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To Our Friends
The Invisible Committee
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The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*

Ross Wolfe

"From now on all friendship is political."¹

Seven years after its incendiary debut, *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee has released another book. *To Our Friends*, the group's long-awaited sequel, attempts to take stock of the global wave of riots, uprisings, and insurgencies that arose during the interim. It is unlikely that this latest effort will have the same impact as its predecessor, which struck a nerve with readers after nearly a decade of fruitless antiwar campaigns. Whereas *The Coming Insurrection* struck a premonitory note, forecasting the shape of future struggles, *To Our Friends* is relatively measured and circumspect in tone. Despite this somewhat different tenor, however, many stylistic traits that feature in the former recur in the latter — and along with them, all of the strengths and weaknesses they entail.

One undeniable merit of *To Our Friends* is its directness, which it inherits from *The Coming Insurrection*. No footnotes appear throughout the text. Quotes from various sources pop up here and there, usually attributed, but scholarly citations are nowhere to be found. "We would have liked to be brief," the authors express in the coda, "to forgo genealogies, etymologies, quotations" (238). Though not able to avoid such digressions altogether, for the most part they are successful. All this lends *To Our Friends* a kind of fluent immediacy, even an urgency, which is largely absent in radical politics these past several decades. Very little background is required to get the basic gist of what they are saying. In a discourse smothered by exegesis and exhaustive/exhausting commentary, this book is like a breath of fresh air.

Nevertheless, *To Our Friends* simultaneously admits of a deeper reading. Besides overt references to theorists such as Antonio Negri, whose notions of “democracy” (55, 74) and “the commons” (207) are roundly criticized by the authors, allusions to other theoretical debates can also be detected. Most of these debates are, predictably, French. Usually there is a quick series of negative criteria, defining what a term is not, followed by a pithy summary which inverts them to define what it is. For instance, lines like the following implicitly nod toward everything from Foucault’s conceptual lineages to Deleuze’s philosophy of affect and “material flows,” from semiotic signifying chains to Bourdieu’s *habitus*:

There is no empty space, everything is inhabited; each one of us is the gathering and crossing point of quantities of affects, lineages, histories, and significations, material flows that exceed us. The world doesn’t environ us, but passes through us. What we inhabit inhabits us. What surrounds us constitutes us. (79)

Another line almost recalls Derrida’s deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence”:

It’s not the world that is lost, it’s *we* who have lost the world and go on losing it. It’s not the world that is going to end soon, it is *we* who *are finished*, amputated, cut-off, *we* who refuse all vital contact with the real. The crisis is not economic, ecological, or political; *the crisis is above all that of presence.* (31)

Examples abound. Besides this repeated rhetorical technique, which *To Our Friends* employs a bit too often, explicit mention is sometimes made of theoreticians whose work clearly hangs over the Invisible Committee’s text. Gilles Deleuze — or “comrade Deleuze,” as they call him — is one of the figures approvingly invoked (230). His thought-figure of “lines of flight” is used to interpret surveillance practices in the cybernetic age (114). Michel Foucault exercises a great deal of influence over the text as well, especially in the second and fourth chapters regarding “governmentality” or “governance.”² Toward the end of the book, the authors appeal to Foucault’s authority in rejecting a dialectical interpretation of history or society (227). Indeed, they question the very existence of “society” in a previous subsection, speculating “[p]erhaps there is no longer a ‘society’ to destroy or persuade.” A Foucauldian genealogy ensues, tracing the shifting historical meaning of the word, from which the authors conclude society was merely a “fiction born at the end of the seventeenth century,” or just “[t]he projected shadow of successive modes of government” (171-77).

Dialectical methodology is not the only aspect of Marxism contested in *To Our Friends*. Marx’s attitude toward crisis, theses on democracy and the state, as well as his analysis of money and commodities all receive harsh treatment (21-22, 69, 82).

