

# **A Model of Behavior Like A Cop or A Female Saint**

**On Jean-Patrick Manchette's Nada**

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**PUT YOUR  
MARXISM  
WHERE YOUR  
MOUTH IS**

Before the Red Army Faction in Germany (1970–1998), the Red Brigades in Italy (1970–1988), and Action Directe in France (1979–1987), there was *Nada*. This latter group was a significantly smaller formation relative to the three other militant, extra-parliamentary, post-68 contemporaries; more importantly, it was work of fiction that has, at its center, neither an historical actor nor a marginal organization of the post-war European ultra-Left, but rather, six disaffected militants who comprise the titular group and owe their existence to the french crime novelist, Jean-Patrick Manchette. Manchette, similarly disaffected, if for radically different reasons, produced an important corpus of literature over four decades that demonstrates an engaging attempt by an ultra-left thinker to respond to the ossification of Europe’s institutionalized left, and its capitulation to authoritarianism. However, reminding us of someone like Nanni Balestrini, for one example, he did this with fiction. Not theory as culture, but rather an appeal for a change in social relations as an anti-fascist cultural practice in itself.

“When Manchette began to write his novels in the mid-1970s, the French *polar* had become a still pool of police procedurals and tales of Pigalle lowlife. Manchette wanted to throw in rocks, disturb the calm surface, bring up all the muck beneath—to demonstrate that the crime novel could be (as he said again and again) ‘the great moral literature of our time.’<sup>1</sup> For these reasons, Manchette was far less interested in the novel form in-itself—though he was an avid admirer of late 19th century French literature, Proust especially, and sought to reconcile literary mastery with pulp forms—but rather with its potential for constituting a genuinely “anti-fascist” platform: at one time a staple of the genre, only to have become atrophied in the years following the golden age of Chandler and Hammett. Avoiding any obvious and uninteresting interpretation regarding the *roman noir* as the “great moral literature of our time”—a statement that is cited as often as it is taken out of context—Manchette sought to bridge the politics of the “neo-detective” as others have called it, with the literary form itself. A more direct statement of Manchette that gets to the point: “The polar for me, was—and still is—the novel of violent social intervention.”<sup>2</sup> Having been involved in the French Left in the postwar years, veering slowly towards the “ultra-gauche” after stints at *La Voie Communiste*, Manchette would arrive at a decidedly anarchist-inspired situationism, a singularly self-styled composite political position which inevitably came to infuse his fiction and, ultimately, his non-fiction essays on the genre.

Beginning in the late 60s, Manchette would embark on an eleven-book cycle, which would have little in common except anti-statist and anti-institutional outlooks, their fascination and erudite usage of noir tropes either genuinely or sardonically, and characters developed quickly and with minimal interiority. In most novels, the anti-heros and the killers who chase after them are developed not through dialogue or interior monologue but rapid-fire descriptions: what kind of gun, what kind of jazz, what kind of breakfast pastry. These characters exist in a dog-eat-dog world, one wherein all fight each other relentlessly. As Sallis writes “For Manchette the world is a giant marketplace in which gangs of thugs—be they leftist, reactionary, terrorist, police, or politicians—compete relentlessly.”<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that Manchette leveled the same level of scorn for police as for corrupted militants. Imbuing all the works, Manchette paints struggle to

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<sup>1</sup> James Sallis, introduction to Jean Patrick-Manchette, *The Mad and the Bad*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (1972; New York: New York Review Books, 2014); available online as: James Sallis, “Manchette: Into the Muck,” *The New York Review of Books*, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/18/manchette-into-muck/>. Accessed on 7/6/2020.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Patrick-Manchette, quoted in Anissa Belhadjin, “From Politics to the Roman Noir,” *South Central Review* 27, no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer, 2010), 62.

<sup>3</sup> Sallis, introduction to *The Mad and the Bad*.

be the characteristic of the post-war era, when even a worker's revolt had been forsaken by the Communists who once fought the Nazis in the Latin Quarter.

