

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**The Invisible Committee**, *To Our Friends* (trans R Hurley), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015.

ISBN: 9781584351672 (paper)

## **Introduction: After the Insurrection**

Since the publication of *The Coming Insurrection* in 2009, the Invisible Committee has quietly traversed the hotspots of global struggle, and they have been taking notes. If they have often been a bit ahead of the curve, it is because they have kept their ears to the ground. “Everyone agrees. It’s about to explode”, they proclaimed in *The Coming Insurrection* (2009: 9). Since then, *it* has exploded. From Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, public spaces around the world have acted as synecdoche of wider and deeper conflicts. *To Our Friends* marks the Committee’s return to publishing after several years of relative silence, and the result is an empirically informed and masterfully written work that synthesizes continental philosophy, autonomist Marxism, insurrectionist anarchism, and neo-communism. Released in multiple languages, *To Our Friends* is an epistle to the partisans of “The Imaginary Party”. This is a charismatic book, that is simultaneously astute, irreverent, playful, and biting. Its stylistic charms survive translation from the original French, to the credit of translator Robert Hurley. Despite their literary élan, the Invisible Committee tends toward intellectual obscurantism, keeping their inspirations and sources in the background and at arms length.

The titles of *To Our Friends* eight chapters are taken from slogans found spray-painted on the walls of various cities and in various languages; photographs show the originals at the beginning of each chapter. The chapters are thematic and could be read as standalone essays, but there is something of a gestalt effect from reading the book’s 237 pages in order. The chapters repeatedly return to sites of a recent insurrection—Athens for instance—and use these as empirical springboards for developing a specific theme.

# Antipode

## A Radical Journal of Geography

In this review, I take the opportunity to contextualize *To Our Friends* in the Committee's wider body of work and its relation to streams of contemporary philosophy. I read *To Our Friends* as a work of strategy, applying theory in the service of action. In this essay I will first examine the Invisible Committee's oeuvre; I then consider the relation of contemporary capitalism and Agamben's notion of state of exception developed within the text. This then leads into a discussion of the Invisible Committee's analyses of the new cybernetics of governance, territory, and infrastructure. Finally, I end by focusing on the role of the commune and destitute power in the Invisible Committee's strategy.

### **An Oeuvre in a Conspiracy of Names**

In *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee explained that, "[t]his book is signed in the name of an imaginary collective. Its contributors are not its authors" (2009: 28). Beyond its tactical function against surveillance, this evasion of authorship ties in with a larger strategic aim. The Invisible Committee accepts the postmodern death of the author along with Foucault's (1977: 119, 138) notions the "écriture" and the "author-function", the dissolution of the author in the diffusion of discourse. As contributors to a discourse rather than authors of a text, the Invisible Committee aims "...merely to introduce a little order into the common-places of our time, collecting some of the murmurings around barroom tables and behind bedroom doors" (2009: 28).

Prior to the publication of *The Coming Insurrection*, the "imaginary collective" had already achieved a degree of recognition within avant-garde and radical circles through writings published under the banner of "Tiqqun", which served as both a collective pseudonym and the title of two issues of the group's journal (published in 1999 and 2001). *Tiqqun* is the Invisible Committee's *Grundrisse*. Since the Committee have often been compared to the Situationist

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

International (Merrifield 2010), perhaps a closer historical analogy is the old Lettrist bulletin *Potlatch*, published by the Lettrist International (1954-1957), the predecessor to the Situationist International (1957-1972).

In addition to the *Tiqqun* journal, *The Coming Insurrection* (2009) and *To Our Friends* (2015), *Introduction to Civil War* (2010), *This is Not a Program* (2011), *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2012a), *Theory of Bloom* (2012b) and *Call* (2004) comprise the bulk of Tiqqun/the Invisible Committee's oeuvre. The motivation behind the transition from Tiqqun to the Invisible Committee is not altogether clear, but clues may be found in their work. For example, in *Introduction to Civil War*, the contributors note that, "[a]t some point, the 'Invisible Committee' was the name given to the ethic of civil war... It refers to a specific faction of the Imaginary Party, its revolutionary-experimental wing" (2010: 193). The Imaginary Party has nothing to do with conventional parliamentary politics, of course. The Imaginary Party references the heterogeneous struggles that compose the world and resist capture in homogenizing apparatuses. Tiqqun explains that, "[t]he Imaginary Party is therefore nothing, specifically; it is everything that impedes, undermines, defies, ruins equivalence" (2011: 38). The Imaginary Party is a partisan in "civil war".

