

# LIFE NOT POLITICS

## TOWARDS DESTITUENT POWER



*excerpt from "now" by the invisible committee  
edited by chicano on the bloc*



The real has something intrinsically chaotic about it that humans need to stabilize by imposing a legibility, and thereby a foreseeability, on it. And what every institution provides is precisely a *stationary* legibility of the real, an *ultimate* stabilization of phenomena.

If the institution suits us so well, it's because the sort of legibility it guarantees saves us above all, each one of us, from *affirming* anything whatsoever, from risking our singular reading of life and of things, from producing together an intelligibility of the world that is properly ours and shared in common.

The problem is that choosing not to do that is the same as *choosing not to exist*. It's to resign from life.

In reality, what we need are not institutions but *forms*.

It so happens, in fact, that life, whether biological, singular or collective, is precisely a continual creation of forms. It suffices to perceive them, to accept allowing them to arise, to make a place for them and accompany their metamorphosis. A habit is a form. A thought is a form. A friendship is a form. A work is a form. A profession is a form. Everything that lives is only forms and interactions of forms.

Even though 80% of French people declared that they no longer expect anything from the politicians, the same 80% have confidence in the state and its institutions. No scandal, no evidence, no personal experience manages to make a dent in the respect owed to the institutional framework in this country. It's always the men who embody it who are to blame. There have been blunders, abuses, extraordinary breakdowns. The institutions, similar to ideology in this respect, are sheltered from the contradiction of facts, however recurrent. It was enough for the National Front to promise to restore the institutions to become reassuring instead of troubling. There's nothing surprising in that.

Except that, voila, we write from France, the country where even the Revolution has become an institution. If the principle comes to us from ancient Rome, the *affect* that accompanies it is clearly Christian in origin. The passion for the institution comes from a properly Christian distrust towards life.

The great malice of the institution idea is in its claiming to free us from the rule of the passions, from the uncontrollable hazards of existence, that it would be a transcendence of the passions when it is actually just one of them, and assuredly one of the most morbid.

The institution claims to be a *remedy against men*, none of whom can be trusted, whether the people or the leader, the neighbor or the brother or the stranger. What governs it is always the same idiocy of sinful humanity, subject to desire, selfishness, and lust, and who must keep from loving anything whatsoever in this world and from giving in to their inclinations, which are all uniformly vicious. Through its name and its language, what the institution promises is that a single thing, in this lower world, will have transcended time, will have withdrawn itself from the unpredictable flux of becoming, will have established a bit of tangible eternity, an unequivocal meaning, free of human ties and situations—a definitive stabilization of the real, like death.

This whole mirage dissolves when a revolution breaks out. Suddenly what seemed eternal collapses into time as though into a bottomless pit. What seemed to plunge its roots into the human heart turns

out to have been nothing but a fable for dupes. The palaces are vacated and one discovers in the prince's abandoned jumble of papers that he no longer believed in it all, if he ever had. For behind the façade of the institution, what goes on is always something other than it claims to be, it's precisely what the institution claimed to have delivered the world from: the very human comedy of the coexistence of networks, of loyalties, of clans, interests, lineages, dynasties even, a logic of fierce struggles for territories, resources, miserable tides, influence— stories of sexual conquest and pure folly, of old friendships and rekindled hatreds. Every institution is, in its very regularity, the result of an intense assortment and, as an institution, of a *denial of that assortment*.

Its supposed fixity masks a gluttonous appetite for absorbing, controlling, institutionalizing everything that's on its margins and harbors a bit of life.

The real model of every institution is universally the Church. Just as the Church clearly does not have as its goal leading the human flock to its divine salvation, but rather achieving *its own salvation* in time, the alleged function of an institution is only a pretext for its existence.

Reducing delinquency and “defending soci-



ety” are only the pretext of the carceral institution. If, during the centuries it has existed, it has never succeeded at these things—on the contrary— this is because its purpose is different; it’s is to go on existing and growing if possible, which means tending to the breeding ground of delinquency and managing the illegalities. The purpose of the medical institution is not to care for people’s health, but to produce the patients that justify its existence and a corresponding definition of health. Nothing new on this subject since Ivan Illich and his *Medical Nemesis*. It’s not the failure of the health institutions that we are now living in a world that is toxic through and through and that makes everyone sick. On the contrary, we’ve seen their triumph.

