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Filippo Argenti

Nights of Rage

On the recent revolts in France



Elephant Editions

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Sulle recenti sommosse di Francia

Translated by Barbara Stefanelli

There is something knocking and knocking impatiently at our door.

Sooner or later we will have to open... Many stay hidden, not only the cowards, but also those who are too calm or too refined. They do not want to get involved. But they are involved as the stream continuously drags them and their blinkers are useless.

Even language fails miserably, language inherited from the old world, with its old sacrifices, its old images, and its embellishment of another era. Nothing is as it was before; old words fall on one another because they can cling to nothing new. There are heights that no joke, no witticism and no wisdom can reach. The bourgeois era is coming to an end. No one knows what is coming. Many have a dark premonition and so they are mocked. The masses also have a dark sensation about it but they are unable to express themselves and are (still) suppressed. The Old and the New, the insoluble opposition between what is and what will be, are gently fighting each other, and armed to the teeth they throw themselves against each other. A seaquake is hitting the earth. It is not just economics; it is not just a question of eating, drinking and making money. It is not just a matter of how wealth will be distributed, of who will work and who will be exploited. No, what is at stake is different: it is everything.

Kurt Tucholsky, Weltbühne, March 11 1920.

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is a modest contribution to understanding the recent revolts in France. Needless to say, it is not sociological or, in a nobler sense, theoretical insight. Revolts can only be understood by those who have the same needs as the rebels, that is to say by those who feel they are *part of the revolt*. After a brief chronology, in fact, the pages that follow pose the question of how the events of November in France concern all of us, and also try to give a possible answer.

We would like to highlight a few points in this short introduction.

If we take a quick look at the various revolutionary theories circulated in France, Italy and in the USA in recent years, we can see how these revolts were not at all unexpected or unpredictable. Some comrades are talking of civil war, of explosions that are difficult to identify with the places where capital concentrates and controls the exploited and of their total exposition to merchandise. Not by chance have the nineteenth century theses on the *barbarians*, on the collapse of any common *logos* of the exploited, and the ambivalence of the concept of nihilism, etc., been revised. Certain concepts express, even if in an embryonic and confused way, needs that go beyond the individual. In this sense, there exists a direct relation between these revolts and revolutionary theory. It is a kind of dialogue from a distance. According to French comrades, any attempt at a direct encounter has so far failed. Common hostility to the police or practical solidarity to the arrested has not been enough. Evidently these revolts are in themselves a theoretical suggestion, a reflection on the world. But what do they tell us? Certainly not that the insurgents want to manage this world, control production and technology from below. They do not tell us about hard-working multitudes nor of 'Zapatista marches' carried out by intellectual labourers for a democratic Europe. The flames in France have destroyed all social democratic illusions of

integrating the poor into the society of capital.

Walter Benjamin asked himself how in 1830 the Paris rioters shot at town clocks, in different parts of the city and without coordinating the action; for our part we cannot fail to reflect on why wild youths of today are burning cars. In fact, what does the car represent in contemporary society? We leave the question unanswered.

If the claim of putting forward great revolutionary analyses that explain everything and that the proletarians only have to apply diligently has now disappeared, it is time that revolutionary action itself was conceived in a totally different way. Instead of the *mission* of taking the flag to where the first fire breaks out and the first barricade is erected, there is now the *chance* to put up barricades or start fires elsewhere, as an extension of the revolt, not as its political direction. In fact, the lamentations of those on the side of the insurgents who complain about the lack of any political programme are quite pathetic.

To extend the revolt, however, does not mean to put oneself at the level of existing practises and multiply them (cars are burning, so we are going to burn them too), but it means deciding what must be struck, and how, to uphold the universal significance of the revolt.

At the same time, to transform the angry youths of the suburbs into the new revolutionary subjects would be equally pathetic. It would be great to think that the students in struggle against precarity had taken the baton from the insurgents of November. It is not quite like that. Even if there were lots of slogans for freedom for the rebels held in jail since November (most of them underage) in the demos and meetings of March and April, actual encounters have been very few. And there have been not a few problems. During the demo in Paris on March 23, for example, a few hundred ‘youths of the suburbs’

attacked students, stole money and mobile phones, beat them and insulted them. Moreover they also attacked those fleeing from police in the middle of fighting and police attacks. These facts cannot be ignored. Territorial identities, attachment to commodities, contempt for 'privileged' students, etc. are effects of the problems that new social conflicts will carry with them as inheritance of a rotten society. No ideology of revolt will erase them.

In order to examine the relation between the riots of November and the movements that appeared all over France against the CPE (contract of first employment) it is necessary to intertwine tales, testimonies and texts. That is why we decided to prepare two different pamphlets. If we want to avoid journalistic simplification and ambivalent rhetoric we have to grasp the living element of the experiences of struggle. For the time being we are simply offering an outline of the facts.

First of all we want to clarify one banal point: the expression 'people of the suburbs' does not mean a thing. First, because the Paris suburbs alone have over 9 million inhabitants (and the day millions of inhabitants revolt, it will be quite another story!). Then, the *cités* (roughly: whole housing estates with their yards and squares) within the boundaries of the big cities were also involved in the riots. Many 'youths of the suburbs' study in the cities (both in the *lycées*, which are secondary schools, and the universities, which are much more attended in France than they are in Italy). In this sense, a great number of young and not so young people who took part in the demos, blockades and fighting in March and April were the same as those who set the French nights on fire during the autumn. According to reliable assessments, the insurgents in November were 50,000, whereas a few million people participated in the movement 'against

the CPE'. Many 'youths of the suburbs' in fact had a pacific attitude, while other 'more privileged' young people resolutely raised the level of the fighting. Statistics that explain revolts on the basis of income are a matter for sociologists. In some provincial towns (Rennes for example) the encounter between students and the so-called *casseurs* was quite effective from a strategic point of view, which caused Sarkozy and his men to be extremely concerned. In Paris a lot less. Obviously there are precise reasons for that. Many 'youths of the suburbs' find it hard to reach the demos in the capital: if they are not stopped before boarding the trains of the hinterland (Rer), they are beaten by anti-riot cops as soon as they get out of the tube. If they manage to reach the demos they are kept out by the security services of the unions, cheered by many of the students. It is petrol on the fire. Furthermore, the ones belonging to the younger groups, who are not so expert as regards direct fighting with the police, are isolated during looting and fires, and consequently they are easily arrested. Of course this does not justify their indiscriminate hatred towards the other demonstrators, but it is evidence of different social situations and ways of life. Those who experience suffocating controls by the anticrime brigade, which often end up in beatings in the streets or at police stations, find it quite strange to see marches going on with police escorting them everywhere... In other words, without ourselves falling into simplification and bearing in mind some remarkable exceptions, we can say that at present in France certain *wild youths* are facing practically alone a kind of struggle never seen before (since November, as well as the arson, a number of violent thefts have occurred, with gangs of youths attacking security vans with baseball clubs, ...). For the revolutionaries who publicly stand *on the side of revolt* against the *side of the State* it is not so easy to be up to the

situation, even in a movement of struggle that proves as radical as that of the latest months.

An example will clarify this. At first the struggle was centred on the CPE, but it soon became aware that precarity* does not depend on a specific contract; on the contrary it is the product of a whole social system, and cannot be reformed. Even if the movement were to finally win its specific objective (as everybody knows the government retracted the bill in question), it knew that it was still *on the defensive*. The step beyond was not so easy. The main slogan of the movement, which was proposed first timidly and then almost officially (that is through motions voted at the students' meetings) became: let's block everything. So was it. Stations, roads, universities, bus garages, and motorways: the flow of men and goods was massively interrupted, amid an atmosphere of popular complicity. Those who were not ready for fighting the police found their mode of action in the barricades, following the joyful complementarity of actions that characterizes all real movements. The angriest, however, those whose day to day existence is a life sentence between police and iron gates, concrete buildings and shopping centres, regardless of the CPE, don't just want to block everything but also *tout niquer* (destroy everything). Revolutionary rhetoric, stingy with courage and sterile in organisational capacity, has practically abandoned them. There need to be many more experiences, many more fires and a lot more looting. But the road is open.

This booklet and the coming one (*'Nights of Rage'* will be followed by *'Days of Refusal'*) are a small contribution so that these experiences are adopted, discussed, and spread in Italy. What's happening in France today is a sort of 'weapon mill' with which to sharpen our ideas and practices, in the night as well as in the day.

May 2006

Nights of Rage

First night: October 27-28¹

Two teenagers, Ziad, 17 years old, and Bouna, 15 years old, are electrocuted and die after taking shelter in a power station while fleeing police in Clichy-sous-Bois (Seine-Saint-Denise). Another youth, Metin, is seriously wounded. At first police, the prefect and the home secretary deny that the youths were being chased. A second official version released later states that the youths were probably committing a theft in a yard and were therefore escaping. This version is not confirmed by the surviving boy who, according to the investigators, ‘does not remember anything’. The local investigating magistrate claims that the youths ‘were not criminals’ as their police records were clean. Later he also confirms that they were running away from a routine identification and therefore they were not committing any theft. The escape, which also involved other boys, was due to the fact that some of them did not have identity documents, including Metin (who was waiting for his status to be recognized).