*Nada's* success lies in its having synthesized the reception of the American crime novel in France with the prevailing critiques regarding the ossification of the European Left after the "events of May." And as with every reception, the adoption of the genre inevitably implied its modification. As Kristin Ross aptly writes, regarding the differences between the American and French crime novel:

Of all the various kinds of literary characters, the detective is one of the easiest to think of as little more than narrative scaffolding, a string or device whose wanderings link the various anecdotes, local histories, and glimpses of local color into a narrative whole. After all, what other fictional character's underdeveloped personality or lack of 'roundness' is so regularly compensated for by an all-consuming fetish—the love of orchids, for example, or the love of opera? [...] Philip Marlowe, it is important to remember, is a literary hero without a background, and without any cultural or political substratum. The same cannot be said of Victor Blainville, ex-soixante-huitard, sometime journalist, sometime photographer, sometime investigator and Vilar's recurrent protagonist.<sup>4</sup>

Like Victor Blainville before them, the individuals who comprise the Nada group are made up of nothing other than cultural and political substance, a motley crew of would-be or long-ago compromised revolutionaries: Buenaventura Diaz is an anarchist militant in his 50's whose anti-fascist father died defending the Barcelona Commune; André Épaulard a former communist resistance fighter; Marcel Treuffais a young philosophy teacher, author of the group's manifesto, and the only member to rescind participation from the group's actions; Meyer, a waiter, and D'Arcy, an alcoholic, constitute a duo that has been forgotten by society; and Veronique Cash a militant in spirit with anti-civilization proclivities who provides the farm in which the group uses as their hideout. Their plan? To kidnap and ransom the U.S. ambassador to France. Given Treiffais is said to have constructed the intellectual basis of the group, it is telling that he is the only one to abandon the plan—yet more indicative of Manchette's scorn for mediatization, he would ultimately be the one to telegraph their story to the press. As the translator for the book described to us, this may be Manchette saying: "this too, your position, can be recuperated."

Far from valiant, Manchette stages the act, with his characteristic quickness, as an adventurist ploy: something prefiguring small scale militant extremism void of insurrectionary fervor that was characteristic of the era after the left fragmented, and was left looking for a spark. Manchette seems so intimate that the spark cannot be produced, and especially not by a band so naive or corrupt as this. This fragmentation that made the Left all the more susceptible to cooptation by an ascendent neoliberalism; with hindsight this is clearly what happened in Italy and France after the years of Lead and with Mitterand, respectively. And yet, in light of all this, Manchette's novel was already, if only intuitively, aware of this too. To this end, it carries a clear warning: without popular support, militancy will not awaken the lumpenproletariat, but rather will alienate not just the middle classes, but the worker as well. Absent this generalized rebelliousness on the part of a general population, even the most revolutionary of propaganda will be but one more sacrifice at the altar of the Spectacle. Manchette's own words here, quoted by Luc Sante in his introduction to *Nada*, are succinct: "Politically, [the Nada group] are a public hazard, a true catastrophe for the

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<sup>4</sup> Kristin Ross, "Parisian Noirs," *New Literary History* 41, no. 1 (Winter, 2010), 96–9.

revolutionary movement. The collapse of leftism into terrorism is the collapse of the revolution into spectacle.”<sup>5</sup>

Of the wide influence that Manchette’s work had on a later generation of French crime novelists (Dominique Manotti and Didier Daeninckx most prominently), this last point may be the most prevalent. Though, Manotti’s *Escape* (2013) seems to reply that even with popular support the neoliberal carceral apparatus will track you down and employ every biopolitical act in their playbook to neutralize it—she is a historian of economics—and Daeninckx’s *Murder in Memoriam* (1984) adds that historical amnesia may be enough to subdue that popular action regardless. Writing in *Liberation* on the importance and singularity of Manchette’s work, Daeninckx remarks that Manchette “could have drafted history theses,” but instead wrote polars “and [the latter are] a lot more useful.”