At best, his thought is considered to have once been true. Now that the world of nineteenth-century capitalism Marx knew has moved on, however, his critique of political economy is inapplicable or obsolete. In the third chapter of *To Our Friends*, the Invisible Committee addresses the labor theory of value, writing:

The Marxists can stick to their day jobs: the process of commodity valorization, from extraction to the pump, coincides with the process of circulation, which itself coincides with the process of production.... Saying the value of the commodity crystallizes the labor time of the worker was a political operation as fruitful as it was fallacious. (92)

But it is difficult to take such objections seriously, since Marx includes the cost of transport — and labor outlays in general — in the sphere of production, though it constitutes the physical circulation of commodities.³ Likewise, the notion that value production has been irrevocably altered by cybernetics or informatics is unfounded. Far from surpassing the horizon of dead and living labor, the dynamic of constant and variable value is still the basis of capital's organic composition; only the ratio has changed. When it comes to political economy, the Invisible Committee would've done better to acquaint themselves with recent German scholarship on Marx's value-critique, as Anselm Jappe and others active in the French scene have done.⁴

To Our Friends does manage to clarify the group's distance from Marxist politics, though, developing a distinction that had merely been latent in *The Coming Insurrection*: namely, between "revolution" and "insurrection." In *The Coming Insurrection*, revolution is discussed primarily in terms of potentiality, possibility, and prospect; its connection to insurrection remains undertheorized.⁵ Anyone familiar with the anarchist tradition will recognize the roots of this divide in Max Stirner's *The Ego and Its Own* (1846). "Revolution and insurrection must not be looked upon as synonymous. Whereas revolution aims at new arrangements, insurrection leads us to no longer let ourselves be arranged, but to arrange ourselves, and sets no glittering hopes on 'institutions.'"⁶ It would be overhasty to assume that the Invisible Committee accepts Stirner's delineation of these terms unmodified or outright. Still, this provides a helpful heuristic for thinking about the group's own idiosyncratic usage. Frustratingly, however, the terminology in *To Our Friends* is far from consistent on this score. "Revolutions of the past promised a new life," the second chapter proclaims. "Contemporary insurrections deliver the keys to it" (44). Here insurrection seemingly opens the door to revolution. But earlier on in the text, a short circuit appears to run between them: "The insurrections have come, but not the revolution, [which] always seems to choke off at the riot stage, [or else] serves as a stepping stone for those who speak in its name but only think of liquidating it" (12-13).

Others have already noted the disconnect between the sense of vindication expressed at the book's outset and the sobering political realities of the present.⁷

Glancing back at the results of the Occupy movement, the Arab Spring, riots in London, and anti-austerity protests across Europe, one would be hard pressed to describe any of them as a success. Little wonder, then, that the strongest moments in *To Our Friends* come when the authors pause to reflect on defeat. “At this point it must be admitted that we revolutionaries have been defeated,” they write candidly at the beginning of the book. “Not because... we haven’t achieved revolution as an objective, but because... we’ve lost sight of revolution as a process” (13). Syntagma Square in Athens, site of major 2008 clashes with metropolitan police, is paradigmatic for the Invisible Committee, and it is here the authors brush up against the limits of insurrection as a model of struggle:

What the Greek case shows is that without a concrete idea of what victory would be, we can’t help but be defeated. Insurrectionary determination is not enough; our confusion is still too thick. Hopefully, studying our defeats will serve at least to dispel it somewhat. (135)

Demobilization in Greece after 2012 or so meant a return to the same rotten institutions, and to institutionalized defeat: Syriza’s eventual capitulation was guaranteed from the start. *To Our Friends* endeavors, inadequately at times, to digest the failures of the past seven years.

Perhaps the most surprising of these reflections concerns a much more distant defeat, though. In the third chapter, riffing on a remark by the Italian Marxist Mario Tronti, the authors contend “[the proletariat in the twentieth century] was... defeated by failing to appropriate the substance of working-class power.” Rather than the common bonds of exploitation, “what distinguishes the worker in a positive sense is his embodied technical mastery of a particular world of production” (96). This is not merely a contention about the past, either. What the Invisible Committee has in mind here is part of a broader move away from the workerist emphasis on the wage-relationship, toward the autonomist emphasis on the “general intellect.” Unexpectedly, in contrast to its disparaging appraisal of tech overall, this particular portion of *To Our Friends* stresses the technical (as opposed to the political) dimension of practice. “A revolutionary perspective no longer focuses on the institutional reorganization of society... but on the technical configuration of worlds” (95). Specialists — or, better, technicians — will be required in order for a successful revolution to take place:

We need to look in every sector, in all the territories we inhabit, for those possessing strategic technical knowledge. Only on this basis will movements truly dare to “block everything.” Only on this basis will the passion for experimenting toward another life be liberated, a largely technical passion that is the obverse, as it were, of everyone’s state of technological dependence. This process of knowledge accumulation, of

establishing collusions in every domain, is a prerequisite for a serious and massive return of the revolutionary question. (96)