As the news spreads, ‘uncontrolled gangs of dozens of youths’ (to quote the words of fire brigade officials) give vent to their rage. They pelt firemen, who have come in aid of the electrocuted youths, with stones; then they destroy a few bus stops, set fire to 23 cars (including police cars and council vehicles) and skips, attack a commercial

store, a school, a post office and the city hall. 300 police officers try to deal with the youths' rage for a few hours.

Second night: October 28-29

About 400 youths fight with police by throwing Molotovs and stones in Chêne-Pointu (where Ziad and Bouna lived). Shots are fired at a CRS vehicle (French anti-riot brigade). During the night a dozen policemen and a journalist are wounded and about thirty cars and many skips are burnt. 19 people are stopped, 14 of whom are held in custody. The police union ask for more power, on the pretext of shots fired at police. Sarkozy announces that all police cars will be equipped with video cameras.

Third night: October 29-30

On Saturday October 29 500 inhabitants of Clichy-sous-Bois organise a silent march in memory of the two electrocuted teenagers. Some demonstrators wear white t-shirts with the names of the two victims and the words 'dead for nothing'. In the night skips and cars are set fire to but no fights with the police occur. A dozen youths carrying hammers and petrol cans are stopped.

Fourth night: October 29-30

Objects are thrown against police in the Forestière area. The CRS shoot a teargas cannister inside a mosque where a group of women are praying. As they leave the mosque, the latter are abused by the policemen: 'Go home bitches and look after your children'. A Muslim resident in Clichy claims: 'If this had happened in a synagogue they would have said it was a scandal'. As a result of the fighting, 6 policemen are wounded and 11 people are stopped.

Fifth night: October 31 - November 1

On October 31 the two dead boys' parents refuse to meet home secretary Sarkozy, who had called the youths of the suburbs 'scum'. The same day three youths (one French, a Moroccan without documents and a refugee from Cote d'Ivoire), who had been stopped the previous days in Clichy-sous-Bois, face summary trial and are sentenced to 8 months, two of which to be spent in jail, on charges of assaulting police. Another 5 youths are arrested and awaiting trial. 'You are locking us up without any evidence', they scream as they hear the news of their arrest. Groups of adults organise rigorously Muslim (*Le Monde*) social service units, in order to try to avert further violence. The rebels have no intention of following their suggestions as they trick them and manage to attack police with stones and Molotovs. More cars are set on fire and skips set alight: the fire brigade and police are punctually welcomed with stones from the surrounding streets and estates when they turn up. Police then shoot teargas and flash-balls (rubber bullets). The metropolitan police garage in Montfermeil, close to Clichy-sous-Bois, is also set fire to and more fires occur in other parts of the region resulting in a total of one hundred burnt out cars.

Sixth night: November 1-2

The revolt spreads all over France. 228 cars are set on fire throughout the country, most of which in the Seine-Saint-Denis area where many police cars and fire engines are also burnt. According to the government, this is the result of 'a normal day's urban violence'. In other departments involved in the revolt direct battles with police are quite rare. The strategy of the rebels, in fact, consists in forming small groups that move rapidly and light fires, avoiding frontal battles with police.

Home secretary Sarkozy claims: 'We won't be soft with those who disobey the law so that we can better help all the others' (*Le Parisien*).

Seventh night: November 2-3

Roughly 400 vehicles are set on fire all over France. In the suburbs of Paris not only are cars set alight but there are fights with police and attacks on a police station, a commercial store and a prête-a-porter shop. A few cars are burnt just outside the palace of the prefecture in Bobigny. In other departments (Hauts-de-Seine and Aulnay-sous-Bois, both in the north) Molotovs are hurled at police stations. Three journalists of France 2, the State television, have to abandon their car in flames in front of dozens of rebels: soon it is only a burnt out wreck. A few police officers are wounded; a fireman suffers second-degree burns as he is hit in the face by a Molotov bottle. A Renault car showroom, a few schools and a bank (in Sevran) are also set fire to. Gunshots are fired at the CRS and the police in La Courneuve and Saint-Denis. Furthermore in La Courneuve Molotov bottles are launched against the site of Eurocopter, whereas in Clichy-sous-Bois a fire station is attacked. A regional railway line (Rer) is disrupted owing to continuous hurling of stones at the train.

Sarkozy declares that this violence 'is not at all spontaneous', on the contrary 'it is perfectly planned. We are trying to understand who is behind it'.

Eighth night: November 3-4

Roughly 900 vehicles are set on fire all over France, 519 of which in Ile-de-France (an area in Paris) and 250 in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis alone. Five policemen are wounded by hurled objects. Seven cars are also burnt in the centre of Paris. All in all direct fights with police do not occur. *Le Nouvel Observateur* states that owing to fights and arrests that occurred the previous days the 'scum' have chosen to act outside their territory. The same paper acknowledges that symbols of authority are mainly hit, along with some private interests. In fact many buildings of public authority are hit, especially schools, council buildings and police stations (with Molotovs in various areas). In Val d'Oise, where 105 cars are burnt, a supermarket is also looted. In Seine-Saint-Denis a sports shop is looted. Public transport is suspended in many areas for security reasons. A massive fire broke out in a carpet depot in Aulnay-sous-Bois. Other depots are set on fire in a number of areas. A few Molotovs are hurled at the court building in Bobigny. Gunshots are fired at vehicles of the CRS in Neuilly-sur-Marne. The communist mayor of Stains witnesses his car being set on fire while talking to a group of youths. Many buses are also set on fire: in Trappes (Yvelines) 27 buses are destroyed in a fire that is started in a bus garage. In the night about 250 people are stopped by police all over France. In Sevran a disabled woman is injured during an attack on a RATP bus.

Prefect Cordet claims: 'Large gangs are disappearing as violence is now being perpetrated by a great number of small groups that move

very quickly'. Home secretary Sarkozy declares that the government is determined to adopt a tough attitude. Marine Le Pen, Jean Marie Le Pen's daughter and vice-president of the neo fascist party Front National, asks the government to adopt emergency measures. Philippe De Villiers asks the premier 'to strengthen the reaction of the government towards what appears to be an ethnic civil war'.

Ninth night: November 4-5

754 vehicles are set on fire during the night and 203 people are stopped by police all over France. During the afternoon a great number of cars are burnt in an underground parking area in Bobigny: many of these cars belonged to the court situated in the area. A bus garage is set on fire in Aisne: two vehicles are completely destroyed and another two are seriously damaged. Other attacks against Renault car shops occur. A Molotov is hurled at a police station in Paris (in Place des Fêtes, XIX *arrondissement*). A court is ransacked and set on fire in Ile-de-France. A great number of schools are also destroyed and set fire to. A massive fire flares up in a textile depot in Aubervilliers; a car shop and a supermarket are burned in Montreuil; a nursery school is set on fire in La Courneuve. In Seine-Maritime unknown people stop a bus and set it on fire after letting all the passengers out.

A few hundred citizens organise demos for the end of violence. During the night the Paris area is controlled by a helicopter equipped with spotlight and video camera; a further 2,300 officers are mobilized besides those already on duty. Attorney magistrate of Paris Yves Bot declares to *Europe 1* that the 'violence is organised'. Romano Prodi claims that similar explosions of violence will also soon occur in Italy.

Tenth night: November 5-6

1,295 vehicles are set on fire, 741 of which in Ile-de-France, and 312 people are stopped by police. Objects (stones, bike wheels and trolleys) are hurled at police from buildings in Yvelines. There is an attempt to set fire to a council oil depot. The windows of a McDonald's store are destroyed by a car used as battering ram in Corbeil-Essonne. The store is eventually set on fire. In Grigny, south of Paris, about 200 rioters engage in fights with police and a few pump-gun shots are fired against officers: dozens of policemen are injured, 2 quite seriously. In Evreux, Normandy, about 60 vehicles are burnt in the night as well as a commercial store, a post office, the council hall and two schools; officers are injured during the fight. Still in Grigny two schools are set on fire. In Noisy-le-Grand (Seine-Saint-Denis) a big school and many cars are also burnt. Sabotage and fire occur in electrical plants belonging to EDF in Grand Vallauris (Maritime Alps department). A Korean journalist of TV Kbs is assaulted in Aubervilliers. 13 cars are also set on fire in the III, XIII, XIX and XX *arrondissement* in Paris; 30 people are stopped, 11 of whom are 'caught in the act of making incendiary devices'. Fires also break out in areas of France that have so far been relatively calm (Bretagne, Alsace, Lorraine, Auvergne, Limousin and Cote d'Azur): it is mainly burning of cars caused by launching of Molotov bottles by small fast groups that act in spite of the presence of numerous helicopters. Bus garages are burned in various areas. Even if direct fighting with police does not often occur, the latter are punctually targeted with stones when they pass. Incendiary bottles are also hurled at police and the fire brigade in Loire. Two policemen are injured following the explosion of a skip hit by a gas cannister in Grenoble. About 150 Molotov

of urban guerrilla, which moves very rapidly and sets fire, destroys, attacks, avoiding direct fighting with police and able to use all modern means of communication' (*Libération*). The first fights occur in a 'hot area' in Toulouse, where rioters fight against police. A Molotov bottle is hurled at the electoral site of MP Pierre Lellouche in Paris. A great number of cars are burnt in Rouen where a car is also used as battering ram against a police station; the same method is used against a police station in Perpignan. A nursery school is set fire to in Saint-Etienne where public transport is interrupted owing to the numerous attacks. The site of a TV station in Asnières-sur-Seine (Haute-de-Seine) is destroyed by fire in the night. Fires also break out in Lyon (where three nights of fighting had occurred before the revolt started as an Arab youth was beaten by police), Lille, Orléans, Nice, Bordeaux, Strasburg, etc. A 13 month old child is injured in the head in Colombes following an attack on a bus. In Rosny-sous-Bois a juvenile recreation centre is attacked; a motorbike shop is also attacked in Aubervilliers, as well as a nursery school in Saint-Maurice, a treasury office in Trappes and a pharmaceutical depot in Sur. Molotov bottles are hurled at a church in Sète, without causing serious damage. A 61-year-old man dies after being assaulted as he attempts to secure his car.