With regards to *Nada*, we see the beginnings of Manchette’s recovery of the genre, and its use for spreading the gospel of extra-parliamentary action through cheap paperback pulp. It is a story of anarchist illegalism and revolutionary violence, of a group of militants’ unwavering commitment to the abolition of capital at a moment when the Left found itself divided around questions of both strategy and tactics (most notably, for Manchette, was the French Communist Party’s [PCF] support of France’s ongoing colonization of Algeria during the anticolonial struggles that emerged after the Second World War), and whose inflection points reside at the level of history. This is the historical moment in which *Nada* unfolds. It is a moment defined not by an unrealized, though wholly tenable, transformation of society via the PCF, but by a Party that has been reduced to nothing more than “a desperate attempt on the part of a traditional body to keep itself going in the context of radically altered production relations.”<sup>6</sup> As once-colleague Guattari with whom Manchette briefly worked with during his stint at the Trotskyist newspaper *La Voie Communiste*, aptly put it: “Under these [historical] circumstances, the French Communist Party is peculiarly badly placed to combat the myths of the consumer society, for it has no sort of alternative to offer. By comparison, the leftist *groupuscules* undoubtedly represent an attempt to keep alive the basic themes of an independent, working-class revolutionary policy.”<sup>7</sup> And as if to anticipate, not only the novel’s conclusion but Manchette’s own assessment of the *groupuscule*<sup>8</sup> as a political form of organization, Guattari concludes: “Unfortunately, all we see of them is their failure.”<sup>9</sup>

And yet, *Nada*’s is a storied history as well. For in the course of the novel’s unfolding, one cannot help but recall previous moments of France’s history, when various extra-parliamentary groups were formed with the intention of sustaining, or reviving, the revolutionary fervor that was felt during their respective cycles of struggle. Thus, it is no coincidence that the way in which Manchette narrates the *Nada* group’s kidnapping of the US diplomat bears striking similarities to

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<sup>5</sup> Jean-Patrick Manchette, quoted in Luc Sante, introduction to Jean-Patrick Manchette, *Nada* (New York: New York Review Books, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Félix Guattari, ‘Causality, Subjectivity and History,’ *Psychoanalysis and Transversality: Texts and Interviews, 1955-1971*, tr. Ames Hodges (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles, 2015), 235–280, 265.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, emphasis ours.

<sup>8</sup> Derived from the French word for group (*groupe*-) and combined with the suffix *-cule*, meaning small or minor, *groupuscule* refers to an informal and decentralized form of political organization. While the term can be used to classify either right-wing or left-wing political organizations, during the 60’s it was typically used by French leftists to refer to extra-parliamentary groups (e.g. *Gauche prolétarienne*) that sought to rehabilitate class struggle in the face of the PCF’s strategy of establishing the collaboration, as opposed to the antagonism, between classes.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

the actions of the Bonnot Gang—one of the most well known French anarchist groups and were active between 1911–1912. Manchette even goes so far as to dub the group’s hideout “the tragic farmhouse,” which was the “epithet used by the newspapers in 1912 to refer to the death scene of Jules Bonnot.”<sup>10</sup> And before the Bonnot Gang there was, of course, Blanqui.

While it may strike some as odd to view a group such as the Bonnot Gang and an individual such as Blanqui as having a shared orientation toward capital and the state, both advocated for an extra-legal form of organization; whether in the attempt at building a clandestine vanguard (Blanqui) or through various interventions in everyday life that directly seize the means for reproducing the organization and its goals (Bonnot). Moreover, and of equal importance regarding Manchette’s relation to the history of radical politics in France, both the Bonnot Gang and Blanqui share a similar fate in terms of their reception within the dominant currents of Leftist politics: a reception that presents both as exemplary figures of what becomes of an allegedly unprincipled and excessively voluntarist form of organizing revolutionary struggle.

Once more, this type of historical reception is carried forward by Manchette and is brought to bear on the members of the Nada group. However, rather than any moral posturing and subsequent denunciation, when reflecting on figures and organizations of the past—Lenin’s celebratory dance in the snow to celebrate the Bolsheviks having been in power for one day longer than the Communards of Paris, for example—Manchette makes use of the novel-form in order to delineate the fate that is most likely to befall those who give primacy to direct actions against the State and an escalation of tactics, absent a situation defined by an wide enthusiasm for struggle and, by consequence, an expanded notion of what people view as acceptable and unacceptable with respect to certain strategies and tactics. For it is precisely in light of these debates, that we find the young, defacto “theorist” of the group, Treuffais, accusing his older and more seasoned comrade, Buenaventura, of engaging in Leftist terrorism: “You’re falling under the spell of terrorism, and that’s really stupid. Terrorism is only justified when revolutionaries have no other means of expressing themselves and when the masses support them.”<sup>11</sup> By adapting the hard-boiled caper format “to the single most newsworthy leftist-terrorist scenario of the 1970s: the symbolic abduction,”<sup>12</sup> Manchette achieved a novel fusion of pre-existing literary form with, what was then, presently existing extra-literary content. In short, pulp across spheres of literary production.

