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The Rage of the Slums

Miguel Amorós

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*“How long can this go on?
When are you going to blow it up?
You wanted the war of the worlds and here it is
What do you expect to achieve by setting fires?”*

Lyrics of the hip hop group, Nique Ta Mère, from
the 1995 album, “Paris sous les bombes”

At the beginning of the 1980s, when the urban revolts of Brixton (London), Toxteth (Liverpool) and Les Minguettes (Lyon) took place, radical milieus were struck by the sensation of witnessing a final resurgence of the proletarian offensive against class society, which was then well on the way in its transition towards more perfect forms of exploitation and domestication. The Polish workers effectively undermined bureaucratic rule and struggles had only recently broken out in the old continent that pointed directly at the root of the problem, such as the Spanish assembly movement, workers autonomy in Italy, the riots and arson in the North of France or the confrontations between the police and the English miners.

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Within the span of five or six years the state had provided irrefutable evidence both of its incompetence, due to its inability to control the capitalist system, and of its impotence, due to its inability to maintain order in the factories and the slums. Direct action made progress. The liquidation of large industrial sectors that were no longer competitive, and the confinement of the unemployed in ghettos located on the peripheries of the major cities, threatened to provoke a greater crisis than the one that the state was trying to ameliorate. The proletariat emerged from its suicidal passivity and refused to allow itself to be led like cattle to the slaughter. So much hatred reigned in its ranks that the smallest spark triggered explosions of violence, which were unfortunately local and isolated. The radicals were hoping that this working class rage would spread enough to obstruct the mechanisms of repression and permit direct communication among the pariahs of the earth, without the mediation of leaders. "When the workers speak to one another, the state dissolves." The slum revolts were to confirm this transformation of everyday despair into a vivid hatred. The inhabitants of the outlying suburbs (the impoverished working class) did not accept the destiny to which it was condemned by capitalist exploitation and violently rejected both work as well as the miserable life upon which it was based. The collective violence of the slums showed all the proletarians the road to follow to escape from the dynamic of production-consumption. They could not bring themselves to beg for the right to work and to a place to live by presenting as desirable what for many of them was already unbearable, but to satisfy the will to live fully they had to confront the system head-on, proceeding methodically. Firebombs and baseball bats had to make way for critical discussion, the rejection of all mediation, and anti-hierarchical association. We know how all that ended. Through a mixture of repression, drugs and trade unionism, the first victories were not capitalized upon, many opportunities were allowed to pass by, steps in the wrong direction were taken, stagnation set in,

etc., and we are paying today for the consequences of those errors and failures. Those who fought on these fronts became more impoverished as far as communicable experience is concerned. They proved to be defenseless on a terrain that within a few years became unrecognizable. The closing of industrial plants condemned a large number of workers to a precarious existence. They soon found themselves without jobs and without resources. But the new poverty was much more than just material poverty: life was constantly being digitalized and submission to the most insignificant economic or technological imperatives was the norm. The impoverishment of experience, both private and public, was the main result of this development, and the one that defined a new condition of barbarism. I have called the society in which this condition prevails, mass society.

The rupture between two eras was brutal and absolute. Who would dare under these conditions to address rebel youth in terms of the experience of the era of classes? The working class community has disintegrated and the rule of the new oligarchies over mass society is very different from the previous rule of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. The unemployed are not utilized as a “reserve army” to put pressure on wages, but as a threat to “security”, that is, as a public enemy, in order to obtain the absolute submission of that part of the population that is still integrated in the market. The unemployed no longer constitute an element within the market but are permanently excluded and condemned to material and moral degradation, precisely because it is not their poverty that the system seeks to exploit, but the image of their poverty. The worse that image is, the better. The spectacle assumed responsibility for criminalizing them, first identifying the slums with violence, and then, later, with both immigration and fundamentalism. It is clear that the slum was the laboratory for spectacular domination where the social management of the future was tested. There, political experiments were carried out *in vivo*

that were later applied to all domains of society, when all of society had been transformed into a slum. The R.G. (French national police intelligence service) [*Direction Centrale des Renseignements Généraux* or Central Directorate of General Intelligence—Tr. Note] had already created in 1991, due to the revolts in Vaulx-en-Velin (Lyon) and Sartrouville (Paris), a Section for “cities and suburbs” which was at first called the “urban violence” Section. With all the difficulties entailed by the management of a society that is being undermined and besieged by every kind of real catastrophe, while the cities were being evacuated in order to provide accommodations only to tourists and elites, and at the same time that the cities were spreading throughout the countryside and transforming the latter into suburbs, the spectacle helped to unleash and propagate their “violence”.

The revolt of October 27 was an experiment of this kind, having originated in a public relations exercise on the part of the Minister of the Interior, Sarkozy, with an eye to the presidential elections. It was not the deaths of two boys who were being chased by the police when they were burned alive in a transformer that triggered the revolt, but rather the media coverage of this event. The police had claimed that one hundred arson fires each day was normal for the country and the first days witnessed the burning of far fewer cars than that, but the event was magnified. All the emphasis that immediately followed, with Sarkozy’s fascist threats, only made sense as a provocation: he played with fire because he wanted fire. The media caused and provided further encouragement for the incidents. “We like to see ourselves on television, it makes us feel proud”, an arsonist would say. And starting a fire is the best way to appear on the daily TV news. In fact, there was a competition between young people mesmerized by television: “when we see what they are doing in the other neighborhoods, we want to do better”. “We have understood that this is how we can get them to pay attention to us”, others would say,

illuminating all at once the terrible truth of a cruel and absurd era; all the people of France saw it and were scared shitless. So the only really French passion that survives in our neighboring country is just that, fear; and it is also the only surviving passion in all modern countries, but in France it reaches truly pathological levels. The sudden rise to popularity of Sarkozy, that hysterical politician who speaks “the same language as the French”, is enough to prove this, as if any more were needed. The rage of the slums is the rage of Reason, but it does not know this. The arsonists are starting from scratch, alone, without anyone’s help, neither on the terrain of solidarity or on that of ideas. They will have to leave in their wake more than just smoldering ashes if they want to give shape to that project that is perfectly characterized in the rap slogan, “Nique la France!” (Fuck France!). An incitement that, slightly altered, should be put into practice by all rebels in their respective countries.

