Learning from urban revolt

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Learning from urban revolt
From Watts to the banlieues

Yousuf Al-Bulushi

This paper brings into conversation two texts that were written 40 years apart—Society of the Spectacle in 1967 and The Coming Insurrection in 2007—and yet share great lines of continuity. Both texts are situated within their economic, cultural and political conjunctures in order to ground their theoretical contributions. The paper emphasizes the important influence that urban rebellions in Watts and the Parisian banlieues had upon both texts, and in so doing, highlights the over-looked debt these theoretical projects owe to marginalized and racialized populations in struggle. Henri Lefebvre’s theory of autogestion is developed as a mediator between the two books, and as a way to engage their theories through the eyes of a more obviously spatial and Marxist thinker. The argument expands upon the spatial perspective central to both texts, while highlighting the urban implications of both their conjunctural analyses of capitalism and the territorial nature of the adequate forms of resistance that Debord and The Invisible Committee propose in the form of workers’ councils and metropolitan communes. These two works provide a foundation for a heretical Marxist tradition that both remains loyal to something we can continue to call Marxism, even as it departs from and extends this tradition in new and exciting directions by way of what Debord calls detournement. The paper concludes with an examination of Frantz Fanon’s writings on spontaneity and the relevance of the discussion for contemporary political praxis.

Key words: urban revolts, autogestion, metropolis, Watts, banlieues, communes, spontaneity, Debord, Invisible Committee

‘The self-emancipation of our time is an emancipation from the material bases of inverted truth. This “historic mission of establishing truth in the world” can be carried out neither by the isolated individual nor by atomized and manipulated masses, but only and always by the class that is able to dissolve all classes by reducing all power to the de-alienating form of realized democracy—to councils in which practical theory verifies itself and surveys its own actions.’ (Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle, 1967, p. 119)

‘Communism then, as presupposition and as experiment. Sharing of a sensibility and elaboration of sharing. The uncovering of what is common and the building of a force. Communism as the matrix of a meticulous, audacious assault on domination. As a call and as a name for all worlds resisting imperial pacification, all solidarities irreducible to the reign of commodities, all friendships assuming the necessities of war. COMMUNISM. We know it’s a term to be used with caution. Not because, in the great parade of words, it may no longer be very fashionable. But because our worst enemies have used it, and continue to do so. We insist. Certain words are like battle-grounds: their meaning, revolutionary or reactionary, is a victory, to be torn from the
Guy Debord, Henri Lefebvre and The Invisible Committee are all excellent examples of the tremendous creativity that is still possible within the Marxist tradition. Their theoretical production runs counter to a certain discourse, popular especially in the American academy, that somehow the 1960s represented the death of Marxism in both theory and political practice. While it is true that important theorists like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were all at times operating in explicit rejection of certain strains of the Marxist tradition, even these thinkers cannot be so easily detached from Marxism. This paper, however, will focus on the more explicit attempts to rethink theory and practice from within the Marxist tradition, while highlighting the tremendous innovation in thought that these three thinkers/collectives—Debord, Lefebvre and The Invisible Committee—were able to bring to Marxism.

Though published exactly 40 years apart, Society of the Spectacle and The Coming Insurrection bear a striking resemblance in several ways. Both works are written in a decisively non-academic style, testifying to the fact that they are embedded in spaces beyond the university. Both embrace a Nietzschean dialect of aphorisms, choosing to present arguments through theses or a few powerful and direct sentences, and thus eluding the traditional elaboration and development of philosophical ideas through the production of conceptual building blocks. Finally, both are clearly written for an insurgent audience on the precipice of taking action, or for those who might be enticed to flee the existing stagnant forms of leftist intervention and organization.

Guy Debord and The Invisible Committee provide us with two texts that radically depart from the established tradition of Marxism yet extend that very tradition in new and exciting directions by way of detournement. Nonetheless, both texts are often relegated by an official Marxist discourse to the realms of anarchistic irrelevance, and are denounced for supposedly abandoning class politics, proposing mere destruction without creation, libertarian chaos instead of organization, and opposition without affirmation (Toscano, 2009).

In what follows, I attempt to bring these texts into conversation by establishing the continuity in themes taken up by both, while exploring the historical and theoretical moments from which they emerge. I situate both texts within the context of urban revolts by marginalized and racialized communities, thus bringing to light their own celebration of sectors of the population often derided by official Marxists as incoherent and counter-revolutionary. I contend, however, that it is much more productive to see both texts as embedded within the Marxist tradition, establishing a kind of heretical variant within the long and important development of Marxist theory and practice. In so doing, I adopt the figure of Henri Lefebvre as a bridge between the two works as a more explicitly Marxist thinker. This will allow us to capture both the continuities between the two works and reveal more explicitly their own heretical brand of thought within a spatial problematic. I close the paper with an examination of the contemporary political relevance of these ideas in light of the most recent round of revolt in Britain in August 2011. By coupling the insights of Debord and The Invisible Committee into the power of urban revolt with the writings of Frantz Fanon on spontaneity and decolonization, we can begin to imagine a contemporary platform for action that would allow progressives to encounter rather than simply denounce or subsume contemporary instances of urban rebellion such as those in Paris in 2005 and Britain in 2011.
Historical context: the spectacle and the metropolis

Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* was published in 1967, in a moment of tremendous global transformation. Let us try and grasp certain elements of the conjuncture in which Debord was writing. The Soviet Union had lost tremendous credibility in the wake of its repression of Hungarian attempts at self-determination, and after Khrushchev came clean regarding Stalin’s repressive legacy. Debord was clear on his position vis-à-vis the Soviet State, which he saw as a bureaucracy that could not recover from its initial choice to subsume the workers’ councils within a centralized Bolshevik Party. ‘After Kornstadt,’ he wrote, ‘the bureaucracy consolidated its power as sole owner of a system of state capitalism’ (Debord, 1967, p. 57). This state capitalism—a term he is likely borrowing from C.L.R. James and Cornelius Castoriadis—was responsible for ‘implementing the most brutal primitive accumulation of capital in history’ at home, while abroad it meddled in the affairs of other countries seeking revolution by ‘sabotaging the entire revolutionary movement and supporting bourgeois governments whose support it in turn hoped to secure in the sphere of international politics’ (ibid.). Meanwhile, China was entering the peak of a complex cultural revolution whose outcome was still unclear. However, despite the Sino-Soviet split, Debord still saw little difference in the ‘confrontation between the Russian lie and the Chinese lie’ (1967, p. 63).

Therefore, if neither the USSR nor China could serve as a model of productive revolutionary activity for Debord, perhaps the Third World movements for national liberation might? Certainly, nobody could escape the increasing violence imposed upon the Vietnamese forces as they buckled down to fight a protracted war against the USA, after having defeated their French colonizers a decade earlier. Likewise, many African countries were still struggling for independence against their European colonizers. Here Debord is especially critical of the Trotskyist model of socialism in the Third World, as a supposedly fitting correction to capital’s uneven development. He objected that it amounted to little more than an ‘ideology of economic development’ in such countries (Debord, 1967, p. 65). Debord also points out that those countries that had recently won their independence, such as Algeria, now struggled against a form of neo-colonialism. In the midst of this struggle, he unleashes a Fanonian critique of the rise of the national bourgeoisie. ‘Foreign imperialism remains the real master of the economy of these countries,’ he wrote, ‘but at a certain stage its native agents are rewarded for their sale of local products by being granted possession of a local state—a state that is independent from the local masses but not from imperialism’ (p. 66).

