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A Sales Pitch for the Insurrection™

A Critical Look at *The Coming Insurrection*

Wolfi Landstreicher, Apio Ludd, Feral Faun

2019

**“the same sales assistants adjusting their dis-
course according to the findings of the latest
surveys”**

It would be easy enough to go through *The Coming Insurrection* phrase by phrase showing how bad the book is, but it really isn't worth the effort. Still, since Semiotext(e) published it in English (with MIT Press as its distributor), it has gained popularity, not only among the fans of right-wing idiot Glenn Beck, who gave it free advertising when he denounced it as a dangerous communist book on his show, but also among anarchists. I am not sure why, because Glenn Beck was right about one thing: this book is not anarchist; it is communist.¹

In addition, despite what the French Interior Minister and the prosecutor in the Tarnac 9 case have said, this book is neither a “manual of terrorism,” nor a “manual of sabotage,” or

¹ Not anarchist-communist, not anarcho-communist; just straight-up communist.

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even a “manual of insurrection.” A manual is a book that gives instructions on how to do something. It has concrete, useful contents. This book does not; it merely has a product to sell.

Even the byline reflects its lack of content. “The Invisible Committee” to which the book is attributed claims to be “an imaginary collective,”² made up of “contributors” to the book who “are not its authors,” but merely “scribes” introducing “a little order into the common-places of our time.” They have collected these “common-places” from “murmurings around barroom tables and behind closed bedroom doors” (28). The book is actually authorless— so the authors tell us. But this doesn’t prevent the imaginary Committee, which repeatedly proclaims its adherence to communism, from copyrighting the book, thus claiming exclusive, private ownership of the text. After all, “The commune needs money” (103), and with MIT Press doing distribution and Glenn Beck helping with publicity, this imaginary Invisible Committee of “contributors” and “scribes” is sure to get some decent royalty checks.³

If the book lacks content, it does not lack the shallow, emotionladen language useful to advertisers and slick political propagandists. Before you even get to the table of contents you’ll find these words: “The book you hold in your hands has become the principle piece of evidence in an anti-terrorism case in France directed against nine individuals who were arrested on November 11, 2008...” (5). This could have been an opportunity to expose how the repressive ploys of the state function, to point out how little evidence there is that any of those arrested took part in writing the book including the one individ-

² In keeping with the reifying ideology this book is selling, I have chosen to talk as if the Invisible Committee is an entity that acts, rather than a mere name that certain individuals chose to use. I intend this sarcastically...

³ The book apparently spent several hours as the number-one seller on Amazon the day after Beck’s denunciation, and has continued to be bestseller there, still in the low hundreds on a site that handles hundreds of thousands of titles.

were, indeed, simply carried away by the “truth” of events (perhaps their commune’s need for extra money?) and couldn’t help themselves—in which case they would be justified in denying their role as authors, but would be rather pathetic as human beings—or, as *L’Incomestible* (the Indigestible who also claims to be the Invisible Committee) says, the book was simply a pataphysical hoax...⁸ In either case, their Insurrection™ is a joke.

⁸ You can find the document, *La vérité sur “L’insurrection qui vient” ou les mésaventures d’un canular pataphysique*, which makes this claim at <http://juralibertaire.over-blog.com/article-la-verite-sur-l-insurrection-quivient-ou-les-mesaventures-d-un-canular-pataphysique-38519292.html>. For a clumsy English translation go to <http://www.notbored.org/pataphysical-truth.html>.

ual who the authorities claim helped author it, to clarify that it is not a manual for anything. In other words it could have been the opportunity to create a bit of substance. Apparently that didn’t interest the publishers. They preferred to use the arrest of the Tarnac 9 and the state’s use of the book against them as an advertising gimmick, going so far as to distort facts: “taking care to single out this book, described as a ‘manual of terrorism,’ which *they* [the Tarnac 9] are accused of authoring” (5; emphasis added). In fact, only one of *them*, Julien Coupat, a co-founder of the journal *Tiqqun*, was accused of authoring this book.⁴ The main charge against the “9” was “criminal association for the purposes of terrorist activity,” but to the US publishers, this charge only seems to serve as an adjunct that aids in advertising the book.

