

REG JOHANSON / “Our Bodies Feel Struggle”: Loving / Hating the Symptom In Tiquun and The Invisible Committee

Two recent texts emerging from the European (French) “post-left” have become the latest in revolutionary theory: The Invisible Committee’s *The Coming Insurrection* and Tiquun’s *Introduction to Civil War*, both published in the US by Semiotext(e). *The Coming Insurrection* (TCI) caused a sensation upon its publication in the US in 2009, attracting the attention of Fox News and other major media outlets. Influenced (though often the influence is one of antagonism, as in the case of Antonio Negri) by the work of Michel Foucault, the Situationists, Giorgio Agamben, Antonio Negri, and by insurrectionary anarchist and autonomist marxist thought, the French police believe TCI to be the work of certain members of the so-called “Tarnac 9,” who are accused of sabotaging railways.¹ The writers of TCI overlap with the writers involved in Tiquun, which began as a journal and later evolved into several books, including *Introduction to Civil War* (ICW). But the identity of the authors is only of interest to cops. The important thing about these two texts is their emergence out of several waves of youth riots in France and Greece between 2005 and 2009. Here the Invisible Committee summarizes the official explanations for the riots:

The newspapers conscientiously draw up the list of causes for the sudden disquiet. There is the financial crisis, of course, its share of hopelessness and of social plans, its Kervioff and Madoff scandals. There is the failure of the education system, its dwindling production of workers and citizens, even with the children of the middle class as its raw materials. There is the existence of a youth to which no political representation corresponds, a youth good for nothing but destroying the free bicycles that society so conscientiously put at their disposal. (TCI 10)

¹ “The book you hold in your hands has become the principle piece of evidence in an anti-terrorism case in France directed against nine individuals who were arrested on November 11 2008, mostly in the village of Tarnac. They have been accused of ‘criminal association for the purposes of terrorist activity’ on the grounds that they were to have participated in the sabotage of overhead electrical lines on France’s national railways. Although only scant circumstantial evidence has been presented against the nine, the French Interior Minister has publicly associated them with the emergent threat of an ‘ultra-left’ movement, taking care to single out this book, described as a ‘manual for terrorism,’ which they are accused of authoring. What follows is the text of the book preceded by the first statement of the Invisible Committee since the arrest” (TCI 5).

These explanations, however, miss the point. For the Invisible Committee, the “disquiet” is not one that can be bought off with reforms: “As the welfare state collapses, we see the emergence of a brute conflict between those who desire order and those who don’t.... What this war is being fought over is not various ways of managing society, but irreducible and irreconcilable ideas of happiness and their worlds” (TCI 12, 14). The riots, in fact, are against “Empire,” by which “we name the mechanisms of power that preventively and surgically stifle any revolutionary potential in a situation. In this sense, 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” (TCI 12). In the phrase “the mechanisms of power that preventively and surgically stifle” we hear Foucault’s notion of biopower, through which the state extends, and hides, its domination through the discourses of “care” and “security”; in “a way of dispensing and dispersing reality,” we hear Guy Debord’s “spectacle.” The riots, then, do not express a “demand,” or even a “frustration.” For the Invisible Committee,

Two centuries of capitalism and market nihilism have brought us to the most extreme alienation—from ourselves, from others, from worlds. The fiction of the individual has decomposed at the same speed that it was becoming real. Children of the metropolis, we offer this wager: that it’s in the most profound deprivation of existence, perpetually stifled, perpetually conjured away, that the possibility of communism resides.... When all is said and done, it’s with an entire anthropology that we are at war. With the very idea of man. (TCI 16)

It should be pointed out that by “communism” they are not referring to the various experiments in state socialism. This is an anti-state communism that does not accept the Marxist interim “dictatorship of the proletariat.” It is the *being*, the subjectivity, the identity, the ontology, that has been constructed by capital via the liberal democratic state (or state capital via the socialist state), expressed in the figures of the “citizen” and the “consumer,” that is rejected here. Against Leninist vanguardism, instead of “what is to be done?” Tiqqun asks “how is it to be done?” The Invisible Committee offers answers that are tactical:

Make the most of every crisis. Sabotage every representative authority. Spread the talk. Abolish general assemblies. Block the economy, but measure our blocking power by our level of self-organization. Liberate territory from police occupation. Avoid direct confrontation, if possible. Take up arms. Do everything possible to make their use unnecessary. Against the army, the only victory is political. Depose authorities at a local level. (TCI 119-130)

This is an organization of affects and “complicities” that cannot be represented in the traditional politics of demand and reform that have the sharing or seizure of state power as their ultimate goal. These tactics are intended to be disruptive of the surveillance of the biopolitical, of the mediation of political / spectacular representation, and in their execution to create new subjectivities, new and “terrible bonds.”