## 1

Not one to keep his readers waiting, the kidnapping of the US ambassador to France takes place in the first third of the novel. After some minor planning, and minimal scoping out, and some punches exchanged among them, the Nada group descends upon a brothel frequented by the ambassador. The kidnapping, however, is not without loose ends. Not only does the Nada group end up exchanging fire with the Parisian police upon exiting the brothel but, much to his horror, D’Arcy ends up killing one of the officers. (“‘I killed him,’ D’Arcy repeated calmly. ‘I want to drink myself to oblivion’”<sup>13</sup>). As it turns out, the entire kidnapping was filmed from the apartment building directly across the street as part of a surveillance operation that sought to

<sup>10</sup> Luc Sante, Introduction, Jean-Patrick Manchette, *Nada*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (NYRB: New York, 2019), vii–xii, xi.

<sup>11</sup> Manchette, *Nada*, 92, emphasis ours.

<sup>12</sup> Sante, “Introduction,” *Nada*, viii.

<sup>13</sup> Manchette, *Nada*, 67.

create dossiers on “important clients” who frequented the brothel. Further complicating matters is the fact that the group’s action was filmed by a member of the Renseignements Généraux or **RG** (which refers to the Direction Centrale des Renseignements Généraux or **DCRG**): the intelligence branch of the French Police that answered directly to the Minister of the Interior and, in 2008, would eventually be folded into the Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire (**DST**), which now oversees and operates as a domestic surveillance agency.<sup>14</sup> And despite the RG’s shared role with the police as incarnations of the repressive arm of the State, the RG are unwilling to simply hand over the footage to the Paris police, since every exchange has its price. Again, Manchette is at his best when he shows that everyone is at war with everyone else—class collaborators pitted against each other. Thus, the State will enter into negotiations with itself.

In exchange for the footage, the “Grabeliau faction” of the RG “demand the removal of the sanctions, the rehiring of fired officials, and...those expelled from the SAC [Service d’Action Civique].”<sup>15</sup> That is, in exchange for the video recording the Minister must re-employ and ultimately pardon the Service d’Action Civique (SAC)—that historical militia who unconditionally supported de Gaulle’s push for continuous occupation and colonization of North Africa and that engaged in paramilitary tactics, such as kidnapping and torturing students and demonstrators during May ‘68 while establishing far-right youth organizations to counter left wing youth groups; and who, in 1981, carried out the massacre of a police inspector and his family under suspicion of corruption and for maintaining strong ties with the Left. With these scenes of intra-bureaucratic dissensus, Manchette demonstrates the extent to which the State is always-already primed for absolving itself of the violence it inevitably wishes to employ. What is more, it is via this process that the figure of the “left-wing terrorist” emerges and serves as the new grounds for the self-absolution of the State. *But what is Statist self-absolution if nothing other than psychic disavowal raised to the level of the juridical?* A disavowal, which announces that “it is because I am no longer responsible for past violence that I am justified, and therefore free, to engage in the violence of the present?” And just like that, “a thousand leftists [are] questioned in Paris.”<sup>16</sup>

Back with our protagonists, their next move is a “wait and see” style retreat to Veronique Cash’s farmhouse just outside of the city after distributing their manifesto to various media outlets throughout the Paris metro area. From the safety of the countryside, the group gets wind that the media has began reporting on the manifesto: *Le Monde*, *France-Soir*, *Libération*, to the newspapers of the French Communist Party, The Communist League, and the *Parti Socialiste Unifié* (Unified Socialist Party, PSU), as well as a communiqué from the New Red Army, all weigh in on the group’s kidnapping. With each new editorial, review, and communiqué, however, a consensus takes shape denouncing the group’s actions: the Communist Party “condemns what it calls provocation,” the *Parti Socialiste Unifié* accuses of the Nada group of putting the revolutionary front at risk, *France-Soir*’s editorial accuses the “terrorists of the Nada group” for “aping the Tu-