The French Committee of Islamic Organisations launches a 'fatwa' that condemns the violence under way. The mayor of Raincy (Seine-Saint-Denis) organises civilian security units to patrol the town. Justice secretary Pascal Clement declares: 'It was just urban violence until last weekend. Now it is a real uprising'. The home secretary announces that majors and attorneys will be allowed to impose curfews and that an emergency law that was applied in Algeria on April 3 1955 (when the country was a French colony) will be restored. Sarkozy also announces that massive searches will be carried out wherever the presence of weapons is suspected. De Villiers claims that the army should intervene and that all immigrants should be ar-

rested. Meantime three ‘bloggers’ are arrested (two from Paris and a minor from Aix-en-Provence) accused of instigating attacks against the police through the internet.

Twelfth night: November 7-8

1,173 cars are set on fire, 12 policemen are injured, 330 people are stopped by police and 226 French towns are involved in riots. Again public buildings, schools and buses set fire to; two Italian journalists are attacked in Clichy-sous-Bois. Rioters stop a bus in Toulouse, let all the passengers out and set fire to the vehicle. The paper *Hal reporter del popolo* spreads the news that a boy is seriously injured in one hand after attempting to throw back a tear gas cannister. All in all riots are diminishing in the Paris area but continue in the provinces. Muslim organisations vent their anger against violence once again. In a few areas it is forbidden to sell petrol and gas bottles to minors. A bus explodes in Bordeaux after being targeted with Molotovs. In Lyon the underground night traffic is interrupted owing to various incidents and the continuous launching of molotovs on to the tracks, whereas nine buses parked in a depot are destroyed. A 53 year old man is injured after being hit by a handle thrown from a building. Michel Gaudin, general director of the national police, declares that rioters are animated by a true ‘anti-institutional will’.

Small episodes of urban guerrilla actions occur in Brussels (where some cars are set on fire) and Luxemburg. In the night between November 7 and November 8 three cars are set on fire and the window of a shop is destroyed in the Cagliari area (Sardinia, Italy), where a few cars had already been set on fire a few days before.

rence : The same day a bill imposing a state of emergency in France ‘starting from November 9 2005’ is made known. It establishes that:

- people and vehicles are forbidden to circulate in certain streets at certain times;
- security areas are created where rules of behaviour are imposed;
- living in certain departments is forbidden;
- seditious meetings are forbidden;
- certain people are to be put under house arrest;
- searches are allowed in the day as well as in the night;
- radio stations, movies, theatrical plays and the press must be controlled;
- any kind of weapon and munitions must be handed in police stations.

In the evening home secretary Sarkozy sends a telegram to the attorneys asking them to deport all foreigners who have been stopped during the episodes of urban violence, including those with stay permits. 120 youths are involved in the measure, almost all of them with regular papers. Various human rights associations, the Communist party and the Green party unanimously denounce this sort of double condemnation (deportation of regular foreigners owing to other charges). The home secretary replies that it is not double condemnation, but simple deportation, that is to say direct deportation of people without them being sentenced(!). In 1994 first a high court then the State council had refused the measure taken by former home secretary Pasqua against two Algerians involved in riots in Lyon. The home secretary mobilises 11,500 policemen (1,000 more than the previous night).

As a result, attacks diminish considerably: only 617 cars set on fire and 280 people stopped by police (about 1,830 people have been

arrested since the beginning of the riots, and about one hundred have been tried summarily). Schools are devastated by fire in La Courneuve and in Villeneuve-d'Ascq (in the north). Two shops are looted then set on fire in Arras, where a business and a recreational centre are also set on fire. The site of a local paper is attacked and set on fire in Grasse. A few Russian journalists are assaulted in Lyon, where the tube transport is still interrupted owing to an incendiary attack occurred in the previous nights. Night traffic is also still interrupted in other towns, including Grenoble. In the suburbs of Toulouse molotov bottles and stones are hurled at police. In Lille the town council hall is attacked. An attempt to loot a superstore in Marseille fails.

Rapper Magyd Cherfi depicts the rebels as 'desperate youths who believe in nothing'.

17 cars are set on fire in various towns in Belgium. 11 cars are also burnt in Germany (Berlin and Cologne), whereas molotovs are hurled at a school in Altenburg. Cars are also set on fire in Lisbon.

In Montréal (Canada) dozens of anarchists organise a demo outside the French consulate in solidarity to the French rioters.

Fourteenth night: November 9-10

Magistrates launch an investigation for 'attempted murder' following the hurling of rubber bullets at police in Grigny. A great number of summary court procedures are carried out on November 9. 482 cars are set on fire in 152 different towns and 203 people are stopped by police (the total arises at 2,033 since the beginning of the riots). In Sens a police officer and a fireman are injured after being hit by stones. A police station, three schools and a council hall are targeted

lowing day. It is feared that violence might occur in the city centre during the weekend.

Riots also occur in the suburbs of Brussels and other Belgian towns, still without direct fighting against police.

Fifteenth night: November 10-11

As incidents continue to diminish in number, 463 cars are set on fire (111 of which in Ile-de-France) and 201 people are stopped by police. A few police cars parked inside the fences of the court are set on fire in Bordeaux. A policeman is arrested and another 4 are investigated and charged with abuse of violence towards a man in La Courneuve. 8 policemen in total are put under investigation following some documentaries on *France 2*. On Thursday November 10 another man (the fourth) is arrested for inciting violence through the internet: he risks from 1 to 7 year's imprisonment. Transportation and selling of petrol cans is also forbidden in Paris.

On Thursday Jean-Marie Le Pen, president of the Front National, ironically thanks premier Villepin and home secretary Sarkozy for proposing the same slogans and measures he himself put forward. Intervening in a TV program on *France 2*, Sarkozy declares that distinction must be made between the unfortunate youths of the suburbs and the 'scum' that are responsible for the incidents (and therefore he once again repeats his controversial statement). He also claims that 'children of African immigrants pose more problems than those of Swedish, Danish or Hungarian immigrants because their culture, social origins and polygamy create more difficulties'.

About 400 anarchists attack the French Institute in Athens (Greece) in solidarity to the rebels of the French *banlieues*: the windows of the building are smashed to pieces and a slogan is left on the walls: 'Those who sow armies reap social war in Paris, Athens and everywhere'.

The windows of the local French Institute are also destroyed by stones in Saloniki, and leaflets are left on the spot, which say that ‘the insurgents are right’. 6 cars are set on fire in Belgium where other ‘isolated incidents’ occur, including attempts to set fire to schools.

Sixteenth night: November 11-12

502 cars are set on fire (86 of which in Ile-de-France) and 206 people are held by police (2,440 in total since the beginning of the riots). The number of incendiary attacks diminishes considerably as very few towns see more than five or six fires. The hottest points are in Lille, Lyon, Strasbourg and Toulouse. In Saint-Quentin (Aisne) a policeman is seriously injured (second degree burns) following the explosion of an incendiary device that has been placed on the rear seat of a car. The car is eventually set on fire. Six molotov bottles are thrown into the yard of a police station in Maison-Alfort (Val-de-Marne). Two incendiary devices are hurled at a mosque in Carpentras (Vaucluse). Two shops are set on fire in Yvelines and a nursery school in Seine-et-Marne. A helicopter prevents a school in Sevran from being set on fire, and 9 people are taken in. In Amiens (Somme), where the curfew is imposed, a few electric plants of the EDF are sabotaged and eventually fighting with police takes place. The fire brigade are welcomed with a hail of stones in Alsace; the young perpetrators of the attack disappear as soon as the police arrive. In the afternoon dozens of youths battle with police in the centre of Lyon (Bellecour square): a few shops are damaged, and 11 people are arrested. On the spot witnesses declare that the fighting was clearly provoked by the police. In Ousse-des-Bois (Pau) a restaurant is attacked, looted and set on fire; as usual, when the fire brigade arrive

they are welcomed with stones. In Angoulême three people attempt to set fire to an electric plant of the EDF; police chasing them are targeted by stones thrown from the roofs of surrounding houses. In Lyon a scooter set on fire close to a cash machine causes serious damage to the latter.