While they share some formal features of the manifesto genre—imperatives, points organized into theses, generalizations about the “spirit of the age”—these texts also mark something of a rupture in the genre. According to Janet Lyon,

the manifesto marks the point of impact where the idea of radical egalitarianism runs up against the entrenchment of an ancien regime. The rise of the manifesto is thus coeval with the emergence of the bourgeois and plebian public sphere in the West: mixing hortatory political rhetoric with righteous rage, the manifesto addresses and at the same time elicits an entity called the People, each constituent of which is hailed as an entitled universal subject of the modern state. (2)

Historically, “manifestoes functioned to circumvent ordinary parliamentary avenues of public redress, and to challenge the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic cultural formations” (Lyon 2). Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee do not seek any sort of “redress.” It is the hailing, the interpellation, of what Tiqqun, following Agamben, call “forms-of-life” as “entitled universal subjects of the modern state,” that is rejected. They reject the politics of identity for a “resonance” among “singularities,” beings without the attributes which are assigned to them by identity politics (of state, nation, race, gender, sexuality or class) and through which they might be named and thereby known to power.

How does the “call” of Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee work then? How do unnamed singularities resonate to the experiences and conditions they describe? In the words of Tiqqun, “we—those of us who refuse to settle for any sort of comfort, we who admittedly have frayed nerves but also intend to make them still more resistant, still more unyielding—we need something else entirely. We need a *radically negative* anthropology” (6). Janet Lyon argues that while the manifesto has been a “liberatory genre,” it is also

the genre not of universal liberation but of rigid hierarchical boundaries: on this reading, the manifesto participates in a reduced understanding of heterogeneous social fields, creating audiences through a rhetoric of exclusivity, parceling out political identities across a polarized discursive field, claiming

for “us” the moral high ground of revolutionary idealism, and constructing “them” as ideological tyrants, bankrupt usurpers, or corrupt fools. (3)

The call of Tiqqun and the Invisible Committee operates through this negative “rhetoric of exclusivity.” The figure of the unenlightened mass for Tiqqun is “The Bloom,”² and sometimes “THEY” or “ONE.” Frère Dupont has criticized this problem in Tiqqun from the point of view of the isolation that such a conception of “others” produces. Liking Tiqqun to children in a field, Dupont writes,

Perhaps Tiqqun play somewhere in a field near the rural centre of France and their rough and tumble has given rise to a set of demands relating to the ownership of their field. It is a natural progression for them to translate the rules of their play into the real world and thus demand that the field of play itself be released to them. (n.p.)

However,

Even where the owner of the field accedes to the collectivity’s demands and releases the field to the self-defined radical subjectivity, “they” (i.e. everyone else) remain unmoved, and see no reason not to stay where they are. Without the tension of demand and counter-demand to sustain it, and whilst it recruits no others in order to expand its territory, the radical subject as soon as it successfully achieves its first demand, must then pass into a rapid state of decline; its radical example passing unconsumed by the indifferent masses. Tiqqun have achieved the status of life in a commune, and every “smallest detail” of their practice is a “heroic” victory and yet none of it makes any difference. It has no meaning for anyone but themselves. (n.p.)

Dupont’s condescension here is itself polemical, and the contention that “none of it makes any difference” is belied by the popularity of these texts (or does that confirm it?). He does, however, bring out Tiqqun’s tendency to privilege a mobility and ab-

² “To the inattentive observer, it may seem that Bloom offers a counterexample: a body deprived of every penchant and inclination, and immune to all attractions. But on closer inspection, it is clear that Bloom refers less to an absence of taste than to a special taste for absence. Only this penchant can account for all the efforts Bloom makes to persevere in Bloom, to keep what leans his way at a distance, in order to decline all experience. Like the religious, who, unable to oppose another worldliness to ‘this world,’ must convert their absence within the world into a critique of worldliness in general, Bloom tries to flee from a world that has no outside. In every situation he responds with the same disengagement, each time slipping away from the situation. Bloom is therefore a body distinctively affected by a proclivity toward nothingness” (ICW 7).

sence of responsibility (to provide for children or other family members, for example) that are characteristic of youth and / or wealth. For Dupont, Tiquun,

even as it denounces subjective formations and identity politics, nonetheless still locates in its own practice a transcendent alternative to the lives of the “them,” the herd, the spectators, the sometimes silk but usually plastic and always contemptible Blooms of conventional existence... With Hellfire Club style exultations in images of “abandoning ourselves to our inclinations,” Tiquun set themselves qualitatively against the masses who are to be understood in terms of “fake self-control, restraint, self-regulation of the passions...” Tiquun define the “us,” the form-of-life, their civil war, as an exponential increase of excitations, a contagious sense of their “being carried away.” Grand gestures of relinquishment sets their “us” apart from the acquisitiveness of others. (n.p.)