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<sup>14</sup> **A Note On Historical Uncanniness:** The year that the *Renseignements Généraux* (RG), who filmed the abduction, was integrated into the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* (DST), was the same year that *gendarmes* (one of France’s national police forces) would descend on the small village of Tarnac in order to arrest the group that has now come to be known simply as the “Tarnac 9.” In response to their arrest, it would be the then Minister of the Interior, Michèle Alliot-Marie, who labeled the group as an “anarcho-autonomist cell.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 76. The “Grabeliau faction” in question takes its name from its then purged national secretary, Joseph Grabeliau, who, Manchette explains, “set up his own networks within various security and police organizations, networks that he financed in several ways.” Ibid, 88.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 82.



pamaros<sup>17</sup> in demanding the publication of their manifesto,” while *Libération* publishes the New Red Army’s communiqué dismissing the Nada group as “petty-bourgeois nihilists...who are objectively complicit with the power structure.”<sup>18</sup> Complicit though they may be, it is not the same complicity maintained by propaganda outlets of the reformist and bourgeois parties (*Le Monde*, *France-Soir*, *Libération*) and left-wing orientalist fetishistically wanting their own ‘Cultural Revolution’ (New Red Army).

Meanwhile, from the privacy of his Paris apartment, our young philosophy teacher and author of Nada’s manifesto, reads the following analysis from *Le Monde*:

The style is disgusting...and the childishness of certain statements of an archaic and unalloyed anarchist might raise a smile in other circumstances. In the present situation, however, they inspire disquiet, a deep anxiety in the face of the nihilism embraced, seemingly with delight, by this Nada group, which chose such an apt name for itself but which, in its texts as in its actions, express itself in an utterly unjustifiable way.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, Treuffais, without having aided in the kidnapping, still finds himself being held to account. From the vantage point of *Le Monde* and its editors, not only was the kidnapping a counter-revolutionary measure, the idea and its subsequent justification via the manifesto format, was already an embrace of the nihilism at the heart of the group’s “unalloyed anarchism.” Scenes such as these lead readers to feel that the group and their plans are the mere playthings of a fate they have yet to grasp; an intuition that is confirmed soon after the critiques of the groups activities went to print. Not only does the Minister of the Interior agree to pardon Grabeliau and his followers from the *Service d’Action Civique* (thereby allowing for the French police to track down the group to Cash’s farmhouse by means of the newly released video footage), the group, caught off guard, find themselves surrounded by police on all sides. The police, for their part, waste no time and lay siege to their farmhouse and all but one of the group (Buenaventura) makes it out alive, having found himself on a supply run.

As for the Spanish anarchist, it would take the utter failure of the kidnapping, the murder of fellow comrades, and a protracted evasion of the law while attempting to make it back to Paris, for him to eventually realize the truth of Treuffais’ reservations; that the condemnation of terrorism “is not a condemnation of insurrection but a call to insurrection,” with the necessity of wide support.<sup>20</sup> Or as he puts it in a recording made to be broadcast over radio and TV alike:

‘I made a mistake...Leftist terrorism and State terrorism, even if their motivations cannot be compared, are the two jaws of [...] the same mug’s game,’ he concluded, and went on right away: ‘The regime defends itself, naturally, against terrorism. But the system does not defend itself against it. It encourages it and publicizes it. *The desperado is a commodity, an exchange value, a model of behavior like a cop or a female saint.* The State’s dream is a horrific, triumphant finale to an absolutely general civil war to the death between cohorts of cops and mercenaries on the one hand and nihilist armed groups on the other. This vision is the trap laid for rebels, and I fell into it. And I won’t be the last. And that pisses me off in the worst way.’<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The ‘Tupamaros’ refers to the Tupamaros National Liberation Movement (*Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros*, MLN-T); an Uruguayan left-wing urban guerrilla group active from 1967 till 1972. One of its most notable former members, José Mujica, would later go on to serve as the President of Uruguay (2010-2015).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 160, emphasis mine.

