

Who You Are Is but a Manner of War

Enunciatory Notes on To Our Friends

Érik Bordeleau

Essay – December 3, 2015

Erik Bordeleau characterizes the political collective the Invisible Committee as a revolutionary and literary force entangled within a complex field of power relations. He asserts that the collective configures a politics of enunciation that oscillates between anonymity and extreme personalization. This essay is part of the research theme Commonist Aesthetics [onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics].

1



Who is the Invisible Committee? This is likely not the most propitious question when it concerns a political collective that adamantly refuses any form of representation. Since the publication of *The Coming Insurrection* (2009), the anarcho-communist group has demonstrated a strong affinity with authorial withdrawal, readily drawing on Michel Foucault's provocative insights about anonymity and the policing role of authorship. For indeed, 'What does it matter who is speaking?'¹ In this Samuel Beckett outlined an ethical indeterminacy Foucault would explore extensively in his famous lecture 'What Is an Author?' (1969). Taken up by the Invisible Committee through their second essay *To Our Friends* (2015), this ambiguous line of flight becomes a conspiratorial war cry: 'however localized it may be, every insurrection gestures beyond itself; it contains something global from the outset. It raises us together to the level of the epoch.'² In order to reveal how today's worldwide uprisings secretly resonate with one another to form one global *destituent* wave, the great narrative proposed by the Invisible Committee requires a zone of indiscernibility. This 'distinctly global perspective' [*sensiblement mondial*] allows them to 'spell out the practical implications of this [historical] sequence';³ it translates into a proposition for a sensible or lived communism that resists the abstractions of power and the desertified field of representational politics.

The Invisible Committee's politics of anonymous enunciation takes various forms. In a rare interview given to the German newspaper *Die Zeit* on 23 April 2015, they answer surprisingly thoughtful questions by reverting exclusively to quotes from allied thinkers including Franz Kafka, Friedrich Nietzsche, Auguste Blanqui, Reiner Schürmann and Zhuangzi.⁴ This playful and polyphonic composition is both refreshing and quite unsettling. The strategic use of these authoritative figures of the past simultaneously multiplies registers of enunciation and gives a historical depth to the committee's revolutionary claims. It is also an efficient way to skirt around some delicate issues, or better yet, to undermine the assumptions within certain lines of questioning so as to posit the problem in another light. When asked amidst the 'confusion' of the 'post-modern jungle,' who the coming insurrection is directed against, the Invisible Committee replies with Thomas Münzer's cry: '*Omnia sunt communia!*' This is also the title of one chapter in *To Our Friends*. Or again: when questioned about why 'what is to come' could be in any way better than 'what is now,' the collective somehow enigmatically recalls Kafka on the

veiled splendor that lies beside and in the depths of every being. This potential but hidden plenitude is said to be responsive to the 'right naming,' that is, to magical invocation.⁵ This art of magical invocation is, I would argue, a central component of the Invisible Committee's mode of address. It hints at the 'ontology of style'⁶ that innervates all of their writing, the specific mode of enunciation by which they call into being the coming insurrection.

2

According to its wildest and most disinhibited ambition, the Invisible Committee could thus be conceived as a destituent literary war machine. Speaking directly to and for the time to come, it actively invokes the power of a 'we' that anonymously insists within the feeling of our 'epoch,' that which 'must be sought deep within each situation and deep within each person.'⁷ The Invisible Committee's appeal to a common intimacy with oneself and to the fullness of a form of life as source of destituent power is a defining element of their political proposition and prose. This position traces back to texts like *Call* (2003)⁸ or *Introduction to Civil War* (2001).⁹ To the critical and professionally negligent eye of academics, such an epochal narrative with indubitable prophetic rather than dialectical overtones might appear unremittingly romantic.

