

The war against pre-terrorism

The Tarnac 9 and *The Coming Insurrection*

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On 11 November 2008, twenty youths were arrested in Paris, Rouen and the village of Tarnac, in the Massif Central district of Corrèze. The Tarnac operation involved helicopters, 150 balaclava-clad anti-terrorist policemen, with studiously prearranged media coverage. The youths were accused of having participated in a number of sabotage attacks against high-speed TGV train routes, involving the obstruction of the trains' power cables with horseshoe-shaped iron bars, causing a series of delays affecting some 160 trains. The suspects who remain in custody were soon termed the 'Tarnac Nine', after the village where some of them had purchased a small farmhouse, reorganized the local grocery store as a cooperative, and taken up a number of civic activities from the running of a film club to the delivery of food to the elderly.

The case

The minister of the interior, Michèle Alliot-Marie, promptly intervened to underline the presumption of guilt and to classify the whole affair under the rubric of terrorism, linking it to the supposed rise of an insurrectionist 'ultra-Left', or 'anarcho-autonomist tendency'. The nine were interrogated and detained for ninety-six hours. Four were subsequently released. The official accusation was 'association of wrongdoers in relation to a terrorist undertaking', a charge that can carry up to twenty years in jail. On 2 December, three more of the Tarnac Nine were released under judiciary control, leaving two in jail, at the time of writing (early January 2009): Julien Coupat and Yldune Lévy.

Giorgio Agamben and Luc Boltanski wrote editorials decrying the disproportion and hysteria of this repressive operation. A petition was circulated by Eric Hazan, publisher and friend of Coupat, and signed by Badiou, Bensaïd, Butler, Rancière, Žižek and several others.¹ In Tarnac (a village proud of its role in the Resistance, and represented by a communist mayor for four decades) a committee of support was set up, conveying a virtually unanimous show of solidarity of the villagers with those arrested.

Following the time-honoured reactionary motif of the wayward child of the bourgeoisie drifting into violent idealism, the media's attention has focused on Coupat. Readers of the press were soon apprised of Coupat's studies at the elite ESSEC business school; of his DEA dissertation on Guy Debord at the EHESS, where he worked closely with Boltanski; of his involvement in the journal and collective *Tiqqun*; and of his alleged authorship of the book *L'insurrection qui vient* (*The Coming Insurrection*), signed by the 'Comité Invisible'.² In flagrant contradiction to both the tenor of *L'insurrection* and what may be surmised about the modus operandi of the Tarnac commune, he was fingered as the book's author and depicted as the charismatic ringleader behind the commune and its subversive acts.

As the media feeding frenzy progresses, some of the ideological and investigative background has surfaced in the press. (The intelligence agency which reports directly to the Ministry of the Interior, the Direction centrale du renseignement intérieur (DCRI), the 'French FBI' which replaced the famous Renseignements généraux (RG) in July 2008, seems rather prone to leaks, managed or otherwise.) It appears that Coupat had long been an object of observation by the section of that RG tasked with monitoring the Left. One of their reports even describes him as a 'critical metaphysician' – one of several ironic indications in this whole affair of the passing acquaintance of French spooks with the world of theory. Increasingly, he is tagged as a leading light in an ominous and diffuse political agitation, which eschews the domains of organization, political representation and regulated conflict for the sake of direct action and irrecoverable opposition to capitalism.

Unsurprisingly, for a case steeped in the new language of security and the 'war on terror', the Tarnac affair has a transatlantic component: the FBI contacted their French counterparts to signal an allegedly illegal crossing from Canada into the USA by Coupat and his companion Lévy, and the discovery, in a rucksack left at the border, of a picture of the recruiting office in Times Square, New York, that would later be the object of a small bomb attack. The broader context of the operation is the theorem, dear to Alliot-Marie, of the mounting threat of an anti-capitalist, anti-statist and anti-systemic radicalization of youth in France and across Europe which cannot be contained in the usual forms of social conflict. The revealing title of a report on this putative phenomenon by the DCRI is accordingly: 'From the anti-CPE conflict to the constitution of a pre-terrorist network: Perspectives on the French and European ultra-left'.³