It is here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the novel, that we find Manchette at his most Situationist. The trap laid for all would be rebels, we are told, resides in the illusion that national, or even international, media attention can be *immediately* and *directly* used for the purposes of social transformation in the absence of the popular support that is realized during periods of struggles. As Buenaventura points out, while political parties may defend against the variants of ultra-Left *praxis*, it remains the case that the market and its media outlets seemingly encourage and happily publicize it. And if so, it is precisely because the circulation of the image of the revolutionary is nothing more than another commodity readied for mass consumption. That is, the 'left-wing terrorist' is never simply "a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images."<sup>22</sup>

*Nada*, however, does not end with this critique of the figure of the urban guerrilla but with Treuffais, dialing the number of an international press agency, saying, "Listen, man, and take careful notes...I am going to tell you the short but complete history of the Nada group."<sup>23</sup> We do not know if he includes Buenaventura's recordings in this "short but complete" history of the group. And in some sense, neither of these are of great importance. What is of import in this final scene is the manner in which it acts as a critical rejoinder to Buenaventura's discovery of the commodity that lies at the heart of the desperado. The fact that the urban guerrilla's commodification and circulation as that spectacular image, which would shape the relationship between the Nada group, the broader Left, and the masses (and would eventually come to shape the Left's relationship to itself and the broader public in the decades following 1968) does not culminate in Treuffais' resignation but in his reassertion of the revolutionary principles around which the group came together within the realm of the media. *Nada* ends by acknowledging that it's finally become clear that the media is but one more site of contestation in the long game of revolution, and counter-revolution.

Manchette, however, is not interested in a programmatism of literature. If it was the case that in the classic mystery novel (which Manchette nominated as the "great moral literature" of the 1920s–1940s) "crime disturbs the order of the law, which it is crucial must be restored by the discovery of the guilty party and his elimination from the social field," in the world of the *roman noir*, "the order of the law is not good; it is transitory and in contradiction with itself."<sup>24</sup> Unlike works of moral literature that presuppose an essentially just world, the *roman noir* adheres to Benjamin's dictum that every document of history is a document of barbarism. Thus, the *roman noir* can no longer be seen as the complimentary opposite of the mystery novel, such that the preservation of justice can be had by correcting unjust laws. The law that grounds the *roman noir* is identical to the law(s) that determines the world as a concatenation of freely competing interests between various social groups, without recourse to social or historical restitution: for every social group, an Angel of History.

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<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, tr. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Zone: New York, 1995), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>24</sup> Jean-Patrick Manchette, 'Five Remarks on How I Earn My Living,' (1976) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/manchette/1976/earn-living.htm>. Accessed on 4/20/2020.

Manchette would retain a life-long commitment to what one could call a “methodological indistinction between the literary and the political,” a penchant for viewing literary crimes as political crimes, and vice versa. And so much so that as late as his 1994 essay, “The Roman Noir and Class Struggle,” we read Manchette continuing to criticize the laws of that govern capitalist reality (which are viewed as the same laws that govern the *roman noir*):

Against such repression anarchists sometimes toss bombs, and the *agents provocateurs* toss others, which only worsens the situation and worsens the pursuit of “criminal syndicalism.” Other militants, doubtless the best of them, attempt to unify the laboring class in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW, very much of a minority, but active throughout the country, has as its slogan One Big Union, and unites workers without distinction as to craft (or ethnicity), leads several large-scale victorious strikes before and during World War I, and suffers many defeats as well. Its program is anarcho-syndicalist and the organization thus refuses any participation in the electoral political game. After the war it is progressively crushed, principally by judicial means [...] *Its defeat left in tact a tradition of direct action that still flourishes today*, where dynamite and rifles periodically resurface in mining and other conflicts. *But this defeat showed how impossible it was for the proletarian strata to unify.* Which leads us back to the *roman noir*...<sup>25</sup>

Given that Manchette was not only familiar with *roman noir* authors in the American tradition — he was a “passionate admirer of Dashiell Hammett and the bare-bones approach of the American hard-boiled school”<sup>26</sup> — but understood that the genre itself emerged during the rise and fall of class struggle across the United States, it would be post-war France in general, and post-68 France in particular, that came to serve as the French analogue to the American tradition of crime fiction.