“Everybody agrees”

The Invisible Committee provides an introduction to the American edition entitled “A Point of Clarity.” It is nearly as empty as the rest of the book, but its first two sentences are obviously intended to catch you and draw you in. “Everyone agrees. It’s about to explode” (9). Thrills and excitement are bound to follow... But there is more to the first sentence. “Everyone agrees” is precisely the attitude the Invisible Committee has about everything it has “contributed” to this book. If you are looking for publicity slogans, for fiery political propaganda, for emotional ultra-left platitudes, it’s all here. On the other hand, if you are looking for well-reasoned arguments, well-constructed theoretical analyses, significant examinations and inquiries into the world we face today and how we might confront it, forget it. Arguments are

⁴ The Invisible Committee repeats this fallacy in their introduction to the American edition on page 17, in a way that also seems like an attempt to exploit the Tarnac 9 case to give credibility to a book that even its scribes must realize has little content.

unnecessary because “everyone agrees” (9 and 13) “everyone can testify to” (40), “everyone feels” (40) the “few necessary truths” (28) that the scribes have laid down, so what need is there for arguments, analyses, and theoretical endeavors? At least they leave a clear clue that we can expect no arguments, no explanations, and no analyses. We’re dealing with honest hucksters.

The introduction is clearer about a few other things. On page 12, we are told, “Revolutionary movements do not spread by contamination but by resonance.” They go on to point out that “An insurrection is not like a plague or a forest fire,” but rather “takes the shape of music, whose focal points...succeed in *imposing* the rhythm of their own vibrations” (12–13; emphasis added). What is interesting in these metaphors is not the distinctions made, since these are pretty vacuous, but the fact that there isn’t any consideration of the possibility that a revolutionary movement or an insurrection might be something that you and I might strive to create through our own intentional activity. Their preferred metaphors speak of something that happens to us, not something we do. This assumption – that we have no agency as individuals – permeates the book, which, in itself, guarantees that it cannot be a manual. What use is there in giving instructions to those who can only be moved by resonances and rhythms imposed upon them? In fact, according to the book’s scribes, insurrection operates precisely like Empire, since it too “is a rhythm that imposes itself, a way of dispensing and dispersing reality” (13). This theme of abstractions, actions, and relationships as the sources of agency in the world runs through the book. And really, could any substantial, meaningful content possibly resonate from the imposed rhythms of such an ideology?

This denial of individual agency is already enough to tell us that the authors are not anarchists. On page 15, they tell us clearly what their agenda is: “Everywhere, a new idea of communism is to be elaborated.” There you have it. They are com-

about attacking this world with the aim of destroying it. The promotion of scamming (103–105), DIYism (106–7) and “informal” economics are fine if all you are talking about is getting by in this world as easily as possible, but if you are talking about eradicating this world and creating a new way of living, they are simply not enough.

The Committee also tells us that it’s a fine thing to travel and communicate, as long as we are “prudent, innocuous” (109). And yet it also recommends “incivilities of the streets” (110–111). Considering that in the present world such “incivilities” are inevitable, I don’t think the scribes had any choice here. Especially since their entire theory rests on letting the “truth” of events carry you. But there is another reason why the Committee supports such “incivilities”: “In fact though, rage and politics should never have been separated” (111), especially when you have a supposedly revolutionary political program to sell, however hidden it may be. And the Invisible Committee has made its program clear: the disappearance of individuals into “the commune.” This is their copyrighted Insurrection™.

In addition, the scribes of *The Coming Insurrection* promote sabotage, “invisible” night actions, the self-defense of the “communes,” continued confrontations with cops, alternative forms of social welfare, blockades, etc. People who call themselves radical already do these things. The Invisible Committee offers nothing new, either theoretically or practically while what it does offer has been said before many times and with much more substance. But the Committee, like a good sales representative, says it in a way that makes us feel good. We have nothing to worry about. What we’re doing is fine. All we have to do is go with the flow, give ourselves over to the truth of the commune, and the Insurrection™ will come to us. *The Coming Insurrection* is selling a feel-good ideology that rids us of any responsibility for our lives or our rebellion. It is an empty book, with no more content than any other sales pitch. There are only two possible excuses for writing it. Either the scribes

say we” other than the possibility of complicity between you and me. If this is what the communes are, I am not won over.