Drawing on the work of Foucault (2003: 281) and Agamben (2005), the use of the term "civil war" here designates the ontological matrix of struggle, and is identified as "...the free play of forms-of-life...the principle of their coexistence" (Tiqqun 2010: 32). As will become apparent, if the Invisible Committee has an intellectual patron saint he would likely be Giorgio Agamben. Communism, the commune, another key idea of the group's oeuvre, hews closely to Agamben's concept of "form-of-life" and overlaps with civil war. According to Tiqqun, "I call 'communism' the real movement that elaborates, everywhere and at every moment, civil war" (2010: 63). This terminology is not to be taken in its conventional sense. Tiqqun note that "[t]he

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

continuity of the modern State—from absolutism to the Welfare State—shall be that of an endlessly unfinished war, waged against civil war” (2010: 73). “The Imaginary Party”, “civil war”, “forms-of-life”, and “communism” all designate an ontological struggle of excess against conformity and limit.

## **Crisis Capitalism as State of Exception**

*To Our Friends* begins with a strategic analysis of the contemporary situation, the current state of civil war. The enemy is the neoliberal capitalist state, an integrated system of apparatuses, global networks of power and control that Debord (1998) called “the integrated spectacle”. Tiqqun (2010, 2011) referred to this system as “empire” but this terminology has since been jettisoned, likely due to a desire to distinguish and distance their analyses from the work of Hardt and Negri (2000).

The Invisible Committee’s strategic assessment sees crises are instruments of contemporary neoliberalism. It’s as if neoliberals have wholeheartedly adopted the famous observation attributed to Mao concerning the situational opportunities of chaos. Klein’s (2007) thesis of disaster capitalism and Harvey’s (2014) recent emphasis on contradiction and crisis seem generally commensurate with this view. The Committee insists that “...the ‘crisis’ was not an economic phenomenon but a political technique of government. We’re not experiencing a crisis of capitalism but rather the triumph of crisis capitalism” (p.25). Conceived as a political project, crisis capitalism resonates with Agamben’s notion of the “state of exception”: “...a transformation of a provisional and exceptional measure into a technique of government” (2005: 2).

This confluence of economic crisis and exceptional measures is exemplified in austerity discourse, while struggle against austerity demonstrates that the state of exception is not smooth

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

but splintered by conflict. As Agamben observes, “[o]ne of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance” (2005: 2). The state of exception is not a narrow suspension of law, but the culmination of the Western tradition of politics; as it develops its techniques of government it simultaneously produces a new subject, a figure of the excluded that is yet internal to it, being its product.

In a general statement regarding their strategic calculus, the Invisible Committee suggest that “[e]ngaging with the war that *is present*, acting strategically, requires that we start from an openness to the situation, we understand its inner dynamic, the relations of force that configure it, the polarities that give it its dynamism” (p.145). Their emphasis on the present is a purposeful rejection of any lingering revolutionary eschatology. The apocalypse is already here; it is continuous with global civilization. The challenge for the Committee is to begin “rethinking an idea of revolution capable of interrupting the disastrous course of things...to purge it of every apocalyptic element it has contained up to now” (p.38).

Here it should be noted that “coming” in the title of *The Coming Insurrection* is an obvious riff on Agamben’s (1993) *The Coming Community*. As Agamben makes clear, “the coming does not mean future” (2001: 92). Rather, as Salzani (2011: 46) explains, the coming is a potentiality in the present. It is the undetermined possibility for change now. The insurrectionary moment is always now. Insurrection, the realization of our potential, is the act that establishes the commune.