Blockades, which seek to disturb infrastructure and interrupt logistical flows, are for the Invisible Committee the principal means by which to “destitute” power or government (72, 75-79, 128, 135). So central is this notion to the architecture of the text that its authors feel compelled “to reconceive the idea of revolution as *pure destitution*” (74). Government today, they maintain, is no longer identified with charismatic figures of authority or the personal patrimony of kings, but is located in the interstices, in the endoskeletal framework of society: “*Power now resides in the infrastructures of this world*” (83). Destitution thus entails a kind of hollowing out or rotting from within. One begins to suspect after a while that *To Our Friends* is imprecise in this assessment, however, mistaking the impersonal domination of capital for the impersonal power of the state. Its takeaway from the antiglobalization experience of the 1990s and 2000s is “the critique of the global apparatus of government” (224). Revolution is then a simple outmaneuvering of state force: “As far as strategy is concerned, it’s a matter of getting two steps ahead of global governance” (18). Questions of politics, the role of the state in brokering a postcapitalist transition, are thus evaded without ever being properly posed. In this the Invisible Committee seems to concur with John Holloway’s assertion that one can “change the world without taking power.”

Still, it is to the authors’ credit that they do not embrace local struggles, isolated pockets of resistance, as a surefire method by which to counteract global patterns of accumulation. “We risk losing everything if we invoke the local against the global,” they warn. “The local is not the reassuring alternative to globalization, but its universal product. Local is just the underside of global, its residue, its secretion — not something capable of shattering it” (188). Even if the Invisible Committee errs in assigning priority to the state instead of capital, it errs in the right direction by insisting on the global scope of the problem: “Only a *global perspective* can capture its significance” (15). However, the category introduced to bridge the gap between global and local, “territory” (cribbed from the Deleuzean lexicon), is unconvincing. Initially, *To Our Friends* situates territorial planning within the context of economic restructuring since the 1970s: “Capital doesn’t frame itself any longer in national terms, but territory by territory” (180). Against this new tendency, the Invisible Committee recommends “secession,” accompanied by the rapid formation of “communes” in territories that secede:

Seceding is not carving a part of the territory out of the national whole; it is not isolating oneself, cutting off communications with the rest — that would be certain death. Seceding is not using the scraps of this world to assemble *counter-clusters* where alternative communities would bask in their imaginary autonomy vis-à-vis the metropolis.... Seceding means

inhabiting a territory, assuming our situated configuration of the world, our way of dwelling there, the form of life and the truths that sustain us, and *from there* entering into conflict or complicity. So it means linking up strategically with other zones of dissidence... regardless of borders. (184-85).

Romantic and reactionary ideologemes are readily discernible this passage. Unmistakably Heideggerian residues cling to the concepts of “dwelling” and “inhabiting” used by the authors here and elsewhere in the text, explicitly informing their conception of “the commune”: “The commune inhabits its territory — that is, it shapes it just as much as the territory offers it a dwelling place and shelter. It forms necessary ties there, it thrives on its memory, finds a meaning, a language, in the land” (202).⁸ Similarly, their counterposition of quantitative “space” (a geometric grid in which the metropolis expands) to qualitative “place” (an organic ground on which the commune grows) takes its cue from Heidegger’s anti-Cartesian ontology.⁹ One can likely trace the anti-humanist tirade in the opening chapter back to this theoretical origin as well.¹⁰ Not to mention the weirdly dated polemic against existentialism and Camus, which cannot help but strike readers as dancing over the grave of a long-dead philosophical foe (29-31).

As soon as it lays down roots in a particular “place,” the commune orients itself according to the friend/enemy binary conceptualized by Schmitt. “Every declared commune calls a new geography into existence around it,” *To Our Friends* concludes.