Sixth night of disorder in Belgium: 15 cars are set on fire, 8 of which in Brussels, for a total of 60 cars burnt there since the beginning of the riots. Police maintain that these are isolated episodes. In the afternoon and during the night a dozen skips are set on fire in Bologna (Italy) where slogans are written on the walls: 'Bologna like Paris' and 'Revolt is necessity, solidarity to the *casseurs* from Paris'. Actions in solidarity to the French rioters also occur in Istanbul where a demo in support to the 'legitimate struggle' of the inhabitants of the French suburbs is organised by the Federation for fundamental rights outside the consulate. A demo outside the French consulate is also organised in Barcelona where, even though no incident occurs, 5 people are arrested as the demo finishes. They are accused of disturbing public order and resisting public officials. One of the demonstrators writes on Indymedia: 'All this just for having expressed their solidarity in a pacific way. It seems that the state of emergency is also being applied on the pavements outside French consulates'.

Seventeenth night: November 12-13

'Normality' is slowly restored: only 374 cars are set on fire (76 of which in Ile-de-France) and 212 people are stopped by police. In the evening Sarkozy, who has reconfirmed that all foreigners (be they regular or not) involved in the riot are to be deported, goes to the

Champs Elisées: he is welcome by demonstrations of protest. But he boasts: 'There were also people clapping their hands'. During the night about 12,000 policemen are mobilised all over France. In La Courneuve an officer is injured by a bowl launched from a building. A school is set on fire and a car is used as a battering ram against a recreation centre for the elderly in Carpentras (Vaucluse). Massive fires are started in the suburbs of Toulouse, including one at a Hi-fi shop and its depot. A ban on people meeting is also imposed in Lyon. A mosque is attacked with a Molotov bottle that does not explode. Violence also occurs in Toulouse and Strasburg. No incidents occur in Paris, where 3,000 police officers have been mobilised. About thirty towns are still under curfew.

Seventh night of violence in Belgium: dozens of cars are set on fire. In Brussels several streets around the centre are blocked after clashes with police break out, barricades are erected and skips are set on fire. Dozens of people are arrested and a number of police cars are damaged. 90 vehicles have been set on fire in Belgium over the last seven days. Belgian authorities still maintain that these are isolated episodes. In Rotterdam (Holland) a few cars are also destroyed and set on fire. About one hundred anarchists demonstrate outside the French embassy in Athens in solidarity to the French rioters. Again in the Greek capital two car showrooms (Mercedes and Citroen) are attacked during the night with Molotovs and twenty cars are burned.

Eighteenth night: November 13-14

The number of incidents continues to diminish: 271 cars are set on fire, 62 of which in Ile-de-France, and 112 people are stopped by

police; 5 officers are injured, two of them following a well-known practice: explosion of a gas bottle placed in a skip, which eventually catches fire. A burning vehicle is hurled at a nursery school in Toulouse causing damage to part of the building. In Lyon about 15 cars are set on fire, a school is also set fire to and another is attacked with a car as a battering ram. Incidents also occur in Strasbourg.

The French government decides to extend the state of emergency for another 3 months. News is spread at 12.39pm about police carrying out 8 operations in different *banlieus* to identify and arrest the authors of the violence. As a result 503 people are arrested (107 minors and 486 people of age). Since the beginning of the riots 2,652 people have been stopped by police, 375 have been summarily tried and 213 have been kept into custody awaiting trial. Another 622 people are immediately called to court, 112 of whom must return. 120 foreigners, some with regular documents some without, risk deportation. Magistrates open new investigations that lead to further arrests. On a few occasions the imams contribute to individuating those allegedly responsible for violence and incidents.

Here are a few examples of sentences inflicted on people. In Toulouse: 5-month sentence for setting a skip on fire; 3-month sentence for showing one's bottom to the police; 2 months for insulting public officials, that is to say for having been with the one who showed his bottom. In Lyon: 2 months for sitting in a bar where two minors had taken refuge following clashes with police; 2 months are inflicted on a young man who had been sitting on a bench during clashes with police; 3 months for setting rubbish on fire; 2 months for throwing stones; 4 months for creating a false alarm about a bomb in the airport.

Nineteenth night: November 14-15

215 cars are set on fire (60 of which in Ile-de-France) and 42 people are stopped by police. An officer is injured. 3 molotov devices are hurled at a mosque in Saint- Chamond (Loire). A recreation centre is set on fire in Bruges whereas a few cars are burnt in Paris.

Twentieth night: November 15-16

163 cars are set on fire (of which 27 in Ile-de-France) and 50 people are stopped by police. ‘an almost normal situation’ comments Sarkozy. A policeman is injured while attempting to intervene against a group of youths who are hurling bottles filled with acid at the city hall in Pont-Evêque (Isère). In Grenoble a school and an educational centre are set on fire respectively in Grenoble and in Chalons-en-Champagne (Marne). In Drome a battering ram car is hurled at a police station and Molotovs are thrown against a church. Garages are set on fire in the Rodano and Marna areas. An ambush is laid for police and fire brigade in Point-a-Pitre (isle of La Reunion): after setting fire to a few cars, behind which barricades have been erected, unknown people fire gunshots at police, who respond by shooting in turn (no news about wounded).

In total 126 policemen are injured and 2,888 people are stopped by police, of which 593 are arrested (107 the minors, many among the people stopped by police and then released are to appear in the court). 8,973 vehicles are set on fire.

Twenty-first night: November 16-17

98 cars are set on fire and 33 people are stopped by police, mainly because they were caught carrying incendiary devices or had violated the curfew. Less than 100 vehicles set on fire all over France is considered normal (about 90 cars are normally set on fire every night). Premier Villepin claims that 'there exists a real threat of terrorism against France' and therefore 'surveillance must be permanent'. And this is *not* another story.

¹This chronology does not intend to give an objective account of events that occurred in France during the revolt of the 'scum' between the end of October and the first weeks of November 2005; not only because of the sources that have been used (newspapers, press agencies, police reports, websites, and 'blogs' on the internet, which sometimes are real collections of collective memory), but also and mainly because the sense of a chronology lies not so much in the presentation of past events as in the lines that such events can trace in the present.

A few similar explosions of rage that occurred in the Nineties

From when the death penalty was abolished in France in 1981 up until 2001 there have been 175 cases of death directly or indirectly provoked by the State police. On a number of occasions this sort of senseless death ignited explosions of anger against the abuse police inflict every day. Such explosions are testimonies of the brutality of a whole social system...

October 6-9 1990. *Thomas Claudio dies after his motorbike is hit by a police car that is chasing him. Police presents the crime as 'an accident'. Violent fighting against police breaks out, shops and commercial stores are looted and set on fire.*

August 31, September 3 1995. *Clashes between police and youths explode in Nanterre (cité de Fontanelle) after a 25-year-old man of North African origin dies after being accidentally hit by a concrete mixer while rushing to the place where his brother was being ar-*

rested.

May 25-26 1996. *Dozens of youths loot commercial stores and set fire to vehicles in Saint-Jean in Château Roux after a youth dies of car accident caused by a police chase.*

November 1996. *In Rabaterie (St Pierre des Corps, Tours) 23-year-old Mohamed Boucetta dies after being shot in the head. As the murderer is freed thanks to Le Pen's personal intervention, a revolt lasting 15 days breaks out with clashes and fires of cars, shops and public buildings.*

December 12-21 1997. *Clashes between police and youths occur in Dammarie-les-Lys (banlieues of Melun, Seine-et-Marne), where a sixteen year old boy of North African origin killed by police at a roadblock in Fontainebleau used to live. Not one policeman is arrested following the murder nor is any trial held.*

December 13-16 1998. *As 17-year-old Habib is killed by a cop while attempting to steal a car, and violent fighting occurs between police and youths in Mirail area (Toulouse). More than one hundred vehicles are set on fire. Three years later the cop killer, who had been free since then, is sentenced to 3 years on bail.*

September 12-22 2000. *In two areas of Essonne, in Grande Borne in Grigny and in Tarterets in Corbeil-Essonnes clashes with police occur as a 19-year-old man is killed while attempting to go through a roadblock in Combs-la-Ville (Seine-et-Marne) after stealing a motorbike.*

July 4-6 2001. *Incidents break out in Borny in Metz as two local youths die following a car accident.*

October 13-14 2001. *Urban violence explodes in Thonon-les-Baines (Haute Savoie) as four men die ‘accidentally’ while attempting to avoid being identified by police.*

December 26-31 2001. *Clashes with police occur in Vitry-de-Seine (Val-de-Marne) after a young man is killed while attempting to rob a bank in Neuilly-sur-Marne (Seine-Saint-Denis).*

January 3-7 2002. *Dozens of cars are set on fire in Mureaux (Yvelines) as 17-year-old Moussa dies after being shot in the head by police while trying to avoid a roadblock.*

February 25-26 2002. *As a man dies of overdose inside the yard of a police station in Evreux, groups of masked youths fight with police, set cars on fire and devastate shop windows.*

October 18-19 2001. *A seventeen year old boy drowns after diving into a river in an attempt to escape police who surprised him during an attempted robbery. Dozens of youths armed with baseball batons attack police in Haute-pierre (Strasbourg) and set cars on fire. 25 cars are burnt, 3 firemen are injured, a school is devastated by an explosive device and council’s structures are also set on fire.*

March 3 2003. *Riots break out as a thief dies while attempting to escape police.*

January 12-14 2004. *A 17-year-old boy dies after falling from a stolen motorbike while being chased by police. Clashes between youths and policemen break out, dozens of cars are set on fire and a battering ram car is hurled at a police station.*

Temporary results

—9,19 cars are set on fire (figure provided by the French home secretary).