## **Cybernetics, Territory, and Infrastructure**

Concepts of *territory* and *infrastructure*, and their governance by cybernetic systems of regulation and control, take on a prominent position within the Invisible Committee’s strategic

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

outlook. For the Committee, society, as a project of government, is at an end. They argue, “[a]t bottom ‘society’ only denotes the projected shadow of the successive modes of government. It was the whole set of subjects of the absolutist state in the age of Leviathan, then that of economic actors in the liberal state” (p.172).

If society is over, then space becomes even more important for understanding processes shaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While society has died, government has undergone a metamorphosis. Led by capital’s need for value accumulation, global space has been reconfigured from the bounded and totalizing societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to a networked geography of selection. This new configuration is roughly tripartite: [i] metropolitan zones of wealth and privilege; [ii] secondary zones of urban productive specialization and poor rural areas that survive as vacation spots and nature preserves; and [iii] zones of pure exclusion, permanently policed and subjected to low or high intensity conflict (p.179). For capital, “[t]he challenge is to determine in real time, in a calibrated way, where the value lies, in which space, with whom, and for what”, assert the Committee (p.182). These zones are transnational. Within and across states, rights and privileges shift along with the shifting territories of value production.

The Invisible Committee refers to this new order as “cybernetized capitalism”, the logic of neoliberal state management. This conception first appeared as far back as *Tiqqun* #2 in 2001, under the title of “The Cybernetic Hypothesis”. The cybernetic hypothesis “proposes to conceive biological, physical, and social behaviors as something integrally programmed and re-programmable” (2001: 4). It has supplanted the liberal hypothesis as the former “conceives of each individual behavior as something ‘piloted’, in the last analysis, by the need for the survival of a ‘system’ that makes it possible, and which it must contribute to” (2001: 4). This is obviously contra the classic Western ideal of the rational individual operating in pursuit of his own interests but, as the Invisible Committee suggest, it goes even further as the individual is supplanted “with

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the cybernetic concept of a being without interiority, of a selfless self, an emergent, climatic being constituted by its exteriority, by its relations”. They describe, wryly, “a being which, armed with its Apple Watch, comes to understand itself entirely on the basis of external data, the statistics that each of its behaviors generates” (p.110). The individual is rendered a node in a system of management, measured and evaluated. This ideal of management manifests most apparently in the various forms of digital surveillance—whether as a voluntary health monitoring app or as hidden government/corporate surveillance—and anti-politics of technocratic administration—whether in the form of administrative bloat plaguing universities or in the form of the Troika currently plaguing Greece.

Cybernetic theory was born in the context of the Second World War. Norbert Wiener, a mathematician and physicist, sought to make the targeting of German bombers by British anti-aircraft more efficient. The initial idea was to gain the ability to calculate, based on information of bomber behavior patterns, where in the sky a particular bomber would be before it actually got there and then target the bomber in advance. According to Galison (1994: 229), Wiener’s thought developed from simply predicting the future behavior of bombers based on their past patterns to conceiving of the anti-aircraft gunners and the bombers as an integrated system interacting and adjusting based on information feedback.

“We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name of *Cybernetics*,” wrote Wiener (1961: 11). In *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, Wiener explained that his thesis was that society could be understood by studying the pattern of messages that comprises social communication. He prophesied that for the future, “these messages and communication facilities, messages between man and machine, between machines and man, and between machine and

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

machine, are destined to play an ever increasing part” (1989: 16). Wiener was prescient as the world of interactive media, predictive algorithms, and infrastructural design attest.

Though geographers and other critical scholars have largely overlooked cybernetics in recent years, a small interest in the history of applied cybernetics is growing. This has focused on its application in the context of socialist economies such as that of the former Soviet Union (Gerovitch 2002) and Allende’s Chile (Medina 2006). Though he doesn’t mention cybernetics by name, Deleuze’s (1992) “Postscript on the Societies of Control” might be read as anticipating a cybernetic critique.