At home in the developed countries of Europe, Debord examined the pinnacle of a Fordist society predicated upon mass consumption, even as he was simultaneously able to glimpse the origins of its demise into a form of flexible accumulation. It is at this juncture that his theory of ‘the society of the spectacle’ becomes most clear. An initial understanding of the spectacle involves a shift in emphasis from production to consumption. Not only are workers subject to exploitative and alienating conditions within the workplace, but they are now also required to remain active on capital’s behalf beyond the factory by becoming good consumers. Thus, time beyond the factory is no longer merely conceived as a subordinated time of reproduction, less important than the time of direct production. Rather, the two begin to blend together with the society of the spectacle. Debord summarizes this initial understanding of the spectacle in a straightforward manner: ‘With the “second industrial revolution”, alienated consumption has become just as much a duty for the masses as alienated production. The society’s *entire sold labour* has become a total commodity whose constant turnover must be maintained at all costs’ (1967, pp. 21–22).
The second, more complex, understanding of the spectacle involves its visual component. Fordism was pioneered by Henry Ford in the early 1900s, and was theorized by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* in the 1920s and 1930s. It was only able to penetrate society as a whole in the years following World War II—after a recovery from the Great Depression (Harvey, 1990). By 1967, the Fordist regime of production was beginning to show some cracks, and Debord’s concept of the spectacle highlights this juncture. Consumption was not just encouraged by paying workers more; it necessitated an entire social shift, requiring ‘new forms of interpenetration … between the economy and the political and cultural spheres’ (Gramsci, 2000, p. 275). It is for this reason that Debord, drawing on the 20th-century Marxist tradition that understood the superstructural realm of culture as an important arena of subject formation and consciousness development, decries the spectacle ‘whose function is to use culture to bury all historical memory’ (1967, p. 106). As mass production increased, capital was forced to devise ever more clever ways of orchestrating a corresponding rise in mass consumption. The use of advertising campaigns coupled with the public relations tactics adopted by the Nazi regime allowed theorists such as Edward Bernays to tap into the hidden realm of desire, harnessing Freud’s revelation of a latent pleasure principle beneath the surface of a supposedly rational society. 3 Now the form of consumer society itself begins to shift, as the intensity of the necessary consumption requires quantitative and qualitative transformations in Fordism itself. As Debord explains:

‘the first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having … The present stage … is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing—all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances.’ (1967, pp. 10–11, original emphasis)

It was not enough that Fordist society celebrated having as a central tenet of consumer society. The dominance of the visual represents a shift towards an intensification of consumption made possible by expanding the realm of what Debord calls our ‘false desires’ by tapping into our collective visual imaginary. In so doing, the spectacle ‘naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special pre-eminence once occupied by touch’ (Debord, 1967, p. 11).

While this may seem like the height of Fordist society, Debord also grasps moments of the transition to something beyond it. Although he recognizes that the increased centrality of machines in the production process makes the threat of idle labor power evident for capital, he sees the solution to this problem in the growth of the service sector that will become central to post-Fordist society. ‘To this end the reserve army of the unemployed is enlisted into the tertiary or “service” sector, reinforcing the troops responsible for distributing and glorifying the latest commodities’ (Debord, 1967, p. 23). Thus, the rise of this tertiary sector is a component of the qualitative shift within Fordism, not merely to ever-increased consumption but also to a shift in the conditions of production themselves. ‘In this it is serving a real need, in the sense that increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities’ (p. 23). It does not take much work to extrapolate from these statements the emergence of an increasingly central affective, cognitive or biopolitical form of production doing the work of producing images and subjectivities rather than merely products that promise a particular material use-value.4 Debord lays out a revelatory paragraph towards the end of the book detailing the commodification of culture and the increasing centrality of knowledge as an element of capitalist accumulation:

‘As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the
foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge already accounts for 29% of the gross national product of the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century the “knowledge industry” will become the driving force of the American economy, as was the automobile in the first half of this century and the railroad in the last half of the previous century.’ (1967, p. 107)

If the simultaneous peak and waning of Fordism is what represents the economic conjuncture being analyzed in Society of the Spectacle, then the rise of the networked global cities of post-Fordist just-in-time production are at the center of The Coming Insurrection. The term The Invisible Committee uses for this new form of production is ‘the metropolis’. The metropolis represents a quantitative leap in the ability of capital to collapse the time and space required between production, distribution and consumption. ‘The metropolis is ... a flow of beings and things, a current that runs through fiber-optic networks, through high-speed train lines, satellites, and video surveillance cameras, making sure that this world keeps running straight to its ruin’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, pp. 58–59). The metropolis is thus characterized by a tendentially de-nationalized flow of goods and information between different hubs around the world. This permits it a certain form of time-space compression, as David Harvey has demonstrated (1990). In the leading capitalist countries, the metropolis is characterized by the decline of industrial society, and a similar shift from material to immaterial production. ‘We are living the paradox of a society of workers without work, where entertainment, consumption and leisure only underscore the lack from which they are supposed to distract us’ (The Invisible Committee, p. 46). The demise of the industrial society is coupled by the rise of Debord’s spectacle in the form of the dominance of the incessant consumption of images over strictly material products. ‘The mine at Carmaux, famous for a century of violent strikes, has now been converted into Cape Discovery. It’s an entertainment “multiplex” for skateboarding and biking, distinguished by a “Mining Museum” in which methane blasts are simulated for vacationers’ (ibid.). Actual industrial society is thus replaced by a simulated production of an experience of industrial society, in a false representation/glorification of its reality.

Yet for The Invisible Committee the rise of the metropolis also represents a qualitative shift in the production process. Quoting from the text at length is valuable in order to gain a deeper insight into the economic conjuncture that is under analysis in this work:

‘Capitalism got as much as it could from undoing all the old social ties, and it is now in the process of remaking itself by rebuilding these same ties on its own terms. Contemporary metropolitan social life is its incubator. In the same way, it ravaged the natural world and is now taken with the crazy notion of reconstituting nature as so many controlled environments, furnished with all the necessary sensors. This new humanity requires a new economy that would no longer be a separate sphere of existence but, rather, its very tissue, the raw material of human relations. It requires a new definition of work as work on oneself, a new definition of capital as human capital, a new idea of production as the production of relations, and consumption as the consumption of situations; and above all a new idea of value that would encompass all of the qualities of beings. This burgeoning “bioeconomy” conceives of the planet as a closed system to be managed and claims to establish the foundations for a science that would integrate all the parameters of life. Such a science could make us miss the good old days when unreliable indices like GDP growth were supposed to measure the well-being of a people, but at least no one believed in them.’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, pp. 70–71, original emphasis)

