

# *Becoming Ungovernable: Insurrectionary Process as Abolition*



*excerpt from "to our friends" by the invisible committee*

*edited by chicano on the bloc*



# Becoming Ungovernable: Insurrectionary Process as Abolition

*They Want to Oblige Us to Govern. We Won't Yield to that Pressure ( 2 )*

*Characteristic Features of Contemporary Insurrections ( 4 )*

*There's No Such Thing as a Democratic Insurrection ( 5 )*

*Democracy Is Just Government in Its Pure State ( 7 )*

*Government as Counter-insurgency ( 9 )*

*Ontological asymmetry and Happiness ( 13 )*

*Theory of Destitution ( 17 )*

## *They Want to Oblige Us to Govern. We Won't Yield to that Pressure*

Anyone who lived through the days of December, 2008 in Athens knows what the word “insurrection” signifies in a Western metropolis. The banks were in pieces, the police stations under siege, the city in the hands of the assailants. In the luxury shops, they were no longer repairing the windows, which would need to be done every morning. Nothing that embodied the police reign of normality was untouched by this wave of fire and stones whose bearers were everywhere and representatives nowhere—even the Syntagma Christmas tree was torched. At a certain point the forces of order withdrew, after running out of tear-gas grenades. Impossible to say who took over the streets then. They say it was the “600 euros generation,” the “high schoolers,” the “anarchists,” the “riffraff” from the Albanian immigration, they’ll say anything. As usual, the press blamed the “koukoulofori,” the “hooded ones.” The truth is that the anarchists were overrun by this faceless outpouring of rage. Their monopoly on wild, masked action, inspired tags, and even Molotov cocktails had been taken from them unceremoniously. The general uprising they no longer dared to imagine was there, but it didn’t resemble the idea of it they had in their minds. An unknown entity, an egreore, had been born, a spirit that wouldn’t be appeased till everything was reduced to cinders that deserved to be. Time was on fire. The present was fractured as payment for all the future that had been stolen from us.

The years that followed in Greece taught us the meaning of the word “counter-insurgency” in a Western country. Once the wave had passed, the hundreds of groups that had formed in the country, down to the smallest villages, tried to stay faithful to the breach which the month of December had opened. At one spot, people might empty the cash registers of a supermarket, then film themselves burning the loot. At another, an embassy might be attacked in broad daylight in solidarity with some friend hounded by the police in his or her country. Some resolved, as in Italy of the 1970’s, to carry the attack to a higher level and target, using bombs or firearms, the Athens stock exchange, cops, ministries or perhaps the Microsoft headquarters. As in the 1970’s, the left passed new “antiterrorist” laws. The raids, arrests, and trials multiplied. For a time, one was reduced to militating against “repression.” The European Union, the World Bank, the IMF, in agreement with the Socialist government, undertook to make Greece pay for the unpardonable revolt. One should never underestimate the resentment of the wealthy towards the insolence of the poor. They decided to bring the whole country to heel through a string of “economic measures” more or less as violent, although spread over time, as the revolt.

This was met by dozens of general strikes called by the unions. Workers occupied ministries; inhabitants took possession of city halls; university departments and hospitals that had been “sacrificed” decided to self-organize. There was the “movement of the squares.” May 10, 2010, five hundred thousand of us flooded into the center of Athens. There were several attempts to burn the Parliament. February 12, 2012, an umpteenth general strike was

staged in desperate opposition to the umpteenth austerity plan. That Sunday, all of Greece, its retirees, its anarchists, its civil servants, its workers and its homeless demonstrated in a state of near-insurrection. With downtown Athens again in flames, that evening was a paroxysm of jubilation and weariness: the movement perceived all its power, but also realized it didn't know what to do with it. Over the years, in spite of thousands of direct actions, hundreds of occupations, millions of Greeks in the streets, the euphoria of rebellion was dampened in the drop-box of "crisis." The embers stayed active under the ashes, certainly. The movement found other forms, providing itself with cooperatives, social centers, "networks of exchange without middlemen," and even self-managed factories and health clinics. It became more "constructive" in a sense. The fact remains that we were defeated, that one the biggest offensives of our party during the past few decades was repulsed through debt impositions, exaggerated prison sentences, and generalized bankruptcy. The free used clothing won't make Greeks forget the counter-insurgency's determination to plunge them up to their necks in privation. Power may have tottered and given the momentary impression of disappearing, but it was able to shift the terrain of confrontation and catch the movement off balance. The Greeks were blackmailed by this alternative: "government or chaos." What they got was government and chaos—plus immiseration as a bonus.

With its anarchist movement stronger than anywhere else, with its people largely uneasy with the very fact of being governed, with its always-already failed state, Greece stands as a textbook case of our defeated insurrections. Jacking the police, smashing the banks and temporarily routing a government is still not destituting it all. What the Greek case shows us is that without a concrete idea of what a 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 dissipate it somewhat.

## *Characteristic Features of Contemporary Insurrections*

It's not the people that produce an uprising, it's the uprising that produces its people, by re-engendering the shared experience and understanding, the human fabric and the real-life language that had disappeared. Revolutions of the past promised a new life. Contemporary insurrections deliver the keys to it. There is where the event resides: not in the media phenomenon fabricated to exploit the rebellion through external celebration of it, but in the encounters actually produced within it. This is something much less spectacular than "the movement" or "the revolution," but more decisive. No one can say what an encounter is capable of generating.

