

# Faint signal

## The student occupations in California and the *Communiqué from an Absent Future*

From 24 September to 2 October 2009, students from the University of California, Santa Cruz occupied and blockaded the University's graduate student commons: nominally in protest against the cuts in education spending in the UC system, more generally against the entire educational machine and the meagre job prospects awaiting graduates who will be saddled with tens of thousands of dollars of debt. It is not surprising that these protests should originate in California. The state is bankrupt, with some even speculating on it being the country's first failed state. However, although the occupation movement was born from these circumstances, what differentiates it from the more conventional protests and rallies on California's campuses is the way it has sought to use this issue as a rallying cry to re-energize a more radical, universal opposition to the prevailing state of affairs. As its main theoretical text, *Communiqué from an Absent Future*, puts it, the aim is 'to create the conditions for the transcendence of reformist demands and the implementation of a truly communist content' (see <http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com/2009/09/24/communique-from-an-absent-future/>).

How should we take this use of the word 'communist' to 'demand not a free university, but a free society'? A passing fad of 'hipster insurrectionists'; a semantic land grab by anarchists in order to add edginess to their provocations; or simply nostalgia, twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the failure of all post-Cold War forms of left activism to challenge neoliberalism and create a new world? It could of course be all these things, or perhaps none of them. It is, however, surely a measure of the continuing weakness of the radical Left that such movements seem worth commenting on. After all, the student occupations at UCSC have been a short-lived and limited affair so far, in spite of the disastrous circumstances in California. Even though they have prompted sit-ins at the University of California at Berkeley and Fresno State, inspired an occupation at the Academy of Fine

Arts in Vienna, and garnered statements of solidarity from the Greek anarchist collectives based in the Exarchia district of Athens, we are still looking at a very small movement in numerical terms. Its seemingly global scope belies its localized marginality.

At the same time, it is easy to miss turning points, or the co-implication of political concepts with even relatively marginal political acts. The cynical response that the way the word 'communism' has of late re-emerged from the ghetto of dwindling Stalinist and Trotskyite party politics is just a new gloss on anarcho-syndicalism doesn't take the power of words, or our historical-political situation, seriously enough. To get a feel for the novelty of the way the word 'communism' is being claimed by the occupation movement – one that would otherwise be considered simply anarchist – it is thus worth considering, by way of contrast, the state of party-based communist politics today. Only in this historical context do the differences become clear between *Communiqué from an Absent Future* and the stylistically similar, Situationist-inspired text of the French Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (for which see Alberto Toscano, 'The War Against Pre-Terrorism', *RP* 154, March/April 2009, pp. 2–7).

### **Communist politics as we know it, and knew it**

Historically, communist politics is firmly associated with the party formation, and if there is one phenomenon in relation to which the decline of communism is charted, it is the decline of such parties across the world. To understand the antinomies this introduces into any attempt to reconstitute communism in the twenty-first century, it is necessary to understand that the main point of distinction between the parties nowadays is the extent to which they engage in the horse-trading of coalition-building as a strategy of influence. So, for example, what divides the Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste (NPA) in France from, say, Italy's Rifondazione Comunista is that whereas Rifondazione

entered into coalition with Romano Prodi's short-lived administration – and was irrevocably compromised by voting for reactionary measures on Afghanistan, and so forth – the NPA has made it a founding principle not to enter into coalition with France's Socialist Party and has remained outside government. An unenviable choice then: Rifondazione's horse-trading, inevitably leading to compromise, or the NPA's absolutism, leading to a certain passivity and/or marginalization in the face of the rational calculation of political realities.

It is not enough to frame this problem through a traditional critique of these parties, and to denounce their leaderships or ideologies. Rather, the electoral figures show a consistency of marginality no matter the variables. For instance, despite the stories of the spectacular growth in membership of the Japanese Communist Party early in 2009, and despite the fact that Japan has been one of the hardest hit of the industrial economies in the global financial crisis, during the election in August their share of the vote actually fell, from 7.25 per cent (in 2005) to 7 per cent. A similar pattern repeats itself with the electoral results of the NPA, who failed to win any seats in the European elections. And despite the massive popular unrest since the December uprising, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) saw their share of the vote for the parliamentary elections drop to 7.5 per cent. There is a consistent pattern: almost no matter what the organizational model, or ideological niche pursued, traditional communist parties show no sign of anything other than decline (highlighting why debates as to which of these are really communist parties, or reformist or revolutionaries, are mostly irrelevant).

What this analysis makes clear is that the relationship of the current occupation movement to party politics is far from, for example, the relationship of the Situationist International to the French Communist Party from the 1950s to the 1970s – as some traditionalist communists might see it. Whereas Situationism came out of a similar ideological hotpotch of anti-totalitarian thought, counter-culturalism and impatience with the institutions of the day, the fact remains that they were positioned in a dialectical tension with a strong, mostly pro-Soviet Communist Party that still had some realistic chance of seizing power. The same could broadly be said of the associated anarchist-communist split; functionally, anarchism amounted (albeit with a few counter-examples, such as in the Spanish Civil War) to a kind of moralizing counterweight to the authoritarian tendencies of Marxism–Leninism in the twentieth century, forming

what might in liberal theory be approvingly conceived of as an agonistic equilibrium.