Quite often, the apparent failure of the institutions is their real function.

If school discourages children from learning, this is not fortuitously: it’s because children with a desire to learn would make school next to useless. The same goes for the unions, whose purpose is manifestly not the emancipation of workers, but rather the perpetuation of their condition. What could the bureaucrats of the labor unions do with their life, in fact, if the workers had the bad idea of actually freeing themselves?

Of course in every institution there are sincere people who really think they are there to accomplish



their mission. But it's no accident if those people see themselves systematically obstructed, are systematically kept out of the loop, punished, bullied, eventually ostracized; with the complicity of all the "realists" who keep their mouths shut. These choice victims of the institution have a hard time understanding its double talk, and what is really being asked of them.

The fate of the institutionalists is to always be treated there as killjoys, as rebels, and to be endlessly surprised by that.

Against the slightest revolutionary possibility, one will always find the institution of the Self and the Self of the institution. Inasmuch as "being someone" always comes down finally to the recognition of, the allegiance to, some institution, inasmuch as succeeding involves conforming to the reflection that you're shown in the hall of mirrors of the social game, the institution has a grip on everyone through the Self.

Breaking the circle that turns our contestation into a fuel for what dominates us, marking a rupture in the fatality that condemns revolutions to reproduce what they have driven out, shattering the iron cage of counter-revolution—this is the purpose of *destitution*.

The notion of *destitution* is necessary in order to free the revolutionary imaginary of all the old constituent fantasies that weigh it down, of the whole deceptive legacy of the French Revolution. It is necessary to intervene in revolutionary logic, in order to establish a division *within* the idea of insurrection.

For there are constituent insurrections, those that end like all the revolutions up to now have ended: by turning back into their opposite, those that have been made “in the name of”—in the name of whom or what? The people, the working class, or God, it matters little. And there are destituent insurrections, such as May ‘68, the Italian creeping May and so many insurrectionary communes. Despite all that it may have manifested that was cool, lively, unexpected, *Nuit debout*, like the Spanish movement of the squares or Occupy Wall Street previously, was troubled by the old constituent itch. What was staged spontaneously was the old revolutionary dialectic that would oppose the “constituted powers” with the “constituent power” of the people taking over the public space.

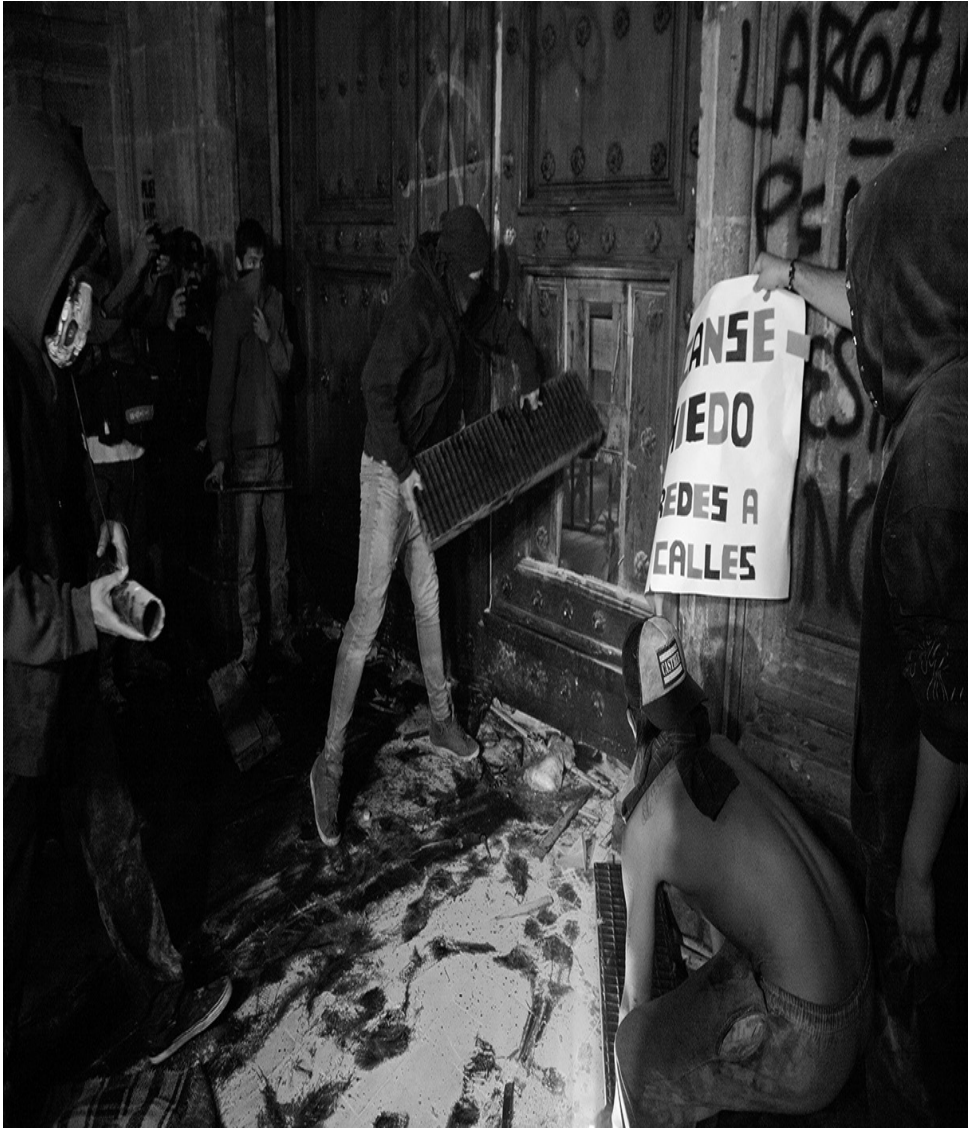
There’s a good reason that in the first three weeks of *Nuit debout*, Place de la République, no