This is how insurrections continue, in a molecular fashion, imperceptibly, in the life of neighborhoods, collectives, squats, "social centers," and singular beings, in Brazil as in Spain, in Chile as in Greece. Not because they implement a political program but because they trigger revolutionary becomings. Because what was lived through shines with such a glow that those who had the experience have to be faithful to it, not separating off but constructing what *was missing from their lives before*. The construction in question here is not that of a "new society" at its embryonic stage, nor an organization that will eventually overthrow an authority so as to constitute a new one, it's the collective power which, with its consistency and its intelligence, consigns the ruling power to powerlessness, foiling each of its maneuvers in turn.

Insurrections no longer base themselves on political ideologies, but on ethical truths. We've conveniently forgotten the slow apprenticeship during which we acquired, together with language, a relationship with the world. Far from serving to describe the world, language helps us rather to *construct* a world. Ethical truths are thus not truths about the world, but truths on the basis of which we dwell therein. Paradoxically, even where an ethical truth is uttered as a refusal, the fact of saying "No!" places us squarely in existence.

The true content of Occupy Wall Street was not the demand, tacked onto the movement a posteriori like a post-it stuck on a hippopotamus, for better wages, decent housing, or a more generous social security, but *disgust with the life we're forced to live*. What is at issue in contemporary insurrections is knowing what a desirable form of life would be, and not the nature of the institutions that would loom over it. But recognizing this would immediately mean recognizing the ethical inanity of the West.

Could anything be less "political" as the starting point of an insurrection than radar Hashes? But could anything be more ethical than the refusal to let oneself be fleeced like sheep? The importance of the theme of prevailing corruption in almost all the

contemporary revolts shows that they are ethical before being political, or that they are political precisely to the degree that they're contemptuous of politics, including radical politics. As long as being of the left will mean denying the existence of ethical truths and correcting for that impairment with a morality that's as feeble as it is expedient, the fascists will continue to look like the only affirmative political force, being the only ones who don't apologize for living as they do. They'll go from success to success, and will go on deflecting the energy of nascent revolts back against themselves.

Limiting oneself to fighting against austerity doesn't just add to the misunderstanding, it also ensures that one will lose, by implicitly accepting an idea of life that one doesn't agree with; you place yourself in their terrain in which they have already set the terms, and won.

What is needed for contesting the austerity plans is a different idea of life, which consists for example in sharing rather than economizing, conversing rather than not saying a word, fighting rather than suffering, celebrating our victories rather than disallowing them, engaging rather than keeping one's distance. Something should be said in this connection about the incalculable strength given to the indigenous movements of the American subcontinent by their embrace of *buen vivir* as a political affirmation. On one hand, it brings out the visible contours of what one is fighting for and what against; on the other, it opens one up to a calm discovery of the thousand other ways the "good life" can be understood, ways that are not enemy ways for being different, at least not necessarily.

### *There's No Such Thing as a Democratic Insurrection.*

Western rhetoric is unsurprising. Every time a mass uprising takes down a satrap still honored in all the embassies only yesterday, it's because the people "aspire to democracy." The stratagem is as old as Athens. And it works so well that even an Occupy Wall Street assembly saw fit, in November 2011, to allocate 29,000 dollars to twenty or so international observers to go monitor the Egyptian elections. Which drew this response from comrades of Tahrir Square, who were intended recipients of the assistance: "In Egypt, we didn't make the revolution in the street just for the purpose of having a parliament. Our struggle—which we hope to share with you—is broader in scope than the acquisition of a well-oiled parliamentary democracy".

Insurrection doesn't respect any of the formalisms, any of the democratic procedures. Like any large-scale demonstration, it imposes its own ways of using public space. Like any specific strike, it is a politics of the accomplished fact. It is the reign of initiative, of practical complicity, of gesture. As to decision, it accomplishes that in the streets, reminding those

who've forgotten, that "popular" comes from the Latin *populor*, "to ravage, devastate." It is a fullness of expression—in the chants, on the walls, in the spoken interventions, in the street—and a nullity of deliberation. Perhaps the miracle of insurrection can be summed up in this way: at the same time that it dissolves democracy as a problem, it speaks immediately of a beyond-democracy

The only thing an assembly can produce, with the right effort, is a shared language. Where the only experience in common is separation, one will only hear the amorphous language of separated life. Then indignation is in fact the maximum political intensity attainable by the atomized individual, who mistakes his screen for the world just as he mistakes his feelings for his thoughts. A plenary assembly of all these atoms, in spite of its touching togetherness, will only expose the paralysis induced by a false understanding of the political, and hence their inability to alter the world's drift in the slightest. It makes one think of a sea of dumbstruck faces pressed against a glass wall and watching the mechanical universe continuing to function without them. The feeling of collective helplessness, after the joy of meeting up and *being counted*, did as much to scatter the owners of those "Quechua" tents as the clubs and the tear gas attacks did.

Yet it's true that there was something going beyond that feeling in these occupations, and it was precisely those things that had no place in the theatrical moment of the assembly, everything having to do with the miraculous ability of living beings to *inhabit*, to inhabit even the uninhabitable: the heart of the metropolis. In the occupied squares, all that politics since classical Greece has basically held in contempt, and relegated to the sphere of "economy," of domestic management, "survival," "reproduction," "daily routine," and "labor," was affirmed instead as a dimension of collective political potential, escaping in this way from the subordination of the private. The organizational ability that was routinely demonstrated every day and that managed to feed 3,000 persons at every meal, construct a village in a few days, or take care of wounded rioters can be seen as marking the real political victory of the "movement of the squares." To which the occupation of Taksim and Maidan added the art of maintaining barricades and making Molotov cocktails in industrial quantities

The fact that a form of organization as banal and predictable as the assembly was invested with such an intense veneration says a lot about the nature of democratic *affects*. If insurrection has to do with anger at first, then with joy, direct democracy, with its formalism, is an affair of worriers. We want to be sure that nothing will occur that is not covered by some procedure. That no event will exceed our capacities. That the situation will remain something we can handle. That no one will feel cheated or in open conflict with the majority. That absolutely no one will ever have to count on their own powers to make themselves understood. That no one will impose anything on anyone. To that end, the



different mechanisms of the assembly—from turn-taking to silent applause—organize a cottony space with no edges other than those of a succession of monologues, disabling the need to fight for what one thinks.