But let's keep the all-too predictable anti-essentialist routines of surveillance at bay. The movement toward felt transindividual interiority and the related ethics of civil war conveyed by the Invisible Committee deserves a closer look. We can envisage it as a way to reformulate the problem of political organization so as to circumvent the Marxist conception of the unity of the hypothetical Subject of the revolution. In this sense, and in the specific context of writings like *The Coming Insurrection* or *To Our Friends*, the Invisible Committee's call to access the common centre of the epoch through one's own interiority reads as a direct extension of Russian anarchist Peter Arshinov's Makhnovist call: 'Proletarians of the world, look into the depths of your own beings, seek out the truth and realise it yourselves: you will find it nowhere else.'¹⁰ It also brings us close to Gustav Landauer's idea of 'community by withdrawal' (who the committee quote in the *Die Zeit* interview mentioned above): 'The path that we must take in order to enter into community with the world doesn't go toward the outside, but the inside.'¹¹

3

In order to fruitfully situate these considerations within the theoretical panorama of French radical politics, one might revert to Hector Bufo's reading of the work of French anarchist thinker Daniel Colson. In a short but luminous article programmatically entitled 'Radical Immanence and Revolution: Going Down with Daniel Colson into the Well without End of Interiority,' Bufo explains how 'the disappearance of the revolutionary subject is directly analogous to the disappearance of the Self and the questioning of our radical separation from the sensible world.'¹² He is keen to point out how, even though they share with the Invisible Committee a common concern for radical immanence, contemporary pragmatist thinkers like Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers or Eduardo Viveiros de Castro fall short of relaying the becoming-revolutionary impulses sketched out in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). For Bufo as for the Invisible Committee, the movement from separation to community and the access to a revolutionary plane of immanence involve a becoming-imperceptible. This corresponds to a plunge into a wild and inappropriable commons that is always already there, beyond and beneath, in the immediacy of that impersonal yet intimate trance 'that's under and around us,' as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten nicely put it in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.¹³

The Invisible Committee's wager for existential and political anonymity works under the guiding assumption that to 'get rid of yourself' constitutes both a subtle art and cardinal revolutionary virtue.¹⁴ The practical and political implications of such a stance are expounded in an important chapter of *To Our Friends* titled 'Let's Disappear.' For the insurgent collective, state power's work of repression isn't so much about eliminating the revolutionary subject as bringing it into visibility and existence. If the government's main operation of counter-insurrection is to constantly reinstitute a separation between an 'innocent or vaguely consenting population'¹⁵ and its most offence-inclined elements, the strategic conclusion becomes: '*we must make it so there is no longer a population.*'¹⁶ But how is that done exactly? How do we not be cut off from the collective power to act and end up being isolated as the 'violent ones'? How do we take advantage of the '*ontological asymmetry*' between insurgents and governments? That is, how do we account appropriately for the fact that '*we are* the environment in which the governmental agents evolve and which they mean to subdue?'¹⁷

The operative fantasy according to which 'we're the water itself, in which our enemy flounder'¹⁸ is folded into a generative paradox that runs through the entire chapter. First, the insurgent friends to whom the book is addressed are defined as attached to an irreducible plurality of truths – they believe in the world, to put it in Deleuzian terms. As such, they prove the exact opposite of the figure of the revolutionary as depicted by governments – a cynical shape-shifter and power-hungry subject, 'stranger to the world just as he's a stranger to any belief.'¹⁹ Yet, a substantial part of the chapter is dedicated to a critique of 'those who make their belief into an article of export,'²⁰ these militants caught up in a competition over radicality that stiffens many an activist milieu. It is therefore with these considerations in mind that the authors invite us to a form of belief in the world that avoids a common pitfall of identity politics: 'when repression strikes us, let's begin *by not taking ourselves for ourselves.*'²¹ In other words, or as the title of a recent book-long poem about past, present and future revolts by Jasper Bernes and published by a friend of the Invisible Committee at Commune Editions and AK Press goes: *We Are Nothing and So Can You* (2015).