The 2006 protests against the law on job contracts for the young (*Contrat de première embauche*), following hard upon the autumn 2005 revolts in the marginalized *banlieues*, played a defining role in the rise to prominence and eventual victory of Sarkozy, whose swaggering performance as minister of the interior during the riots became a kind of trademark. The Sarkozy presidency began under the sign of a deep anxiety, a reactionary rage for order whose other side was the obsessive scrutinizing of the future for signs of social turmoil and radical novelty – in this instance, one might very well agree with the Comité Invisible that 'governing has never been anything but pushing back by a thousand subterfuges the moment when the crowd will hang you' (83). Given the political peculiarities of France, this fear of the future (and its masses) took the form of an exorcising of the past – as in Sarkozy's campaign ultimatum: 'In this election, we're going to find out if the heritage of May '68 is going to be perpetuated or if it will be liquidated once and for ever.' The compulsive reference to the rebellious past, which is simultaneously imagined as a future – as in Sarkozy's recent statement to his cabinet, in view of the possible spread of the 'Greek syndrome', that 'We can't have a May '68 for Christmas' – provides the current French administration with its libidinal content, a much needed supplement to the grim vapidness at the level of its programme.

The very notion of 'pre-terrorism' is deeply symptomatic: it makes patent the link between the obsessive identification of 'dangerous individuals' and the imagination of future revolts that call for repressive pre-emption. (There are interesting parallels here with the 2007 arrest of the German sociologist of gentrification Andrej Holm.) As Boltanski and Claverie have noted, there is an echo here of the film *Minority Report* and its 'precogs'. The context of the world economic crisis and the not-unrelated upsurge of the '700 euro generation' in Greece serve as a backdrop. Indeed, as an anti-terrorist magistrate recently confessed: 'There is a temptation during a time of crisis to consider any illegal manifestation of political expression to be of a terrorist nature.'⁴ Reading the extracts from the secret service reports, the left pessimist might be heartened to see such confidence in the possibility of radical revolt being shown by the state

and its agencies. Alternatively, she might muse that the logic of immunizing oneself against ‘terrorism’ by nipping pre-terrorism in the bud – with all of its hackneyed references to Baader-Meinhof or Action Directe (‘they too started out by writing pamphlets and living in communes...’) – is more likely to accelerate and intensify a process of so-called radicalization, fashioning the state and the legal system into enemies with whom one cannot negotiate.

Whatever it may say about the prospects for radical politics and its attendant suppression, this ‘affair’ illustrates the metastasis of a transnational politics of securitization, which is now being applied to any form of activity that importunes the established order – from hacking to separatism, from anti-war demonstrations to environmental activism. The looseness of anti-terrorism legislation recalls Walter Benjamin’s characterization of the police in his ‘Critique of Violence’: ‘Its power is formless, like its nowhere-tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states.’ (See Irving Wolhfarth on Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ and the Red Army Faction, the second part of his article, in *RP* 153.) This is a situation enhanced by the development of what the parents of the accused pointedly refer to as ‘reality police’, as one might speak of ‘reality-TV’.

Julien Coupat’s father Gérard turned by his son’s ordeal into an eloquent and intransigent advocate for civil liberties, recently put the stakes of the police campaign in stark terms: ‘They are turning my son into a scapegoat for a generation who have started to think for themselves about capitalism and its wrongs and to demonstrate against the government... The government is keeping my son in prison because a man of the left with the courage to demonstrate is the last thing they want now, with the economic situation getting worse and worse.’⁵ Like many others, Coupat senior has underscored the ominous prospect of a form of government so politically illiterate and monolithic in its reactions that it cannot distinguish sabotage – a practice that has always accompanied social and workers’ movements – from ‘terrorism’, a term that is indiscriminately, albeit deliberately, used to cover everything from mass murder to train delays.

The book

What, then, of the book that – considering the meagre pickings for the police at Tarnac (ladders, train schedules, bolt cutters) – seems to be the centrepiece in the state’s inquisitorial arsenal: *L’insurrection qui vient?* The legal obscenity of basing arrests on a text – one that moreover cannot be personally imputed to any of the accused – is obvious. The right to practise collective anonymity, against the crude biographism of the press, should also be stressed. It is nevertheless of interest to consider the Tarnac affair in light of this combative pamphlet – half inspired dissection of the misery of everyday life in contemporary France, half breviary for a diffuse anarcho-communist defection from capitalist society. It appears that *L’insurrection* was first brought to the attention of the powers that be by the criminologist Alain Bauer, who, coming across it on the shelves of the FNAC in 2007, immediately bought up forty copies and circulated them to various security experts and agencies. A passage from it has been repeatedly referred to as incriminating evidence against Coupat:

The technical infrastructure of the metropolis is vulnerable: its flows are not merely for the transportation of people and commodities; information and energy circulate by way of wire networks, fibres and channels, which it is possible to attack. To sabotage the social machine with some consequence today means re-conquering and reinventing the means of interrupting its networks. How could a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless?