If democrats must structure the situation to this degree, it's because they have no trust in it. And if they don't trust the situation, this is because at bottom they *don't trust themselves*. Their fear of allowing themselves to be overwhelmed by the situation makes them want to control democracy at any cost, even if this often means destroying it. Democracy is first of all the set of procedures by which it gives form and structure to this anxiety. It doesn't make much sense to denounce democracy: one doesn't denounce an anxiety.

We can only be freed from our attachment to democratic procedures through a general deploying of attention—attention not only to what is being said, but mostly to what is unspoken, attention to the way things are said, and to what can be read on people's faces and in silences. It's a matter of swamping the emptiness that democracy maintains between the individual atoms by a full attention to one another, a new attention to the world we have in common. What's called for is to replace the mechanical regime of argumentation with a regime of truth, of openness, of sensitivity to what is there. In the 12th century, when Tristan and Iseult found each other again by night and set to conversing, it was a “parlement”; when, through street encounters and the pressure of circumstances, people gather and start discussing things, it's an “assembly.” This is What should be contrasted with the “sovereignty” of general assemblies, with the palaver of parliaments: the rediscovery of the affective charge linked with speech, with true speech. The opposite of democracy is not dictatorship, it is truth. It's precisely because they are moments of *truth*, where power is laid bare, that insurrections are never democratic.

### *Democracy Is Just Government in Its Pure State*

Edward Bernays, the founder of public relations, began the first chapter of his book *Propaganda*, titled “Organizing Chaos,” in this way: “The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in a democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.” That was in 1928. What one has in mind, basically, when one speaks of democracy, is the equivalence between those who govern and those who are governed, whatever the means by which that equivalence is obtained. Whence the epidemic of hypocrisy and hysteria that afflicts our lands. In a democratic regime, one governs *without really appearing to*. The masters clothe themselves in the attributes of the slave and the slaves believe they are the masters. The

former, exercising power on behalf of the happiness of the masses, are condemned to a constant hypocrisy, and the latter, imagining they possess a “purchasing power,” “rights,” or “opinions” that are trampled on all year round, become hysterics as a result. And because hypocrisy is the bourgeois virtue par excellence, something irreparably bourgeois becomes permanently attached to democracy. The popular feeling on this point is not mistaken.

Whether one is an Obama democrat or a fierce proponent of workers’ councils, and however one imagines “government of the people by the people,” what the question of democracy *overlays* is always the question of government. Its premise, its unthought assumption, is that there must be government. But governing is a quite specific way of exercising power. To govern is not to impose a discipline on a body, it is not to compel respect for the Law in a territory even if that means torturing the violators as under the Ancien Régime. A king reigns. A general commands. A judge judges. Governing is something different. It is managing the behaviors of a population, a multiplicity that one must watch over like a shepherd his flock in order to maximize its potential and guide its freedom. So this means taking into account and shaping its desires, its ways of doing and thinking, its habits, its fears, its dispositions, its milieu. It means deploying a whole ensemble of tactics, of discursive, material, and policing tactics, paying close attention to the people’s emotions, with their mysterious oscillations; it is acting to prevent rioting and sedition, based on a constant sensitivity to the affective and political climate. Acting upon the milieu and continually modifying the variables of the latter, acting on some to influence the behavior of the others, to keep control of the flock. In short, it means waging a war that’s never called one and doesn’t look like one, in almost every sphere of human existence. A war of influence—subtle, psychological, indirect.

What has continued to develop since the 17th century in the West is not state power but, through the construction of national states and now through their deterioration, government *as a specific form of power*: a fluid democracy and the need for plasticity to exercise pure government, the more flexible the more governable.

Those who thought that the forms of Law were a definitive acquisition of democracy, and not a transitory form in the process of being outstripped, must be feeling disappointed. Those forms are now a formal hindrance to the elimination of democracy’s “enemy combattants” and to the continual reorganization of the economy. From Italy of the 1970s to Obama’s dirty wars, antiterrorism is not a regrettable violation of our fine democratic principles, a marginal exception to the latter; it is rather the uninterrupted *constitutive action* by which contemporary democracies are held together. In Brazil, under anti-terrorism provisions some young people were arrested whose crime was to have tried to organize a demonstration against the World Cup. In Italy, four comrades were jailed for “terrorism” on the grounds that an attack on the work site of the TAV, the high-speed train

line, seriously damaged the country's "image" by burning a compressor. Useless to multiply the examples, the fact is universal: everything that resists the schemes of governments risks being treated as "terrorist." A liberal mind might fear that governments are detracting from their democratic legitimacy. That is not at all the case; in fact, through such a practice they reestablish it

### *Government as Counter-insurgency*

"Civil war," said Foucault, "is the matrix of all the power struggles, of all the power strategies and, consequently, the matrix of all the struggles over and against power." He added, "Civil war not only brings collective elements into play, but it constitutes them. Far from being the process through which one comes down again from the republic to individuality, from the sovereign to the state of nature, from the collective order to the war of all against all, civil war is the process through and by which a certain number of new collectivities that had not seen the light of day constitute themselves." It's on this plane of perception that basically every political existence deploys. Pacifism that has already lost and radicalism that only intends to lose are two ways of not seeing this. Of not seeing that war is not essentially military in nature. That life is essentially strategic. The irony of our epoch has it that the only ones who situate war where it is conducted, and thus reveal the plane where all government operates, happen to be the counter-revolutionaries themselves. It is striking to note that in the last half-century the non-militaries began rejecting war in all its forms, and at the very time when the militaries were developing a non-military concept, a civil concept of war. A few examples, casually excerpted from contemporary articles:

"The locus of collective armed conflict has gradually expanded the battlefield to include the whole earth. In like manner, its duration may now be indefinite, without there being a declaration of war or any armistice (...) For this reason contemporary strategists emphasize that modern victory results from conquering the hearts of the members of a population rather than their territory. Submission must be gained through adherence and adherence through esteem. Indeed, it's a matter of imposing one's purpose on the inner individual, where the social contact between human collectivities is established at present. Stripped bare by world homogenization, contacted by globalisation, and penetrated by telecommunication, henceforth the front will be situated in the inner being of each of the members that make up the collectivities. (...) This sort of fabrication of passive partisans can be summed up by the catchphrase: 'The front within every person, and no one on any front.' (...) The whole politico-strategic challenge of a world that is neither at war or at peace, which precludes all settlement of conflict by means of the classic military juridical voices,

consists in preventing passive partisans on the verge of action, at the threshold of belligerence, from becoming active partisans.” (Laurent Da-net, “La polemosphere”)

“At present, given that the terrain of warfare has extended beyond the ground, sea, space, and electronic fields into those of society, politics, economics, diplomacy, culture, and even psychology, the interaction among the different factors makes it very difficult to maintain the preponderance of the military domain as the dominant one in every war. The idea that war can unfold in unwarlike domains is foreign to reason and hard to accept, but events increasingly show this to be the trend. (...) In this sense, there no longer exists any area of life that cannot serve war and there are almost no areas remaining that do not present the offensive aspect of war.” (Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *La guerre hors li-mite*)

“The probable war is not waged ‘between’ societies, but ‘within’ societies (...) Since the objective is human society, its governance, its social contract, its institutions, and no longer this or that province, river, or border, there is no longer any line or terrain to conquer or protect. The only front that the engaged forces must hold is that of the populations. (...) To win the war is to control the milieu. (...) It’s no longer a question of perceiving a mass of tanks and of pinpointing potential targets, but of understanding social milieus, behaviors, psychologies. It’s a matter of influencing human intentions through a selective and appropriate application of force. (...) Military actions are truly ‘a manner of speaking’: henceforth, every major operation is above all a communication operation whose every act, even a minor act, speaks louder than words. (...) To wage war is first and foremost to manage perceptions, those of the set of actors, whether close by or far away, direct or indirect.” (General Vincent Desportes, *La guerre probable*)

“The developed postmodern societies have become extremely complex and hence very fragile. To prevent their collapse in the event of a ‘breakdown,’ it’s imperative that they decentralize (the salvation will come from the margins and not the institutions) (...) It will be necessary to rely on local forces (self-defense militias, paramilitary groups, private military associations), first from a practical standpoint owing to their knowledge of the milieu and the populations, second, because on the part of the State it will be a mark of confidence that federates the different initiatives and reinforces them, and last and most important, because they are more apt to find appropriate and original (unconventional) solutions to delicate situations. In other words, the response called for by unconventional warfare needs to be citizen-based and paramilitary, rather than having a police and military focus. (...) If Hezbollah has become a first-rate international actor, if the neo-Zapatista movement manages to represent an alternative to neoliberal globalization, then one has admit that the ‘local’ can interact with the ‘global’ and that this interaction is truly one of the major strategic characteristics of our time. (...) To put it briefly, a local-global interaction

must be answered by a different interaction of the same type, supported not by the state apparatus (diplomacy, army), but by the local element par excellence—the citizen.” (Bernard Wicht, *Vers l’ordre oblique : la contre-guerilla a l’age de l’infoguerre*)

After reading that, one has a slightly different take on the role of the militias of citizen sweepers and the appeals for snitching following the riots of August 1011 in England, or the bringing in— then the opportune elimination when “the pitbull got too big”—of the Golden Dawn fascists as players in the Greek political game. To say nothing of the recent arming of citizen militias by the Mexican federal state in Michoacan. What is happening to us at present can be summed up more or less in this way: from being a military doctrine, counterinsurgency has become a principle of government. One of the cables of American diplomacy revealed by Wikileaks confirms this, bluntly: “The program of pacification of the favelas incorporates certain characteristics of the doctrine and strategy of counterinsurgency of the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq.” The era can be reduced ultimately to this struggle, this race, between the possibility of insurrection and the partisans of counter-insurrection. Moreover, this is what the rare outburst of political chattering triggered in the West by the “Arab revolutions” served to mask. To mask, for example, the fact that cutting off all communication in the working-class areas, as Mubarak did at the start of the uprising, was not just the impulsive act of an addled dictator, but a strict application of the NATO report, *Urban Operations in the Year 2020*.

There is no world government; what there is instead is a worldwide network of local apparatuses of government, that is, a global, reticular, counterinsurgency machinery. Snowden’s revelations show this amply: secret services, multinationals, and political networks collaborate shamelessly, even beyond a nation-state level that nobody cares about now. In this regard, there is no center and periphery, internal security and foreign operations. What is tried out on faraway peoples will be the fate that is in store for one’s own people. The troops that massacred the Parisian proletariat in June of 1848 had honed their skills in the “street war,” with its torchings called *enfumades*, in Algeria during colonization. The Italian mountain infantry battalions, recently returned from Afghanistan, were redeployed in the Susa Valley. In the West, using the armed forces on national territory in cases of major disorder is longer even a taboo, it’s a standard scenario. From health crisis to imminent terrorist attack, their minds have been methodically prepared for it. They train everywhere for urban battles, for “pacification,” for “post-conflict” stabilization. They maintain their readiness for the coming insurrections.