But the Committee does have more to say. If it presents individuals as a fiction, a mere expression of social alienation, it presents communes as active agents that can “accept being what they are” rather than being “constituted” by external forces. Communes have the capacity not to be afraid, to “organize themselves,” to “define themselves.” In other words, the Committee grants the agency that it has denied to individuals throughout *The Coming Insurrection* to these communes. *The commune* “seeks to dissolve the question of needs,” *the commune* “seeks to break all economic dependency and all political subjugation,” and *the commune* “degenerates into a milieu the moment it loses contact with the truths on which it is founded” (102). In fact, “The commune is the *basic unit* of partisan reality” (117; emphasis added). The Invisible Committee has made it clear. The individual is nothing. It is the commune that acts, the commune that decides, the commune that accepts, the commune that isn’t afraid... But the Committee still hasn’t told us what the commune is.

This is no accident. The further I read into the second half of the book, the clearer it became that all of this verbiage does have a purpose: it provides a hip language for justifying the practices that radicals of almost all stripes have been carrying out for years, but which some of us have begun to question. Thus, if “the time of the commune eludes work,” it is because “all communes have their black markets” (103), involving “all kinds of trafficking,” “hustles,” “frauds.” While I certainly have no problem with such modes of survival in the present world, the Committee doesn’t show how such activities are anything more than that, how they are insurrectionary. If the book wasn’t entitled *The Coming Insurrection*, I would assume this was because the authors were awaiting the “imminent collapse” (105) that they say is felt everywhere. But insurrection is not about living on the margins of the present world; it is

munists, just like the Tarnac 9 (see page 17). And like most communists I know, they don’t seem to think too highly of anarchists or anarchism. The word “anarchist” (and its plural) appears a total of four times in the book.

Two of these times, it is used in an explicitly negative and insulting way (15 and 100); the other two times it is relatively neutral (116 and 120). The word “anarchy” appears in one sentence: “Everyone finds themselves forced to take sides, to choose between anarchy and the fear of anarchy” (130). In context, it isn’t possible to tell precisely what the scribes mean by “anarchy,” but it is clear that they do not mean individuals taking their lives and struggles into their own hands and creating them on their own terms; first of all, because we are “forced to choose” and secondly because they have made it abundantly clear that, in their opinion, “individuals” are not capable of any such thing. So whatever this “anarchy” is, it is something being forced upon us. It is certainly not the anarchy of *anarchists*.

This brings me to the most important thing that the introduction clarifies. For the Invisible Committee, the individual is a “fiction.” The Committee tells us, “The fiction of the individual has decomposed at the same speed that it was becoming real” (16). And in case you think that they might have seen anything positive in this “becoming real,” all you have to do is go through the rest of the book and read the “common-places” and “necessary truths” the scribes have to share about individuality. In fact, if you take these scribes at their word, individuality would seem to be the greatest enemy of communism and insurrection in the present world. The word “I” appears more often in the book than the word “state,” six times more often than “capitalism,” four times more often than “class,” and it is used negatively almost every time. Variations on the word “individual” appear over three times more often than capitalism and twice as often as class. Never, except in two quotes, one from a judge (38) and one from a cop (126), and in the sales pitch on page 5 that the *publishers* put before the table of con-

tents, is there any allowance for individual *agency*. But if the individual is a fiction, how could it be otherwise?

The Coming Insurrection itself starts with a prologue that has very little to say. Hip, slick language to remind us again that they are simply clarifying what everybody knows, what everybody feels, what everybody agrees... our “common experience” that we no longer have “any common language for” (26). Well then, why does the Invisible Committee keep on babbling about it? I would have preferred an Inaudible Committee. But along with its revelation that it is talking in “common-places” (ie, banalities and clichés), it also reveals that its project is “political,” but has “nothing to do with politics.” This slippery word game makes its debut on page 25, where the Invisible Committee is careful not to slip up in the distinction they make between “politics” (bad) and “the political”(good). But it’s hard to maintain such care with this sort of word juggling. In fact, in the American edition, even before you come to this distinction between “the political” and “politics” (whose “resolute negation” has a “purely political character”), you will learn in the introduction that the French authorities are worried about *The Coming Insurrection*, because of an “idea of politics” (17) it expresses. Further, on page 111, the Committee declares that “rage and politics should never have been separated.” So apparently there is a worthy form of politics that is not to be politically negated. Indeed, the book promotes a *political* agenda with its “imaginary party,” its “party of insurrection.” And it has as much content as most political agendas nowadays.