fewer than three committees appeared that gave themselves the mission of rewriting a Constitution. What was re-enacted there was the old debate that's been performed to a full house in France since 1792. It must be said that the idea of constitutional reform presents the advantage of satisfying both the desire to change everything and the desire that everything stay the same—it's just a matter, finally, of changing a few lines, of symbolic modifications. As long as one debates words, as long as revolution is formulated in the language of rights and the law, the ways of neutralizing it are well-known and marked out.

*Destituere* in Latin means: to place standing separate, raise up in isolation; to abandon; put aside, let drop, knock down; to let down, deceive.

Whereas constituent logic crashes against the power apparatus it means to take control of, a destituent potential is concerned instead with escaping from it, with removing any hold on it which the apparatus might have, as it increases its hold on the world in the separate space that it forms.

Its characteristic gesture is *exiting* just as the typical constituent gesture is taking by storm. In terms of a destituent logic, the struggle against state and capital is valuable first of all for the exit from capital-



ist normality that is experienced therein, for the desertion from the crappy relations with oneself, others, and the world under capitalism.

Thus, where the “constituents” place themselves in a dialectical relation of struggle with the ruling authority in order to take possession of it, destituent logic obeys the vital need to *disengage from it*. It doesn’t abandon the struggle, it *fastens on to the struggle’s positivity*.

It doesn’t adjust itself to the movements of the adversary but to what is required for the increase of its own potential. So it has little use for criticizing:

“The choice is either to get out without delay, without wasting one’s time criticizing, simply because one is placed elsewhere than in the region of the adversary, or else one criticizes, one keeps one foot in it, and has the other one outside. We need to leap outside and dance above it.”

And Deleuze made this remark:

“Roughly speaking, one recognizes a Marxist by their saying that a society contradicts itself, is defined by its contradictions, especially its class contradictions.

We say rather is that in a society everything is escaping, that a society is defined by its lines of escape [...] Escape, but while escaping look for a weapon.”

It’s not a question of fighting *for* communism. What matters is the communism that is lived *in the fight itself*. The true richness of an action lies within itself.

This doesn’t mean that for us there’s no question of the observable effectiveness of an action. It means that the impact potential of an action doesn’t reside in its effects, but in what is immediately expressed in it.

To destitute is not primarily to attack the institution, but to attack the need we have of it.

It’s not to criticize it—the first critics of the state are the civil servants themselves; as to the mil-

itant, the more they criticize power the more they desire it and the more they refuse to acknowledge their desire—but to take to heart what the institution is meant to do, from outside it. To destitute the university is to establish, at a distance, the places of research, of education and thought, that are more vibrant and more demanding than it is—which would not be hard—and to greet the arrival of the last vigorous minds who are tired of frequenting the academic zombies, and only then to administer its death blow. To destitute the judicial system is to learn to settle our disputes ourselves, applying some method to this, paralyzing its faculty of judgment and driving its henchmen from our lives. To destitute medicine is to know what is good for us and what makes us sick, to rescue from the institution the passionate knowledges that survive there out of view, and never again to find oneself alone at the hospital, with one's body handed over to the artistic sovereignty of a disdainful surgeon. To destitute the government is to make ourselves ungovernable. Who said anything about winning? Overcoming is everything.