The counter-insurgency doctrines should be read, therefore, as theories of the war being waged against us, doctrines that partly define, among so many other things, our common situation in this era. They should be read both as a qualitative leap in the concept of war, short of which we cannot situate ourselves, and as a deceptive mirror. Although the doctrines of counter-insurgency warfare are patterned after the successive revolutionary doctrines, one





cannot negatively deduce any theory of insurrection from counter-insurgency theories. That is the logical trap. It no longer suffices for us to wage the “little war,” to attack by surprise, to deprive the adversary of any target. Even that kind of asymmetry has been diminished. As far as war as strategy is concerned, it’s not enough to catch up: we have to move into the lead. We need a strategy that’s aimed not at the adversary but at his strategy, that turns it back against itself, making it so that the more he thinks he’s winning the more surely he’s heading towards his defeat.

The fact that counterinsurgency has made society itself its theater of operations doesn’t at all indicate that the war to be waged is the “social war” that some anarchists mouth off about. The main defect of this notion is that by lumping the offensives carried out by “the State and Capital” and those of our adversaries under the same rubric, it places subversives in a relation of symmetrical warfare. The smashed window of an Air France office in retaliation for the expulsion of undocumented migrants is declared to be an “act of social war,” on a par with a wave of arrests targeting people fighting against detention centers. While we have to recognize an undeniable determination on the part of many upholders of “social war,” they accept fighting the state head-to-head, on a terrain that has always belonged to it and no one else. Only the forces involved in this case are dysemmetrical. A crushing defeat is inevitable.

The idea of social war is actually just an unsuccessful updating of “class war,” maintaining that each one’s position in the relations of production no longer has the formal clarity of the Fordist factory. It sometimes seems as if revolutionaries are doomed to constitute themselves on the same model as what they’re fighting. Thus, as a member of the International Workingmen’s Association summarized it in 1871, the bosses being organized worldwide around their interests as a class, the proletariat must likewise organize itself worldwide, as a working class and around its interests. As a member of the young Bolshevik Party explained it, the tsarist regime was organized into a disciplined and hierarchical politico-military machine, so the Party should also organize itself into a disciplined and hierarchical politico-military machine.

One can multiply the historical cases, all equally tragic, of this curse of symmetry. Take the Algerian FLN, which in its methods came to closely resemble the colonial occupiers well before its victory. Or the Red Brigades, who imagined that by taking out the fifty men who were thought to constitute the “core of the State” they would be able to appropriate the whole machine. Today, the most wrongheaded expression of this tragedy of symmetry comes out of the mouths of the new left. What they say is that set against the diffuse Empire, which is structured into a network, but endowed with command centers all the same, there are the multitudes, just as diffuse, structured into a network, but endowed nonetheless with a bureaucracy capable of occupying the command centers when the day comes.

Marked by this kind of symmetry, revolt is bound to fail—not only because it presents an easy target, a recognizable face, but above all because it eventually takes on the features of its



adversary. To be convinced of this, open *Counter-insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, by David Galula, for example. One finds therein, methodically laid out in detail, the steps to a definitive victory of a loyalist force over generic insurgents. “The best cause for the insurgent is one that, by definition, can attract the largest number of supporters and repel the minimum of opponents... It is not absolutely necessary that the problem be acute, although the insurgent’s work is facilitated if such is the case. If the problem is merely latent, the first task of the insurgent is to make it acute by ‘raising the political consciousness of the masses’...The insurgent is not restricted to the choice of a single cause. Unless he has found an overall cause, like anti-colonialism, which is sufficient in itself because it combines all the political, social, economic, racial, religious, and cultural causes described above, he has much to gain by selecting an assortment of causes especially tailored for the various groups in the society that he is seeking to take over.”

Who is Galula’s “insurgent”? None other than the distorted reflection of the Western politician, official, or publicist: cynical, external to every situation, devoid of any genuine desire, except for an outsize hunger for control. The insurgent that Galula knows how to combat is a stranger to the world just as he’s a stranger to any belief. For that officer, Galula, insurrection never emanates from the population, which only aspires to security, basically, and tends to go with the party that protects it the best or threatens it the least. The population is only a pawn, an inert mass, a marsh, in the struggle between several elites. It can seem astonishing that power’s notion of the insurgent wavers between the figure of the fanatic and that of the crafty lobbyist—but this is less surprising than the eagerness of so many revolutionaries to put on those unpleasant masks.

Always this same symmetrical understanding of warfare, even the “asymmetrical” kind—groupuscules competing for control of the population, and always maintaining an outsider’s relation with it. In the end, this is the monumental error of counterinsurgency: despite its success absorbing the asymmetry introduced by guerilla tactics, it still continues to produce the figure of the “terrorist” based on what it is itself. And this is to our advantage, then, provided we don’t allow ourselves to embody that figure. It’s what all effective revolutionary strategy must accept as its point of departure. The failure of the American strategy in Iraq and Afghanistan bears witness. Counterinsurgency did such a good job of turning “the population” around that the Obama administration has to routinely and surgically assassinate, via drone, anything that might resemble an insurgent.