A socialist with some sympathies for the emancipatory and egalitarian potential of railway travel might answer like Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste spokesperson Olivier Besancenot, commenting on the sabotage, that ‘we want more trains, not fewer’, and end the discussion

there. But it is worth considering the diagnosis and prognosis advanced by *L'insurrection*, if only to understand the intellectual backdrop to this call to interrupt the flows.

Were one in the business of the RG and the DCRI, one could argue that a host of themes link *L'insurrection* to Tiqqun pamphlets such as *Théorie du Bloom* and *Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la jeune fille*. A narrative of completed nihilism; a Debordian excoriation of the spectacle (embodied in the ‘young girl’, the commodity made flesh, and carried by the schizophrenic entrepreneur); the vitriolic polemics against sundry Lefts (Trotskyists, Negrians, ecologists...); the view of communism not as a programme but as an ethical disposition and collective experimentation, an attempt to recover an emancipatory notion of community; ‘the silent coordination of a sabotage in the grand style’⁶ and the very idea of an Invisible Committee (or an Imaginary Party) – all of these betoken a certain political continuity. Yet the differences are also significant. First, stylistically, the works of Tiqqun practised a kind of second-order situationist *détournement*, keeping Debord while losing much of the Marx



and Lukács that the author of *The Society of the Spectacle* had felicitously plundered, and throwing into the mix a generous helping of Agamben – an author who, albeit not so hard to pastiche, does not lend himself all that well to Debordian operations. *L'insurrection* is a more measured and plain-spoken text, whose politics are rooted more in anti-urbanist libertarian anarchism than in the metaphysical auguries carried by Agambenian figures such as the ‘young girl’ or the ‘Bloom’ (after Joyce).

Though the agenda of *L'insurrection* is still dictated by a situationist-inspired total critique of contemporary society, the lengthy analyses of the ills of everyday metropolitan life in the age of flexitime and the new economy are more in keeping with the recent concerns of critical French sociology than with prophecies about *Homo sacer*. Just as a Bourdieuan perspective marks the sections dealing with France’s singular relation to the state and the school as structures of subjectivation, so the influence of Boltanski and Chiapello’s diagnosis of the dissolution of class solidarity as a foothold for social critique can partly account for the indifference of *L'insurrection* to a Marxist discourse of class struggle, and its delinking of anti-capitalism from class politics.

This is not to say that a certain catastrophism, or, better, active nihilism, does not pervade this book too, as it did the bulk of Tiqqun’s production. *L'insurrection* begins with the lapidary lines: ‘From every angle, there’s no way out from the present. That’s not the least of its virtues.’ But as we move through *L'insurrection* it becomes clear that, despite the nod to Agamben in the title, his brand of messianic reversibility – a left interpretation of the Hölderlinian adage that ‘where danger is, grows the saving power also’ – is overtaken by an anarchist blueprint for the secession from metropolitan capitalism and the reorganization of everyday life in communes that will serve as bases for a diffuse and ‘horizontal’ overturning of the reigning system of misery. This rejoinder to European Nihilism 2.0 is based neither on waiting for eschatological

signs, nor on figures of the reversibility of catastrophe into promise (the young girl, Bloom), nor indeed on the ultra-modernist idea that accelerating moral and material decomposition is the key to a transvaluation of the world. We are also not dealing with a post-workerist exodus immanent to the resources of immaterial labour or cognitive capitalism. Rather, *L'insurrection* advocates a comparatively sober practice of defection and sabotage, which aims to turn the machines of subjection against themselves.

Much of *L'insurrection's* tableau of modern European (more specifically French, and even more specifically bourgeois Parisian) misery is compelling, especially when it heeds the situationist injunction that to 'understand what sociology never understands, one need only envisage in terms of aggressivity what for sociology is neutral'.⁷ Like the Debord of *In girum*, it can even strike notes of dark comedy: 'Europe is a penniless continent which secretly shops at Lidl and flies low cost so it can keep on travelling.' At its core lies something like a social-psychological portrait of the micro-managed and multitasking subject of contemporary work, the function of which is regarded as fundamentally political: that of 'biopolitically' governing the entirety of social life and perpetuating a regime of exploitation that is increasingly superfluous. Though the insight is hardly novel, the Comité Invisible does succeed in pungently capturing the horror and imbecility of the current proliferation of disciplinary devices such as 'personal development', 'human resources', 'social capital' and other managerial monstrosities. *L'insurrection* encapsulates this under the aegis of what it calls the 'ethics of mobilization', the colonization, through work, of the very domain of possibility:

Mobilization is this slight detachment with regard to oneself ... on the basis of which the Self [*le Moi*] can be taken as an object of work, on the basis of which it becomes possible to *sell oneself*, and not one's labour-power, to be paid not for what one has done but for what one is. ... This is the new norm of socialization.