“There is no *I* in team”

Now we enter the hell of this world. The next portion of *The Coming Insurrection* is their transcription of what we all know and agree about this world, their observations of the social hell in which we live. If I were to begin describing the hell of this world, I would start by looking at the institutional structures that make up the social reality that is imposed on us: the

carry us away, seeing that as truth... The Committee claims that “every insurrectional process starts from a truth that we refuse to give up.” There is no place then in their perspective for *my* insurrection, for the insurrection of concrete individuals against the social realities that enslave them, because such an insurrection would not start from “a truth we refuse to give up,” but rather from the questioning of “truths” that have been imposed.

Using the same logic, the scribes inform us that “all affinity is affinity *within* a common truth” (98). In other words, it is based on the *lowest common denominator* found in a truth, not an interweaving of desires and projects that enhance each other. The latter, of course, would be too ephemeral for the scribes. If only collective entities like communes have agency, this lowest common denominator is necessary. Affinity based on the interweaving of the desires, dreams, and projects of individuals would lack the permanence necessary to maintain the existence of these collective entities. But once again, the Invisible Committee has proclaimed that a thing we do is instead a thing that does us. Affinity is not a relationship individuals create among themselves, but something a common truth does to them. I could go on about this, but it gets tiresome.

“the essence of bullshit is not that it is *false* but that it is *phony*” —Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*

After warning us against organizations and milieus, the Invisible Committee calls us to “form communes.” They don’t explain how or why a commune is not a form of organization or a more solidified milieu. They simply say: “It’s what makes us say ‘we’ and makes that an event” (101). The Committee will have to excuse me if, in this world of patriotism and nationalism, of stalinism and nazism, of religious, racial and ethnic violence, I am just a bit suspicious of anything that “makes us

other. It starts talking about “truth.” I suppose this is necessary. The Invisible Committee wouldn’t want us to forget that real agency lies in abstract concepts, and what is more abstract than this concept of “truth”? To make sure that we make no mistakes about this, the scribes inform us: “A truth isn’t a view on the world but what binds us to it in an irreducible way. A truth isn’t something we hold but something that carries us. It makes and unmakes me, constitutes and undoes me as individual...” I am not the one who acts; rather, truth acts upon me, it is the agent and I am merely its puppet, moved by its force. They clarify: “An isolated being who holds fast to a truth will inevitably meet others like her” (97–8). In other words, we can remain passive, riding on the wave of the truth that carries us, and this abstraction will inevitable bring us together. There is no need for us to act, no need for us to take any responsibility for our existence.

But what is this “truth” the Committee puts so much faith in? It is something that events produce “by changing our way of being.” But who, or what, produces these events? This question isn’t dealt with at all. There are simply events and the truths that they produce, and you and I have no choice but to let ourselves be taken by these truths. Stirner would have called such “truths” fixed ideas. I would call them ideologies. The most telling thing the Invisible Committee has to say about “truth” is that “Conversely, any observation that leaves us indifferent, doesn’t affect us, doesn’t commit us to anything, no longer deserves the name of truth” (97). In other words, truth is determined by the *emotional power* of an observation, not by whether it has any connection with the concrete world in which we live. In light of the methods of the Committee and the publishers with whom they have worked, it isn’t so surprising that the truths this collective non-entity upholds are supposed to function in precisely the way that advertisements and political propaganda are supposed to function— moving us, affecting us, committing us to whatever product or cause can

state, economic structures, work, law, religion, the family, the technological system, and the like. Not the Invisible Committee... Its first target is “I,” the individual. The entire first circle is dedicated to attacking individuality as alienation. The fact that this is where the Committee starts in exposing the nature of the current social hell shows how central this is to its political agenda. For it, “I” refers only to “marketing’s latest offering to the world, the final stage in the development of advertising” (29). As such, how could it not be something “wrong,” the cause of emptiness and draining? I kept looking⁵ for the place where the Invisible Committee would see past the typical, tedious leftist rejection of individualism to real, concrete, living individuals, to you and me. It wasn’t there. Not in the first circle, and not anywhere else. On pages 31–32, they make it clear that they do not see themselves (or anyone else) as even potentially creators of their own lives:

What am I? Tied in every way to places, sufferings, ancestors, friends, loves, events, languages, memories, to all kinds of things that obviously are not me. Everything that attaches me to the world, all the links that constitute me, all the forces that compose me don’t form an identity, a thing displayable on cue, but a singular, shared, living existence, from which emerges – at certain times and places – that being which says ‘I’. Our feeling of inconsistency is simply the consequence of this foolish belief in the permanence of the self and of the little care we give to what makes us what we are.⁶

⁵ I read through the book four times for clarification and to gather quotes for this review. In addition, I skimmed it several times for specific concepts.

⁶ This is one of several places where the US translators chose to word things in a way that hides the full implications of the original. Here we read, “a singular, shared, living existence,” an odd enough phrase in itself.

The “I” in this passage is not a self-creator, an acting entity using its past, its present surroundings, its relationships, etc, to constitute and compose itself in each moment. Rather *links* and *forces* constitute and compose this “I.” In other words, I, as a concrete, living, breathing individual, am merely the product of *abstractions*, because a link that is not the linking of two or more individual beings or things is an abstraction. A force that is not the active use of force by an individual being or thing is an abstraction. And here is the political program of the imaginary party of insurrection for which the Invisible Committee speaks: “the dismantling of the hypothesis of the self” (33), because “*The self is not some thing within us that is in a state of crisis; it is the form they [that delightful, abstract “they”] mean to stamp upon us*” (33; emphasis in the original). In fact, “meditation and the police are the only possible forms of conciliation” within this society, not because it requires conformity and the suppression of individuality and rebellion, but because “everywhere, the hypothesis of the self is cracking” (34). Even the political program of “the dismantling of the hypothesis of the self” is something that is already happening to us by force of circumstance, not something we do.

“Humans have given away all their power to a ‘they.’ You aren’t able to fight the system because without the system none of you can survive. You made a world without alternatives, and now your new world already belongs to ‘they’...” —Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods*

The rare times that the Invisible Committee gets beyond fancy wordplay and sloganeering, it is merely to deal with

But in the French it says: “une *existence*, singulière, commune, vivante,” that is, “a singular, *common*, living existence.” I point this out because, in English, where “singular” means “unique, one-of-a-kind,” this phrase is a contradiction; “singular” and “common” cancel each other out, making this clause meaningless.

need to do. Since they “can no longer see how an insurrection might begin” (95), I am not sure why they waste their time on this. But it does give them the opportunity to further develop their sales pitch. They certainly wouldn’t agree with me that social insurrection requires the coming together of individual insurrections (individuals defying state and economic control over their lives), since they see individuals as fictions imposed by the state. But they also seem to ignore the history of social insurrections. If most riots have not become social insurrection, every social insurrection began with rioting. But considering the extent to which the Invisible Committee rejects the concept of individual human agency, perhaps it is simply saying that it can’t figure out what historical force would trigger insurrection now. In any case, if the Committee is as ignorant as it claims here, it is the height of arrogance to go on to offer more than thirty-five pages of strategic solutions, and it is likewise no surprise that its insurgent strategy is as fatuous as its analysis of this society.

The scribes inform us that “every act of government is nothing but a way of not losing control of the population.” This implies that the population is always on the verge of going out of control. But this claim is immediately followed with its contradiction: “We are starting out from a point of extreme isolation, of extreme weakness. An insurrectional process must be built from the ground up. Nothing appears less likely than an insurrection, but nothing is more necessary” (96). In the quarter inch of blank space between two paragraphs, it seems that this population, which the government must expend all of its energy to control, has just vanished. No wonder the Committee cannot see how an insurrection might begin. It cannot even decide whether there is a population on the verge of going out of control or whether we are starting out in isolation.