—Dozens of public buildings and commercial stores are looted or destroyed; a great number of police stations are attacked; a mosque, a church and a synagogue are also attacked.

—About 300 towns are involved in the uprisings.

—Curfew has been imposed in 25 departments.

—3 dead: Ziad and Bouna, electrocuted on October 27, and a 61-year-old man assaulted near his house on November 7.

—An unknown number of civilians are injured.

—About 12,000 police officers are mobilised, 126 of which are injured. 8 officers are under investigation, accused of committing horrendous violence during the clashes.

—Insurance claims are predicted to be about 200 million euros. The

EU maintains it will offer 50 million euros.

—2,921 people are stopped by police (one third of which are minors, the youngest being 10 years old) and 590 are arrested (107 of whom minors). 375 people of age are sentenced without bail. Arrests in the act of committing crime are very rare as people are generally arrested during police raids. Acquittals are also very rare as the lawyers' defendants are appointed by the court.

—About another 1,540 suspects are stopped, questioned and arrested in the days immediately following the end of the riots: about 4,500 people in total are involved in investigations, more than a quarter of whom after the end of the riots.

—In the first days of December 786 people are still under arrest, 83 of whom are foreigners.

—On December 4 Sarkozy announces the deportation of the first seven foreigners.

The Scum

Not all revolts take you by surprise. Of course there is no Nostradamus to predict their specific moments of explosion, but the fact that *revolts happen* can only surprise those who have no idea about the dismal world we are compelled to live in. It is not because

you know that such revolts occur frequently in France with the same practices and rituals (hundreds of cars are set on fire all over France on the last day of the year)¹. Revolts are the inevitable product of the current social system. When a revolt breaks out you can't ask yourself 'how could it happen?' but rather 'how is it possible that it doesn't happen everywhere, all the time?'. But each time a revolt breaks out the first operation that takes place is an attempt to categorise it. One wonders who the rebels are, where they come from and what they want. The research soon starts on names, identities, and right categories: they are foreigners, immigrants... no! They are French... yes, French, but second generation French, second class French, sons or nephews of immigrants, outcasts, excluded... Some are disappointed

because the theory of Islamic fundamentalism doesn't work: obviously these people are not the ones who go to the mosque (in fact appeals made by imams have proved useless). Rightwing papers (for example *Le Figaro*) try to create improbable amalgams for public stigmatisation, by chance, they write about Palestinian-style Intifada, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, etc. These falsifications, however, don't seem to work as every struggle is capable of showing itself in its own irreducible peculiarity.

Sociological categories are mobilised to define, identify and circumscribe, in short, to keep the revolt within certain conceptual limits. Once an identity is given to the rioters – the most used is that of social outcasts, a new name for the underclass – the range of theories for intervention can put forward: from police and emergency measures to social and welfare-orientated actions. They are the two faces of the security syndrome: public security and social security, in other words the punch and the lending hand. In short, the stick and the carrot. All this shows clearly the fact that if subversion and revolt are direct consequences of the system of dominion, their abolition can *only* happen through the abolition of dominion, that is to say through subversion.

However to identify the 'scum', maybe giving it a more *politically correct* definition, implies a number of things. To identify a phenomenon with convenient categories means first of all to circumscribe it, and to circumscribe it means to stem it. On the one hand the limits are erected to present the revolt and its causes as incidental disorders brought about by a system that in spite of everything (misery, war, pollution, total commodification and progressive devastation of the whole world and the life of each and every one) must be preserved, maybe by introducing some providential intervention along with the announcement of the state of emergency. But, as it is well known, this exception is now the rule, which also involves exclusion, impoverishment, social alienation, that this to say the generalised dispossession of life.

It is not a question of an incidental phenomenon, be it local or global. Poverty, precariousness of life in the western society, urban structures in the metropoli all over the world (from Los Angeles to Bogotá, from Alger to Paris), attempts at closing the borders of fortress Europe are only a few examples of this structural fracture. The game of the stick and the carrot, alongside police and judicial repression with the announcement of social action in favour of the suburbs, might take in some people, but certainly not those who experience social emargination on their skin, or those who know that new explosions are ready to break out just around any corner, and, most importantly, those who feel an irrepressible potential for revolt pulsating inside them. And it is exactly the magnetic force of rebellion that is the main target of the process of identification.

In fact, the process of identification, besides presenting the structural phenomenon of the present social order as if it were incidental,

aims at separating and dividing the outcasts from *all the others* – at the same time separating these others from themselves and their active potential. In other words, outcasts have an atavistic right to revolt as anger, desperation and a feeling of injustice belong expressly to them. But you, who are privileged in spite of everything and who enjoy part of the welfare guaranteed by the society, what do you want? In the ghettos in towns, the *banlieues* of Paris and the suburbs of the world, life is uprooted, empty, encircled in the space of social, material and existential alienation, and full of desperation and metaphysical boredom. But not your life! Your life is rich and enjoyable, full of possibilities and perspectives, wellbeing and passion. Your life? Our life? Excuse me, what are we talking about?

As a matter of fact the line of oppression, and with it the rift of rebellion, concerns everybody. The binary logic of opposition interprets reality so grossly that it cannot understand the present development of the revolts underway and the explosions that are yet to come. To separate the youths of the suburbs from all the others, then distinguish the violent and irreducible ones who cannot be tamed from those who must be protected from their contamination, means to separate any potential for rebellion from whatever might make it explode. This is the logic behind all emergency interventions. Moreover, to accept this ideological division means a weakening of any practical perspective. Like all revolts, the French one also speaks to everybody. Its action inevitably affects our potential movements. After all, it is not so important to know who they are, but rather *who we are and what we can do*. As a permanent state of exception exists whether it is officially proclaimed or not, the first practical lesson to be learned concerns the realization of an *effective* state of exception through the

explosion of destructive actions, their fast spreading and the refusal of all delegation.

Some complain about the alleged lack of direction or revolutionary class awareness, and so they take a distance because they cannot see any political perspectives or results; then they talk about barbaric phenomena without any project, which would be the result of a 'passive putrefaction of the oldest strata of the old society'. Some also propose themselves as conscious organizers of revolts (those to come, of course). But instead of giving lessons on how to behave and act there is a lot to be learned from the French riots. There is a tactical and practical awareness in the rebellion of the 'scum' that is notoriously unknown among the most refined revolutionary consciences, often too conscious to be practical. If the French rioters did not make a step towards revolution (yes, but who is a revolutionary today?), at least in their own way they put their active possibilities to the test. Without waiting for a guide to teach *what to do*, on the contrary they effectively realized their way of *how to do*; they made their anger explode in an impressive series of fires without delegating it to anyone. The explosion of a vital force that has been repressed for too long is an angry deflagration that ignores any form of delegation and cannot ever repent.

Phenomenology of angry nihilism

Anger is the expression of strength that has been repressed for too long, offended and abused, the anger of those who suddenly understand that they are 'too young to go rotten'. Its primary manifestation opens up a horizon characterised by *universal destruction*. As you

are in a blind rage you look around you searching for something to destroy, to hurl at a wall or to break with your own hands; the body is felt to be a damaging instrument. Anything can be destroyed! Anger, therefore, manifests itself as a nihilist horizon. As they can desire nothing for themselves, these second-class lives decide to desire that this nothing be realized (as nothing).

But nihilism, this disturbing guest, presents itself in different forms. The less evident is the most widespread, but it is also the most popular: it is the subtle nihilism of the authoritarian management of the existent that pervades everything. It annihilates life and takes away its strength in order to lead it to the preformed structures of order and discipline, production and consumerism, resignation and cynicism. The current social system is nihilist and the citizens who submit to it are also unconsciously nihilist as they accept various forms of voluntary slavery and drag their lives on without passion every day. As they have absorbed the lesson of economy and the imaginary of the value of consumables, their life is based on calculations of costs and benefits, on the separation between means and ends and on resignation to the current misery in the illusory hope that it will be better tomorrow. The nihilist operation of dominion articulates itself in two complementary movements: on the one hand it despoils, alienates and robs, on the other it dresses up, creates illusions and blinds people. But the emptiness upon which this twofold operation stands and finds its substance becomes evident when the second movement (the false satisfaction of illusions) does not work any more: when school, work and the institutions of the spectacular civilized society no longer grip existences that, as a consequence, remain in the proclaimed metastasis of their alienation.