Dialectically, then, the relationship between student insurrectionary ideas of communism, and communism as pursued through party politics from the 1960s until today, is fundamentally refigured by the collapse in the potentiality of the communist parties to take power. So where once the nihilist position of a group such as the Situationists played a performative role, now we could argue that nihilism is a position fully cognizant of reality. When the students in Vienna sloganize their rejection of politics as rational calculation – 'We refuse to subjugate ourselves to the logic of politics and economy!' – this has a certain rational irrationality it did not have in the past. Moreover, with regard to the way the terms 'anarchist' and 'communist' are used to describe this disposition, in so far as it seems almost unimaginable that we will witness a global wave of communist vanguard revolutions (even in Nepal, Prachanda's Maoist Party has, for instance, played the democratic game and instituted neoliberal economic policies), the relationship between communism and anarchism should today be taken to infer points of distinction beyond the question of the party and the role of the state. What marks the difference rests with the question of how productively to engage in the context of political nihilism.

### **From the coming insurrection to the absent future**

Consider the differences between the UCSC student movement's text and the stylistically proximal manifesto of the French anarchist collective, the Tarnac 9. There are ample similarities in terms of style and tactics – voluntarism, rejection of reformism, levelling of total critique – but there are also differences that point to a more nuanced and, dare we say it, 'realistic' form of political nihilism. Alberto Toscano has described *The Coming Insurrection* as 'anti-urbanist libertarian anarchism' marked by its 'indifference' to 'a Marxist discourse of class struggle, and [a] delinking of anti-capitalism from class politics' (RP 154, p. 5). To this, he provides the following rejoinder: 'it is doubtful that actions with "no leader, no claim, no organization, but words, gestures, conspiracies" may be taken as a model for organized emancipatory politics.' It is easy to agree with Toscano that the total critique of *The Coming Insurrection* exists in complete separation from immanent possibilities of social transformation; perversely via their overidentification with immediate experimentation and realization in the 'now'. It is therefore not surprising that such a position defaults

to a ruralist, rejectionist posture. Despite rhetorical similarities to the UCSC occupation movement's text, there are, then, significant differences.

For one thing, whereas the title of the Invisible Committee's text has a portentous tenor of affirmation, the UCSC movement's emphasis on the 'absent future' registers a profound uncertainty. This could be viewed thematically – the absent future being the non-future for debt-straddled graduates – but there are indications throughout the text that this should also be read politically. The analysis puts forward a full-scale critique of any notion of islands of respite from the logic of capitalism, arguing that all eventually become subsumed. Similarly, putting their action at a distance from the student activism of the past, they argue:

The old student struggles are the relics of a vanished world... their mode of radicalization, too tenuously connected to the economic logic of capitalism, prevented that alignment from taking hold. Because their resistance to the Vietnam War focalized critique upon capitalism as a colonial war-machine, but insufficiently upon the exploitation of domestic labour, students were easily split off from a working class facing different problems.

The first couple of pages operate with a deadpan humour. In regard to graduate school and all those PhD candidates and teaching assistants dreaming that 'I will be a star, I will get the tenure track position', the manifesto states:

A kind of monasticism predominates here, with all the Gothic rituals of a Benedictine Abbey, and all the strange theological claims for the nobility of this work, its essential altruism. The underlings are only too happy to play apprentice to the masters, unable to do the math indicating that nine-tenths of us will teach 4 courses every semester in order to pad the paychecks of the one-tenth...

Where the text really takes off, however, is with its introduction of a Marxist economic analysis of the relationship between labour and capital, in its second section. This points to the limits of any reformist settlement for the public university in an advanced capitalist system:

Between 1965 and 1980 profit rates began to fall, first in the US, then in the rest of the industrializing world.... For public education, the long downturn meant the decline of tax revenues due to both declining rates of growth and the prioritization of tax-breaks for beleaguered companies.... Though it is not directly beholden to the market, the university and its corollaries are subject to the same cost-cutting logic as other industries: declining tax revenues have made inevitable the casualization

of work.... We cannot free the university from the exigencies of the market by calling for the return of the public education system.

So far, so agreeable. Equally, in distinction to the anarchist emphasis on maintaining worker co-operatives as the immediate realization of non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist social relations within the capitalist swamp, the text insists upon the necessity of a revolutionary procedure. Unsurprisingly, however, it is in how this could be achieved that things become a bit murky.

*Communiqué* takes inspiration from the anti-CPE movement in France, which 'manifested a growing tension between revolution and reform'. Yet aside from criticizing those elements within the movement making reformist demands, they stop far short of saying what, in the absence of a vanguard party willing to conduct a popular *coup d'état*, could bridge popular mobilization and revolution. Rather, the text endorses the tactics of the Greek December uprising, which made 'almost no demands'; not because 'they considered it a better strategy, but because they wanted nothing that any of these institutions could offer'. The fact that the uprising resulted in a social swing to the far Right, a siege of the semi-autonomous Exarchia district, and politically, and paradoxically, the election of a centre-left political dynasty – all of this remains unmentioned. Making no demands, then, because all demands are effectively recuperated within the system, is tied to a strictly nihilist position in which actions are firmly divorced from the necessity of concrete results.

This form of nihilist anti-statist politics is quite different from that recently advocated by Simon Critchley. Unlike in Critchley's neo-anarchist idea of making infinite demands upon the system which it cannot possibly fulfil, in order to act as a non-statist procedure for change, the *Communiqué* attempts to circumvent any legitimization of capitalism or the bourgeois state, and the cynical tacit interplay of the militant and political insider. In reconstituting the idea of communism in the twenty-first century, the position advocated by the UCSC occupation movement is probably the right one. It posits no obvious idea of how a non-party-based, non-statist communism could be realized or sustained. But holding on to a Marxist analysis, analysing social relations as totality, and rejecting any romantic recourse to the wishful thinking of the noble insurgency or long-term islands of non-capitalist workplaces, it is perhaps as good a position to occupy as any other in the ideational interregnum of the present.

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