

# The Harvard Book Review

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UNBUTTON YOUR MIND AS OFTEN AS YOUR FLY by Anna I. Polonyi  
on The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*.

We all have it in us—it is inherent to being young: the feeling that we are entitled to change that which make us retch and choke on the present; the ability to view the future with just the necessary amount of hope. *L'Insurrection Qui Vient (The Coming Insurrection)* a political essay written by an anonymous French collective called the Invisible Committee exemplifies this duality. It proposes a utopian anarcho-communard alternative to be built atop the ruins of the current capitalist, neo-imperialist system.

While the majority of our generation may bask in political apathy or cynicism, those who choose not to, in Europe at least, often veer to the extremes of the political spectrum, with neo-Nazis and the anti-fascist autonomous 'black block' on the other. While the latter pride themselves in keeping the streets safe of the former, they are equally aggressive and share with their foes a love for Molotov cocktails and black hoodies (hence the name).

In November 2008, in Tarnac, a remote French village in the rural region of Massif-Central, a squadron of anti-terrorist police, armed to the teeth and followed by a highly orchestrated media caravan, arrested twenty post-grads who collectively owned a farm and ran a grocery co-operative and a film club in the village. They were accused of sabotaging the high-speed nationally owned TGV train lines, which had delayed some 160 trains. Nine individuals were threatened with twenty years of prison and interrogated for a total of ninety-six hours. The French government treated the case as a matter of state security, but due to insufficient evidence and raging debate in the media, it released all of the accused, including Julien Coupat, the alleged “ring-leader,” were released after six months.

The state had hoped to use *The Coming Insurrection*, which they branded as a “handbook for terrorism” and believed Coupat to have written, as primary evidence for the prosecution. Michèle Alliot-Marie, French Minister of the Interior, meant the case to set an example to others tempted by sabotage or anarchist ideology. To the public, the state appeared to be waging a preemptive war on “terrorism” in alarming, *Minority Report*-like fashion, not only aiming to imprison individuals before they became dangerous, but also painting the age-proven Resistance tactic of delaying trains as an outrageous assault on security.

Judith Butler, Jean-Luc Nancy, Slavoj Žižek and other public intellectuals signed a petition in *Le Monde* denouncing the government and its repressive hysterics. The book's newest edition mentions the events of Tarnac, pointing out that the state's absurd strategy is a symptom of a "civilization on its knees," terrified of any alternative, such as the Invisible Committee's brand of communism, as they bring it closer to its death.

*The Coming Insurrection* and its overt attack on capitalism, imperialism, and a host of other arguably undesirable "isms" is not novel. Anarchists are a small, but an ever-present component of the state. In their writings they have always violently opposed to the latter. The Invisible Committee aligns itself with the Situationist Internationale, drawing on Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*; it also borrows from later authors such as Deleuze, Baudrillard and Foucault. Its messianic belief in the immanent collapse of our civilization is old news in Marxist thought. But the French government is worried about *The Coming Insurrection* because it points to all the loose threads of capitalist society, threads that can be teased and pulled to unravel the present social, cultural and economic system and lead to real violent insurrection.

The book was directly inspired by the riots related to immigration and employment laws in France in late 2005 and 2006, as well as by the student uprisings in Greece in 2007. It draws upon these experiences when it deals with the concrete, central question: "how does a situation of generalized rioting become an insurrectionary situation?" Its debut in 2008 in the United States was celebrated by an unauthorized reading in the Barnes & Nobles at Union Square, New York. The event culminated in the readers running from security while yelling passages from the book.

As the word "revolution" has been bastardized beyond repair—die for one today, they'll use your face to sell T-shirts tomorrow—the book opens by demarcating its lexicon: "certain words are like battle-grounds: their meaning, revolutionary or reactionary, is a victory, to be torn from the jaws of struggle." Communism is one of these words: it is re-used here in the literal sense of a matrix of autonomous communes, operating in defiance of the state and the global monetary system by being independent. The insurrection envisioned in the text may be no more than the spread and resonance throughout the world of such communes. In a succinct analysis wrought with black humor, *The Coming Insurrection* addresses what it sees as the crumbling capitalist "ethos of mobilization," the auspice under which even the possibility of desires has been colonized, at seven points of contact: the individual, social relations, work, the metropolis, the economy, the environment and, finally, civilization itself.