Infrastructure plays a central role in the articulation of network territory and the technocratic anti-political logic of cybernetic governance. According to the Invisible Committee, “[i]t can be stated in this way: *power now resides in the infrastructures of this world*. Contemporary power is of an architectural and impersonal, and not a representative or personal, nature” (p.83). Alongside *To Our Friends*, Easterling’s (2014) *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* and Graham and McFarlane’s (2015) edited volume *Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context* stand out as two recent contributions to the growing focus on infrastructure in geographic and interdisciplinary concern. Infrastructure is not merely wires and tubing, but rather, as the Committee explains, “[p]ower is now immanent in life as it is technologically organized and commodified. It has the neutral appearance of facilities or of Google’s blank page” (p.84). Bourdieu, in a different context, aptly noted the power of hidden structuring structures when he wrote that “what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying” (1977: 167). More recently, Appadurai asserts that, “[t]hus, to study infrastructure is, in truth, to study the technologies and techniques through which the visible and invisible are separated, connected, and managed in the social life of cities” (2015: xiii). For the Invisible Committee, however, theirs is not merely a study of technology but rather a strategic



# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

assessment of the terrain of struggle. They ask, “[h]ow do we contest an order that isn’t articulated in language, that is constructed step by step and wordlessly? An order that is embodied in the very objects of everyday life? An order whose political constitution is its material constitution?” (p.86).

## **The Destitution of Power and the Coming Communes**

The Invisible Committee advances what might be read, seemingly paradoxically, as an affirmative strategy of negative ontology to which a theory of destitute power and the commune are of central importance. As they proclaim, “[t]he fact of saying ‘No!’ places us squarely in existence” (p.47). According to the Committee, constituent democracy has been a definitional feature of recent insurrections, yet has also been a fatal flaw. The mistake isn’t so much the idea or practice of direct democratic decision-making; rather, the fault is in mistaking constituent power as the ontological source of the constituted sovereign. They write that “[t]his fiction of the constituent power actually only serves to mask the strictly political, fortuitous origin, the *raw coup* by which power is instituted” (p.73-74), riffing on Agamben’s state of exception thesis. With each toppled regime a new sovereign emerges through an appeal to the legitimacy of the people, and “[t]hrough this operation, what is never anything but a localized, specific, partial entity is elevated to an elsewhere from which it can then claim to encompass the world” (p.74-75). Thus real revolution is continually forestalled.

In place of constituent power, the Invisible Committee propose to destitute power, likely inspired by Agamben’s (2014) own notion of “destituent power”. The strategy of destitute power requires would-be constituents to abandon their own legitimacy to disrupt the closed dialectic of constituent-constituted, ultimately an ontological rejection of “the paradigm of government”, abandoning the assumption that humans need to be governed.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The destitution of power does not affirm a politico-metaphysical void, rather the reverse. The destitution of power means recognizing the always-already ontological fullness of the world. “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, of material flows that exceed us. The world doesn’t environ us, it passes through us” (p.79).

For Agamben (2014), destituent power acts as a conceptual bridge, a passage, between the crucial concepts of *bare life* and *form-of-life*. Bare life, produced by the sovereign exception at the base of the Western politico-juridical tradition, is a kind of real abstraction, a life separated from its conditions. Form-of-life, in contrast, is a specific mode of human life inalienable from itself, multiplicity in context. Destituent power makes bare life inoperative, affirming form-of-life. Echoing Agamben, the Invisible Committee assert that “[i]t’s by virtue of their plenitude that forms of life will complete the destitution” (p.79). For the Committee, the *commune* is synonymous with form-of-life.

The commune is the intentional inhabiting of space, transforming it into place: “What constitutes the commune is the mutual oath sworn by the inhabitants of a city, a town, or a rural area *to stand together as a body*” (p.199). The commune involves an ethical-spatial politics. “The territory is that by which the commune materializes, finds its voice, comes into presence”, the Invisible Committee explain and later note that, “[a]s a decision to confront the world together every commune places the world at its center” (p.203, 204). Again, one can see the coincidence of the commune and form-of-life: “By the term form-of-life, we mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something like a bare life”, Agamben explains and continues writing that, “a life that cannot be separated from its form is a life which, in its ways of living, what is at stake is living itself, and, in its living, what is at stake is above all else a mode of living” (2014: 73).