It is clear that The Invisible Committee has placed the control and exploitation of life
itself at the center of this latest round of capital accumulation. There is a strong resemblance here with Foucault’s notion of biopower as that which originates in the control exerted over the population through demography and statistics (2007), but reaches new heights with the advent of genomics (Rabinow and Rose, 2006). However, for The Invisible Committee, biopower, if we can call it that, is something that is also very closely tied to capital’s exploitation of labor power. Human relations are themselves the raw material required for accumulation, and this is why a certain incommensurability arises in this form of capitalism between the production of value and its measure. Thus, the political economy of finance is not the only source of a challenge to the law of value, but the very measurability of labor time is brought into question by the expansion of capital in the new bioeconomy. It is for this reason that The Invisible Committee stresses that GDP figures are no longer reliable, if they ever were. Here they extend the analysis beyond the simple material reality of flexible specialization, whereby workers are supposed to be mobile in their ability to learn a variety of tasks, and in their willingness to shift geographical location to wherever the jobs are. Flexibility is cast as mobility in their eyes, but a mobility of affective qualities:

‘Mobility is the slight detachment from the self, this minimal disconnection from what constitutes us, this condition of strangeness whereby the self can now be taken up as an object of work, and it now becomes possible to sell oneself rather than one’s labor power, to be remunerated not for what one does but for what one is, for our exquisite mastery of social codes, for our relational talents, for our smile and our way of presenting ourselves.’

(The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 50)

We are now able to see that beneath the denunciatory and rhetorical power of both texts by Debord and The Invisible Committee lies a prescient analysis of the functioning of capitalism—an original goal of Marxism—amidst their respective economic conjunctures.

Beyond the impasse of objective structures and postmodern relativism

Beyond the economic analysis, however, lies a second aspect of the historical moment in which these texts were produced. This concerns how they are both also situated within a specific theoretical context, in which structuralism and postmodernism figure most prominently. Both authors can be viewed as attempting to capture the incessant transformation occurring in history and geography by denouncing those theoretical frameworks that end up suspending time-space as a constant process of becoming and thus postponing any possible transformation of the present conditions. ‘The various disciplines where structuralism has become entrenched’, Debord tells us, ‘are developing an apologia of the spectacle—mindless thought that imposes an official amnesia regarding all historical practice’ (1967, p. 108, original emphasis). This is due to the way in which structuralism’s adoption of Saussure’s synchronic approach to language suspends the real incessant material transformation of the world. Dialectics is a tool for grasping this constant change, and therefore Debord seems to be saying that any thought that dismisses the dialectic can only end up being an ideology in the sense that it represents as permanent the given conditions in any society. This is why Debord proclaims, ‘Structures are the progeny of established powers. Structuralism is thought underwritten by the state, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular “communication” as an absolute. Its method of studying code in isolation from content’, what in Saussure’s linguistics is the study of language rather than speech, ‘is merely a reflection of a taken-for-granted society where communication takes the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals’ (1967, p. 111). Therefore, it is only through a radical detournement of the material and philosophical conditions of the present that Debord proposes we can depart from the dominant ideological frame of the society of
the spectacle. ‘Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its overwhelming reality, that validates the frigid dream of structuralism’ (ibid.).

For The Invisible Committee, the dominant theoretical framework at the beginning of the 21st century is likewise one that prevents any detournement that might open space for a radical transformation of existing conditions. However, it is not one that does so by holding on to steadfast truths in attempts to scientifically grasp the reality of existing society. Instead, it is one that constantly escapes truths, and in so doing has difficulty bringing itself to affirm any particular political program. Here there is tremendous resonance with Roland Barthes’ denunciation of the ‘neither-nor critics’. Such critics represent those who claim to stand outside subjectivity and politics, and therefore can oppose high culture to the tainted realm of ideology. However, as Barthes demonstrates, ‘the Neither-Nor brigade themselves are committed to a system, which is not necessarily the one to which they proclaim their allegiance’ (1972, p. 82). Similarly, The Coming Insurrection highlights the intellectual consequences of the general recognition that the economy has always been a political terrain. Those few who remain addicted to the economy as an objective reality are the only people left who refuse to recognize its political nature. ‘All that’s left’, The Invisible Committee suggest, ‘is this strange, middling part of the population, the curious and powerless aggregate of those who take no sides: the petty bourgeoisie. They have always pretended to believe in the economy as a reality—because their neutrality is safe there’ (2009, p. 67, original emphasis).

But whereas the petit-bourgeois critics holding onto a supposedly neutral realm of the economy (whom Barthes critiques) pretend to stand outside of ideology, the postmodernists, who comprise a second petit-bourgeois group made subject to The Invisible Committee’s wrath, revel in the fact that there is no getting outside of ideology. For them, this means the impossibility of politics, and their refusal to take an explicit political position, for fear of falling victim to any essentialism. ‘Today,’ writes The Invisible Committee, ‘Western imperialism is the imperialism of relativism, of the “It all depends on your point of view” it’s the eye-rolling or the wounded indignation at anyone who’s stupid, primitive, or presumptuous enough to still believe in something, to affirm anything at all’ (2009, p. 92). Thus, while The Invisible Committee is cognizant of a dying breed of petit-bourgeois small business owners who refuse to acknowledge the arrival of a kind of postmodern capitalism, they hold out their most visceral critique for those who wallow in relativism. This ire is directed most prominently at the universities, where freedom of speech reigns as long as you promise not to put your ideas into practice (Finkelstein, 2009) and not to speak without ‘problematizing’ every single utterance as incomplete:

‘You can see the dogmatism of constant questioning give its complicit wink of the eye everywhere in the universities and among the literary intelligentsias. No critique is too radical among postmodernist thinkers, as long as it maintains this total absence of certitude.’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 92)

This historicizing of the critique of ideology to run parallel to the transformation of the dominant intellectual viewpoints of their day can thus be seen as a direct continuation of Debord’s attack upon structuralism: ‘A century ago, scandal was identified with any particularly unruly and raucous negation, while today it’s found in any affirmation that fails to tremble’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 92).

Learning from revolt

Society of the Spectacle and The Coming Insurrection are framed by a definite political
context that shapes their analysis. Both texts were published exactly two years after urban rebellions that defined their eras. For Debord and the Situationists, the Watts riots of 1965 in Los Angeles would belie the capitalist claim of the stability of a society where mass consumption of images was supposed to represent the ultimate realization of genuine human desires. By politicizing the actions of the looters in Watts, Debord drew attention to the inversion of capitalist mores taking place:

‘The looting of the Watts district was the most direct realization of the distorted principle: “To each according to their false needs”—needs determined and produced by the economic system which the very act of looting rejects ... real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration.’ (1965, p. 3)

For Debord, Watts highlighted the potential downfall of commodity society by exposing its contradictions, which in the USA were expressed largely along racial lines. The rioters were to be celebrated because of their ability to unmask the repressive force underlying the pleasant images of mass consumption perpetrated through the spectacle. ‘Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. It instantly undermines the commodity as such, and it also exposes what the commodity ultimately implies: the army, the police, and ... armed violence’ (ibid., original emphasis).