5

And yet, the question of who the Invisible Committee is remains of crucial importance, if only because it forms a central component of the accusation of 'criminal association in relation with a terrorist enterprise' laid against the presumed authors of *The Coming Insurrection*. The Tarnac 10, as they've been called, are suspected of having sabotaged the suspended electrical cables of the SNCF (French state-run railway company) in November 2008. A detailed account of what became the 'Tarnac affair' is far outside the scope of this article.²² But what I would like to bring to the reader's attention here is the role and impact of the different individual and collective statements published in French mainstream media by the defendants since the inquiry began. Needless to say, when confronted by the arbitrariness of anti-terrorist procedures, gaining public support is vital. To give but one example: Julien Coupat, a presumed member of the Invisible Committee, had been incarcerated for more than six months (he was the last of his comrades still in jail at the time) before accepting an interview with *Le Monde* on 25 May 2009. Presented by the magistrate as the leader of the group (he humorously prefers to consider himself as a 'lightning rod')²³ Coupat demonstrated such joyful spirit and ferocious wit that one might speculate as to whether the French state wanted to exacerbate such media attention by keeping him in prison. No one knows for sure what happened, but he was released three days later.

Coupat and the others accused have been fighting a juridical battle for seven years since. Facing what they actively characterize as a form of state-sponsored legal bullying, they

reckon it was necessary to relinquish their preference for anonymity and withdrawal and have decided to give a few interviews. One of them, dating from 13 November 2012, is suggestively entitled 'The only way to disappear is to appear.' More recently, the court decided, against all odds but in perfect coherence with the Kafkaesque manner of persecution adopted since the beginning of the affair, to maintain some of the charges but only against Coupat and two other women. It is in this context that Mathieu Burnel, one ex-defendant, accepted to be portrayed by the leftist journal *Libération*. Describing the media as having a foreign and hostile environment that needs to be 'operated upon,' Burnel couldn't help but underline his reluctance to submit himself to such exercise.²⁴

6

This highly personalized media war arrived at a new plateau with the presentation of the prosecution's case in May 2015, a 'mere' seven years after the inquiry began. The Tarnac 10 responded to the indictment with *Bye Bye St-Éloi*, a detailed narrative of the events that reads as a virulent charge against the judicature and actors involved in the affair. 'The prosecutors having thrown themselves in the field of fiction,' they write, 'we deliver here the true novel, although inevitably insufficient, of the Tarnac affair.'²⁵ Claiming that 'anti-terrorism is the modern form of the witch trials' and pursuing the same strategy they have adopted from the start, the collective has taken great care (and truculent pleasure) in exposing personally the otherwise impersonal agents of the state apparatuses. This mode of operation can be conceived of as a reversal or consequent extension at the level of direct struggle of the diagnosis made by Foucault quoted in *Introduction to Civil War*: 'As power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized.'²⁶ Following this analysis, the full-fledged actualization of the fight against state power's withdrawal into daily anonymity logically involves *ad hominem* close-combat practices. Particularly jubilatory in this regard is the unveiling of the role played in the construction of the affair by Christian Bichet, a zealous employee of the Renseignements Généraux (the French CIA). Entitled 'Un situ chez les flics' [A Situationist in the police], the chapter tells the story of Bichet's passion for Situationist heritage, questioning his dubious character and how his long-lasting resentment of Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee interfered in the development of the inquiry (spilling out in blogs and maniacal revisions of articles about the Tarnac affair on Wikipedia).

7

This narrative attempt to set the record straight through a radical unmasking of the government agents of the Tarnac affair is akin to the Argentinian process of public shaming or *escraches*. 'All motherfuckers have addresses,'²⁷ writes the Invisible Committee, explaining in a way reminiscent of the description of networks advocated by STS and pragmatist sociology, how this logic of material and personal exposure is destituent in kind:

*To destitute power is to take away its legitimacy, compel it to recognize its arbitrariness, reveal its contingent dimension. It's to show that it holds together only in situation, through what it deploys in the way of stratagems, methods, tricks – to turn it into a temporary configuration of things which, like so many others, have to fight and scheme in order to survive.*²⁸

This *modus operandi* characterizes the Tarnac 10 public defence. In Coupat's 2009 prison interview mentioned earlier we find a compelling illustration of how to 'force the police to be nothing more henceforth than a gang, and the justice system a criminal association.'²⁹ Defining his prolonged detention as a 'petty revenge, quite comprehensible due to the means mobilized and the depth of the failure,' Coupat kicks off the interview with a

description of the circumstances of their arrest that sets a savory destituent tone:

Le monde: Can you recall the circumstances of your arrest for us?