Thus, just as the *roman noir* is born amidst the robust tradition of anarchist practice despite the waning of organized labor, *Nada* takes place at a moment when the insurrectionary fervor of 1968 is in decline *and* a critical skepticism towards the revolutionary possibilities harbored within the traditional institutions of the Left (the union, the PCF and the party-form in general, etc.) is reaching its peak. In this sense, the *Nada* group is founded upon the anarcho-syndicalist tradition’s rejection of electoral politics, believing that, if the Party-form is ineluctably corrupted by its participation in the affairs of the State, then the only way forward is through direct and militant intervention into the matters of everyday life; a disjunct between political organization and an inherited tradition of tactics that proved to be for *both* questions concerning the revolution *and* those concerning literature. What is more, it was this disjunct between specific literary and political forms and the set of inherited practices out of which it emerges, that allowed an adaptation of the *roman noir* to function as a critique of the genre, as well.

Among the various limitations of the genre, the clearest, if not most urgent, for Manchette, was the *roman noir*’s apparent allergy to all of those acts of barbarism committed by self-described leftists, no matter what shade of red and/or black:

...the *roman noir* was still in its golden age during the great criminal period of the Comintern (end of the ‘30’s beginning of the ‘40’s). Without counting the Russian purges, nor the liquidations carried out during the tumult of the wars (Spanish Civil War and the World War), the classic *roman noir* literally had before its eyes a multitude of kidnappings and assassinations we dare say

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Patrick Manchette, ‘The Roman Noir and Class Struggle’ (1994), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/manchette/1994/roman-noir.htm>. Accessed on 6/21/2020. Emphasis ours.

<sup>26</sup> Doug Headline, Introduction, *Ivory Pearl*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (NYRB: New York, 2018), viii.

every bit as novelistic as the acts of the Nazis. And it doesn't bother with them. While its virtue lies in its criticizing the criminal organization of the world it forgets to criticize the principle politico-criminal form of this organization: the incongruous alliance of the democratic left with the GPU in order to constitute the camp of the "Good" in a world officially organized in two camps.<sup>27</sup>

The problem that plagued the *roman noir's* relationship to authoritarian violence, says Manchette, involves a chain of reasoning that holds the implicit belief that revolutionary forces and an institution such as the GPU (Soviet Intelligence Service and Secret Police) not only share a set of temporary interests but share the same horizon that would guide their material praxis. Thus, when Manchette criticizes this idea of "a world divided into two camps" and whose problematic structure is supposedly resolved by the formation of the "forces of the 'Good'" against those of capital's functionaries, he is asserting nothing other than the incommensurability between literary genre and political organization; that is, between the *roman noir* and stalinism. For it is in his 1946 Moscow address that Stalin reconstructs the events leading up to and immediately after the second world war in such a way that not only is war the inevitable product of capital, but so too are its results ("as a result of this [war], the capitalist world is split into two hostile camps, and war breaks out between them"<sup>28</sup>).

Thus, the *roman noir's* reluctance to include within itself the various moments of counterrevolution enacted by self-described communists forecloses the possibility of breaking with the false dichotomy between the capitalism of the West and the state-capitalism of the Soviet Union; of reaffirming the anti-fascist principles of the genre as a whole without restricting itself to questions of party allegiance. Such would be Manchette's own assessment regarding the crime novel after 1968: "Most of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s have either been taken over or have run out of steam. The crime novel has followed suit. It is now no more than a minor cultural commodity perfectly integrated into the order of things and governed by authors who share none of my concerns."<sup>29</sup> It is, therefore, all the more fitting that Manchette open's *Nada*, not with the voice of any one of the groups members, but with a police officer's hand written letter, expressing his sense of vindication in light of the murders of all but two of the Nada group:

Turning the other cheek is all very well, but what do you do, I ask you, when you are dealing with people who want to destroy everything? Father Castagnac pretty much agrees with me...His opinion is that if policemen are not ready for anything, like I am, there would be no reason for certain individuals not to do anything they want...Seriously, my sweet Mom, *would you want a country with no police?*<sup>30</sup>

And just to guarantee that the poor, old, mother of this nameless pig understands the struggles that come with his position within the State apparatus, he concludes: "Would you want our property, which we worked so hard for, overrun by levelers and collectivists in an orgy of destruction?...Anyway, yesterday, *all I did was do my job.*"<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jean-Patrick Manchette, "The Roman Noir and Terrorism" (1982), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/manchette/1982/terrorism.htm>. Accessed on 6/21/2020. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph Stalin, Speech Delivered by J. V. Stalin At A Meeting of Voters of the Stalin Electoral District, Moscow, February 9, 1946, 22.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivory Pearl*, viii.