Debord is able to capture the importance of the Watts rebellion as representative of a fundamental transformation in the black movement in the USA, often referred to as a shift from civil rights to black power. It is true that the Black Panthers—who emerged in California the following year in 1966 as an armed group critical of Martin Luther King’s non-violent approach—drew from Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* chapter ‘Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity’ (2004) to assess the Watts uprising as demonstrative of the limits to spontaneous violence (Hilliard and Cole, 1993, pp. 114–115, 152, 183). Yet Debord’s celebration of Watts was not romanticized as a pure model of political organization, but rather served as a foreshadowing of the crumbling false harmony of welfare state capitalism.

*Figure 1*  Darkness falls in Watts during riots
'Capitalism has become sufficiently concentrated and interlinked with the state to distribute “welfare” to the poorest. But by the very fact that they lag behind in the advance of socially organized survival, the blacks pose the problems of life; what they are really demanding is not to survive but to live.' (Debord, 1965, p. 7, original emphasis)

For Debord, Watts represented the cracks opening up in Fordist society. According to him, the revolutionary subject of the 1960s and 1970s would no longer necessarily be those at the center of capitalist exploitation—such as the workers’ unions—but those who maintained some distance from complicity with the meager benefits of industrial society.

‘In the United States today the whites are enslaved to the commodity while the blacks are negating it. The blacks are asking for more than the whites—this is the core of a problem that has no solution except the dissolution of the white social system.’ (Debord, 1965, p. 6, original emphasis)

The Coming Insurrection was also penned on the heels of a major urban revolt. In 2005 the suburbs of Paris, known as the banlieues, erupted after a series of incidents of police brutality targeted the residents of immigrant neighborhoods comprised largely of migrant Arabs and Africans. The French welfare state had, up until this time, managed to cling on to much more of its palliative structure than was possible in the USA due to the tremendous institutionalized gains of 1968 in France. Similarly, it had remained a largely homogenous white society of French tradition for much longer than the USA, which was founded upon the dual system of slavery and incessant voluntary immigration. Only with the end of formal colonialism and the rise of globalization was France forced to experience ‘the post-colonial chickens coming home to roost’ (Farred, 2001). Thus, the banlieues riots of 2005 represented a France that was beginning to realize both the limits of welfare state capitalism, its slow erosion and the global remnants of imperialist exploitation brought home to the doorstep of the metropolis. The French state and a significant portion of its working class dealt with the dual realities of globalization and an increasingly multi-ethnic society through the development of a vicious institutionalized racism.

The Invisible Committee greeted the insurrection in the suburbs with enthusiasm, seeing in it both the seeds of an alternative political organization and the remnants of a cultivated anti-colonial force transported to the global north that was able to counter the state’s encroachment upon everyday life with their own exertion of control over urban territory.

‘The conflagration of November 2005 was not a result of extreme dispossession, as it is often portrayed. It was, on the contrary, a complete possession of a territory. People can burn cars because they are pissed off, but to keep the riots going for a month, while keeping the police in check—to do that you have to know how to organize, you have to establish complicities, you have to know the terrain perfectly, and share a common language and a common enemy.’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 56)

The revolts were also central in The Invisible Committee’s search for alternative forms of organization rooted in the everyday, rather than in institutionalized organizations concerned more with their own reproduction than with any actual transformative action. The banlieues riots were celebrated for their ability to take action without leaders, and for their confinement to the realm of invisibility. Rather than calling press conferences and issuing appeals to power, direct action was supposed to establish communication without a clear message or an identifiable messenger.

‘The fires of November 2005 offer a model for this. No leader, no demands, no organization, but words, gestures, complicities. To be socially nothing is not a humiliating.
condition, the source of some tragic lack of recognition—from whom do we seek recognition?—but is on the contrary the condition for maximum freedom of action' (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 113).

For both Debord and The Invisible Committee, the urban rebellions represented a potential source of insurrection emerging from outside the stultifying force of the established political parties, union bureaucracies and official activist organizations. The economic context of their intervention is described in detail with a penetrating analysis despite the deployment of writing styles laden with conjecture and aphorisms. The dominant theoretical terrains of the 1960s and 2000s are also attacked for remaining complicit with a form of ideological thinking.
Figure 3  Advertisement for CBS special on Watts, 1965 (Reprinted with permission)
that ultimately fails to transform—and instead reproduces—the given state of society.

**Beyond critique: an affirmative democratic politics**

Although Debord and the The Invisible Committee are incredibly critical of practically all prior and existing forms of Leftist politics, they also come around to articulating an affirmative politics of their own. This is important because both are interested in going beyond not only the existing forms of political activism but also the ‘neither-nor’ critics who remain sitting on the fence, refusing to take any position. Both texts take a strong position in favor of intervention in the here and now, vis-à-vis either utopian dreams of the future or arguments about the lack of sufficient objective conditions for revolution. And yet, despite accusations of affirming an anarchistic immediatism, Debord is clear that he admires but is also critical of the anarchist tradition. ‘The fact that anarchists have seen the goal of proletarian revolution as immediately present represents both the strength and the weakness of collectivist anarchist struggles’ (Debord, 1967, p. 48). For Debord, historicism is still required for strategizing about political conditions. Such historicism must fight the separation constantly deployed on capital’s behalf, not only in the realm of economic production, but also within politics as well. Union leadership is denounced for repressing the workers’ movement, while the vanguard parties are dismissed for their complicity with the needs of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy, and their over-emphasis on the objective conditions for struggle that never arise. Thus, the form of struggle celebrated by Debord as sufficient in its ability to defeat the separation at the heart of the society of the spectacle is that of the workers’ councils. The immediate revocability of representation experimented with in the Soviet workers’ councils, among others, draws Debord’s attention because of its ability to close the separation he is waging war upon. Debord is also clear that the prior failure of the workers’ councils was due to the fact that in part the historical conditions for democratic political formations were not yet adequate, whereas the youth movement and the workers’ anti-union struggles of his period pointed to the fact that perhaps the conditions had ripened for workers’ councils to succeed:

‘With the power of the councils—a power that must internationally supplant all other forms of power—the proletarian movement becomes its own product. This product is nothing other than the producers themselves, whose goal has become nothing other than their own fulfillment. Only in this way can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in turn.’ (1967, p. 69)

The emphasis on democracy as both an ends and means is something shared by The Invisible Committee in their own vision of an adequate political organization. Instead of workers’ councils, however, their ideal political unit is that of the commune. This is not the commune of the 1960s, where those with certain privileges—lacking concrete commitments to others who depended upon them—were able to flee concrete commitments to others who depended upon them—were able to flee concrete commitments to others who depended upon them—were able to flee concrete commitments to others who depended upon them—were able to flee concrete commitments to others who depended upon them. The communies celebrated by The Invisible Committee in their own affirmative politics do maintain a degree of localized, face-to-face communication, allowing them to ward off the separation inherent in modern political forms. However, they are communes that are engaging in a constant process of encounter with those struggling around them and all over the world. The stress upon the encounter is one that escapes the stagnancy of insular communes, but it also is one that stretches the reliance upon organization to its limits. ‘The promise of
encounter can only be realized outside the organization, and unavoidably, at odds with it’ (The Invisible Committee, p. 100).