But what lies beyond this salutary vituperation of the modern ideology of work – an ideology that is all the stronger to the extent that it replaces the heroisms and anxieties of the Sartrean project with the soft schizophrenia of a thousand 'projects'?

It is here that what one may maliciously term the Epicurean tendency in situationism (present, for instance, in Debord's laments for the disappearance of good wine in *Panegyric*) gets the better of *L'insurrection*. 'Mobilization' is linked not only to the capitalist uses of a parallel-processed self, but to a discourse about the metropolis as a space of deadening indifference and mortifying abstraction, and to the idea that the modern city and its masters have perpetrated a kind of assassination of experience: 'We have been expropriated from our language by teaching, from our songs by variety shows, from our flesh by pornography, from our city by the police, from our friends by the wage system.' Despite the aptness of *L'insurrection's* denigration of cities turned into posthumous museums and the excoriation of the uses of mobility and isolation for purposes of control – not to mention its call for the marginalization and ruination of Paris, that 'frightening concretion of power' – the hankering for revolutionary authenticity is unpersuasive, and ultimately myopic. Just as the short shrift given to the notion of labour-power leads to a Manichaean opposition between a malevolent economy and emancipated 'forms of life', so there is not much attention paid to the transformative uses of abstraction and alienation. There is more of a hint of Jane Jacobs in the scorn against 'indifferent' modern housing and the idea that 'the multiplication of means of displacement and communication continuously wrenches us away from the *here* and *now*, by the temptation of being everywhere'. What's more, the notion that the interruption of mobilization will give rise to practical solidarity, as the 'facade' of the 'hyper-vulnerable' city of flows crumbles, is too romantic to bear scrutiny. Blackouts and blockages can intimate communism but also be the occasion for even more insidious forms of violence and hierarchy (Michael Haneke's film *Time of the Wolf* is an evocative study in this regard). Likewise, despite the welcome corrective to the idea of

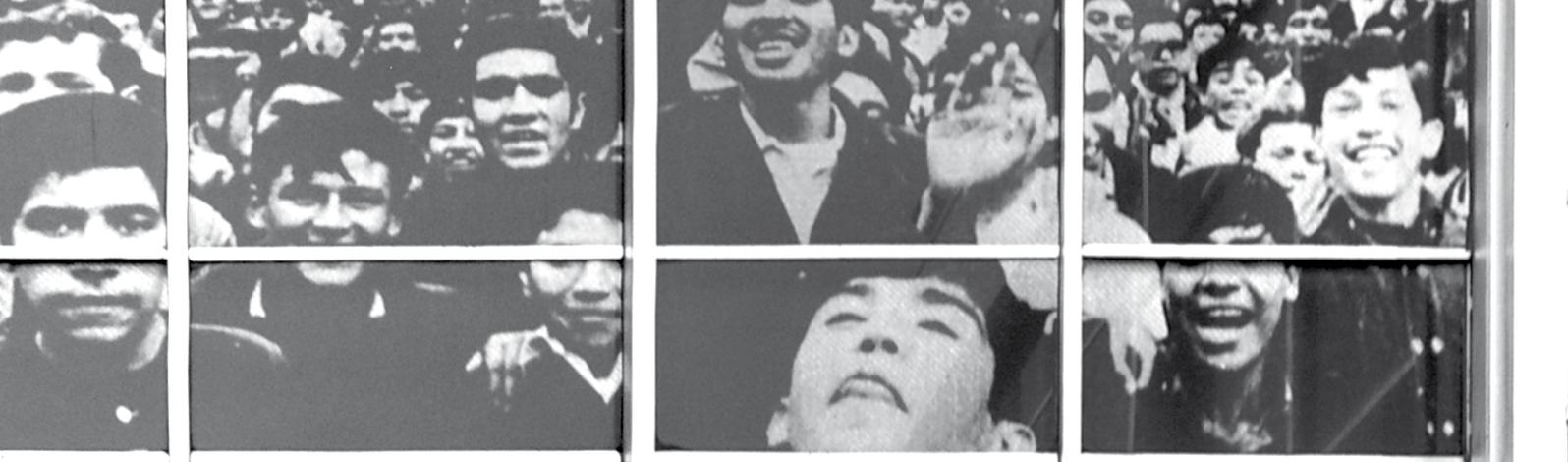
the *banlieue* uprisings of 2005 as an instance of criminal mob rule, it is doubtful that actions with ‘no leader, no claim, no organization, but words, gestures, conspiracies’ may be taken as a model for organized emancipatory politics.

