

Considerations on Nihilism

Guerre au Paradis

January 2010

We would have preferred not to feel the need to write these lines. We would rather speak of love, of freedom and fresh water, leaving aside the negative, at least for a moment. However: a spectre haunts the revolutionary tension, the spectre of nihilism.

Not the “classical” nihilism, represented by Nechaev and his like of the 19th century. Though maybe we can detect similarities, see a continuity between the old and the new manifestations of this attitude.

It is known that each miserable epoch produces its batch of miserable behaviours, which reproduce it in turn. Reactionary epochs, epochs where the revolutionary perspective finds itself nearly completely smothered beneath an enormous ideological morass, asphyxiated in the midst of the political desert. Sometimes this desert is animated by the sad celebrations of the democratic masses, ecstatic to live in the best of all possible worlds, rushing off to the nightclubs to consume their alienation in the form of alcohol and cocaine, spiritedly discussing the tragic possibilities: Bayrou or Cohn-Bendit in the next electoral cluster-fuck, the latest Top 40 hits¹, what to think of the Grenelle de l’environnement², sealing themselves up in their cell phone or iPod so as not to be too in touch with their fellows, winding their way through the tons of merchandise, both accessible and untouchable.

A multitude of mechanisms that democracy knew to develop to forge the citizen from nothingness: from student parties to the days against... war, domestic violence, climate change, world hunger, GMOs and so on, from television and advertising propaganda to the free journals distributed en masse to massively annihilate minds, from 50-euro internships in non-violent civil disobedience to the penitentiary administration recruitment campaigns, from People magazine to the latest gaming system’s hot new shoot-em-up that feels “like Gaza”, we find again this same carefree bonhomie, this same satisfaction, the forced smiles, this repugnant “fun attitude”³ face-to-face with the social emptiness in which we are immersed, the same frightful impression

¹ ‘...nouveau classement du Top 50’ in original.

² *Le Grenelle de l’environnement* was a series of political meetings organised in France in October 2007, looking to make long-term decisions on matters of environment and sustainable development. The term “grenelle” comes from the Grenelle accords of May ’68, and by analogy means a multi-party debate which brings together government representatives, professional associations, and NGOs.

³ In English in original.

of living in an almost incredible age, where the positivist religion will be enough to erase the ambient misery.

On one hand, mass welfare, lay-offs by the shovelful, generalized poverty and precarity, increasingly common and powerful wage slavery exploitation, total lack of perspective, despair and resignation, occasional rage.

On the other, the mob of clowns and citizens always ready to tell you it's much worse in Bangladesh and that we have to know how to make do with what we've been given, and to continue to flounder joyously in the swamp of survival. And that even if times are tough, at least here there is peace and security.

When the nihilists of the 19th century threw their bombs into crowds, they were acting from the expression of a pure negativity, from a radical and global refusal of society, anxiously awaiting the end times, the end of the world, of making a definite end to a life devoid of sense. There was something to destroy. More precisely: everything was to be destroyed.

Today the nihilism produced by the democratic spectacle and by democratic indifference has many meanings, different types of expression.

On one hand, one feels that the world is not coming to an end, despite the relative success of various versions of 'catastrophism'; that on the contrary it is working to hold on, to accompany the permanent changes of the system that rules it, to adapt itself somehow to the epoch and its norms, to follow the tendencies which create the illusion of renewal, of an illusory change. In short, to paint the grey of daily domestication a bright, fluorescent yellow. What is at stake is the sustainable development of domination in all its aspects. All means seem to be good for use to this end, and the saddest part of the business is to note that the cops are not the principal tool of this politics, which knows how to craftily wed a system of voluntary adherence with one of constraint.

This is not to say that the economy and the State no longer need the cop to maintain order, but that when the notions of exploitation and oppression disappear from our common language, when people can no longer put their rage and despair into words, nor point the finger at those responsible for this permanent nightmare we call survival, the latter have every reason to believe that their domination has many glorious days ahead.

"There is a lack of money, but money cannot bring us what we lack."