Some might read this as a strictly libertarian interpretation of politics. However, it comes just prior to their insistence that we ‘get organized’ (The Invisible Committee, p. 103). How to interpret these seemingly contradictory remarks? While it may be correct to say that The Invisible Committee is walking on shaky theoretical ground here, I believe we can understand their analysis of encounter as that which lies on the border of (or even beyond) organization as an attempt to stress the contradiction internal to the constant process of ‘becoming-other’ at play in the experience of opening oneself up to the difference which defines the encounter. This should be contrasted with the comfortable stagnancy of organization, which often seeks to merely preserve itself rather than engage in a constant process of *detournement* or becoming. Giving their statements a favorable reading, we can say that encounter is what allows organizations to escape their drive to preservation and instead open themselves up to a process of incessant transformation. Their concept of the commune brings the two concepts—organization and encounter—together. It also escapes the indeterminacy and chaos of a purely individualistic politics of encounter. ‘The commune is perhaps what gets decided at the very moment when we would normally part ways. It’s the joy of an encounter that survives its expected end. It’s what makes us say “we”, and makes that an event’ (p. 101).

Thus, just as with Debord, there exists an emphasis upon collectivity in the realm of politics, but also one that attempts to escape the conformist hierarchy of traditional models of organization. Unlike Debord’s workers’ councils, however, which seem to remain confined to the economic realm of production in the factory, the commune is seen as operative in society as a whole. ‘Why shouldn’t communes proliferate everywhere? In every factory, every street, every village, every school. At long last, the reign of the base committees!’ (ibid.).

**A Lefebvrian interlude: political alienation, *autogestion* and the production of space**

In order to understand this shift from workers’ councils in the factory to communes in the metropolis, our discussion of Debord and The Invisible Committee will now take a brief theoretical detour through the figure of Henri Lefebvre. Like Debord and The Invisible Committee, Lefebvre remained grounded in traditional Marxist concepts of alienation and ideology. Unlike these other two thinkers, however, Lefebvre was also for a long period a central member of the French Communist Party. Interestingly, as a member of the party he was also responsible for a tremendous innovation in Marxist theoretical discourse, developing concepts such as everyday life, spontaneity and the importance of the urban, which had hitherto been marginalized within that tradition. It is at the juncture between Lefebvre’s experimentations with the concept of everyday life and his departure from the French Communist Party following the Soviet invasion of Hungary when Lefebvre is able to establish a lasting encounter with the Situationist International, of which Guy Debord was a central member.

According to Lefebvre (see Lefebvre and Ross, 1997), his theories of everyday life and of moments were what attracted the Situationists to his work, although their encounter was also one of chance based on mutual personal acquaintances. While those relationships—especially those involving lovers—would ultimately bring about the split between Lefebvre and the Situationists around 1961, the theoretical exchange would have a lasting impact on the development of both their bodies of thought. Lefebvre claims his late 1950s publications were what attracted the Situationists to his thinking. In this period he develops the concept of ‘moments’, which is intended to serve as an alternative theory of time that transcended the limitations of traditional Marxist discourse of the objective and
subjective conditions for struggle. As Andy Merrifield explains:

‘The Lefebvrian moment, like Mallarmé’s, was there between the lines, in a certain space, at a certain time. It disrupted linear duration, detonated it, dragged time off in a different, contingent direction, toward some unknown staging post. The moment is thus an opportunity to be seized and invented.’ (2006, p. 28)

Here Lefebvre is attempting to work beyond the discourse of the linear development of the productive forces—supposedly leading to an inevitable proletarian revolution—by expanding upon the contingent and perhaps even aleatory aspects of class struggle. For the Situationists, this was important because it was a leap forward in Marxist thinking that allowed for the possibility of emphasis upon certain forms of struggle previously derided as either purely spontaneous or lacking in organizational discipline. It brought together this theorizing of everyday life with a strategic approach to politics. And yet, the Situationists felt that Lefebvre’s moment remained grounded in a strictly temporal framework, and one that looked only to the past for its examples.

‘They more or less said to me during discussions—discussions that lasted whole nights—“What you call ‘moments’, we call ‘situations’, but we’re taking it farther than you. You accept as ‘moments’ everything that has occurred in the course of history: love, poetry, thought. We want to create new moments.”’ (Lefebvre and Ross, 1997, p. 72)

Lefebvre’s theory of moments can be read as an attempt to capture the element of the temporal irruption of chance events within struggle. The Situationists, while excited by this idea, preferred a praxis whereby a more refined reflection upon subjective and objective conditions of struggle would incorporate the aleatory, but in a way that internalized it within a logic of organization, taking what was more of an aesthetic and philosophical category and grounding it in the process of explicit political struggle. For the Situationists, this meant placing Lefebvre’s temporal conception of moments within a space-time framework of organization in their idea of ‘the situation’. Thus, it would be the spatial components of ‘the situation’ that would in turn transform Lefebvre’s thinking. Here the Situationist emphasis on the city, in both theory and practice, would prove to be crucial. ‘Their idea was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the derive’ (Lefebvre and Ross, p. 73). Lefebvre would in turn expand upon this spatial emphasis in his attempt to capture the separation at play in urban settings. He elaborates his analysis of urban space in a 1970 article entitled ‘Reflections on the Politics of Space’ (Lefebvre, 2009). Here he reveals the extent to which urban planning has become a new means by which separation is continuously ensured between otherwise geographically collectivized workers. In his analysis he is very close to Debord’s proclamations regarding the ‘lonely crowd’. A 1979 article entitled simply ‘Space’, outlines the centrality of space to the capitalist process of accumulation.

‘To produce space, these are surprising words: the production of space, in concept and in reality, has only recently appeared, mainly, in the explosion of the historical city, the general urbanization of society, the problems of spatial organization, and so forth. Today, the analysis of production shows that we have passed from the production of things in space to the production of space itself.’ (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 186)

Specifically, it is urban space that takes on a qualitative and quantitative precedence in the emerging post-Fordist regime of accumulation. ‘The urban fabric, with its multiple networks of communication and exchange, is part of the means of production. The city and its various installations (ports, train stations, etc.) are part of capital’ (p. 187).
With this expanded understanding of space, we can now return to the political dimension of organization to grasp the shift between Debord and The Invisible Committee, from workers’ councils to metropolitan communes. Lefebvre expands the Situationist critique of alienation and separation in the economic and cultural realm of the spectacle, to the political realm of the state. Now the state becomes for him a form of political alienation in which a body external to the subjects it governs stands above it and dictates to those subjects what is and is not required of them as citizens. The capacity to decide and act upon those decisions is thus alienated in the state form. In order to ground his theory of political alienation in Marxism, he turns in classic Lefebvrian fashion to both the early Marx of the *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* and *On the Jewish Question*, as well as to the late writings of Marx on the *Gotha Program*, and to the Leninist concept of ‘the withering away of the state’. This examination allows him to conclude that for Marx, ‘Man realizes himself not at the level of the State, nor in the State, nor in that which depends on the State, but in freeing himself from the State’ (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 73). He then joins the early critique of Hegel with Lenin’s later formulation to posit the following proposition:

> ‘The critique of the Hegelian philosophy of the State is already the theory of the withering away and the disappearance of the State . . . The whole work of Marx consists in pushing the Hegelian dialectic further than Hegel; this is why he comments on the text with the greatest care, precisely because it shows that oppositions are very real and inevitably become or even already are contradictions, and that the State will consequently explode into pieces. The State is destined to disappear.’ (pp. 80–81)

Thus, if the state exists as a form of political alienation, the withering away of the state is a political platform that must not be postponed into the future by insisting upon a preliminary period of transition, but rather requires a realization in the here and now, through a political practice that begins to attack that alienation head on. For Lefebvre, this was possible through *autogestion*, or self-management. ‘Only through *autogestion* can the members of a free association take control over their own life, in such a way that it becomes their work [*œuvre*]. This is also called appropriation, de-alienation’ (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 150). Often associated with the concept of workers’ self-management of the factory, with Lefebvre *autogestion* will take on a broader meaning. He elaborates the concept in a similar fashion as Debord and The Invisible Committee: as a means of escaping the stultifying control of political parties and hierarchical organizations. ‘Indeed *autogestion* carries within itself, along with the withering away of the State, the decline of the Party as a centralized institution that monopolizes decision making’ (p. 136). However, he also expands *autogestion* beyond its traditional association with industrial factories. ‘I personally believe that the problematic of *autogestion* is transposed more and more from enterprises toward the organization of space. I have found some extraordinary examples, like in a Mexican shantytown, where two hundred thousand inhabitants are under complete *autogestion*’ (p. 160).

We have now come full circle from Debord to The Invisible Committee, and back to Lefebvre and his tie with the Situationists. Debord begins with the proclamation of workers’ councils as a democratic celebration of the spontaneity of the working class beyond their unions and party representatives. Lefebvre picks up on the Situationist emphasis upon the city and tracks the increasing centrality of the very fabric of urban space as comprising the means of production in the emerging post-Fordist society. It is my contention that his expansion of the concept of *autogestion* beyond the confines of the factory is a recognition of the parallel expansion of capital’s ability to exploit labor power in all of its dimensions of social life. In addition, this expanded concept, combined with his
theorization of the production of space itself as increasingly central to late capital, sets the ground for *The Coming Insurrection*’s own focus on the metropolis and its communes.

**In the space of insurrection: struggles over urban territory**

Debord’s own understanding of the importance of space was extremely advanced for its time, and debate remains as to the extent of his influence upon Lefebvre, with Lefebvre acknowledging that part of his fall-out with the Situationists rested on their accusations that he had plagiarized some of their work (Lefebvre and Ross, 1997, pp. 79–80). Regardless, in *Society of the Spectacle* we can observe Debord’s prescient analysis of the centrality of urban space as directly related to our earlier discussion of his theorizing the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism.

‘The dictatorship of the automobile—the pilot product of the first stage of commodity abundance—has left its mark on the landscape with the dominance of freeways, which tear up the old urban centres and promote an ever-wider dispersal. Within this process various forms of partially reconstituted urban fabric fleetingly crystallize around “distribution factories”—giant shopping centres built in the middle of nowhere and surrounded by acres of parking lots.’ (1967, p. 97)

This new urban fabric is qualitatively different from the original cities produced by primitive accumulation and its corresponding agricultural surplus. Debord highlights the manner in which the city and the country can no longer be viewed as two totally opposed realms, but should instead be seen as part of one general urbanized system (ibid.). This becomes The Invisible Committee’s definition of the metropolis:

‘We’ve heard enough about the “city” and the “country”, and particularly about the supposed ancient opposition between the two. From up close or from afar, what surrounds us looks nothing like that: it is one single urban cloth, without form or order, a bleak zone, endless and undefined, a global continuum of museum-like hypercenters and natural parks, of enormous suburban housing developments and massive agricultural projects, industrial zones and subdivisions, country inns and trendy bars: the metropolis. Certainly the ancient city existed, as did the cities of medieval and modern times. But there is no such thing as a metropolitan city. All territory is subsumed by the metropolis. Everything occupies the same space, if not geographically then through the intermeshing of its networks.’ (2009, p. 52)

The necessary political subject for the terrain of collapsed country and city is, in Debord’s formulation, the figure of the workers’ councils that incessantly open up to the transformative process of encounter:

‘The most revolutionary idea concerning urbanism is not itself urbanistic, technological or aesthetic. It is the project of reconstructing the entire environment in accordance with the needs of the power of workers councils, of the antistate dictatorship of the proletariat.’ (1967, p. 99, original emphasis)

Importantly, these workers’ councils will not reproduce capital’s separation by seceding from the society around them, but rather will be able to generate ‘a diversity of local scenes that are independent without being insular’ (ibid.). *The Coming Insurrection* is then merely an updating of the workers’ council model of revolution to the contemporary conditions of the metropolis. Today, as Lefebvre has already demonstrated, the metropolis is able to extend its tentacles of exploitation beyond the factory not merely in order to fulfill its cycle of production through increased mass consumption in the spectacular spaces of everyday life, but it is also able to capture the productive potential of labor power in those same spaces. As The Invisible Committee points out, gentrification is not simply a model for displacing useless reserve supplies of labor, but also entails the capture of other forms of life:
‘This taste for the “authentic”, and for the control that goes with it, accompanies the petty bourgeoisie in its colonization of working class neighborhoods. Pushed out of the city centers, they find on the frontiers the kind of “neighborhood feeling” they missed in the prefab houses of suburbia. By chasing out the poor people, the cars, and the immigrants, by making it tidy, by getting rid of all the germs, the petty bourgeoisie wipes out the very thing it came looking for.’ (2009, p. 53)

In one fell swoop we have the articulation of the productive power of ghettos and slums alongside the destructive power of capital’s incessant attempt to capture our labor power in all its forms. However, the very ‘neighborhood feeling’ that is longed for by the petty bourgeoisie represents the form of cooperation by those sectors of society most disgusted by capital’s valorization of their labor power. Just as Debord was able to recognize in the slums of Watts an insurgent black population that represented a negation of commodity society, so too does The Invisible Committee highlight the centrality of migrant-occupied slums to the organization of communes:

‘There’s a whole set of skills and techniques just waiting to be plundered and ripped from their humanistic, street-culture, or eco-friendly trappings. Yet this group of experiments is but one part of all of the intuitions, the know-how, and the ingenuity found in slums that will have to be deployed if we intend to repopulate the metropolitan desert and ensure the viability of an insurrection beyond its first stages.’ (2009, p. 105)

We are now able to see the tremendous continuity between Society of the Spectacle and The Coming Insurrection. They share an affinity in their prescient analysis of the economic conjuncture in which they lived. Both are firmly rooted in an analysis that attempts to respond to political moments defined by urban insurrections of marginalized and racialized communities that had hitherto represented a problem for traditional modes of political organizing that remained confined to the formal proletariat. They share the ability to grasp capital’s cutting edge transformations, and to critique the exploitative expanse of its reach beyond the factory. Both texts emphasize the importance of territory and the spatial relations of domination and resistance. Finally, each presents an affirmative project of resistance in the face of stagnant philosophical and political platforms. This resistance is grounded in democratic collective initiatives that are oriented towards a definitive de-alienation process whereby the separation at the heart of political representation is eroded in favor of the creative power of workers’ councils and metropolitan communes.