Julien Coupat: A gang of youths, hooded and armed to the teeth, broke into our house. They threatened us, handcuffed us, and took us away, after having broken everything to pieces. ... The one who seemed to be the brains of the operation vaguely excused himself from this circus by explaining that it was the fault of the 'services,' the higher-ups, all kinds of people who want [to talk to] us very much. Today, my kidnappers are still free. Certain recent and diverse facts attest to the fact that they continue to rage with total impunity. ³⁰

Bye Bye St-Eloi is written in the same vindictive and joyful way, with elements of theology and depictions of petty careerist ambitions mixed in. In a sudden break in tone, the novel ends with a postscript addressed to the judge in charge of the inquiry. It expresses the exasperation of the defendants facing this 'inane' and 'absurd' procedure, but also their unshaken will to fight. The Tarnac 10 persists and *signs* (as we say in French), delivering a rather unexpected blow by claiming a potentially incriminating solidarity with the presumed members of the Invisible Committee:

Faced with this formidable coalition, made of lies and counter-attacks, leaks and turnarounds, we must legally admit: if adhesion to the writings of the Invisible Committee is constitutive of a criminal association in relation to a terrorist enterprise, we must collectively admit such guilt with a light heart. We even embrace it. Not a single one of us regrets anything of what he or she believes. We especially do not regret having resisted counter-terrorism and having partially defeated the delirious assault launched against us, and this is – we are quite aware of it – constitutive of a criminal association that you and your colleagues cannot leave unpunished. ³¹

On 11 June 2015, three days after the publication of the novel, a group of intellectuals worried about the use of a book as the 'central element of a process' published an open letter in *Libération*. Keeping in mind the protests following the Charlie Hebdo attack, they invited anyone who agrees that 'the freedom of expression doesn't limit itself to the "right to blasphemy" and that we have "the right to say that we want to change the world"' to claim to be one of the authors of *The Coming Insurrection*. ³²

8

In the very last paragraph of *Introduction to Civil War*, we find a quite surprising statement which, in retrospect, prefigures the turbulent 'unleashing of reality' associated with the publication of *The Coming Insurrection* about six years later:

The preceding phrases will usher in a new era that will be shadowed, in ever more tangible ways, by the threat of a sudden unleashing of reality. At some point, the 'Invisible Committee' was the name given to the ethic of civil war expressed in these pages. It refers to a specific faction of the Imaginary Party, its revolutionary-experimental wing.

The concept of (civil) war is no doubt one of the most important and disputed concepts around which *To Our Friends* is articulated. Another essay would be necessary to give a proper account of how this dramatic and heavily charged term unfolds, as it crystalizes like no other a series of ontological, anthropological, political and, in the end, practical concerns into a singular worldview. ³³

I've tried to characterize the Invisible Committee as a revolutionary and literary force entangled within a complex field of power relations. Given a juridical existence through

anti-terrorist charges made against the Tarnac 10, the collective configures a politics of enunciation that oscillates between anonymity and extreme personalization. The question 'who?' in certain contexts, can be an enabling and destituting one, as it foregrounds the contingency of power formations. There are, to be sure, many ways of responding to who the Invisible Committee is. One straightforward answer would be: the Invisible Committee is a strategic instance of enunciation for the revolutionary movement. Though philologically correct, this response feels somehow incomplete, falling short of a deeper and unrelenting truth exemplified with bravery by the Tarnac 10. For in reality, who you are is but a manner of war.