Nowadays, the lack of and the quest for money have constituted themselves as an unsurpassable horizon, they have become the value which has replaced all others, until they have practically disappeared.

The desire for freedom, and the permanent battle which it necessitates, occupy at best, in these morose times, the importance that one gives to artifacts and archaic curiosities. Making money, raking in cash by any means, becoming a popular personality, respected or feared, crawling up the ladder of capitalist success by internalizing its laws. The first rule is to banish all ethics, key to rising in this society where stepping cynically on people's throats is a sign of undeniable success. Marking one's territory, to have your clan, your little private racket, claiming ownership of a neighbourhood, or even a city, to gain fame and power.

None of this is new, but it was once more or less eclipsed by another type of antagonism, one between classes and more broadly social; a war against oppressors, for freedom. After the 70s and the revolutionary push which shook capitalist society, the putrid wind of reaction blew

through, bringing out with it numerous frantic lovers of a revolt without concession, vanquished by abnegation or brutal repression.

One could say that it in this period of ebb that the current period began, during which capitalism could lead its desired restructuring, sweeping aside the subsequent, all-too-rare opposition, grinding millions of individuals beneath its arrogant advance, carting along its load of human despair and misery. These periods are always called “crises”, as if to speak of exceptional situations; this is to forget that the economy is in perpetual mutation, that this crisis is not an economic crisis, but the crisis of those whom the economy domesticates and wishes to reduce to the state of slaves.

The fully developed capitalism of the 19th century was already passing humans through the industrial meat-grinder. And at the time, nihilism was one of the reactions to this infamy. For cruelty is a common response to terror, and cold hatred and total contempt generates more and more inhumanity.

While disaster presents itself before our eyes every day, and we see that there seem to be many who would seem to be accommodating it, rage builds, a volcano inside each of us which erupts, sometimes wisely, sometimes randomly, crying out that there are no innocents in this nameless whorehouse.

So this blind anger lashes out against whatever crosses its path, playing into the divisions already created by religion, nationalism, sexism, and every kind of racket. Thus, revolt, the good old war against authority, cedes its place to nihilism, whose facets, more than anything else, are chaos and civil war, in which the prospect of freedom grows further away, a terrain on which one is invariably outweighed by the State and the system which it protects.

Sometimes the line between rage and despair is very fine, very fragile. The abyss of nihilism awaits every sincere rebel who ceases to be critical, to listen to their heart, stifling their dreams of mutual aid and solidarity, saying that this is all useless, since no one gives a fuck anymore, at least it seems so. A very thin line then, but one which marks a real difference in perspective, between yet another eschatological fantasy of the end of the world, and the anarchist desire to annihilate every oppression in order that the rest, that is to say pretty much everything worth living for, may grow and thrive.

Between nihilism and revolt we find the same rupture as between civil war and social war, the same difference as between the oppression of all by all and the revolutionary struggle against all authority.

Between nihilism and revolt there is a divide which contains all the others: the rupture with this alienated and sick society, for the total liberation of human relationships.

Faced with this alternative, there can be no doubt as to our choice.

The thirst for death that gives rise to democratic domination, by wars between States, civil wars, wars among the poor, suicides by the thousands, only increases our disgust.

And when we see the temptation for civil war poking its nose among the revolutionaries to lead them into the quicksand of nihilism, we think that there is serious danger there, against which we must spare no criticism. Recently appearing slogans such as “Against nothing, for nothing”⁴ represent a very real shift and are dark omens for the future.

⁴ In English in original. Given that the authors of *Guerre au Paradis* identify themselves as interested readers of *Fire to the Prisons*, dismayed by what they identify as FTTP’s shift of late away from anarchy towards nihilism, I think it highly possible that this is a reference to the infamous “For Nothing, Against Everything” cover of issue #7; particularly given that ‘against nothing’ is not exactly a common formulation of nihilist orientation.

When we fight for nothing, and against nothing,
nothing makes any sense, there is nothing to do.
We can do nothing.

We could also decide to rearm our revolt,
and begin again to storm heaven.

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