When such metastasis shows itself blindingly, when it inflicts inhuman senseless death, it can explode in *angry nihilism* : as they perceive the nullity that surrounds them and erodes their life, nameless individuals decide to give it back to its nothing. Angry nihilism *wants* exactly *nothing* and realizes perfectly how everything surrounding it has only to be swallowed up in its vacuity. The explosion of angry nihilism, which frees and explodes bad passions, can also be seen as pure fun generated by a nausea for the existent; but that is exactly how it turns into destructive euphoria.

Following the era of cynicism, opportunism and fear, in the present generalised proletarianisation of the life of each and every one, what struggles are possible? We are sorry to disappoint the indefatigable officers of human progress, but these struggles also involve the total destruction of what surrounds us. Once upon a time someone said: ‘Nihilists...make just one more effort to be revolutionaries’: it’s a short step from *wanting nothing* to *wanting everything*. But we also say: ‘Revolutionaries...make just one more effort to be nihilists’ – it takes a bit of courage to be up to one’s rage.

But where will all this take us? Did not you realise? It will take us *nowhere*... And anyway, where do you think you are going, all of you?

‘S’ io fossi foco arderei lo mondo’

The destructive euphoria of angry nihilism finds its main form of expression in the element that most represents anger: fire. Molotovs and incendiary devices are like the warriors’ arrows, with which symbols and structures of power and of the system are targeted: police stations, town halls, courts, banks, shops, commercial centres, schools

and cars.

Some of these targets touch many people's civil conscience deeply. Why are schools set on fire, given that they could bring about the emancipation and integration of the socially alienated? Is it not true that education for everyone was an important conquest for humanity and its progress? Maybe; but if it is also true, and how you could deny it, that schools look more and more like prisons (both prisons and schools being part of the generalized prison-society), we should silence our conscience and look at a phenomenon that is *beautiful like a school in flames*. After all, the school system is based on a removal of meaning – in other words, schools are instruments for life or rather for work, which in turn is an instrument for life – and therefore schools have no meaning in themselves as they constantly refer to a meaning that is yet to come. In this way, as the future is denied and consists in dragging on between boredom and desperation, schools are losing their false pedagogic value. When instruments are in no way useful they become *fetishes*, and fetishes are only worth burning, possibly during fights with kids screaming 'tonight is my future'.

Civil conscience also has something to say about cars: why to set fire to the neighbours' cars if the latter share the same state of emergency as the rioters? First of all, most of the burned cars belonged directly or indirectly to institutions, secondly the 'scum' does not come from nowhere, but lives in a specific territory that does not represent any homogeneous human reality. On the one hand the rioters of the *banlieues* know they can count on the support and active solidarity of many inhabitants of the area (without such solidarity twenty nights of riots in a row would not have been possible), on the

other they also know very well whom the cars set to fire belong to, and certainly the latter are not those of the rioters' direct or indirect accomplices. In the banlieus, like everywhere else, there stand zealous supporters of orders and dialogue, informers and profiteers, collaborators and various kinds of vile characters, as well as those who do not share *in practice* the unequivocal and clear position of the rioters. The youths of the *banlieues* do not tolerate any form of neutrality, dialogue or compromise with the institutions [*which is to represent a major problem during the anti-CPE movement in March and April 2006, especially in Paris*].

In other words, neighbours are not always friends or accomplices. Moreover revolts are not carried out at a symbolic level but at the concrete one of the struggle and the field of battle. Cars are set on fire not only because it is obviously a pleasure to see fires burning but also and mainly following a *strategic and territorial view*, that is to say by being in the territory through the struggle. It is only in the perspective of real conflict (and not in its representation or sociological translation) that the value of this practice can be understood. Setting fire to cars is quite an effective means of building barricades rapidly and it is also a useful way to draw police to a specified area, where they can be hit by stones and Molotovs and from where rioters can escape easily, only to find each other elsewhere and start the game again (a dynamic that was largely employed in the sabotage of public lighting power plants which opened the nights of rage).

The fact that these considerations have not been taken into account by many is quite astonishing. The most important point to be considered, however, is the importance of the territory as battlefield for all of today's conflicts and those to come. In a society based on the cir-

culcation of money, information, people and goods, management of the territory is one of the most important operations carried out by power. For example, it is the way traffic circulation is set out that is slowly killing us with its poison, especially in metropolitan areas where urban spaces are reduced to alienating transit and service zones. It is an asymmetric, dehumanising and murderous reality that is killing life, where territories are being made more and more aseptic and impenetrable to those who, be it for needs related to the system or of out of individual choice, cannot be reduced to merchandise (and are therefore marginalized, locked up or deported).

At the same time, territory and traffic have become vital strategic factors in current and future struggles, with the spreading of practices such as road blocks and sabotage, the invention of new ways of living in the territory and the destruction of everything that is to all effects uninhabitable. Of course we do not know if the destroyers of cars are aware of that. We do not know if we are overestimating their rage. What is certain is that behind their destructive negative attitude there stands a positive attitude relating to their way of living and making human relations, which besides continuously reinventing language and gestures, brings about complicity and solidarity during the riots. It is a positive attitude that cannot be reduced to the representation set out by the forces of the enemy field, for whom, consequently, they are nothing but vandals, dumbness and senseless gesticulation. We are not elaborating a tedious neo-realist embellished image of the underclass. What we are trying to do is, once again, ask ourselves if it is possible to live in spaces and territory in a different way so as to encounter new accomplices and occasions of struggle to be exploded with due joy and radicality.

March 2006

Notes

1. *Following a well-established habit that is unique in Europe, on New Year's Eve 2005 425 vehicles are set to fire all over France, 330 in 2004, 324 in 2003 and 379 in 2002. Clichy-sous-Bois, Aulnay and La Courneuve are the towns most involved in this phenomenon. Furthermore on New Year's Eve 2004 a blackout in a locality in Sevran allows rioters to set an ambush for police, who are targeted by stones hurled from the roofs of the surrounding buildings. We can say that the New Year is a real celebration in France.*

Hypotheses not to be rejected

*'Philippe de Villiers has asked the premier
Dominique de Villepin
to raise the level of the State's response to
what seems to be a real ethnic civil war'.*

(Reuter, October 29 2005)

*'Sincere and open civil war
is better than a rotten peace'.*

M. Bakunin

Civil war

The current generalised war scenario, having gone beyond the borders between exterior and interior, having *in its own way* taken the war home, is precisely that of a civil war in act.

Civil war, therefore, is not a value to be exhorted, nor is it a myth to serve as encouragement. . On the contrary, it is an obvious fact, a starting point. It is something that is normally silenced (in the name of a false unity of purpose, a slogan used as an injunction to social order) or, when it openly explodes, it is mystified as an ethnic-racial matter ('clash between civilizations', as it has recently been labelled). . But this civil war is not an internal fight within a homogeneous social context, nor is it a conflict between different identities; on the contrary it is the actual proof of the fictitious character of any unity: a fiction behind which the constant and unilateral offensive of capital against all the exploited, alienated and excluded (in other words against all the damned of the Earth) tries to hide itself. *When rebellion and revolt break out, we cheer with joy the surpassing not only of all fictitious unities but also that of the unilaterality of attack.*

Those upon whom power inflicts attacks and abuse every day and can attempt to overturn the relations of strength at any moment and with any means necessary, do not belong to any ethnic category. It is beyond doubt that certain peoples are most oppressed by dominion, excluded from mythical western wellbeing and confined in the innumerable ghettos of the planet; but, insofar as dominion affects every-

one and everyone's life, this is only a difference in the intensity of the generalized nature of oppression. To each his own. The misery of exploitation and the precarity of life are not peculiar phenomena that only affect those who do not take an active part in the economic cycle and political representation. On the contrary it is a universal situation that affects everybody: submission to economic and political dictatorship. *Consequently, every revolt unleashes a universal potential of rebellion that only the transversality of contagion will be able to realise, so that this civil war becomes a social war against capital.*

Neutrality is impossible in a context of civil war. If you claim to be neutral you are choosing one side while giving the impression you are not, you are collaborating under the mask of 'not having any other choice'. But neutrality is simply the most common self-justification in the grey zone and it is also the mother of every form of voluntary slavery. *In a context of civil war any form of neutrality is potentially hostile to rioters.*

A nihilist fire does not save its arsonists.

*It is their areas that burn,
their neighbours and parents' cars;
they loot their brothers and sisters' nurseries and schools.*

*They make a clean sweep of anything
that makes life better and easier,
that allows them to amuse themselves, communicate or find a job.*

Philosopher A. Glucksman, *Le Monde*, November 21 2005.

*The town planners always get it wrong:
they consider cars (and their sub-products such as scooters)
essentially as means of transport.
It is a materialisation of an idea of happiness,*

to the whole of society.