### *Ontological asymmetry and Happiness*

If the insurgents’ war against the government needs to be asymmetrical, it’s because there is an ontological asymmetry between them, and hence a disagreement about the very definition of war, about its methods as well as its objectives. We other revolutionaries are both the focus

and the target of the permanent offensive that government has become. We are the “hearts and minds” that must be conquered. We are the “crowds” that are to be controlled. We are the environment in which the governmental agents evolve and which they mean to subdue, and not a rival entity in the race for power. We don’t fight in the midst of the people “like fish in water”; we’re the water itself, in which our enemies flounder—soluble fish. We don’t hide in ambush among the plebs of this world, because it’s also us that the plebs hide among. The vitality and the plundering, the rage and the craftiness, the truth and the subterfuge all spring from deep within us. There is no one to be organized. We are that material which grows from within, which organizes itself and develops itself. The true asymmetry lies there, and our real position of strength is there. Those who make their belief into an article of export, through terror or performance, instead of dealing with what exists where they are, only cut themselves off from themselves and their base. It’s not a matter of snatching the “support of the population,” nor even its indulgent passivity, from the enemy: we must make it so there is no longer a population. The population has never been the object of government without first being its product. It ceases to exist once it ceases to be governable. This is what’s involved in the muffled battle that rages after every uprising: dissolving the power that had formed, focused, and deployed in that event. Governing has never been anything but denying the people all political capacity, that is, preventing insurrection.

Separating those governed from their political power to act is what the police are about whenever they try to “isolate the violent ones” at the end of a righteous demonstration. Nothing is more effective for crushing an insurrection than causing a split within the insurgent mass between an innocent or vaguely consenting population and its vanguard, who are militarized, hence minoritarian, usually clandestine, and soon to be “terrorist.” We owe the most complete example of such a tactic to Frank Kitson, the godfather of British counterinsurgency. In the years following the extraordinary conflict that engulfed Northern Ireland in August 1969, the great strength of the IRA was to stand together with the Catholic districts that had declared themselves autonomous and called for its assistance, at Belfast and Derry, during the riots. Free Derry, Short Strand, Ardoyne: three of those no-go areas that one finds so often in apartheid territories, and still encircled today by kilometers of “peace lines.” The ghettos had risen up, barricading their entry points and closing them to the cops and the loyalists. Fifteen-year-old kids alternated mornings at school with nights on the barricades. The most respectable members of the community did the shopping for ten and organized clandestine grocery outlets for those who couldn’t safely go out on their own. Although caught unprepared by the summer’s events, the Provisional IRA blended into the extremely dense ethical fabric of those enclaves that were in a constant state of insurrection. From that position of irreducible strength, everything seemed possible. 1972 would be the year of victory.

Somewhat taken aback, the counterinsurgency deployed its major means. At the end of a military operation with no equivalent for Great Britain since the Suez crisis, the districts were

emptied out, the enclaves were broken, in this way effectively separating the “professional” revolutionaries from the riotous populations that risen up in 1969, tearing them away from the thousand complicities that had been woven. Through this maneuver, the Provisional IRA was constrained to being nothing more than an armed faction, a paramilitary group, impressive and determined to be sure, but headed toward exhaustion, internment without trial, and summary executions. The tactic of repression seems to have consisted in bringing a radical revolutionary subject into existence, and separating it from everything that made it a vital force of the Catholic community: a territorial anchorage, an everyday life, a youthfulness. And as if that wasn’t enough, false IRA attacks were organized to finish turning a paralyzed population against it. From counter gangs to false flag operations, nothing was ruled out for making the IRA into a clandestine monster, territorially and politically detached from what constituted the strength of the republican movement: the districts, their sense of making-do and of organization, their custom of rioting. Once the “paramilitaries” were isolated, and the thousand exceptional procedures for annihilating them were routinized, it was just a matter of waiting for the “troubles” to dissipate of their own accord.

When the most indiscriminate repression comes down on us, we should be careful, then, not to see it as the conclusive proof of our radicality. We shouldn’t think they are out to destroy us. We should start rather from the hypothesis that they’re out to produce us. Produce us as a political subject, as “anarchists,” as “Black Bloc,” as “anti-system” radicals, to extract us from the generic population by assigning us a political identity. When repression strikes us, let’s begin by not taking ourselves for ourselves. Let’s dissolve the fantastical terrorist subject which the counterinsurgency theorists take such pains to impersonate, a subject the representation of which serves mainly to produce the “population” as a foil—the population as an apathetic and apolitical heap, an immature mass just good enough for being governed, for having its hunger pangs and consumer dreams satisfied.

Revolutionaries have no call to convert the “population” from the bogus exteriority of who knows what “social project.” They should start instead from their own presence, from the places they inhabit, the territories they’re familiar with, the ties that link them to what is going on around them. Identification of the enemy and effective strategies and tactics are things that come from living and not from any prior declaration of belief. The logic of increasing power is all that can set against that of taking power. Fully inhabiting is all that can be set against the paradigm of government. One can throw oneself onto the state apparatus, but if the terrain that’s won is not immediately filled with a new life, government will end up taking it back.

Raul Zibechi writes this about the Aymara insurrection in Bolivia in 2003: “Actions of this magnitude cannot be consummated without the existence of a dense network of relationships between persons—re-relationships that are also forms of organization. The problem is that we are unwilling to consider that in everyday life the relationships between neighbors, between friends, between comrades, or between family, are as important as those of the union, the

party, or even the state itself. (...) Established relationships, codified through formal agreements, are often more important in Western culture than those loyalties woven by informal ties” We need to give the same care to the smallest everyday details of our shared life as we give to the revolution. For insurrection is the displacement of this organization that is not one—not being detachable from ordinary life— onto an offensive terrain. It is a qualitative leap in the ethical dimension, not a break with the everyday, finally consummated. Zibechi goes on to say: “The same bodies that sustain everyday life sustain the uprising (the neighborhood assemblies in the local councils of El Alto). The rotation of tasks and the obligatory character ensures everyday community life, just as it guaranteed the task of blocking roads and streets.” In this way the sterile distinction between spontaneity and organization is dissolved. There’s not on one hand a prepolitical, unreflected, “spontaneous” sphere of existence and on the other a political, rational, organized sphere. Those with shitty relationships can only have a shitty politics.