and they would add: “With three nights of rioting we have obtained results; we got on television and they are going to distribute pasta in our neighborhood”. The anger of the youth ultimately was good for something, finding flammable material in two hundred more cities, even in rural areas, and providing the planet with the pleasing image of a country in flames. One cannot blame the protagonists for not following the script to the letter. The victim in the end was the Government, which did not succeed in criminalizing them. Neither organized criminals, nor foreigners, nor even all those of North African or Sub-Saharan origin. Just despised young French people, without a present or a future in the system, persecuted by the same people who marginalized them. Neither drug dealers nor religious fundamentalists had anything to do with it. Furthermore, in the neighborhoods where the mafias or the Islamists exercised a certain amount of control, there were no fires. It was necessary to retract certain claims. The president of the Republic himself, challenging the government, pointed to “the poison of discrimination” as the cause of the riots. And, as Sarkozy’s proclamation of “zero tolerance” implied, the government wanted to direct the attention of the panic stricken, domesticated French population towards the zones of deprivation, not of course to put an end to marginalization, but to throw the young people who survived in those zones into prison, along the lines of the Penal State. The spectacle was dealt a setback, however. The rule of order was scandalously thrown into turmoil for more than three weeks by a handful of adolescents. What would have happened if all the inhabitants of the slums had participated in the revolt? One of the “most powerful states in the world” was subjected to ridicule and social disintegration became visible along with its causes: exclusion, racism, penal urbanism, police control. The government had to resort to proclaiming a curfew under a law passed during the era of the Algerian war, a law whose provisions were not even implemented in May ’68. The Interior Ministry spokesperson Copé blamed the foreign

press for having disseminated the truth, that is, the image of a civil war in France, and warned that, “no country is immune from situations like this, we have seen it in the past and, unfortunately, we could see it again in the future”. The extension of this state of emergency for three months helped dispel any remaining doubts concerning this kind of civil war, with a total of 3,000 arrested and 600 imprisoned, many of whom were sentenced in expedited trials to up to four years in prison. On the one hand, the government extended the state of emergency, while on the other hand it decided that a stage of social assistance was necessary before the establishment of a police state, so it is going to hire 20,000 young people on short-term labor contracts, mostly in the cities. “Voluntary civil service”, “social work”, religion and the “fabric of solidarity” were openly discussed as means of control. The fiasco of police state methods led to the recognition of the need for mediators in order to break up the cohesiveness of the revolt and to deactivate its mechanisms. And if they could not find such mediators they would follow the advice of the sordid Jean Daniel: “create elites artificially”.

The real crime of the revolt was to have revealed the woeful condition of contemporary French society. For their part the young arsonists did not provide many clues about what they wanted but instead indicated exactly what they did not want. They did not want the slums; not the one they lived in or any other. That is why they were destroying them. They did not have any respect for cars, or for journalists, or for firemen, or for McDonalds, or for police stations, or shopping centers that they did not even bother to loot; nor did they want schools, or libraries, or gymnasiums, or welfare offices—so just what did they want? When they did blurt out something like a demand, such as, for example, for Sarkozy’s resignation, decent jobs, justice, etc., they were only repeating the clichés that they had learned from the teachers in their schools. Not even rap lyrics expressed any clear demand. The concerns of the latter

were quite topical. Hatred of the police, the desire to be treated with respect, designer label clothing and not much more. You cannot even call that a language. They spend all their time confusing reality and fiction just like all the other young people: “during the day we sleep, we see our girlfriends, we play with our Playstations ... and at night, we go out to have some fun; at nine we go to make war on the police—we are in the Matrix!” But by some ruse of History, this time fiction does not help to escape from reality but instead helps to cheerfully put up with it. After video games, the flames. Their lack of experience obliges them to start all over again, without the inspiration of anything real, and make a clean slate of everything. This is why they are hardly capable of explaining their actions. They do not follow directives, they are not organized, they do not issue declarations. They make no demands, they make no proposals, they do not enter into dialogue. They only set fires. With these acts of arson they point out that the road to the only solution proceeds via the destruction of the entire oppressive environment. And by remaining totally negative, they prevent the revolt from being used by recuperators. But they also prevent it from ever being anything but that: negation, violence. And violence is not necessarily radicalism. Today, destruction and subversion do not travel on the same road. For now, violence is the only way those who do not count and have nothing to lose can express themselves: “we only know how to talk with fire”, “we have no choice”; it is a way of feeling good: “Damn it, I breathe when I burn”, and even a way to just hang out: “I have nothing to do all day long.” However, violence, too, and this is its weak point, is a way of achieving something positive, that is, to achieve recognition and attention. For what purpose? To “reestablish civic and republican values among the most disadvantaged classes”, so they can be returned to the fold.

The nihilist rage of the slums is a reflection of the nihilism of the dominant system. The angry youths have merely served as a mirror for its irresponsibility and its unconsciousness by