*Cars as the pinnacle of the wellbeing of alienated life,
and inseparably as essential products of the capitalist market,
are at the centre of the same global propaganda.*

G. Debord.

Widespread power, widespread attack

Power does not reside in any Winter Palace that can be attacked by revolutionaries, nor does it articulate throughout the various centres of production that workers can occupy. It does not only include political, police and judicial operations but is also a capillary system of relations that, as they expand over the whole of society, affect individual and collective deeds. Basically power produces and ratifies forms of life that, in their ways of feeding themselves, consuming, moving, communicating and thinking, are easily adapted to the requirements of dominion. Power seems to be invincible everywhere, but for the same reason it can also be hit anywhere (obviously with different levels of strategic attack). This is quite a banal question that could be studied at the Collège de France not long ago. But if all that is true, it is also clear that any complaints about the damage caused by rioters towards third persons is absolutely ridiculous. Be it owners of cars set on fire by the French autoclasts, disturbed customers of a sabotaged bank or commuters disturbed by a roadblock, any claim to be a third party is always equivalent to that of being neutral: an hypothesis to be rejected.

Of course, one could object that destroying a bank, a prison or a court is quite different to setting fire to a car in the suburbs. True, but only up to a point. To understand this, one could carry out the following hypothetical experiment. In order to understand, try this experiment. Imagine that a certain practise occurs universally; in other words

imagine that the latter is imitated by everybody everywhere: for example, that *all* banks are attacked and destroyed. Well, that would be a turmoil not all that dissimilar to revolution. Now repeat the experiment with cars: imagine that *all* cars are set on fire. Would the consequences of such an event be revolutionary in the same way? Would it mean a radical upheaval of the entire social system? An hypothesis not to be rejected.

*'I want to say to all kids living in difficult areas
that no matter where they come from,
they all are children of the Republic'.*

J. Chirac, November 14 2005.

*'A republic is a form of government that
puts itself over the people,
leads it, educates it and does whatever it wants with it.
It has armies and obliges reluctant people to submit to the law
And, like all governments, it does not find obstacles in its running*

*but in the resistance of the governed and in the fear of a possible
insurrection'.*

E. Malatesta

Ideology of citizenship

‘Children of the Republic’: so Chirac addresses the inhabitants of the *banlieues* in order to pacify them (in his attempt to counterbalance Sarkozy’s offensive declarations). Those who know how corrupt republican institutions are, like prostitutes who have gone rotten with gold, would have good reason to feel offended. Just as the State calls itself Homeland when it gets ready to kill, so it calls its subjects ‘citizens’ in order to make them its accomplices and bring back legal servitude.

The principle of citizenship, however, was already denounced long ago as the ideological proclamation of a fictitious equality that covers social hierarchy: they said that citizenship is nothing but a new social hierarchy of a bourgeois kind. For a long time now, moreover, in its retreat the principle of citizenship has shown the bare life that it claimed it was concealing. That was the terrible revelation of the two world wars of the twentieth century: behind the citizen there is not only the bourgeois form of life but also, deeper down, bare life which, once the outer coating is removed, loses any value, right or dignity.

Today it is worse, the universalization of the citizen has resulted in the ordinary man whose behaviour and feelings are quite consistent with dominant models. A grey, sad conformity based on anaesthesia and asthenia, held together by fear. The three ingredients of the contemporary citizen are an incapacity to disdain, an impossibility to act effectively and an affectation of weakness, all strengthened by the horrendous mix of technology and spectacle that lavishes the surrogates required to avoid the ever present eventuality of psychic collapse before oneself, one’s resignation and isolation from the world. In order to claim to lead a normal serene life in the present situation,

first you must have lost the ability to see and listen (anaesthesia); then, when events get too much and you cannot ignore them, you lose the creative ability to react (asthenia): hence the general resignation that does not fall into depression because it is supported by a generalized politic of fear (not only of others but also and mainly towards one's own present and future) and by the innumerable technocratic modes of *divertissement*.

Different forms of life, however, grow up and spread outside citizenship. Those who have kept the ability to be indignant about this world and to nourish strength and imagination to invent forms of reaction and attack against its inhuman banality – as well developing the courage necessary to put them into action – will on principle be without citizenship in this world. They do not have citizenship but they do have life, they have a vitality that cannot be reduced to any form of survival. In part undesired products of this society that continuously return like uncomfortable dregs to disturb its sleep, in part rational and passionate choices of rebellion, these clandestine and barbaric forms of life will not stop obstructing, attacking and burning until the last fragment of this injustice is eliminated. No, Monsieur le President, the French rebels are not children of your Republic, which bleeds blood; they are children of the same anger that will await you at every corner of the world to present you with the bill.

*'It is a security measure that
has been taken to equip police
with any means they need
to restore peace definitively '*

J. Chirac

*'Modern totalitarianism can be described
as the setting up of a legal civil war
through the state of exception.*

*This allows not only the physical elimination of political adversar-
ies*

*but also that of entire categories of citizens who for whatever
reason*

cannot be integrated into the political system.

The intentional creation of a permanent state of emergency

*has since become an essential practice
adopted by contemporary States,
including the so-called democratic ones.*

G. Agamben

State of exception

The state of exception is the rule: it is hard to find a more common expression in present theoretical-critical discussions. It is just as hard though to find critical and practical analyses that are able to support such a statement. The very idea is in the first place ambiguous, as it seems to suggest that, historically or logically, behind the state of exception there is or could be some kind of virgin power capable of functioning properly, without abuse, violence and injustice; as a matter of fact, on the contrary, it is power as such that is abuse, violence, coercion and immorality, clear discrimination and arbitrary justification of all forms of oppression. After clarifying that, it is the force of events that brings us to consider further what there is behind the declaration of the state of emergency.

Officially, the state of emergency is the suspension of the law (and therefore of all the rights and freedom that the latter is supposed to guarantee) in order to defend the law itself. This operation, which is obviously paradoxical, is justified by any situation of danger whatsoever. The fact that it has become the rule means that the state of exception is constantly being applied, regardless of its official proclamation: from the politics on immigration (which not only involve severe limitations of people's right of movement but is also based on the concentration camp style system of detention centres) to the periodic creation of red zones (where citizens' freedom is actually suspended), the strengthening of measures of control (which are invad-

ing every individual's life in spite of the democratic defence of privacy) to the abuses committed by police every day ('abuses' being an euphemism), the list of normal exceptional measures could go on for pages and pages. It is obvious that the young people of the *banlieues* are well aware of this normality as they not only live in a situation of territorial segregation but also and mainly experience police repression on a daily basis, with its repertoire of abuse, humiliation and violence that accompanies searches and arrests. The declaration of the state of emergency in France would not be regarded as a scandal were it not for its symbolic value: the restoration of a 1955 law introduced during the war in Algeria, unveils the idea of a colonialist management of internal politics; in other words, a sort of confirmation by the government that a civil war is in course.

The normality of the state of exception, therefore, inevitably reveals the violence that the State and rights are based on: violence used to keep the State safe (mainly in the form of the government monopoly of legal violence: police, courts and prisons) and violence employed to expand the State (wars, international embargoes, maximum security prisons, etc.). But this normality also shows how power is constantly aware of some immediate danger, the spreading of a potential for revolt that would be quite hard to defeat and suppress if it were to explode effectively. Hence the adoption of innumerable preventive measures, including incessant terror propaganda, a constantly renovated crisis and the spreading of insecurity, which transforms the fears of a drifting power into a common perception of constant danger.

The state of exception, however, has another potential that is rarely underlined by theoretical critique. Benjamin talked about an end of

carry on this way, puts its destructive capacity into action. So don't ask for political programmes, perspectives or outcomes of the revolt. That would be a pitiful return to the usual 'what can I do?', a question that we hoped was finally lost among the junk of past history. More simply, just ask yourself *how can I act*: anything else would simply be a placebo..

'I want to be integrated for what I am'

Twenty-six-year-old girl of Algerian origin

*'Watch out Worker! Do not mark your brothers,
the ones that they call thieves, murderers, prostitutes,
revolutionaries, prisoners with the stain of infamy.*

Do not curse them, do not sling mud at them,

Save them from the fatal blow.

*Don't you see that the soldier approves of you, the judge calls you
to testify,*

the usurer smiles at you, the priest cheers you on,

and the cop excites you?'

E. Coerderoy

Integration

It is not easy to be wrong about the cause of the riots in the French *banlieues*: the fact that they depend on social alienation is so obvious that cannot be denied. But very few are inclined to understand the reasons for this situation. Hence the request for social intervention aimed at integration. In this way an inevitable political lie soon fol-

lows etiological lucidity. Those who ask for social intervention in good faith are simply under the illusion that society can be changed, whereas it is a question of changing societies; at least those who are not in good faith are paradoxically more sincere: they well know what social control is implied in such interventions.

Integration would mean first of all getting involved in work; but as work is a product of capital and therefore synonymous with submission and exploitation, it is more and more divided between ultra-specialised technocracy and progressively marginalising demeaning tasks. These are the two faces of flexibility: the rampant entrepreneur and the suffering proletarian. No need to say which of the two is the destiny of the *banlieue* youths, as is proved by the fact that the age for apprenticeship has been lowered to 14 (following a proposal by prime minister De Villepin on November 9, in sharp contrast with the age of compulsory education that has been fixed at 16 since 1959) and by the law on first employment (CPE), which establishes that workers can easily be sacked during the first two years of employment.