In any case, the scribes go on to prescribe that we “FIND EACH OTHER.” Strangely, though, this chapter does not start by talking about our relationships or how we might find each

in other words, as a spook haunting our heads, that civilization “rules, takes possession, colonizes ... holds together” anything. Concretely, specific human beings—operating within institutional structures they establish and maintain through our alienated activity and force—rule, take possession, colonize and hold together. As some insurrectionary anarchists have said, our rulers and colonizers have names and addresses... They are not hypotheses nor abstractions, but concrete individuals who have made themselves the enemies of all those who would like to create their lives on their own terms. An understanding of the social order based on reified thought can only be confused and confusing. Thus, it is not surprising to find meaningless drivel like this just a few sentences later: “The older and more powerful a state, the less it is a superstructure or exoskeleton of society and the more it constitutes the subjectivities that people it. The French state is the very texture of French subjectivities, the form assumed by the centuries-old castration of its subjects” (87). Certainly, “a completely rhetorical critique.” But I suppose that since the “era of states, nations and republics is coming to an end” and “the state can no longer do anything at all” (89), there is no need to make a real critique based on a deep examination of the social reality in which we live. After all, these “outmoded fictions of the West” only maintain themselves “through artifices that contradict these fictions point by point” (92). These *fictions* that *maintain themselves* carry their destruction within themselves, since the artifices by which they maintain themselves contradict these fictions. All we have to do is decide to go along with the process the fictional social system itself is creating with its contradictions.

“Those who claim to have solutions are contradicted almost immediately”

Having skimmed the surface of the seven circles of the current social hell as they see it, our scribes now tell us what we

symptoms, treating them as causes. Superficiality is the current order of the day in what passes for theoretical endeavors, so they are only being fashionable.

However, this doesn’t mean that there is nothing of interest here, at least for exposing the agenda of the Invisible Committee. For example, in the second circle, the “imaginary collective” gives its first description of what the state does⁷ when they mention “the relentless, age-old work of *individualization* by the power of the state, that classifies, compares, disciplines and separates its subjects starting from a very young age, that instinctively grinds down any solidarities that escape it until nothing remains except citizenship – a pure phantasmic sense of belonging to the Republic” (36; emphasis added). So we learn that it is state power that individualizes us. How? By categorizing, comparing, disciplining, and separating us, until we are nothing but *citizens*. Having assumed that the only individuality is alienation, the Invisible Committee cannot help but resort to absurdities of this sort. You do not create yourself as an individual; rather the state individualizes you by forcing you into a *category* (a group identity, comparing you to others – thus denying your uniqueness), disciplining you (forcing you to conform to its required standard of behavior), and separating you into those categories by means of the comparisons it has forced upon you. This false – wholly state-powered – individualization reduces everyone to citizens. Like Orwell’s newspeak in 1984, this is (in oldspak) bullshit. To be more specific, *leftist* bullshit, the same old, tired leftist critique of individualism we’ve been hearing for decades. The saddest thing is that this

⁷ In the main text of *The Coming Insurrection*, the state is only mentioned twice before this, a reference to the “welfare state” in the prologue and a mention in a note in the prologue in an odd reference to a “mafia code of silence” that seems to have no connection to the real workings of the mafia. In the American edition, the added introduction has three equally vacuous references to the state.

is about as deep as the book gets in its analysis of the state, and it is a false, shallow, and anti-anarchist analysis.

The scribes assume that the state is already a thing of the past, at most a “wounded” but “still dangerous” beast (130), definitely collapsing, weakening to the point that it “can no longer do anything at all” (89) so that activists may feel “a touching nostalgia for the state” (68). According to the Invisible Committee, since history appears to be clearing the state out of the way, why waste time actually trying to understand what the state is and how it operates? The state, rather than the individual, is treated as a living thing (even if it is now supposedly in its death throes) that acts upon us. But when you go looking for the state, you are not going to find this *thing*. You will find buildings, uniforms, papers, weapons, and various other objects; these, in themselves, do not constitute the state. They only take on meaning as tools of the state through specific activities and relationships, of individuals interacting with each other in specific, institutionalized ways. The state is not going to fade away, it is not going to collapse, as long as *individuals* continue to relate in these institutionalized manners, denying their own capacity to create themselves in each moment.