Politics in the here and now

‘Where were you in 1981 in Brixton? I don’t call it rioting, I call it an insurrection of the masses of the people. It is happening in Syria, it’s happening in Liverpool, it’s happening in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and that is the nature of the historical moment... Have some respect for an old West Indian Negro and stop accusing me of being a rioter.’ (Darcus Howe, on the BBC, 9 August 2011)

‘The lumpenproletariat, this cohort of starving men, divorced from tribe and clan, constitutes one of the most spontaneously and radically revolutionary forces of a colonized people.’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 81)

If the Watts rebellion was comprised of a group that some theorized as an internal colony of the USA, and the banlieues insurrection was a product of the post-colonial chickens coming home to roost, then perhaps we can learn something from studying the conditions of struggle that emerged in the formal colonies of the Third World as the anti-colonial movement reached its pinnacle. In order to do that, we would be served best by turning to the writings of Frantz Fanon, one of the strongest theorists of
spontaneity yet. While thinkers like Slavoj Žižek betray their own elitist, Eurocentric brand of politics by referring to the *banlieue* dissidents of 2005 and those who participated in the most recent round of unrest in Britain in 2011 as backward ‘rabble, those outside organized social space’,9 50 years ago Fanon had already provided the seminal understanding of such outbursts of political discontent.10

In Chapter 2 of *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon assesses the ‘Grandeur and Weakness of Spontaneity’. The chapter, like the book as a whole, represents Fanon’s attempt to assess the different class forces at play in the anti-colonial revolts of Africa, similar to Marx’s class analysis of the events of 1848 in France roughly 100 years earlier. Fanon was an official member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), but he also travelled and spent time in many different African countries throughout the 1950s, witnessing the plethora of struggles on the continent seeking self-determination. This experience allowed him to provide a diagnosis of the strengths and weaknesses of the different struggles for national liberation and their attempts to forge a national consciousness distinct from their prior identity as mere territorial extensions of Europe. What is extremely impressive about his 1961 study is its foreshadowing of the problems of post-independence that would only become clear to others many years later. Most particularly, he targeted the nascent African national bourgeoisie, predicting that they would sell out the masses in each country who sacrificed so much in their struggle against the European colonizers.

Fanon’s assessment of the African national bourgeoisie was one that saw its interests as being tied to centralized political parties that he viewed as forces that would stunt the liberatory power of the anti-colonial movement. His critique of political parties
foreshadows The Invisible Committee’s own suspicion of the formal organizations of the Left. Fanon states:

‘The formation of the nationalist parties in the colonized countries is contemporary with the birth of an intellectual and business elite. These elite attach primordial importance to the organization as such, and blind devotion to the organization often takes priority over a rational study of colonial society. The notion of the party is a notion imported from the metropolis.’ (2004, pp. 63–64)

Interested more in their own survival than in genuine societal transformation, the national political parties become conservative impediments to revolutionary change.

Just as Marx saw the French bourgeoisie giving up its commitment to republican political power in order to allow Bonaparte to save its economic power, Fanon sees the national bourgeoisie in newly independent countries as sacrificing the radical political goals of the anti-colonial revolutions in order to maintain its limited economic power as lackeys for Europe in a neo-colonial arrangement. Where, then, would genuine transformation emerge from, if not from the mouthpiece of the independence parties?

Marx’s own assessment of the revolutionary potential of 1848 sought out amongst the potentially radical groups a class that was capable of representing itself. As Edward Said and other post-colonial scholars never tired of reminding us, this unfortunately entailed denouncing the peasantry as too disjointed and unable to represent itself due to its spatial dispersion. Similarly, Marx saw the lumpen proletariat classes of France as too easily manipulable by Bonaparte. It is from The 18th Brumaire that many orthodox Marxists get their classic lines about the lumpen as the ‘refuse of all classes’ (Marx, 1963, p. 75). For him, only the proletariat, concentrated in urban settings and already used to cooperating for capital under single factory rooftops, was capable of representing itself at that historical moment.

Fanon’s diagnosis, like Marx’s, attempts to identify precisely that class which is capable of representing itself. However, unlike Marx, he views the urban proletariat and their workers’ unions as relatively conservative forces.

‘It has been said many times that in colonial territories the proletariat is the kernel of the colonized people most pampered by the colonial regime. The embryonic urban proletariat is relatively privileged. . . . These elements make up the most loyal clientele of the nationalist parties and by the privileged position they occupy in the colonial system represent the “bourgeois” faction of the colonized population.’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 64)

Thus, the urban proletariat under colonialism not only would shy away from the most radical forms of action in the interest of protecting their relatively privileged wages, they also eluded a form of self-representation by allowing the equally conservative national parties to act politically on their behalf.

Fanon instead looks to the peasantry and the lumpen classes in the transition from colonialism to independence as those classes most likely to provide the radical edge needed to drive the struggle forward. All over Africa Fanon witnessed forms of spontaneous struggle, often but not exclusively violent, that emerged outside the grasp of the formal models of organization represented by the political parties and workers’ unions. The response of these traditional Left organizations was often to denounce these events as extremist.

‘Insurrection disorients the political parties. Their doctrine has always claimed the ineffectiveness of any confrontation and their very existence serves to condemn any idea of revolt. Certain political parties secretly share the optimism of the colonists and are glad to be no part to this madness which, it is said, can only end in bloodshed.’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 79)

Against this model, Fanon saw this period of spontaneous revolt as an initial stage that had to be celebrated by those members of society.
who truly hoped to overthrow the colonial model, both in its original form and under its later, neo-colonial guise. However, he also saw that the revolts would reach a point where they would bring on a horrific crackdown by the colonial/state forces trying to restore order. At this point, they reached a kind of breaking point, beyond which a pure, immediatist spontaneity could go no further. ‘It soon becomes clear that this impetuous spontaneity, which is intent on rapidly settling its score with the colonial system, is destined to fail as a doctrine’ (p. 85). The second stage of the struggle, then, had to bring about an encounter between those actors experienced with and seeking to provide organization, and the peasantry classes of the countryside as well as the lumpen classes gathered along the urban peripheries. For Fanon, this encounter was made possible by those militants who had abandoned urban politics (in the form of political parties), and who now ‘rediscover politics’ (p. 86) in the recognition that the people’s army needs organization and education if it is to triumph.