The destituent gesture does not *oppose* the institution. It doesn't even mount a frontal fight, it neutralizes it, empties it of its substance, then steps to the side and watches it expire. It reduces it down to the incoherent ensemble of its practices and

makes decisions about them.

Fernand Deligny said: “In order to fight *against* language and the institution, the right phrase is perhaps not to fight against, but to take the most distance possible, even if this means signaling one’s position. Why would we go and press ourselves against the wall? Our project is not to take and hold the square.” Deligny was clearly being what Toni Negri cannot abide, “a destituent.” But observing what happens when a constituent logic of combining social movements with a party aiming to take power, it does look like destitution is the way to go. Thus we saw, in the last few years, Syriza, that political party “issuing from the movement of the squares,” becoming the best relay for the austerity policies of the European Union.

The latest deplorable political intrigues that now make up the life of Podemos moved certain of its members to make this bitter observation: “They wanted to take power, and it is power that has taken them.” As for the “citizen’s movements” that decided to “squat power” by taking possession of the Barcelona mayor’s office, they’ve confided to their former friends of the squats something they still can’t declare in public: by gaining access to the institutions, they were indeed able to “take power,” *but there was nothing they could do with it* from there, apart from scuttling a few hotel projects, legalizing one or two occupations and receiving with great ceremony Anne Hidalgo, the





mayor of Paris.

Destitution makes it possible to rethink what we mean by revolution. The traditional revolutionary program involved a reclaiming of the world, an expropriation of the expropriators, a violent appropriation of that which is ours, but which we have been deprived of. But here's the problem: capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence. It has created a world in its image. From being an exploitation of the existing forms of life, it has transformed itself into a total universe. It has configured, equipped, and made desirable the ways of speaking, thinking, eating, working and vacationing, of obeying and rebelling, that suit its purpose. In doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate.

Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon's warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, Dassault, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and their poisonous merchandise?

Who imagines a people's takeover of industrial farming operations where a single man plows 400

hectares of eroded ground at the wheel of his mega-tractor piloted via satellite? No one with any sense. What complicates the task for revolutionaries is that the old constituent gesture no longer works there either.

So the revolutionary gesture no longer consists in a simple violent appropriation of this world; it divides into two.

On the one hand, there are worlds to be made, forms of life made to grow apart from what reigns, including by salvaging what can be salvaged from the present state of things, and on the other, there is the imperative to attack, to simply destroy the world of capital.

A two-pronged gesture that divides again: it's clear that the worlds one constructs can maintain their apartness from capital only together with the fact of attacking it and conspiring against it. It's clear that attacks not inspired by a different heartfelt idea of the world would have no real reach, would exhaust themselves in a sterile activism.

In destruction the complicity is constructed on the basis of which the sense of de-

stroying is constructed. And vice versa.

It's only from the destituent standpoint that one can grasp all that is incredibly constructive in the breakage. How can you break something unless, at the moment of breaking it, the thing is in your hands, is in a sense yours? In effect, someone who breaks doesn't engage in an act of negation, but in a paradoxical, counterintuitive affirmation. They affirm, against all appearances: "This is ours!" Breaking, therefore, is affirmation, is appropriation. It discloses the problematic character of the property regime that now governs all things.

Only an affirmation has the potential for accomplishing the work of destruction.

The destituent gesture is thus desertion and attack, creation and wrecking, and all at once, *in the same gesture*.

It defies the accepted logics of alternativism and activism at the same time. It forms a linkage between the extended time of construction and the spasmodic time of intervention, between the disposition to enjoy our piece of the world and the disposition to place it at stake.

Along with the taste for risk-taking, the reasons for living disappear. Comfort—which clouds perceptions, takes pleasure in repeating words that it empties of any meaning, and prefers not to know anything—is the real enemy, the enemy *within*. Here it is not a question of a new social contract, but of a new strategic composition of worlds.

Communism  
is the  
real movement  
that destitutes  
the existing  
state of things.