If the Invisible Committee lacks any analysis of the state, the way they deal with the family is actually rather amusing. Toward the end of the second circle in the American edition, you will find these words: “We count on making that which is unconditional in our relationships the armor of a political solidarity as impenetrable to state interference as a gypsy camp. There is no reason that the interminable subsidies that numerous relatives are compelled to offload onto their proletarianized progeny can’t become a form of patronage in favor of social subversion” (42). Obviously, we all work out how we are going to survive in this world as best we can, but there is something absurd about claiming that living off a stipend from your parents can be a basis for deep solidarity or constitute “patronage for subversion.” What we do for survival is nothing more than

the rhythms of reality” (82). Again, we are not capable of simply choosing to reestablish such a contact; a crisis, an external event, needs to force this upon us.

I won’t waste time tearing apart the delusional picture that the scribes paint of the Common Ground clinic in New Orleans, nor their even more absurd picture of “the penniless joy of the New Orleans neighborhoods before the catastrophe, their defiance towards the state and the widespread practice of making do with what’s available” (84), but having lived in a few of those New Orleans neighborhoods, I will inform these scribes who are obviously *not* penniless that there is no joy in abject poverty in the midst of plenty (there may be *moments* of joy despite the poverty, but spend enough time in the midst of that poverty and you will see the despair and depression), defiance of the state is at best very sporadic, and “making do with what’s available” is what all poor people do everywhere with no pretence that it means anything more than *making do*. If there is a passage in the book that most clearly exposes the class background of its authors, it is this one. These scribes come from money, from parents whose “interminable subsidies” can fund their “social subversion” and “becoming autonomous.” The poor don’t idealize poverty.

In circle seven, the Invisible Committee informs us that “In a single century, freedom, democracy and civilization have reverted to the state of hypotheses” (85). I am not convinced that they were ever anything more than this but it only takes the Committee one page to completely forget the purely hypothetical nature of civilization in the present: “A civilization is not an abstraction hovering over life. It is what rules, takes possession of, colonizes the most banal, personal daily existence. It’s what holds together that which is most intimate and that which is most general” (86–7). This is a prime example of the reification that the Invisible Committee relies on in its attempt to understand the world. The scribes completely blind themselves to the fact that it is only as “an abstraction hovering over life,”

give up our attempts to look too deeply into the world we live in.

So instead of any analysis of what the economy is and how it operates, the Invisible Committee sticks to marxian clichés with sarcastic commentary but drained of any content. The Invisible Committee, unwilling to seriously deal with the state, work, the economy, or the family, instead aims its biting wit at the thoroughly deserving phenomena of “green” politics and “green capitalism.” This provides a moment of humor in the book, but it is mediocre. Like the rest of the book, it lacks substance. It is the sort of sardonic commentary you might expect to hear from a hipster at the local bar—precisely “the murmurs around barroom tables.” There is really no need to waste ink or paper on such superficial banalities. Perhaps the most humorous aspect of this whole section comes when the Invisible Committee tells us that, “The inventors of zero growth—the Club of Rome in 1972—were themselves a group of industrialists and bureaucrats who relied on a research paper written by cyberneticians at MIT”—the same institution distributing the authorized English translation of *The Coming Insurrection*.

“a completely rhetorical critique of individualism uneasily coexists with the most ferocious cynicism”

In the sixth circle (the environment), the “malfunctions and shortcircuits of the system” are where we find “the elements of a response whose logic would be to abolish the problems themselves” (81). Not in our own rebellion against the system. But then, if the *problems* of the system rather than the system itself are to be abolished, our willful rebellion might destroy too much. Better to let the system abolish its own problems through its malfunctions and short-circuits. On the same level, “What makes the crisis desirable is that in the crisis ... [w]e are *forced* to reestablish contact ... with what’s there, to rediscover

how we get by in the existing world. Living off your parents does not subvert the family relationship. It does not transform or destroy the existing world. It merely means that you are lucky enough to have a means at hand for avoiding getting a job that others do not have. I would hope that you would use this good fortune well, against the ruling order, but in itself, it is just another means of survival.