This doesn’t mean that in order to conduct a winning offensive we must ban any inclination to conflict among us—conflict, not double dealing and scheming. It’s largely because the Palestinian resistance has never prevented differences from existing within it—even at the cost of open confrontations—that it has been able to give the Israeli army a hard time. Here as elsewhere, political fragmentation is just as much the sign of an undeniable ethical vitality as it is the nightmare of the intelligence agencies charged with mapping, then annihilating, resistance. An Israeli architect writes as follows: “The Israeli and Palestinian methods of fighting are fundamentally different.

The fractured Palestinian resistance is composed of a multiplicity of organizations, each having a more or less independent armed wing—Iz Adin al-Qassam for Hamas, Saraya al Quds (the Jerusalem Brigades) for Islamic Jihad, Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Force 17 and Tanzim al-Fatah for Fatah. These are supplemented by the independent PRC (Popular Resistance Committees) and imagined or real members of Hizbollah and/or Al-Qaeda. The fact that these organizations shift between cooperation, competition, and violent conflict increases the general complexity of their interactions and with it their collective capacity, efficiency, and resilience. The diffuse nature of Palestinian resistance and the fact that knowledge, skills, and munitions are transferred within and between these organizations—and that they sometimes stage joint attacks and at others compete to outdo each other—substantially reduces the effect that the Israeli occupation forces seek to achieve by attacking them.” Accommodating internal conflict when it presents itself honestly, doesn’t interfere at all with the concrete elaboration of an insurrectionary strategy. On the contrary, it’s the best way for a movement to stay vital, to keep the essential questions open, to make the necessary shifts in a timely manner. But if we accept civil war, including in our midst, it’s not only because in itself this constitutes a good strategy for defeating imperial offensives. It’s also and above all because it accords with the idea we have of life. Indeed, if being revolutionary implies an attachment to certain truths, it follows from the irreducible plurality of the latter

that our party will never enjoy a peaceful unity. As far as organization is concerned, then, there will be no choosing between fraternal peace and fratricidal war. We will need to choose between the forms of internal confrontations that strengthen revolutions and those that hinder them.

### *Theory of Destitution*

Coming out of Argentina, the slogan “¡Que se vayan todos!” jarred the ruling heads all over the world. There’s no counting the number of languages in which we’ve shouted our desire, during the past few years, to *destitute* the power in place. And the most surprising thing still is that in several cases we managed to do that. But however fragile the regimes succeeding such “revolutions,” the second part of the slogan, “¡Y que no quede ni uno!” (“And let not a single one remain!”), has gone unheeded: new puppets have taken the places left vacant. The most exemplary case has to be Egypt. Tahrir had Mubarak’s head and the Tamarod movement that of Morsi. Each time, the street demanded a destitution that it didn’t have the strength to organize, so that it was the already organized forces, the Muslim Brotherhood then the army, that usurped that destitution and carried it through to their benefit. A movement that demands is always at a disadvantage opposite a force that acts. We can marvel in passing at how the role of the sovereign and that of the “terrorist” are basically interchangeable, seeing how quickly one transitions from the palaces of power to the basements of its prisons, and vice versa.

So the complaint that is commonly heard among yesterday’s insurgents says: “The revolution was betrayed. We didn’t die to make it possible for a provisional government to organize elections, then a constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution that would lay out the modalities of new elections from which a new regime would emerge, which would be almost identical to the previous one. We wanted life to change, and nothing has changed, or very little.” On this point, radicals always give the same explanation: it’s that the people have to govern themselves instead of electing representatives. If revolutions are consistently betrayed this may be the result of fate, but perhaps it’s a sign that some hidden flaws in our idea of revolution condemn it to such an inevitability.

One of those flaws is in the fact that we still tend to conceive of revolution as a dialectic between the constituent and the constituted. We still believe in the fable that tells us all constituted power is rooted in a constituent power, that the state emanates from the nation, as the absolute monarch does from God, that beneath the constitution in force there always exists another constitution, an order that’s underlying and transcendent at once, silent

normally, but capable at certain moments of flashing into presence. We like to think that “the people” only have to assemble, ideally in front of the parliament, and shout “You don’t represent us!” for the constituent power to magically depose the constituted powers through its simple epiphany. This fiction of the constituent power actually only serves to mask the strictly political, fortuitous origin, the *raw coup* by which power is instituted. Those who’ve taken power project the source of their authority back onto the social totality which they henceforth control, and in this way legitimately silence it *in its own name*. So it happens that the feat of getting the people fired upon in the name of the people is regularly accomplished. Constituent power is the matador’s costume which the squalid origin of power always sports, the veil that hypnotizes everyone and makes them believe that the constituted power is much more than it is.

Those who propose, like Antonio Negri, to “govern the revolution” only see “constituent struggles” everywhere, from the banlieue riots to the uprisings in the Arab world. A Madrid-based Negriist who supports a hypothetical “constituent process” coming out the movement of the squares, even calls for the creation of “the party of democracy,” “the party of the 99%,” for the purpose of “articulating a new democratic constitution just as ‘ordinary,’ as non-representative as 15M was.” Misdirections of this kind encourage us to reconceive the idea of revolution as *pure destitution* instead.