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## Conclusion

To paraphrase Lefebvre (2009: 6), the task of radical politics is to transcend philosophy by realizing it. The Invisible Committee seem to share this perspective and, as a strategic intervention, *To Our Friends* contributes to this task. From crisis capitalism to cybernetics, and from infrastructure to political destitution and the commune, *To Our Friends* engages in lively and innovative ways with the contemporary situation. This engagement has been longstanding and placing it in the context of the Invisible Committee's oeuvre strengthens the book. In relation to contemporary philosophy it is clear that Agamben's influence is significant; they've weaponized Agamben. Geographers will likely find the implications of the book's strategic conception of space and territory worth thinking through. There is, of course, plenty of room for critiquing the book as well. Many readers will likely find the highly abstract and obscure rendering of the commune frustrating. Many readers will likely find the book's critique of radical constituent politics unconvincing, or at least inadequate, but, in any case, it will certainly stimulate conversation—and disagreements are to be expected between friends.

## References

- Agamben G (1993) *The Coming Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Agamben G (2001) *La comunità che viene*. Turin: Bollati Boringhieri
- Agamben G (2005) *State of Exception*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Agamben G (2014) What is a destituent power? *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(1):65-74

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

- Appadurai A (2015) Forward. In S Graham and C McFarlane (eds) *Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context* (ppxii-xiii). London: Routledge
- Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Debord G (1998) *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso
- Deleuze G (1992) Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October* 59:3-7
- Easterling K (2014) *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. London: Verso
- Foucault M (1977) What is an author? In D F Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (pp113-138). Ithaca: Cornell University Press
- Foucault M (2003) “Society Must be Defended”: *Lecture at the at the College de France, 1975-1976*. New York: Picador
- Galison P (1994) The ontology of the enemy: Norbert Wiener and the cybernetic vision. *Critical Inquiry* 21(1):228-266
- Gerovitch S (2002) *From Newspeak to Cyberspeak: A History of Soviet Cybernetics*. Cambridge: MIT Press
- Graham S and McFarlane C (eds) (2015) *Infrastructural Lives: Urban Infrastructure in Context*. London: Routledge
- Hardt M and Negri A (2000) *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Harvey D (2014) *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Klein N (2007) *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan Books
- Lefebvre H (2009) *Dialectical Materialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Medina E (2006) Designing freedom, regulating a nation: Socialist cybernetics in Allende’s Chile. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 38:571-606

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

- Merrifield A (2010) The coming of *The Coming Insurrection*: Notes on a politics of neocommunism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28(2):202-216
- Salzani C (2011) Coming community. In A Murray and J Whyte (eds) *The Agamben Dictionary* (pp44-46). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- The Invisible Committee (2009) *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)
- Tiqqun (1999) Issue 1. <http://tiqqun.jottit.com/> (last accessed 26 August 2015)
- Tiqqun (2001) Issue 2. <http://tiqqun.jottit.com/> (last accessed 26 August 2015)
- Tiqqun (2004) *Call*. <http://bloom0101.org/?parution=call> (last accessed 25 August 2015)
- Tiqqun (2010) *Introduction to Civil War* (trans A R Galloway and J E Smith). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)
- Tiqqun (2011) *This is Not a Program* (trans J D Jordan). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)
- Tiqqun (2012a) *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (trans A Reines). Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)
- Tiqqun (2012b) *Theory of Bloom* (trans R Hurley). Berkeley: LBC Books
- Wiener N (1961 [1948]) *Cybernetics, or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*. Cambridge: MIT Press
- Wiener N (1989 [1950]) *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*. London: Free Association Books

*Patrick W. Huff*  
*Birkbeck, University of London*  
*pathuff123@gmail.com*

*August 2015*