Though one wishes that the anti-urbanism of the Comité Invisible were more dialectical, some of their reflections on the ‘commune’ are worthy of consideration. Not only is renewed debate on the collective experimentation of everyday life to be welcomed, especially by contrast with nebulous figures of messianic transfiguration; *L’insurrection* also raises some important questions for a radical left which conceives of capitalism as an unacceptably destructive system and views crisis-management as an unappetizing and doomed vocation. Rather than an ephemeral image of a glorious tomorrow or a utopian enclave, the commune is envisaged simultaneously as a collective experimentation of politics and as an instrument for a political action which is not merely instrumental but existential, or ethical. Among other things, the emphasis put on the density of real relations – as against the issues of identity and representation that allegedly bedevil parties, groups, collectives and milieus – gives a concrete political meaning to friendship, over against the obsession, whether prudish or prurient, with the commune as the site of sexual exchange. Another classic motif, that of self-reliance, is given a contemporary twist: the commune is presented as a way of gaining and practising the kind of know-how (medical, agricultural, technical) to allow one to depend no longer on the metropolis and its forms of ‘security’ – in other words, to ready oneself for *real* crisis, as communistic survivalism prepares for capitalist apocalypse.

One cannot gainsay the force and interest of concrete utopias, however minimal or marginal, nor deny the all too familiar truth – once again laid bare by this case – that the modern capitalist nation-state does not suffer alternatives gladly. The young activists and intellectuals at Tarnac, in this regard echoing if not necessarily following *L’insurrection qui vient*, have certainly shown that even very simple experiments with egalitarianism and emancipation can sow real political relations and solidarities. But, especially at a moment when the political question of the *public* is so crucial – whether we are speaking of universities, hospitals, banks, or indeed trains – the opposition between the commune and the metropolis is a false one, as is, to borrow another dichotomy from *L’insurrection*, the one between hegemony and horizontality. To appropriate authenticity is not enough. Any truly transformative politics must surely appropriate distraction, mobility and, indeed, alienation and indifference too. Trains, like sewerage systems, dams, airports and hospitals, are not to be repudiated, interrupted or merely abandoned to the whims of the capitalist state. Perhaps one day, rather than shuttling us from Human Resources conferences to Personal Development seminars, they may be put to more creative and revolutionary uses, like the Russian Kino trains of the 1920s.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, ‘Terrorisme ou tragicomédie?’, *Libération*, 18 November 2008, www.liberation.fr/societe/0101267186-terrorisme-ou-tragi-comedie; Elisabeth Claverie and Luc Boltanski, ‘Christ ou caténaire? Du sacrilège religieux’, *Mediapart*, 13 December 2008, www.mediapart.fr/club/edition/les-invites-de-mediapart/article/131208/christ-ou-catenaire-du-sacrilege-religieux-au-s; ‘Non à l’ordre nouveau’, *Le Monde*, 27 November 2008; English version at <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/2008/11/24/free-the-tarnac9/>.
2. Comité Invisible, *L’insurrection qui vient*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2007; also available at www.lafabrique.fr/IMG/pdf_Insurrection.pdf; English version at <http://tarnac9.wordpress.com/texts/the-coming-insurrection/>.
3. Isabelle Mandraud, ‘L’obsession de l’ultragauche’, *Le Monde*, 3 December 2008, www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2008/12/03/l-obsession-de-l-ultragauche_1126282_3224.html.
4. Quoted in Celestine Bohlen, ‘Use of French Terrorism Law on Railroad Saboteurs Draws Criticism’, *Bloomberg News*, 4 December 2008.
5. Quoted in Jason Burke, ‘France braced for “rebirth of violent left”’, *Observer*, 4 January 2009.
6. Tiqqun, *Théorie du bloom*, La Fabrique, Paris, 2000, p. 134.
7. ‘Critique de l’urbanisme’, *Internationale Situationniste* 6, 1961; English version at www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/critique.html.



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