After all, few realize that it is capital (and therefore work) that created the situation that the former is now required to sort out: during its imperialist expansion first it created the conditions of hardship that forced millions of people to emigrate, then it knew how to import and exploit cheap labour in the industrial areas (creating the big council estates after the second world war, where at the time there were networks of worker solidarity); finally, in the second half of the Seventies, following the so called industrial reorganization, that is to say investment in places where labour was cheaper, it has abandoned the population of the suburbs to their current condition of lives in excess, creating the social conditions favourable for the explosion of

angry nihilism. Will capital be asked to solve the problems that it itself creates yet again? Will we see again the most vile acrobatic dialectics between capital and work?

As concerns education, the other form of integration, it is soon said: its task is to prepare for work; if it did not have such task, it would be a useless exercise at the best and a device of special surveillance at the worst, as it is proved by the ZEP (Priority Education Areas) implemented in 1981 and involving 20% of the schoolchildren all over the country today. In short, any request for integration is no more than the latest attempt to keep the social corpse alive.

The contradictions implied in the logic of integration also concern the rioters, at least in part, or those who claim the right to speak on their behalf. Once revolt has been welcomed with joy, it is necessary to understand whether the latter broke out as a result of the will to destroy *the system* (as happened during the revolt of Watts, according to a situationist analysis) or just *its inequalities*, whose structural character has not been grasped. A remarkable element, however, makes the first hypothesis quite plausible: the fact that the youths of the *banlieues* could easily acquire goods through other means, i.e. networks of trafficking and delinquency. One of the tasks of theoretical critique, however, is precisely to demonstrate that a generalized 'integration' is impossible and so is any unrealistic request for political perspectives opened by the riot. In a word, oppose the necessary disintegration of the current system of dominion to the litany of social integration. And it is well known, the creation of the new can only come from such disintegration.

April 2006

On riots¹

Any attempt to overturn the world by the modern poor has begun with riots: 1789, 1848, 1871, 1917, 1968, and 1978 in Iran and Nicaragua. But not all riots lead to revolution, i.e. a generalized conflict involving everybody, nor do they lead to insurrection, i.e. to the public occupation of at least one area of the town by its inhabitants against the State that administrates it, after they have rejected or defeated the armed forces and gained the support of inhabitants who had been passive until that moment. If on the one hand there are riots that do not lead to revolution or insurrection, on the other all revolutions and insurrections begin with riots. In fact a riot is the beginning of something and, as there is no science that can predict its explosion and even less its consequences, every riot must be considered as the possible beginning of the end of the world.

rior to emotion. But the former has faded into the spirit and objectivity for a long time now. It is so alienated and falsified that it claims it can stir up positive emotions (cinema, music, commercial advertising, and dominant news are practically no more than laborious factories of artificial feelings); but, instead of giving the truth of emotion to reason, they extend to the latter the falsification and objectivity that destroy all reasoning. The organized form of reason is the State. Since the world has become statified the party of reason wants to make the present eternal, wanting to get rid of history and excommunicating its driving force: negativity.

Modern riots are the ignition of the negative. This emotion, having become the ghetto of authenticity, is against reason, which has become the palace of falsification. It is an historical upturning: now emotion, the very absence of conscience and hooliganism par excellence, creates thought, rebelling against reason, reified thought and eternal domestication of the spirit. Revolt is the evergreen outbreak of the old quarrel between the intransigence of subjectivity and conservatism of objectivity.

Collective emotion is revolt whereas collective reason is the State. Today all riots are against the State and all States are against riots. As the State and its ideologies are being hit by the storms of spirit the modern poor's revolts are spreading. Such a remarkable multiplication of radical negation, instead of reflecting the growing distance between the immobile organization of the present society and the movement of the humans that form it, is systematically minimised. First of all, the frequency of revolts comes to be presented to the enemy as if they were inevitable accidents that have no historical importance as they have always existed and will continue to do so. Secondly, it is the police, that is to say the State, that hold the monopoly of information about riots: whenever possible the latter is concealed, and when this is not possible their proportions are inten-

tionally declared to be smaller than they are. In general there are three figures as regards demos against the government: those provided by the organizers, which are always in excess; those provided by the police, which are always smaller; and those provided by the media which, according to the general mood, stand between the two false extremes. As regards riots, which do not have organisers, there is only the figure provided by police whereas the media keep silent or follow the police's directives. The same concerns the assessment of damage, dead and wounded, arrests, strength and length of the clashes. Finally, when it comes to explaining the reasons for the revolt, the servants of the State and journalists devalue it, putting forward trivial political or economic pretexts and disregarding the serious question of the mood of the moment. They finally draw sociological banalities or scream about plots of opposing servants. These are vile excuses, which they do not say much about, however, because the more they talk about the riot the more they show they never took part in it and know nothing about it. On the other hand, these ignorant people think that street clashes increase according to their visibility on TV.

The vast majority of the modern poor have an even more vague idea about riots. First of all they adapt their opinion to that offered by the media: they think that riots are despicable excesses. Dialogue and wisdom have failed. How was it possible to reach or rather to be dragged to such a point? For every answer to this pseudo-question a pseudo-feeling is always ready: desolation. If riots transform the rioter's emotions into awareness, they transform the spectator's reason into pseudo-emotion. The latter is therefore unable to communicate with the rioters; even if he condemns them, he also thinks they

have no responsibilities. As the spectator is absent from the riot and from history, he disconsolately regrets the lack of adequate measures or reforms, as if riots were errors in management: nothing could be more stupid.

If State servants minimize riots, the poor mystify them. In fact they mystify their own revolt – which is considered impossible (as Ruge’s famous letter to Marx stated in 1843) – and consequently any other too. The modern poor take part in riots in very small proportions. Nearly all revolts come from demonstrations. Demonstrators are a minority of the modern poor and it is a minority of demonstrators that take part in riots. Finally, it is a minority of rebels that really fight. So almost all the poor of the town where riots occur learn about the latter through the enemy’s sources, whose clumsy and embarrassing explanations of such a terrible and close event tend, even if unintentionally, to widen its content through representation.

That is the reason why recuperators attribute trivial reasons to riots. They systematically reduce the revolt to the demo that it started from. They make this methodological mistake because they left the demo before the revolt even broke out, the latter acquiring its very essence precisely as soon as they disappear from the scene. The discussions and even the concessions of the recuperators are almost always related to the pretext of the demo, which is not that of the revolt and even less its main reason.

The modern poor that were absent the day the riots broke out are therefore divided between the recuperators’ reasonable arguments and an epic vision of their own revolt, projected on to the event that they have missed yet again. They have a sensation: it must be emotion that nobody risks feeling after a glass of beer, a party that could never

be experienced at a disco. Even if joy and sadness, anger and friendship, credulity and desire are there to the bitter end, to prison or death, even if passion and the will are constantly upturned by the vertiginous alternation of lucidity and thrills, of bravery and fear to the point of rashness and panic, the only really epic thing is the incredible distance that a long and quiet movement of things digs between everyday life and history, between survival and life. The spectator, who is constantly absent from life, forgets that the rioters put their lives at stake. As he thoughtfully stares at his slippers, he tends to be reasonable according to the enemy's explanations and to the detriment of his confused dreams, which once again flow out towards more realistic and comfortable occasions.

This abdication sharply distinguishes the modern poor from the angry indigent. Its consequence is the discrediting of the revolt, along the lines of the propaganda of the enemy, even the most absurd. After every revolt, one of the two factions of servants attributes it to a conspiracy led, if not by the other faction, by the scapegoat preferred by its ideologues. And facing them, separated by a mountain of abstractions there stands a crowd of half-slave, half-lucid, half-apatetic people: the huge movement of thought they have produced isolates and immobilizes them, preventing them from thinking and acting all together. We have sensations, of course, but they are imitated and have been suggested, they are contradictory and without issue, so we will not rebel; or they are produced by intimate and sudden lacerations, and can bring about everything, even including their being repressed by police, and cannot be recuperated as they are spontaneous.

Spontaneity is the main feature of modern revolts. All the poor, be they dressed up or in rags, submit equally: no one of them is able to

lead others' emotions. Conspiracy is based on secrets and lies, one of the big contradictions of the worker parties at the time when they wanted to conquer the world; but nowadays, between rival factions of slaves, it exists more in ghosts and anathemas than in fact.

Sometimes the enemy distinguishes martyrs and leaders in a revolt; but always afterwards. While police or the army are attacking a barricade, the most beautiful speech or the most cunning conspiracy cannot convince someone to resist or escape. The martyrs of a revolt are the dead alone and the leaders are simply the bravest who have no authority other than example. And if sometimes slanderers go in search of professionals of insurrection they will find them at home: the only ones that are paid to go to the scene of riots are police and journalists. If you are for pleasure you will find people enjoying themselves [si dilettano] and, if this happens more than once, you will be with true amateurs [dilettanti]..

Notes

1. *This text can be found in its complete version on the site [teleology.org/traits/patates aigres-douces/Emuete](http://teleology.org/traits/patates_aigres-douces/Emuete) and was first published in 1987 in Dal 9 gennaio 1978 al 4 novembre 1979. The author is a member of the 'Bibliothèque des Emuetes'.*