This may seem like a re-introduction of a traditional Leninist model of organization, one that cannot help but clash openly with the form of spontaneous revolt Fanon has just been advocating as part of the initial stage of struggle. However, here he adds a crucial caveat that often goes unnoticed. For Fanon, the encounter between urban militants and intellectuals who have abandoned their political parties, and the rural and peri-urban forces is one that must be premised upon a total humility and re-education for the urban militants and intellectuals themselves. Such an encounter can only succeed if ‘the colonized intellectual who is lucky enough to bunker down with the people during the liberation struggle’ does not come simply bearing the gift of knowledge to the marginalized masses, but instead comes with a humility that recognizes the necessity to learn, more than the necessity to educate (Fanon, 2004, p. 11, my emphasis).

‘Involvement in the organization of the struggle will already introduce him to a different vocabulary. “Brother”, “sister”, “comrade” are words outlawed by the colonalist bourgeoisie because in their thinking my brother is my wallet and my comrade, my scheming… This colonized intellectual, pulverized by colonalist culture, will also discover the strength of the village assemblies… In such a context, the “every man for himself” concept, the atheist’s form of salvation, is prohibited.’ (p. 12)

Clearly, in this context, the urban militants and intellectuals who choose to abandon their political parties in favor of direct action with the more marginalized sectors of their society must learn more from these sectors than they can possibly share, both in terms of everyday modes of social interaction that attack a privileged individualism, as well as in terms of alternative models of organization. The interaction between the two sectors is one that takes place along similar lines as the ‘encounters’ that The Invisible Committee insists are necessary to prevent the stagnation or isolation of the movement. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, the encounter must lead not to a re-instantiation of hierarchical models of struggle if it is to succeed, but must instead develop into an education that produces only more intense modes of self-determination. ‘The more the people understand, the more vigilant they become, the more they realize in fact that everything depends on them, and that their salvation lies in their solidarity’ (Fanon, 2004, p. 133). It is in this sense that Fanon understands the lumpen and peasantry classes in a colonial and neo-colonial context as the only classes capable of self-representation.

Similarly, we can now comprehend precisely why urban revolts like those that occurred in Watts and the Parisian banlieues are so interesting. They are important precisely for the very reason they are often condemned politically by mainstream politicians from both the Left and the Right: for not presenting a clear set of demands. By not presenting formal demands, these actors are not easily
assimilable into the mainstream electoral political system. This prevents the state from stepping in to ‘represent’ them, and leaves open only the option of repression. The task of progressives who are growing increasingly dissatisfied with the electoral system around the world is therefore one of identifying with such elements, and like Fanon, grounding their struggles in the everyday lives of such communities and learning from their daily experiences. Politics beyond official modes of electoral representation is what such communities in revolt present as a possibility, and they therefore present potential realms for the implementation of the metropolitan communes envisioned by The Invisible Committee. In certain respects, such communes can be said to exist already, albeit in certain limited and inadequate forms. Without such forms of pre-existing everyday organization, The Invisible Committee point out, the revolts would not have endured for so long. Here it is worth repeating their assessment of what occurred in the banlieues:

‘People can burn cars because they are pissed off, but to keep the riots going for a month, while keeping the police in check—to do that you have to know how to organize, you have to establish complicity, you have to know the terrain perfectly, and share a common language and a common enemy.’ (The Invisible Committee, 2009, p. 56)

Therefore, it is clear those who took part in the events in London and Paris did not lack an ‘organized social space’, as Žižek claims, but instead, as The Invisible Committee has already demonstrated, were actively taking possession of a territory. It is a similar culture of collectivity active in these communities that attracts isolated suburbanites back into the city in their hopeless attempt to capture a portion of what they kill through gentrification. As The Invisible Committee makes clear, such communities do not escape the bioeconomic capture of their cultural products by capital. Therefore, as Lefebvre reminds us, if capital has expanded to the metropolis writ large, then our forms of autogestion must also reach beyond Debord’s workers’ councils that remain confined to the factory, and instead extend into the terrain of daily life.

The Black Panthers represent perhaps the most advanced attempt to synthesize Debord’s celebration of a specifically black rejection of the spectacular commodity society in Watts with Fanon’s simultaneous affirmation and critique of spontaneous struggle. What would such a recognition look like today, in the wake of numerous urban uprisings? One task of the militant today might be to discover the forms of everyday organization at play in such events, and to seek to blend into them, intensifying them while opening them up to processes of encounter that ensure their dynamism and articulation with other struggles and communities. Decision-making bodies such as the people’s assemblies that have emerged in places as far apart as Tahrir, Plaza del Sol and Wall Street present just one potential structure for doing this. Yet the more difficult task will be to re-embed such structures in the everyday lives of our communities. Rather than orienting our struggles towards the state, such revolts present us with the opportunity for an encounter with those sectors of society most marginalized by the existing political-economic arrangements. The progressive task is therefore not to condemn such acts, but to seek to articulate existing struggles with communities in revolt, perhaps necessitating the very kind of decolonization that Fanon originally proposed.11 This is encapsulated in the proposal by activists in the people of color caucuses across the US occupy movements for a shift from ‘Occupying’ to ‘Decolonizing’ our cities.

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Notes

1 This paper was first drafted in the fall of 2010. Two events occurred in 2011 that brought its line of argument further into the foreground. First, readers will note the resonance with Andy Merrifield’s exciting new book, Magical Marxism. Our two arguments converge nicely. My own attempt to work through these specific theoretical texts is one that grounds Debord and The Invisible Committee in the urban uprisings of 1965 and 2005, while Merrifield tends to view their texts as foreshadowing the events of 1968 and the movements that have emerged around the world in the wake of the economic crisis of 2008. The second event was the aforementioned August 2011 revolt that occurred throughout Britain, and which came in the wake of the peaceful union demonstrations in late June that were largely ignored by the government. I deal with these events briefly in the conclusion.


3 For more on the tie between Freud’s theories and the advent of mass marketing and ‘public relations’, see Adam Curtis’s fantastic 2002 BBC documentary film, The Century of Self.

4 The literature on this topic is vast. One concise explanation can be found in Maurizio Lazzarato (2002).

5 For a parallel discussion of an attempt to get beyond objectivity and relativism, but working within a hermeneutic tradition of cartography, see John Pickles (2004, pp. 47–59).

6 Marx’s text The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune provides a similar appraisal of the commune’s edict on the immediate revocability of all representatives. Engels emphasizes this in his 1891 introduction (p. 21) and Marx reminds his readers in a letter to Dr Kugelmann included in an appendix to the text that what the revocability of delegates amounted to when combined with setting their wages at the average worker’s rate, and the abolishing of a special army in favor of an armed people, was essentially the smashing of the state. He also assures us that his position on the necessity of dissolving the state had remained consistent for 20 years: ‘If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is essential for every real people’s revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting’ (p. 86).


8 See the Situationist discussion of Lefebvre’s moments in ‘The Theory of Moments and the Construction of Situations’, Internationale Situationniste No. 4, June 1960.


10 For a similar discussion of Fanon’s analysis of spontaneity applied to the London revolt, see Nigel Gibson “London Calling: Fanon, spontaneity and the English Insurrections” Pambazuka News. September 6, Issue 546.

11 For an excellent account of the necessity for contemporary forms of decolonization in a different context, see Alvaro Reyes and Mara Kaufman (2011).

References


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