Where there had only been uniform territory, a plain where everything was interchangeable, in the grayness of generalized equivalence, it raises up a chain of mountains... with passes, peaks, incredible pathways between friendly things, and forbidding or precipitous terrain between enemy things. (229)

This dichotomy is unavoidable, the authors write, since “even our immune system depends on the distinction between friend and enemy” (139). It would perhaps be too literal to infer from such metaphors that the Invisible Committee “naturalizes conflict,” as some reviewers have, but it is easy to see how this reading is possible.¹¹

Beyond interrogating the book’s intellectual background, however, one has to ask: Does anything proposed in *To Our Friends* differ that much from the utopian socialism of the nineteenth century, albeit dressed up in slightly more militant garb? Numerous cases are culled from world history to illustrate the authors’ arguments, but two are especially revealing. Early on, they implore readers to study the revolts of native populations in the Americas so as to rid themselves of Western prejudices: “There is no humanity, only earthlings and their enemies, the Occidentals.... We would do well to learn about the uninterrupted uprisings by the indigenous peoples of Central

and South America” (34). An analogous romanticism attaches to the primitive folk-community [*Volksgemeinschaft*] still found among Oaxaca tribes, who in the course of their struggles “arrived at the notion of ‘communality.’ For these Indians, living communally is... what sums up their traditional basis and what they oppose to capitalism.” On the following page, the authors summon up a still more distant past, the communes of eleventh-century France (198-99). Here one begins to understand the needless invective hurled at communicative instruments, technology, and all manner of mediation.

Conditioning the communist prospect throughout the book is the vain notion that premodern forms of communal life could somehow be revived as an emergency measure amidst generalized societal collapse. Autarky, the principle of economic self-sufficiency or independence, is once again placed on the agenda as a goal to be achieved. *To Our Friends* justifies the (re)turn to this outmoded ideal as a practical result of changed circumstances. “[I]t’s the confrontation with our epoch that has required this theorization,” write the authors. “The need to autonomize from infrastructures of power is not due to an ageless aspiration to autarky” (204). Rather, this necessity supposedly flows from the fact that it is too late to project a future that builds on present developments, on the accumulated infrastructure of past centuries. On the contrary, that ship already sailed a long time ago: “In reality, the end of civilization has been clinically established for well over a hundred years, and countersigned by events” (29). For the Invisible Committee, there is no way to avert the impending disaster. “So every attempt to block the global system, every movement, every revolt, every uprising should be seen as an attempt to delay the catastrophe and branch off in a less fatal direction” (94). Marxism, of course, teaches that the only way *out* of capitalism lies *through* it. But it is precisely Marxism that the Invisible Committee rejects.

Notes

1. Unknown, *Call*, trans. Lawrence Jarach (Pasadena: Anemone, 2004) 10.
2. For “governmentality” and “governance,” see *To Our Friends* 66-71, 76-79, 85-86. 103-13, 115, 126-29, 153-54, 161-64, 171-73.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 2, trans. David Fernbach (Penguin Books. New York, NY) 226-229.
4. Anselm Jappe, “Toward a History of the Critique of Value,” trans. Alastair Hemmens and Salvatore Engel-Di Mauro, *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 25:2 (2014): 25-37.
5. The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009) 13, 15, 16, 90, 101, 107, 128.
6. Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. David Leopold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 279-80.
7. Jason Smith, “Since the End of the Movement of the Squares: The Return of the Invisible Committee,” *Brooklyn Rail* (June 3, 2015). <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/06/field-notes/since-the-end-of-the-movement-of-the-squares-the-return-of-the-invisible-committee>.
8. For more examples of Heideggerian influence, see 33, 62, 79, 89, 96, 112, 123, 133, 164, 184-185, 187-188, 199, 214, 219, 228.
9. “[W]e inherit from modernity a conception of space as an empty, uniform, and measurable expanse where objects, creatures, or landscapes occupy their place. But the sensible world doesn’t present itself to us in that way. Space is not neutral. Things and beings don’t occupy a geometric position, but affect and are affected by it. Places are irreducibly loaded with stories, impressions, and emotions. A commune engages the world from its own place. Neither an administrative entity nor a simple geometric unit of space, it expresses rather a certain degree of shared experience inscribed territorially” (201).
10. “When one asks the left of the left what the revolution would consist in, it is quick to answer: ‘placing the human at the center.’ What that left doesn’t realize is how tired of the human the world is, how tired of humanity we are — of that species that thought it was the jewel of creation, that believed it was entitled to ravage everything since everything belonged to it. ‘Placing the human at the center’ was the Western project. We know how that turned out. The time has come to jump ship, to betray the species” (34).
11. McKenzie Wark, “No-Futurism,” *Public Seminar* (June 22, 2015). <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/06/no-futurism/>.