the flows?” (105). The Committee does not provide adequate answers for these essential questions. They simply assert, “[Every commune] seeks to dissolve the question of needs” (102), and recommend urban gardening. That said, they should be credited for attempting to address the central challenge of modern revolution: the concept of *necessity*. They have identified the problem: “Our dependence on the metropolis—on its medicine, its agriculture, its police—is so great at present that we can’t attack it without putting ourselves in danger” (106). They simply have not provided a workable solution.

The Coming Insurrection is an important radical text at least for its attempt at a synthesis of contemporary post-Left anarchism, especially primitivism, and insurrectionism. At times, its language is eloquent, even inspiring. However, the manifesto that remains of a bogus government initiative to resurrect the spectre of “homegrown terrorism from the ultra-left” is a document more interesting for its literary flourishes than its pragmatic designs for revolution.

Works Cited

Schmidt, Michael, and Lucien van der Walt. *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2009.

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