

# Review: “The Coming Insurrection”

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This is the English translation of the principle piece of evidence in an anti-terrorism case in France. Nine people were arrested in 2008, mostly in the village of Tarnac, under the charge of sabotaging overhead electrical lines on the French railways. With only little circumstantial evidence available, the French Interior Minister has associated them with a ultra-left insurrectionary movement and singled out this book as a “manual for terrorism.” It is not that, but is it a manual for revolution?

There is something I like to call “Daily-Mail-Land”, in which “political correctness” has gone mad, an Englishman’s castle has been squatted by gay asylum seekers in burqas claiming benefits from “our” apparently “generous” benefits system while, simultaneously, stealing “our” jobs and all the while New Labour and their caviar quaffing and Champaign guzzling public sector workers have organised legions of dole scroungers to stealth-tax “middle” England and ban them flying the “racist” English flag. Suffice to say, any relation to reality is purely co-incidental.

The left has its own version of this: “Situ-Autonomist-Land.” Here, we are always just moments from social revolution. The masses are not only alienated and exploited, they consciously *know* it and act on that knowledge. Workers are just dying to go on strike and if they don’t then it’s the union-bureaucrats holding them back. If they cross picket lines, it is because the Labour movement is too moderate and they are simply showing their contempt for safe reforms. Every development, no matter how apparently bad, is really (when looked closely enough) a good sign and an expression of proletarian consciousness. Again, reality is a passing acquaintance.

“**The Coming Insurrection**” is firmly part of that world. While I would like to think fellow workers crossing my picket lines was really an expression of their (unconscious) contempt for reformism, a more realistic assessment would suggest 30 years of ruling-class victories (neo-liberalism) have eroded even basic levels of class consciousness. While things are somewhat different in France, reading “**The Coming Insurrection**” on my way to work made me wonder at times whether it was an elaborate hoax or satire. One thing is true, it does not describe the world as I know it. While this may be a reflection on me, I doubt it. I’m not sure that many people would recognise the world it describes.

But perhaps I’m just past it, as the text proclaims there “remains scarcely any doubt that youth will be the first to savagely confront power.” (17) Still, my age does allow me to remember that “I AM WHAT I AM” is not “marketing’s latest offering to the world,” the “final stage” in its development (29) but a hit-single from the early 80s and, half a century before, Popeye’s catchphrase. To

proclaim this as “a *military* campaign, a war cry directed against everything that exists *between* being” (32) seems to be clutching at straws, seeking meaning in the meaningless. Not the best way to start a book on the current crisis we face.

Still, good points are often made, just as the striking and imaginative turn of phrase we come to expect of social protest in France is exercised. They note that work under capitalism is based on both exploitation and participation (45) something all too often glossed over. On ecology, it correctly notes that capitalists “hired our parents to destroy this world, and now they’d like to put us to work rebuilding it, and – to add insult to injury – at a profit” (75–6) So bits and pieces, rarely developed, are of interest but over all the work is lacking in real analysis and strategy.

No attempt is made to synthesis the proclamation that work has developed to the level “that they have almost reduced to zero the quantity of living labour necessary in the manufacture of any product” by means of, amongst others, “outsourcing” and rising productivity. (46) Work is still being done, just in *other* countries. As for raising productivity, they seem to forget they denounced that as the cause of “[s]ickness, fatigue, depression” so making France “the land of anxiety pills ... the paradise of anti-depressants, the Mecca of neurosis.” (33) Still, we are “living the paradox of a society of workers without work” (46) so are we getting stressed being over-worked to produce things we don’t really need. Yet is this that new? Much labour under capitalism has been wasteful, related purely to the needs of the profit system, rather than meeting human needs. Similarly, the “flexible, undifferentiated workforce” hardly produces “the worker who is no longer a worker, who no longer has a *trade*” (the temp) (48) but rather the 19<sup>th</sup> century wage-slave returned. Is there a quantitative difference to suggest a new era and so radically new tactics and strategies?

Destruction is a theme of the book. Thus a “day will come when” Paris and “its horrible concretion of power will lie in majestic ruins, but it will be at the end of a process that will be far more advanced everywhere else.” (132) It talks about “sabotaging the social machine” and ponder “[h]ow can a TGV line or an electrical network be rendered useless?” (112) That sort of irresponsible rhetoric will, undoubtedly, be quoted by the Interior Minister but that does not stop it being stupid. What of the people dependent on said train-line and electricity? Unlike a strike, such infrastructure cannot be easily repaired once destroyed.

This is a recurring theme, ultra-revolutionary rhetoric (with the occasional suggestion which will keep the Interior Minister happy for selective quotes) and a remarkably reformist and quietist practice. The book does present the vision of dropping-out and tending your allotment. It urges us to organise “apprenticeship, and for multiple, massive experiments” including “understand plankton biology” and “soil composition; study the way plants interact.” (107) Comments like understanding “plankton biology” do provoke thoughts of a sophisticated satire. We also discover that the commune “needs money” and that they will “have their black markets. They are plenty of hustles” (103) Yet people fiddling welfare are *less* likely to cause trouble simply to avoid the state taking too great an interest in their goings on.

The collective direct action of the Argentine *piqueteros* they also point to on the same page is the opposite of hustling the system. That they cannot see this suggests they favour doing *something* (“to no longer wait is ... to enter into the logic of insurrection” (96)) but this seems more like action for actions sake, with the hope that something positive will come from it. As a comrade once said in reply to an animal rights activist’s proclamation that “thought without action means nothing”, action without thought means Bar-L (the prison said activist was in at the time).