The Invisible Committee is just as superficial in the way it deals with work. The scribes tell us, “the notion of work has always included two contradictory *dimensions*: a dimension of *exploitation* and a dimension of *participation*” (45). This is a superficial restatement of a dialectic Marx used to justify the horrors of industrialization. For Marx, the horrid exploitation that industrialists imposed on workers through the factory system was historically necessary because it brought workers together into a situation of objectively communal production. Thus, it would make communism possible, ultimately inevitable. Like most communists today, the scribes of the Invisible Committee are not so much marxists as postmarxists. From what I gather, what post-marxists have actually done (as opposed to what they claim) is rid marxism of its teleology. They keep the dialect and the deterministic metaphysics, but are no longer convinced that there is any guaranteed end. The Invisible Committee reflects that quite well.

What is lacking in the superficial observations on work that the Invisible Committee makes is any conception of *alienation*. To point out the alienation inherent in *work* as it exists in this society would require a clear and concrete understanding of alienation, and that would go against the ambiguous program that this book is selling. Work, in the social world in which you and I find ourselves, is the alienation of an individual’s time, activities, and forces from her/himself. In other words, it is the institutionalization of a process where the things you do, the things I do, and the things we do together are determined by powers (individuals, social structures, etc) outside of ourselves

to serve their interests. In compensation, we receive what we need to survive and perhaps some extra to keep us pacified. If it were to deal with alienation in a concrete manner, it would be forced to see that the *participatory* nature of work as it operates in this society, which turns *my* activity into a common activity that is *imposed* on my life and time, is what constitutes my alienation. But since “I” am a mere fiction, this cannot matter. Only the common is real and desirable, what the Invisible Committee’s insurrection that “triumphs as a political force” (130) aims to achieve. This is why *alienation* is of so little importance to the scribes that it is mentioned only once in the book (16), in an introduction added to the American edition. Perhaps the Invisible Committee had noticed that the word gets used frequently in the more radical texts from the US, so they added it to their sales pitch – as an afterthought.

After the “I,” the next greatest enemy to we must face, according to the Invisible Committee, is *the metropolis*. As usual, our scribes have chosen to treat a symptom as a cause, so they cannot avoid being superficial, making profoundly meaningless statements like “there is no such thing as a metropolitan city” (52). In fact, the most interesting part of their treatment of the metropolis is their recognition that in many urban areas, shacks and shantytowns are “the last living and livable areas” (59). The Invisible Committee had an opportunity here to explore why this might be, but wastes this opportunity, preferring to continue making empty, banal statements. Again, I suspect that this is because it would have to look at the possibilities that exist in *individual* endeavors. Many of those who live in shantytowns do not have any steady work. If they lack money, most of their *time* is their own. This provides an opportunity for individuals to explore practical creative endeavors on their own or together with others, so that they can create their own living spaces from whatever they can bring together. But once again, the individual is rearing its head as a concrete reality rather than a state-created fiction, and this does not fit

with the ideology of the Invisible Committee. The scribes continue to sidestep the idea that individuals act in the world, finally telling us that “the metropolis also produces the means of its own destruction” (61). This is precisely what Marx said about capitalism, and the ultimate message is the same: you and I will not bring about the downfall of the metropolis; its own forces will do so. Social constructions, relationships, abstractions are what have agency and act in the world. Not you, not me; we just have to let ourselves be carried along by the force of circumstance. It sounds like a pretty passive insurrection.

In the fifth circle, where the non-authors of this book talk about the economy, they finally offer an explanation for the superficiality that permeates the book: “the general misery becomes intolerable the moment it is shown for what it is, a thing without cause or reason” (65). Why that in itself would suddenly make it intolerable isn’t clear. But this statement does make it clear that the Invisible Committee believes that this “misery” that is the economy is “a thing without cause or reason.” So there is nothing to analyze or explain. There is no reason to try to see past the surface, to look beyond the symptoms. The problem is that if the only thing that makes “the general misery” intolerable is its lack of any cause or reason, then all that is necessary to make it tolerable again is for those in power to come up with convincing causes and reasons. Since there are real causes and they have their own reasons, they have learned the art of doing exactly that.

But if revolutionaries decide to examine these realities more deeply, to understand causes and reasons, they are merely “doing what religions have always done: *providing explanations*” (65). Here’s a news flash. Some of us who were brought up with religion saw it being used to do something very different: to *suppress* our urge to find real explanations. “God’s ways are not our ways” does not sound so different to me from “a thing without cause or reason.” In both cases, we are being told to