Though *The Coming Insurrection* may not break ground in its analysis, it vividly captures today's biopolitics. The erosion of the concept of man, presaged by Foucault, can be seen in the micro-management of personal identity, in a system that tells us we are all unique even as it markets and sells us the means to express this uniqueness. "The self is not something within us that is in a state of crisis; it is the form they mean to stamp upon us," writes the Committee, interpreting ontological angst as a sure sign that the pillars of modernity are beginning to topple. Working under the fundamental anarchist assumption that

any form of 'management' is a species of alienation, the Committee declares war against “mobilization,” the means by which the Self can be viewed as an object and sold, which also leads to the penetration and sterilization of the domain of desires and dreams.

The metropolis, often the birthplace of revolutions, is an indifferent, schizophrenia-inducing machine; with its “proliferation of means of movement and communication, and with the lure of always being elsewhere,” it tears its citizens from the “*here and now*.” The environment and its crisis are an extension of the metropolis, and ecology is the “new morality of capital.” The rhetoric surrounding the ecological movement—so similar to the rhetoric around the economic crisis—betrays the deviousness of the crisis-management state, as it exploits a very real fear to perpetuate itself: “we have to consume a little less *to be able to keep consuming*. We have to produce organically *to keep producing*,” while “Europe is a penniless continent which secretly shops at Lidl [a worst-case Wal-mart] and flies low cost so it can keep traveling.”

Faced with an apt panoramic view of the current dismal state of affairs, the book proposes as a solution an aggressive hedonistic autonomy, “with no leader, no claim, no organisation.” As an emancipation, this conclusion is hardly convincing. Idiomatic phrases such as “pacifism without being able to fire a gun is only the theoretical formulation of impotence” demonstrates the naïvete of the writers; *bobo (bourgeois bohème)* university graduates with a complete indifference to class and racial struggles advocating violence from the cushy armchair of relative financial stability and inexperience. The authors' complex language, riddled with catchy theoretical slogans and obscure references, and their focus on Western (and particularly French) upper-middle-class concerns also undermine their claims to universality. The Invisible Committee's plagiarism of a wide range of contemporary intellectuals comes together in a vivid collage, accessible to a vaster audience in ways that Adorno will never be. The same radicalism that renders the book so incendiary and enjoyable to read also keeps it from reaching its full potential as a constructive critique—any politically undecided reader, rather than becoming convinced of the Invisible Committee's cause, will more likely be thrown off by their uncompromising style.

Though *The Coming Insurrection* may suffer from typical radical left problems—totalitarian language, tangential diatribes against other leftist groups, claims to speak for an entire generation of “children of the metropolis,” promises that uprisings are brewing in all four corners of the world delivered in the same breath as complaints about world-wide apathy—the book deserves to be read very carefully by anyone with an interest in identifying movements while they are still alive and kicking. Despite the fact that *The Coming Insurrection* is a bestseller, it is questionable whether people have understood that it is not solely about the spectacle of misdemeanors of modern day society, nor is it simply the manifesto of a bourgeois anarcho-terrorist movement.

Certainly it may be naïve to believe that the end is nigh for modern capitalism, yet the book's power lies in its attempt to criticize society while simultaneously laying down basic guidelines for subversion—thus it is both destructive and constructive. *De-mobilization*; civil disobedience; the displacement of vitality outside the sphere of “work;” urban sabotage; rioting;

and last but not least, the founding of communes: these may all be useless when compared to the value for our generation of “finding each other,” discussing the concerns voiced in the book, and “not backing away from what is political in friendship.” Perhaps the winter of our detachment and discontent is finally ceding to a new season of ideology, when we will no longer be embarrassed to “dream [once again] of an age equal to our passions.” It's time to strap those aching hipster fetishes to the gears of a real machine.