The community imagined by Tiquun, Dupont argues, is not a community, “it is a gang. Or a congregation.... Community never exceeds the ideological representation of itself wherever it is proposed as *people agreeing with each other*” (n.p.). Here we see how Tiquun are inheritors of the ambivalent tradition of the manifesto, constructing an audience which reflects a “reduced understanding of heterogeneous social fields.” As Dupont says,

any community is the unlooked for, accidental and arbitrarily accumulated depositing of long histories of different human traffics which have all passed through this same narrowing in the river. Tiquun’s urgent need for group consummation inhibits their grasp of the essential truth of community, which is that it is never achieved. Every subject-fragment which sticks to this place rather than another, proceeds to disrupt the “us” which might just then have been about to formalise. The presence of the new arrival causes the community as an aggregate to reorient towards a deferred and greater “us,” the conditions for which are still not present and are always deferred. In short, a community is a positive representation of the binding together of conflicting interests in close proximity over long periods of time but it is never a community as such. (n.p.)

Just as Marx was contemptuous of the lumpenproletariat, whom he called a “sack of potatoes” and thought incapable of revolutionary organization, both Tiquun and the Invisible Committee reserve a special contempt for those community members who are sick, disabled, mentally ill, or otherwise handicapped. In *TCI*,

The handicapped are the model citizens of tomorrow. It’s not without foresight that the associations exploiting them today demand that they be

granted a “subsistence income”.... France wouldn’t be the land of anxiety pills that it’s become, the paradise of anti-depressants, the Mecca of neurosis, if it weren’t also the European champion of hourly productivity. Sickness, fatigue, depression, can be seen as the *individual* symptoms of what needs to be cured. They contribute to the maintenance of the existing order, to my docile adjustment to idiotic norms, and to the modernization of my crutches. They specify the selection of my opportune, compliant, and productive tendencies, as well as those that must be gently discarded.... (33-34)

And in Tiquun:

Insofar as we stay in contact with our own potentiality, even if only in thinking through our experience, we represent a danger within the metropolises of Empire. We are *whatever enemy* against which all the imperial apparatuses and norms are positioned. Conversely, the resentful ones, the intellectual, the immunodeficient, the humanist, the transplant patient, the neurotic are Empire’s model citizens. From these citizens, THEY are certain there is nothing to fear. Given their circumstances, these citizens are lashed to a set of artificial conditions of existence, such that only Empire can guarantee their survival; any dramatic shift in their conditions of existence and they die. They are born collaborators. It is not only power that passes through their bodies, but also the police. This kind of mutilated life arises not only as a consequence of Empire’s progress, but as its *precondition*. The equation *citizen = cop* runs deep within the crack that exists at the core of such bodies. (38)

While I’m not prepared to come to the defense of the intellectual or the humanist, as a neurotic I must protest. Rather than a compassionate care for and solidarity with those who “crack” under the pressures of the society Tiquun condemns, or with those who, in the case of physical disability, suffer in spite of anything they might do about it, rather than offering the possibility of healing, Tiquun not only digs their graves but makes their vulnerability grounds for suspicion of them as “collaborators.” In this they resemble fascist radicals for whom sickness and disease are signs of a process of natural (i.e., racial) selection. The “us” of Tiquun must be physically and mentally “fit,” capable of speedy mobilization, the highest level of intellectual engagement, and unencumbered by the obligations of any intimacy that doesn’t permit these. Dupont identifies “the presence of historical traces of modernist misanthropy” here, which “constructs small-group, avant-garde leadership ethics in contradistinction to the cracked and passive masses of the many.... Hatred of the weak and sick is a crude rhetorical device which has also been deployed by the Futurists, Lawrence, H.G. Wells, Nietzsche, Leiris” (n.p.).

The Invisible Committee however, in a move characteristic of autonomist marxist thought, does offer a way to recompose the crack-ups of mind and body. In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri suggest a more self-valorizing way to understand “failure”:

The will to be against really needs a body incapable of submitting to command. It needs a body that is incapable of submitting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth. If you find your body refusing these “normal” modes of life, don’t despair—realize your gift! (137)

This is echoed in *TCI*:

My failings... become acts of resistance in the current war. They become a rebellion and a force against everything that conspires to normalize us, to amputate us.... *Our inadaptability* is only a *problem* from the standpoint of what aims to subjugate us. [Symptoms] indicate rather a starting point, a meeting point, for new complicities. They reveal a landscape more damaged, but infinitely more sharable than all the fantasy lands this society maintains for its purposes. (34)

The Invisible Committee proposes a necessary intermediate stage, maybe a dictatorship of the wounded, while in *Tiqqun*, revolutionary bodies are represented as wholenesses, even while they valorize difference and multiplicity:

A body’s persistence in letting a *single* form-of-life affect it, despite the diversity of situations it passes through, depends on its crack. The more a body cracks up—that is, the wider and deeper its crack becomes—the fewer the polarizations compatible with its survival there are, and the more it will tend to recreate situations in which it finds itself involved in its familiar polarizations. The bigger a body’s crack grows, the more its absence to the world increases and its penchants dwindle. (9)

Tiqqun takes “singularity,” undividedness, not only as goal but also as starting place. They see a clear choice: “either desert, join us and throw yourself into becoming, or stay where you are and be dealt with in accordance with the well-known principles of hostility: reduction and abasement” (38). But the sick, the cracked, among us are not welcome. They suspect us of being collaborators. *Tiqqun* also reduces and abases us.

Works Cited

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