To institute or constitute a power is to give it a basis, a foundation, a legitimacy. For an economic, judicial, or police apparatus, it is to ground its fragile existence in a dimension that is beyond it, in a transcendence designed to place it out of reach. Through 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 whole. As a constituted thing, a power becomes an order with no outside, an uncontested existence with no counterpart, which can only subject or annihilate. The dialectic of the constituent and the constituted comes to confer a higher meaning on what is never anything but a contingent political form. This is how the Republic becomes the universal banner of an indisputable and eternal human nature, or the caliphate the single locus of community. Constituent power names that monstrous piece of magic that turns the state into that entity that’s never wrong, having its basis in reason; that has no enemies, since to oppose it is to be a criminal; that can do anything, being without honor.

So to destitute power it’s not enough to defeat it in the street, to dismantle its apparatuses, to set its symbols ablaze. To destitute power is to deprive it of its foundation. That is precisely what insurrections do. There the constituted appears as it is, with its thousand maneuvers—clumsy or effective, crude or sophisticated. “The king has no clothes,” one says then, because the constituent veil is in tatters and everyone sees through it. To destitute power is to take away its legitimacy, compel it to recognize its arbitrariness, reveal its

contingent dimension. It's to show that it holds together only in situation, through what it deploys in the way of stratagems, methods, tricks—to turn it into a temporary configuration of things which, like so many others, have to fight and scheme in order to survive. It's to make the government lower itself to the level of the insurgents, who can no longer be “monsters, criminals,” or “terrorists” but simply enemies. To force the police to be nothing more henceforth than a gang, and the justice system a criminal association. In insurrection, the power in place is just one force among others from the perspective of common struggle, and no longer that meta-force which regiments, commands, or condemns all potentialities. All motherfuckers have addresses. To destitute power is to bring it back down to earth.

Whatever the outcome of the street confrontations, insurrection has always-already torn holes in the tight fabric of beliefs that enable government to be exercised. That is why those in a hurry to bury the insurrection don't waste their time trying to mend the broken foundation of an already invalidated legitimacy. They attempt instead to infuse the movement itself with a new claim to legitimacy, that is, a new claim to be founded on reason, to preside over the strategic plane where the different forces clash. The legitimacy of “the people,” “the oppressed,” “the 99%” is the Trojan horse by which the constituent is smuggled back into insurrectionary destitution. This is the surest method for undoing an insurrection—one that doesn't even require defeating it in the streets.

To make the destitution irreversible, therefore, we must begin by abandoning *our own legitimacy*. We have to give up the idea that one makes the revolution in the name of something, that there's a fundamentally just and innocent entity which the revolutionary forces would have the task of representing. One doesn't bring power back down to earth in order to raise oneself above the heavens.

Destituting this epoch's specific form of power requires, for a start, that one challenge the notion that men need to be governed, either democratically by themselves or hierarchically by others, returning it to its status as a hypothesis, not a “self-evident” truth. The assumption goes back at least to the birth of politics in Greece—its power is such that even the Zapatistas have gathered their “autonomous communes” under the umbrella of “good-government councils.”

A definite anthropology is at work here, which is found in the anarchist individualist aspiring to the full satisfaction of their personal passions and needs and in seemingly more pessimistic conceptions, seeing man as a voracious beast who can only be kept from devouring his neighbor by a coercive power. Machiavelli, for whom men are “ungrateful, fickle, liars and deceivers, fearful of danger and greedy for gain,” is in agreement on this point with the founders of American democracy: “In contriving a system of government,

man ought to be supposed a knave,” asserted Hamilton. In every case, one starts from the idea that the political order is designed to contain a more or less bestial human nature, where the Self faces the others and the world, where there are only separate bodies that must be bound together through some artifice. As Marshall Sahlins has shown, this idea of a human nature that “culture” must contain is a *Western illusion*. It expresses our misery, and not that of all earth dwellers. “For the greater part of humanity, self-interest as we know it is unnatural in the normative sense: it is considered madness, witchcraft or some such grounds for ostracism, execution or at least therapy. Rather than expressing a pre-social human nature, such avarice is generally taken for a loss of humanity.”

But in order to destitute government, it's not enough to criticize this anthropology and its presumed “realism.” One must find a way to grasp it from the outside, to affirm a different plane of perception. For we do move on it *different plane*. From the relative outside of what we're experiencing, of what we're trying to construct, we've arrived at this conviction: the question of government only arises from a void—more often than not, from a void it was obliged to create. Power must have sufficiently detached itself from the world, it must have created a sufficient void around the individual, or within him, created a deserted space between beings large enough, so that it becomes a question of organizing all these disparate elements that nothing connects any more, of reassembling the separate elements as separate. Power creates emptiness. Emptiness attracts power.

Leaving the paradigm of government means starting politically from the opposite hypothesis. 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. What we inhabit inhabits us. What surrounds us constitutes us. We don't belong to ourselves. We are always-already spread through whatever we attach ourselves to. It's not a question of forming a void from which we could finally manage to catch hold of all that escapes us, but of learning to better inhabit what is there, which implies perceiving it—and there's nothing certain about that for the myopic children of democracy. Perceiving a world peopled not with things but with forces, not with subjects but with powers, not with bodies but with bonds.



It's by virtue of their plenitude that forms of life will complete the destitution.

Here, subtraction is affirmation and affirmation is an element of attack.

**They Want to Oblige Us to Govern.  
We Won't Yield to that Pressure**

**Nos quieren obligar a gobernar,  
no vamos a caer en esa provocación**

**Oaxaca, 2006.**