<sup>30</sup> *Nada*, 5-6, emphasis mine.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis mine.

Given everything we've seen — the groups error regarding their level of militancy in relation to popular support, the narrative arc of Nada's coming into being only to pass into a relative nothingness, and all of the criticism levelled by various groups across the red-black spectrum at the group's overall mode of presentation — we are still inclined to reply in the affirmative. We want nothing more than the abolition of the police, though not simply within a single nation-state, but in every nation-state, such that eliminating one aspect of the repressive arm of the State primes us to abolish the State as well. What is more, the horror expressed towards the idea of doing away with private property is nothing but the illusory threat proper to the most uninteresting of bourgeois imaginaries, for it cannot even bind itself to the material conditions of the present, where private property has already been abolished “for nine-tenths of the population,” and whose existence is due solely “to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.”<sup>32</sup> So *all the worse for the cops...* who are right in sensing our collective desire for their abolition.

### 3

*Today's pig is tomorrow's bacon.*<sup>33</sup>

Today, as the question of abolition is in urgent need of being reconciled with the question of tactics, Macnhette's diagnosis and critique of the organized left may serve as a crucial reminder for prioritizing the cultivation of popular support and extra-legal formations for the goals of decolonization, revolution, and emancipation. If in the late 60s, Manchette's scorn was reserved for the capitulation of historically anti-capitalist parties and structures to the totalitarianism that it had once opposed and to global, capitalist, colonial war that it had once stood in opposition to, the organized (decidedly less so) contingents of what remains of the left today can be similarly criticized. Today, however, a more trenchant and necessary diagnosis would read the development of non-profit structures and other complicit forms of institutionalizing struggle that have served to reify capitalism's structures of austerity and philanthropy/charity even as they often aim to genuinely help those cast aside by late capital's forms of value production and alienation.

Returning to Manchette today is not to encourage nostalgia for formerly powerful state communist parties nor to lionize the ultra-left of the post-68 years, but rather for two main reasons: to look to his forms of self-critique as instructive, and secondly to acknowledge that literature, even the bourgeois novel form can be detoured for the purposes of liberation. If collective emancipation and widespread abolition is to occur, we must not only reserve critique for right wing hegemons, but also for the “allies” in elected posts that do more to enshrine capitalist production than undo it. The Green New Deal, for one example, may in fact be one terrain of struggle where popular formations and Indigenous communities can bargain for further recognition, where the goal of full employment can be problematized and made moot (as some, like Alyssa Batistoni have argued), but for that to be the case, we must be mindful to actualize these forms of self-critique.

Almost 50 years since its publication, *Nada* continues to remind us of the questions we are continuously obliged to answer. *What is to be done once the insurrection has come and gone? How to go on making revolution under the reign of a fragmentation so generalized that it has become indistinguishable from everyday life?* Absent the lived promise that one experiences when politics

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<sup>32</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf>. Accessed on 6/18/2020.

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Patrick Manchette, *Nada*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (NYRB: New York, 2019), 169.

spills out into the streets; failed by the weapons and institutions inherited from the history of the workers movement and Party's that remain communist only in name; it is no surprise that the end of the 60's saw the emergence of localized groupuscules tempted into taking desperate actions. And yet, as Manchette is careful to demonstrate, what is desperate about the Nada group is not their affirmation of revolutionary violence, since any effective action taken against capital and its nation-states would necessarily do violence to the existing state of affairs (condemning terrorism "is not a condemnation of insurrection but a call to insurrection"<sup>34</sup>). On the contrary, desperate was their attempted substitution of mediatized attacks against Spectacular society in place of actually existing popular support. That is to say, it is only when there exists a real and solidaritous relation between extra-parliamentary struggle and mass politics that localized actions can become a modality through which collective struggles are realized. Of what use is kidnapping the U.S. Ambassador to France when the Left is in a moment of retreat, and is therefore capable of little else? Hence, the figure of the desperado. Stripped of all social utility, militant praxis becomes nothing more than "*an exchange value, a model of behavior like a cop or a female saint.*"

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<sup>34</sup> Nada, 161.

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