Who came up with the idea that the civil order is an order of battle? Who saw war just beneath the surface of peace; who sought in the noise and confusion of war, in the mud of battles, the principle that allows us to understand order, the State, its institutions, and its history? ...

This discourse about the general war, this discourse that tries to interpret the war beneath peace ... is a discourse in which truth functions exclusively as a weapon that is used to win an exclusively partisan victory. It is a sombre, critical discourse, but it is also an intensely mythical discourse; it is a discourse of bitterness, but also of the most insane hopes. ³⁴

Érik Bordeleau is researcher at the SenseLab (Concordia University, Montreal). He is the author of *Foucault anonymat* (Le Quartanier, 2012, Spirale Eva-Legrand 2013 award) and of *Comment sauver le commun du communisme?* (Le Quartanier, 2014). He is interested in the current speculative turn in contemporary continental thought and has recently published 'Bruno Latour and the Miraculous Present of Enunciation' in the book *Breaking the Spell: Contemporary Realism Under Discussion* (Anna Longo and Sarah de Sanctis (eds.), Mimesis, 2015).

Footnotes

1. Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?,' *Aesthetics, Methods and Epistemology*, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 205.
2. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015), 15.
3. Ibid., 15.
4. 'Comité invisible,' *Lundi AM*, (French), 18 August 2015, lundi.am.
5. Ibid.
6. See Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi* (Vicenza: Neri pozza editore, 2014).
7. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 15.
8. This anonymous and samizdat text is available online in English [here](#).
9. Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2010).
10. Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918-1921* (London: Free Press, 1987), 261.
11. Gustav Landauer quoted by Hector Bufo, 'Immanence et révolution: Descendre avec Daniel Colson dans le puits sans fond de l'intériorité,' *Le Merle* 2, no. 1 (2014): 43. Translation by author.
12. Hector Bufo, 'Immanence et révolution,' 43.
13. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 19.
14. See Bernadette Corporation, *Get Rid of Yourself*, DV, 61 min., 2003, which follows the Genova 2001 anti-globalization riots from a black bloc perspective and quotes lengthy passages from 'How is it to be Done?,' a political poem published alongside *Introduction to Civil War* by Tiqqun.
15. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 161.
16. Ibid., 160.
17. Ibid., 159.
18. Ibid., 160.
19. Ibid., 158.
20. Ibid., 160.
21. Ibid., 163.
22. For an up-to-date follow-up of different articles translated in English about the affair and media statements made by the 'Tarnac 10' see www.notbored.org.
23. Julien Coupat, 'Le cynisme de nos gouvernants est inoxydable,' interview with Aude Lancelin, *Le nouvel observateur*, 11 May 2015, tempsreel.nouvelobs.com.
24. Quentin Girard, 'Mathieu Burnel, l'ami invisible,' *Libération*, 8 June 2015, www.liberation.fr.
25. Christophe Becker, Mathieu Burnel, Julien Coupat, Bertrand Deveaud, Manon Glibert, Gabrielle Hallez, Elsa Hauck, Yildune Lévy, Benjamin Rosoux and Aria Thomas, *Bye-Bye St. Eloi*, 8 June 2015, 6, www.notbored.org.
26. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1979), 192.
27. Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, 76.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Julien Coupat quoted in Isabelle Mandraud and Caroline Monnot, 'Julien Coupat: "La prolongation de ma détention est une petite vengeance,"' *Le Monde*, 18 December 2009, available in English at www.notbored.org.
31. Christophe Becker et al., *Bye-Bye St. Eloi*, 22.
32. See the petition 'Je suis l'auteur de "L'Insurrection qui vient,"' www.petitions24.net.
33. 'Civil war simply means the world is practice, and life is, in its smallest details, heroic,' Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, thesis #74.
34. Michel Foucault, *We Must Defend Society: Lecture at the College de France 1975-76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 47-57.

Crosslinks

Commonist Aesthetics: onlineopen.org/commonist-aesthetics

Tags

Activism, Capitalism, Commons, Communism

This text was downloaded on April 26, 2024 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/who-you-are-is-but-a-manner-of-war