There is a central paradox of the work. They demonise organisations and milieus while promoting their own. They proclaim that we must “[f]lee all milieus. Each and every milieu is oriented towards the neutralisation of some truth” as they “are the old people’s homes where all revolutionary desires traditionally go to die.” (100) Their solution? “Form communes” (101) And their communes are, what, exactly? Yet another milieu, surely? No, apparently, because the commune only “degenerates into a milieu the moment it loses contact with the truth on which it is founded.” (102) Which is nice and vague, as well as sounding deep...

As for organisations, they are “aren’t needed when people organise themselves.” (122) So organisations are not needed until people need them... And yet their communes do sound like organisations for they “come into being when people find each other, get on with each other, and decide on a common path ... Why shouldn’t communes proliferate everywhere? In every factory, every street, every village, every school. At long last, the reign of the base committees!” (101) Yet we are also informed that an “assembly is not a place for decisions but for *talk*” and that decisions “are vital only in emergency situations, where the exercise of democracy is already compromised.” (122) So general assemblies are out, until the very next page when the book points to the example of “the sections of the Paris Commune during the French Revolution”! (123–4) They seem aware of this obvious contradiction, noting that we must seek “to set aside the fantasy of a General Assembly and replace it with an *assembly of presences*.” (123) What that actually means and how they differ are left to the reader, as is how “we must commit ourselves to their coordination” (127) while the traditional libertarian means of co-ordination, the mandated delegate, is dismissed out of hand (“people with mandates are by definition hindered” (123)).

Yet, who can deny that “[e]very wildcat strike is a commune; every building occupied collectively and on a clear basis is a commune. The action committees of 1968 were communes”? (102) Or deny that such organs of working class power have general assemblies (or sections), discuss and make decisions, federate and mandate delegates for the coordination of their struggles, and so on? To denounce organisation while urging the creation of new organisations is not that convincing, no matter the lovely expressions used.

Is “fucking it all up” (112) *really* a revolutionary strategy? No, it is just a cry of nihilistic alienation at a system which appears to be beyond influence, beyond change. Denouncing everything and postulating the most radical of spontaneous jolts based on pan-destruction and ruins may sound extremely revolutionary but it just shows that they have no real awareness of how to transform society or how a free world could function. In the end, this rhetoric is more often than not a disguise for reformist practice (at best) or inaction (at worst). And this is reflected in the book, with wishful thinking about global insurrection sitting side by side with tending your allotment, fiddling welfare and studying the finer points of plankton cultivation.

Revolution does not mean destruction. It means taking over and transformation, constructive change. It means recognising where we are now and developing strategies to get to a freer society while recognising, and preparing for, the difficulties social movements (never mind a social revolution) will face. Kropotkin (correctly) argued (in “**The Conquest of Bread**” and elsewhere) that a social revolution would face economic disruption and would need to face those challenges. The centralisation and industrialisation of production has continued apace since those days, so it is really not sufficient to glibly suggest “[w]e must start today, in preparation for the days when we’ll need more than just a symbolic portion of our nourishment and care” (107) as provided by allotments and such like. Yes, “a blockade is only as effective as the insurgent’s capacity to supply themselves and to communicate, as effective as the self-organisation of the different communes”

(125) but the aim must be to spread out the struggle and ensure what can be restarted can be done so quickly (something difficult to do if you've destroyed key parts of the social infrastructure). Ironically, it proclaims mainstream environmentalism as a means of ensuring "Voluntary austerity" (77) while, at the same time, urging us to acquire "skills to provide, over time, for one's own basic subsistence ... it seems pointless to wait any longer." (125) Basic subsistence sounds remarkably austere...

External shocks figure large in the book, as "the suspension of normality ... liberate[s] potentialities for self-organisation unthinkable in other circumstances." (119) That our struggle as a class within capitalism may create such potentialities is not the focus. Liberation, if it comes, will come as a result of external forces. Yet this is just the old Marxist focus on capitalist economic breakdown as the motivator for socialism (which raises the question, if socialism *is* so wonderful why does it need even *more* misery to make people want it?). This is applied to history, as the "revolutionary workers' movement understood it well, and took advantage of the crises of the bourgeois economy to gather strength." (119) Except economic crisis has usually resulted in a massive weakening of labour's power. It is harder to strike facing mass unemployment, as can be seen from the organising drives in America during the 1930s starting over 4 years into the Great Depression. Unions in the UK have not recovered from the mass unemployment of the early 1980s recession.

They point to the Paris Commune to show "the unique attraction of the power of fire" (55), apparently forgetting that the burning of Paris was a product of *defeat*. Similarly, they point to Genoa in 2001 as a positive example while failing to note that the movement was kicked off the streets by the state. (127) Is "harassing passersby in the street" *really* the same as "playing cat and mouse with riot police"? (38) Is it *really* above reproach and a sign of leftism if you do note the difference? Tellingly, the book seems to confuse Sergei Eisenstein's film with the actual revolution, proclaiming that "Winter Palaces still exist but they have been relegated to assaults by tourists rather than revolutionary hordes" (131) Yes, it is a cliché that "Nothing appears less likely than an insurrection, but nothing is more necessary" (96) The Russian Revolution broke out shortly after Lenin proclaimed that he would not live to see it. Yet a riot does not equal an insurrection and the book provides no real clue as to how to go from a riot to (social) revolution beyond the vaguest of rhetoric.

Rest assured though: "The impasse of the present, everywhere in evidence, is everywhere denied." (28) That someone may not be convinced of the evidence does not seem to be entertained. Over all it just feels like wishful thinking, but written in a stylish French way and full of striking expressions.

### **The Coming Insurrection**

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